Early America
Preliminary Exam
Spring 2012

Instructions: Answer one question from each of the following sections. You must do a total of three (3) questions. Be sure each essay has a clear argument, addresses as many dimensions of the question as possible, and offers relevant, persuasive evidence from specific secondary sources wherever appropriate. Good luck!

Section I

A. How has the field of early American studies been impacted by work outside of itself—in other disciplines, from other areas of the world, from other time periods, and so on? In answering, think about both arguments (the major narratives that organize a field) and method (the practice that governs its scholarship).

B. Historians since the 1970s have articulated several different historical trajectories, or frameworks of development, in the social and cultural history of colonial America from the early 17th century to the Revolution. Identify as many of these as possible, and identify their key proponents. To what extent have these frameworks shaped the field? Which is/are the most useful?

C. Historians since the 1970s have expanded the frames of colonial American history considerably, and top journals like the William and Mary Quarterly are no longer dominated by scholarship about New England, Virginia, and the Low Country. Discuss the expansion of the field of colonial America, and discuss the challenge of synthesis since this turn began. Is it possible to identify key themes or issues that unite the broad field of early American studies since the 1970s?

D. How have material conditions impacted the creation of the field of early American studies? Today, for instance, we might say that globalization is impacting the stories we tell about the past. How do you see this happening across the arc of the scholarship represented here (from the earliest dated monographs on your list to the most recently published ones)?

Section II

A. Is “empire” an important category for understanding colonial America? How did empires work in early American history, how relevant were they, and what were the limits of their power? In developing your answer, refer to examples from important works of scholarship.

B. It might be argued that colonial American history over the past two generations has been rewritten from the margins, borderlands, and frontiers. Discuss how scholarship on colonial American borderlands has reshaped our understanding of the overall story.

C. Part of the story of early American history has to do with the construction and re-construction of various kinds of social identity. Discuss various ways in which early America witnessed the creation of new categories of social difference—such as race and gender—and new identities.
more generally. Develop your answer using examples drawn from important books on identity-formation in early America.

Section III

A. Americans tend to believe that early Americans were religiously tolerant and valued religious freedom. Is this true? What are the key lessons from recent work on early American religious experience?

B. Scholars have decided that slavery was not one essential thing in early America. Write an essay in which you describe slaveries in early America, trying to synthesize as much recent writing as possible on the subject.