NEW HAVEN INDEPENDENT

"America At 250" Course Debuts

Alan Appel September 16, 2025

Sorry to have to reveal this, folks, but Paul Revere would never have said "The British are coming" because, duh, he was British! He was a subject of King George, and no "American" identity was set in stone or even on paper in 1775. Indeed, everyone was trying to figure it out.

Instead, Revere would have said, "The Regulars are coming out," because that's how the British citizens of the American colonies referred to the English soldiers.

That record-correcting and de-mythologizing note made this reporter a little sad that it wasn't true, and reminded me of my boyish over-indulgence in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's 1861 poem "Paul Revere's Ride."

It also emerged in the first lecture of Yale University's much anticipated publicly offered course "America at 250: A History."

As a service to the community (and of course to its students) on the occasion of the semiquincentennial, Yale has assembled three of its distinguished American historians — Joanne Freeman on the early period, David Blight on the Civil War and latter 19 century, and Beverly Gage to cover the whole of the 20th — to do a whirlwind history. The plan is to cover our 250 years in 26 lectures over 14 weeks — or as Blight put it, "in one gulp."

And to make it available on Yale's YouTube channel right here for anyone who wants to listen.

"Joanne creates the Union, I get to destroy it and help you watch it come back into being in a second founding and try to hang on till the end of the 19 century," Blight said in a preview of the lecture series. "Stick around for this crazy ride and we're anxious to take it with you."

They've opened the credit course to the public in the hope the history can be instructive for the present moment. The semester-long enterprise is part of the university's DeVane lecture series, which consists of courses that students and community members can share.

On history's importance, Blight quoted, among many writers in the intro lecture, James Baldwin, from one of that writer's 1965 lectures: "History is not merely something to read . . . it doesn't refer principally to the past. We carry it within us . . and are unconsciously controlled by it . . it's present in all we do . . . If Americans ever face their past, they'd be entering a dialogue with that Terrifying Deity called history."

Over the coming weeks of Yale's semester, I'll be dipping into some of the lectures to write about what I learned, what many other of my childish ideas I was disabused of, what surprised me, or delighted me, or what I find useful in my thinking about where we are because, no surprise to anyone, the democracy that the founders were trying to figure out is going through a very shaky moment.

So, on a recent Tuesday, 486 students (that's the number when the course was capped) crammed into Battell Chapel, along with a good number of members of the New Haven community who were lucky enough to get in under the registration wire, for the first two lectures.

I alas was too late to get in but watched on YouTube, where you are encouraged to catch them yourself, along with a post-lecture discussion among the profs themselves, also posted.

Here are some of my quirky highlights in addition to the sad truth about Paul Revere:

More on “Founders”: Freeman began with how the very term “founders” is problematic and misleading—suggesting what was quite the opposite of the mood and tone in the rooms where Adams, Madison, Jefferson, and the others met.

For they were really nervous about the new thing they were creating, a new way of governing in the midst of monarchies.

It is *we* who consider them founders; they considered themselves quite the opposite, experimenters, said Freeman, and that is the word that regularly comes up in the sources.

“The period was one of sweeping improvisation and risk,” she said. “They didn’t know what was coming next.”

Don’t forget the French and Indian War: I always loved learning about it because of the image of the young major George Washington being so brave, bullet holes in his cape, learning to be the great general we would need in 25 years. But, no. There’s a lot more than Allan Appel’s memories from the Landmark classics.

Freeman says that the French and Indian War cost the British vast amounts of money that they needed to recoup. “They also discovered gaps in the imperial system like lots of smuggling” and that’s what in part pushed the British government so aggressively to tax and prod the colonists.

And, ironically, fighting for the crown against the French reminded the British colonists they had rights, and even though they were far away from the epicenter of the empire, they’d shed blood and treasure and, darn it, they were going to protect those rights.

And the Stamp Act: Remember “taxation without representation”? Well, again, too simple. “What was upsetting,” Freeman said, “was not just a financial issue. It was the meaning that went beyond not having representation in Parliament. Paper, playing cards, items of personal life, were now being taxed for the first time. The issue was entering peoples’ homes in a new, intimate way. And since this affected all the colonies, which previously hadn’t had much in common, the Stamp Act became a kind of shared irritant and oppression that began to unite the far-flung colonists. They shared experiences and in 1765 convened a Stamp Act Congress. Very significant, said Freeman, because this was the very first entity aimed to address grievances created outside of the regular colonial legal system. “The congress didn’t’ accomplish much — boycotts did much more to change Parliament’s mind and the act was repealed. Yet its significance was bringing together the colonies in a shared cause.”

In protesting the Declaratory Acts, which came later, as well as Stamp Act, Freeman said colonists used petitions, resolutions, held debates, gathered lawyers, created more of those gatherings that became “congresses,” all the while wrestling and learning their rights as British citizens. This was a kind of training wheel period, she said, democratic practice for what came later. And when they declared that they were not “slaves to Britain, they knew what they spoke of because many speakers enslaved others.

For example, to many of the founders the concept of “democracy in which *everyone* votes was the very definition of chaos.” They often added “al” to create, as Jefferson wrote, a “democratical republic,” not democracy. And of course democracy had a complex meaning to the enslaved.

Here’s a real town/gown surprise: When Freeman discussed Revere and the march of the British regulars to get to the war supplies in Concord, she asked the nearly 500 students at Battell if they knew what Powder House Day was in New Haven. Remarkably, only two people raised their hands with knowledge of our annual April re-enactment of those heady days in April 1775 when Benedict Arnold walked over from his house on Water Street and demanded keys to the powder house to go join the revolutionary confreres in Massachusetts. And Freeman herself admitted she had been teaching many years already at Yale without herself knowing about that re-enactment of the Elm City’s revolutionary zeal was unfolding on the Green.

The fundamental, big question was, What was the country to be as a nation? That was the debate then, and it is roiling again and needs to be engaged, at the 250th and beyond.
As Freeman put it: “We assume on some visceral level that the Revolution went smoothly to ‘Hosannah.’ In fact many colonists, especially at first, were resisting, demanding, evaluating big questions, not demanding revolution.”

So I was left with the question: Therefore, what, among a million things that today are going wrong with American democracy, are the key things to restore and to rectify? Is a new kind of founding, a third one, in the cards for us? What, precisely, is it we are demanding today?