

37:575:201:03 U.S. Labor and Work Before the End of Reconstruction
Rutgers University, Fall 2025

Instructor: Michelle Chen

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Meeting Time: Monday 5:40-8:40

Classroom: Cook-Douglass Lecture Hall 103

Course Description:

America is the work of many, but its history often tells the story of just a few. The real story of how America developed--as a nation, a culture, and an idea--is interwoven with countless stories of the people who did the work of creating, expanding and peopling this society--sometimes driven by a vision of collective prosperity, but more typically fueled by individual aspiration, survival or avarice. This course will explore the history of labor and working-class people from the first encounters of colonialism to the mass labor uprisings at the turn of the twentieth century. We will analyze the historical forces that created our socioeconomic hierarchy, including migration, global capitalism, slavery, indenture, labor organizing and industrialization. Through the experiences of workers as historical actors, including African, indigenous and European peoples, we will discuss what it means to work, how class is formed, and how different types of identity--race, ethnicity and gender--intersect with people's identity as workers.

This is a writing intensive course that meets the writing distribution requirement for the School of Arts and Sciences. The coursework will not only involve writing short and long papers, but also engaging in collaborative review and revision of your writing with your classmates. In addition to developing your own writing skills through writing successive drafts, you will learn to provide constructive feedback to other students' writing. As part of the writing component, peer review sessions are built into the assignment schedule to facilitate writing instruction. The instructor will offer guidance on drafts but a large part of the writing process will involve giving and receiving feedback before you submit your final drafts. By the end of the course, you should be able to demonstrate mastery of expository writing and the editing process, in addition to a firm grasp of history writing and using primary and secondary sources in your historical analysis.

Specifically, you should be able to:

- enter into a dialogue with specialists in a particular field of study,
- read essays and extract and explain key points and terms,
- organize a paper from thesis, to topic sentence, to conclusion,
- interact with texts by using meaningful citations in their papers,
- use a range of sentence structures, and
- write meaningful, clear, and organized papers.
- thesis development
- logic and organization
- tone, vocabulary, and spelling

Learning Objectives:

The following learning objectives of the course are based on Rutgers University's "Permanent Core Curriculum Learning Outcome Goals" (May 2008) and relate to the overall objective of a liberal arts education. "A Rutgers SAS graduate will be able to:"

In the history and social science of the core:

H. Understand the basis and development of human and societal endeavors across time and place.

K. Explain the development of some aspect of a society or culture over time.

L: Employ historical reasoning to study human endeavors

M: Understand different theories of human culture; social identity, economic entities, political systems, and other forms of social organization.

In the writing and communication area of the core:

S1: Communicate complex ideas effectively, in standard written English, to a general audience.

S2: provide and respond effectively to editorial feedback from peers and instructors/supervisors through successive drafts.

T: Communicate effectively in modes appropriate to a discipline or area of inquiry.

U: Evaluate and critically assess sources and use conventions of attribution and citation.

V: Analyze and synthesize information and ideas from multiple sources to generate new insights.

In the Labor Studies and Employment Relations Department:

- Demonstrate an understanding of the perspectives, theories and concepts in the field of labor and employment relations. (Goal 1).
- Apply those concepts, and substantive institutional knowledge, to understanding contemporary developments related to work. (Goal 2).
- Analyze the degree to which forms of human difference shape a person's experience of work. (Goal 6)

In the School of Management and Labor Relations:

- Demonstrate an understanding of relevant theories and apply them given the background context of a particular work situation. (Goal IV)
- Evaluate the context of workplace issues, public policies, and management decisions (Goal V).
- Demonstrate an understanding of how to apply knowledge necessary for effective work performance (Goal VI)

Evaluation Breakdown:

- Attendance, participation, presentation: 15%
- Essay 1: 20%
- Essay 2: 20%
- Short reading responses: 15%
- Final paper: 30%

Disability Statement:

Rutgers University welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. In order to receive consideration for reasonable accommodations, a student with a disability must contact the appropriate disability services office at the campus where you are officially enrolled, participate in an intake interview, and provide documentation: <https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/documentation-guidelines>. If the documentation supports your request for reasonable accommodations, your campus's disability services office will provide you with a Letter of Accommodations. Please share this letter with your instructors and discuss the accommodations with them as early in your courses as possible. To begin this process, please complete the Registration form on the ODS web site at: <https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/registration-form>.

This course is open to all students who meet the academic requirement for participation. Any student who has a need for accommodation based on the impact of disability should refer to the Rutgers Office of Disability Services and then contact the instructor privately to discuss the specific situation as soon as possible.

Statement on Academic Freedom:

Freedom to teach and freedom to learn are inseparable facets of academic freedom. This class will introduce an array of sometimes conflicting ideas and interpretations of U.S. history, and all who partake in the course should feel encouraged to express their views in an open, civic forum.

Please note that the syllabus may change during the semester as I deem necessary.

Course work:

Canvas: Assignments, readings and announcements will be posted regularly on Canvas. To ensure that you do not miss any updates, please subscribe to notifications for new Canvas content.

Required text: The following required book is currently out of print but has been uploaded onto the class Canvas site. You do not need to purchase the book.

Rosenweig, et al. *Who Built America? Working People and the Nation's History* (2025 edition, beta): [Who Built America?](#)

The online readings and one academic article (available via Rutgers Library) compliment the main text. Some of the online readings are primary sources and will be noted as such on the syllabus. Other online readings are secondary sources—commentaries and historical analysis provided after the events have taken place.

Primary sources and some of the secondary readings are from the following books. Excerpts will be uploaded:

- [The American Yawp Reader](#)
- *American Labor: A Documentary Collection* by M. Dubofsky (Editor), J. McCartin (Editor)

● *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs* by Kathleen M. Brown

Weekly Meetings: Our class meets once a week. In mid-October, when the instructor will be traveling abroad, the class will be conducted over zoom via a link provided on Canvas.

Conversation questions will be posted the Friday before each Monday meeting, which will serve as the basis for the discussion reading.

Phones and laptops are not permitted during lectures and discussions.

Participation and presentations: Being an active participant in our class discussions is a crucial part of this course. In every class, you may be called upon at random to help lead the discussion on the readings. If you need to miss class, come late, or leave early please let me know. Attendance and participation account for 10% of the semester grade. This component will be determined by your attendance and record of participation in weekly discussions and engagement with the class materials. You are responsible for being sure that you sign the weekly attendance sheet.

Each class will start with a brief presentation led by one or two students, following a schedule set at the beginning of the semester (pick a week with readings that look interesting to you!). The presentation will involve you starting off the discussion for that meeting, by bringing up a passage from the reading that spoke to you, or posing a question to your classmates based on your interpretation of the reading, or prompting your classmates for a debate about a particular event or issue in the reading. The presentation will not be given a letter grade but will be factored into your class participation grade. Participation is 15% of your total grade.

Writing Assignments: This class fulfills one of the writing requirements for undergraduates at Rutgers, so you should expect to be writing something, or reviewing and giving feedback to your peers' writing, during most weeks. There are three main writing assignments over the course of the semester, 800-900-word essays and a 1500-word final essay . You will have an opportunity to write a first draft of the paper, and you will receive commentary on the draft from your peers.

All writing assignments should be emailed to your assigned reader before class time the day they are due.

The use of Generative AI (ChatGPT, etc) in the writing of your assignment will be considered plagiarism and will require a rewrite. In all likelihood, the assignments are structured and graded in such a way that using an AI tool to construct an argument using primary and secondary sources will be more trouble than it's worth.

Weekly Class Summary (subject to change)

Week 1: September 8: Introduction to the Class.

Who Built America? Vol. 1, Ch 1: read introduction through “The French and the Dutch”

Introductions. Syllabus presented.

Week 2: September 15: Colonial encounters--labor and dominion 1492-1680.

Who Built America? Vol. 1, Ch 1: read “The English Experience” through “Conclusion”

[Bartolomé de Las Casas Describes the Exploitation of Indigenous Peoples, 1542](#)

Week 3: September 22: Free and unfree labor (1619-1760)

Who Built America? Ch2

American Labor Ch 1 excerpts (on Canvas)

Week 4: September 29: Family Labor, Reproductive Labor, and Gender (1640-1750)

Who Built America? Ch 3: read only “Rural Families and Independence” through “Cities by the Sea”

Brown, Ch 6

Saidiya Hartman, “The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women’s Labors,” *Souls* 18 (2016), No. 1, 166–73.

American Labor Ch 1 excerpts

Film: “A Midwives Tale.”

Week 5: October 6: Revolution and rebellion

Who Built America? Ch 4

[Boston King recalls fighting for the British and for his freedom, 1798](#)

Peter Bestes and Other Slaves Petition for Freedom (April 20, 1773)

“*New York Mechanics Declaration of Independence.*” (May 29, 1776)

Draft of paper 1 due in class for peer review

Week 6: October 13: The Constitution and capitalism, 1776-1815. CLASS ON ZOOM (link to be posted on Canvas)

Who Built America? Ch 5.

[Hector St. Jean de Crèvecoeur Describes the American people, 1782](#)
[Venture Smith, A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, 1798](#)

Final draft of paper 1 due 10/17

Week 7: October 20: Slavery society in the South

Who Built America? Ch 6.
[Harriet A. Jacobs, "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself." \(1861\)](#)
"The World of Slave Labor" in *American Labor*, Ch 2
[Solomon Northup Describes a Slave Market, 1841](#)

Film: "Roots"

Week 8: October 27: Wage labor and "free labor," 1790-1837

Who Built America? Ch 7: read only from "Industrialization and Social Stratification" through "The Workingmen's Movement."

Ira Berlin and Herbert G. Gutman. "Natives and Immigrants, Free Men and Slaves: Urban Workingmen in the Antebellum American South." *The American Historical Review* 88, no. 5 (1983): 1175-1200. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1904888>
American Labor excerpts, Ch 2
[BLACK FOUNDERS: The Free Black Community in the Early Republic](#)

Week 9: November 3: Migration, gender and the factory, 1838-1860.

Who Built America? Ch 8.

American Labor excerpts, Ch 2
[Harriet H. Robinson Remembers a Mill Workers' Strike, 1836](#)
[Alexis de Tocqueville, "How Americans Understand the Equality of the Sexes," 1840](#)

Draft of Paper 2 due in class for peer review

Week 10: November 10: The Spread of Slavery and the Crisis of Southern Society, 1836-1848.

Who Built America? Ch 9.

Frederick Douglass, "Frederick Douglass Confronts Working Class Racism." (1836)
American Labor excerpts, Ch 2
[George Fitzhugh Argues that Slavery is Better than Liberty and Equality, 1854](#)

[Prigg v. Pennsylvania, 1842](#)

Final draft of paper 2 due 11/14

Week 11: November 17: The Settlement of the West and the Conflict Over Slave Labor

Who Built America? Ch 10

Browse: [Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project](#)
[Silver, Joseph S. "The Chinese in California." Lippincott's Magazine of Literature, Science, and Education 2 \(1868\): 36](#)
[Charlotte Forten complains of racism in the North, 1855](#)

Paper topic due Wednesday November 19, via email

Week 12: November 24: The Civil War: America's Second Revolution, 1861-1865

Who Built America? Ch 11

[Excerpt from "John Brown,"](#) Digital Public Library of America
Excerpt from "[Boston Courier report of the union meeting in Faneuil hall](#)"
[John C. Calhoun Speech On The Importance Of Domestic Slavery](#)
[Lincoln's Address before the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society | Teaching American History](#)
[Marx's letter to Abraham Lincoln](#)

Week 13: December 1: Reconstructing the Nation, 1865-1877

Who Built America? Ch 12

[Jourdon Anderson Writes His Former Enslaver, 1865](#)
[Freedmen discuss post-emancipation life with General Sherman, 1865](#)
A Northern Unionist Lectures Ex Slaves on the Work Ethic (1865)

Draft of final paper due in class for peer review

Week 14: December 8: Towards a "free labor" society

Who Built America? Vol. 2 Ch 1

[Henry George, Progress and Poverty, Selections \(1879\)](#)
American Labor excerpts, Ch 2

Final draft of final paper due during finals week

Writing Assignments:

Reading responses. Three reading responses will be due over the course of the semester, on weeks of your choosing. You will respond to a writing prompt that will be posted weekly on Canvas under “Assignments,” submitting the response the following Friday. Because this exercise is intended to encourage you to write freely, the response will be graded only on a credit/no credit basis, but will receive feedback from Writing Assistants.

Essay assignment 1

Work and life in early America

Write a 800-900 word essay that draws from both primary and secondary sources in the syllabus, in response to the following question: “How were work and workers defined differently for different groups that coexisted in early America? Choose three groups (e.g. women, white landowners, indigenous people, enslaved Africans, etc.) that our readings cover, who either do labor, or are defined as labor, in distinct ways. For each group, cite at least two primary sources that show how work (or the label of “worker”) was defined, quoting the portion of the primary source that demonstrates how this definition played out in their day to day lives; their social interactions with their employers, coworkers or community members; and how they viewed themselves and their position in early American society. In your analysis of these three groups, explain what these three definitions of work/workers tell us about the social structure and culture of early American communities, and how that is similar or different to what you experience in your own life today.

Essay assignment 2

Slave labor, free labor and democracy

Write a 800-900 word essay that draws from both primary and secondary sources in the second half of the syllabus, about one major contradiction that you see in the American labor and economic system since the establishment of the early Republic. Discuss contradictions in how free and unfree labor were defined, for example, or how domestic and wage labor were valued or devalued during this time, or the contradictions inherent in definitions of democracy under capitalism. Quote 3-4 primary sources and cite at least one secondary source outside of the main textbook, to explain why the phenomenon you describe is a contradiction, the social and cultural consequences of this contradiction, and whether, or to what extent, anyone or any group tried to rectify or justify this seeming conflict between different coexisting realities.

Final paper

In a 1500 word essay, use at least two secondary sources and 3-4 primary sources to discuss one significant event or development in work life, or working-class life, that continues to influence how people in America work today. Use quotes from primary sources and do a close reading of passages from the stories of individuals, communities or organizations, to analyze how these historical phenomena influenced definitions of work and labor rights that still apply today, and show how the struggles and crisis facing the working class shaped the social landscape of class,

race or gender that we still live with today. Spend most of the essay, of course, on discussion of history, but when pointing to contemporary labor-related issues that have a historical resonance, cite outside sources you used in your analysis.

You will submit your topic and a list of sources three weeks before the due date and receive feedback on this from the instructor. Two weeks before the end of the term, we will devote part of class to peer review, in which you and your classmates will exchange drafts and give each other feedback in both written form and class discussion.