During July 2013 I had the opportunity to participate in a one week seminar “American Origins.” The course was organized by The Gilder Lehrman Institute; a New York based private organization dedicated to furthering the study of American History. There were approximately twenty members of the class and we lived, ate, and studied at the USC campus in Los Angeles. Our primary instructors were Peter Mancall, the Andrew W. Mellon Professor of Humanities and Professor of History and Anthropology at USC and Robert Ritchie, a Senior Associate at the nearby Huntington Library.

The focus of the course was the Native American and European understandings of the early colonial period in an area stretching from Arctic Canada to Brazil. We examined oral, visual, and written sources connected to topics such as religion, long-distance travel, and trade. For me the learning involved wasn’t so much the content of the course but rather our discussions of how to use different types of sources with my students. My colleagues were from all over the U.S. and abroad. The majority worked in various public school systems, but there five or six teachers coming from independent schools.

Aside from our work on campus we also enjoyed a trip to the San Gabriel Mission. We were given a specially prepared tour by Dr. Steve Hackel, an authority on Spanish California. In addition we spent 2 afternoons at the Huntington Library. The Huntington is one of the premier research institutions in the United States and also contains an impressive series of galleries, museums, and gardens. Our group visited sections of the Huntington not open to the general public and spoke with curators about how the museum prepares exhibits for school groups.

The seminar was a helpful experience in several ways. I was exposed to an assortment of resources I will experiment with this school year. At the same time, getting to know teachers from varying backgrounds provided me with some fresh ideas I can put to good use.