In 1890, W. E. B. Du Bois pointed to Jefferson Davis as “a representative of civilization” as it had developed over the previous century. Scholars have often remembered the 19th century as the Age of Emancipation, as an age of liberal nation-building or even as the Age of Lincoln. But according to the latest scholarship, 19th-century American civilization was dependent on slave-based capitalism, racism and imperial conquest. Seen in that light, Jefferson Davis, as a soldier in the Mexican-American War, a U.S. secretary of war and senator, a Mississippi cotton planter, and leader of a slaveholding breakaway republic with imperial ambitions of its own, was much more than an anomaly.

This conference coincides with the completion of “The Papers of Jefferson Davis” documentary editing project. A group of leading American historians will look unblinkingly on the 19th-century U.S. as a nation in which Jefferson Davis, more than Lincoln, was in many ways the typical figure. Like Du Bois in 1890, we “wish to consider not the man, but the type of civilization which his life represented,” with papers on the forces — territorial expansion, slavery, capitalism, nationalism, Civil War memory and empire — with which Jefferson Davis’s life intersected at crucial moments in U.S. history.

All Sessions in Room 100, Herring Hall

Jefferson Davis’s America:
New Perspectives on the Mid-Nineteenth-Century United States

Friday, Feb. 19

7 p.m. Keynote opening address:
Amy S. Greenberg, Penn State University: “From Mexico to Washington: Jefferson Davis’s 1848”

8:15 p.m. Reception in lobby

Saturday, Feb. 20

8 a.m. Continental breakfast for presenters, Rice grad students and participating faculty in lobby

9 a.m. Kimberly Welch, West Virginia University: “Black Litigants: Rethinking Race and Law in the Cotton South, 1800–1860”

10 a.m. Caitlin C. Rosenthal, University of California, Berkeley: “Slavery’s Scientific Management: Plantation Accounting and American Capitalism”

11 a.m. Coffee break

11:30 a.m. Matthew Karp, Princeton University: “Architects of Empire: Jefferson Davis, the Pre-Civil War South, and the U.S. Military in the 1850s”

12:30 p.m. Lunch break (box lunches for presenters and Rice grad students and participating faculty)

2 p.m. Robert E. Bonner, Dartmouth College: “Jefferson Davis and the Reactionary Atlantic”

3 p.m. Coffee break

3:30 p.m. K. Stephen Prince, University of South Florida: “Robert Charles in Jefferson Davis’s America: Race and Violence in Jim Crow New Orleans”

4:30 p.m. Closing keynote address: William J. Cooper, Louisiana State University: “Jefferson Davis and His Country”

5 p.m. Concluding wine and cheese reception in lobby

6 p.m. Private catered dinner for presenters, Rice faculty and graduate students, and invited guests, Room 129, Herring Hall