

Course Syllabus

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U.S. Labor and Work Before the End of Reconstruction

Rutgers University 37:575:201:93 *Tentative – Subject to Change*

Fall 2025



Course schedule: Thursday, 5:40pm-8:40pm, September 4 - December 4, 2025. Class meetings held remotely on Zoom. Discussion forums, paper assignments, exams, and other course activities on Canvas.

Instructor: Prof. Derek Seidman, PhD.

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al office hours by appointment.

Course Description: This course surveys major developments and themes in the history of work in the Americas from the period of initial contact between European, African, and Indigenous civilizations through the period of Reconstruction after the U.S. Civil War. The course centers on the historical contexts and shifts that shaped early American concepts and experiences of work, with a focus on slavery, indentured servitude, domestic work, free labor, and the rise and impacts of industrialization and the early labor movement. We will approach this history of work in early America from both from the "bottom-up," focused on the diverse experiences, identities, and worldviews of ordinary people, and from the "top-down," looking at the major larger political and economic forces that shaped the history of work during our time period. By combining these "top-down" and "bottom-up" approaches, and through close secondary and primary source readings, we will gain a deeper understanding of what structured the experiences of work in early America and how ordinary people experienced this work.

Skills development: This course meets the writing distribution requirement for the School of Arts and Sciences. In addition to developing writing skills through writing successive drafts, students will learn to

provide constructive feedback to their peers. At the conclusion of the course, students will demonstrate an increase in their knowledge and skills in writing and revising academic essays.

It is my hope that by the end of this course, students will be able to:

- develop and demonstrate their critical thinking and analytical skills as readers, listeners, writers, and communicators.
- be able to organize a paper from thesis, to topic sentence, to conclusion and write meaningful, clear, and organized papers.
- be able to generate your own arguments, backed by evidence, on the questions raised by the history we study.
- be able to recall the key features and basic arcs of the aspects of history we study, and understand how the different parts of that history relate to a larger whole.
- develop a basic understanding of how to interpret primary and secondary sources.
- perhaps most of all, I hope that the study of the history of work and workers in early America strengthens your own capacity for tolerance, empathy, and understanding and helps you to further develop your own personal sense of morality and larger mission in life.

Learning Objectives: This course covers several School of Arts and Sciences (SAS), School of Management and Labor Relations (SMLR), and Labor Studies and Employment Relations (LSER) Department learning objectives.

School of Arts and Sciences:

Students will learn to:

HST-1: Explain the development of some aspect of a society or culture over time.

SCL-1: Understand different theories about human culture, social identity, economic entities, political systems, and other forms of social organization.

WCR: Communicate complex ideas effectively, in standard written English, to a general audience, and respond effectively to editorial feedback from peers, instructors, and/or supervisors through successive drafts and revision.

WCD: Communicate effectively in modes appropriate to a discipline or area of inquiry; evaluate and critically assess sources and use the conventions of attribution and citation correctly; and analyze and synthesize information and ideas from multiple sources to generate new insights.

School of Management and Labor Relations:

Students will learn to:

I: Communicate effectively at a level and in modes appropriate to an entry-level professional.

IV: Demonstrate an understanding of relevant theories and apply them given the background context of a particular work situation.

Labor Studies and Employment Relations Department:

Students will learn to:

1: Demonstrate an understanding of the perspectives, theories and concepts in the field of labor and employment relations.




4: Make an argument using contemporary or historical evidence.

Course Requirements:

1. **Read the entire syllabus** and make sure you understand it! You will be responsible for following the rules, guidelines and expectations here.
2. **Be prepared for class.** Always complete any reading, discussion, and writing assignments by their due dates. Also, check your email and Canvas notifications regularly for class announcements!
3. **Participation.** For most weeks of this course, we will have synchronous (live) class meetings on Zoom that students are expected to attend. These classes will be recorded and posted on the course Canvas site. In addition, we will have asynchronous discussion forums or other assignments that you will complete over a course week. You should participate fully in these forums and assignments. The participation grade will be based on the completion of eight asynchronous discussion forums on assigned readings and videos throughout the semester.
4. **Absences due to illness.** If you have a legitimate reason for not being able to participate in course activities (due to serious illness, or another major reason), report it ***in writing*** in advance or as soon as possible using the University absence reporting website <https://sims.rutgers.edu/ssra/> (<https://sims.rutgers.edu/ssra/>). Not all absences will be excused. Students with excused absences will be able to make up missed course work.
5. **Academic Integrity:** Academic integrity requires that all academic assignments you submit must be the product of your own work. This means that you must generate and write your own work that you submit. For example, you cannot submit work that was produced by another person but that you present as your own work, and you cannot submit work as your own that was created or assisted by a computer application, **including artificial intelligence (AI) programs such as ChatGPT**. Doing so would constitute plagiarism and/or academic dishonesty and violate class policy and Rutgers University Academic Integrity Policy. Joint efforts are legitimate only when the assistance of others is explicitly acknowledged and permitted by the assignment. Ethical conduct is the obligation of every member of the university community, and breaches of academic integrity constitute serious offenses. Students must assume responsibility for maintaining honesty in all work submitted for credit and in any other work designated by the instructor of this course. Students are also expected to report incidents of academic dishonesty to the instructor or dean of the instructional unit. For more information on the Rutgers University Academic Integrity Policy, see <http://nbacademicintegrity.rutgers.edu/home/academic-integrity-policy/> (<http://nbacademicintegrity.rutgers.edu/home/academic-integrity-policy/>) and <https://nbprovost.rutgers.edu/academic-integrity-students>

<https://nbprovost.rutgers.edu/academic-integrity-students>).

<http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/academic-integrity-policy>).

6. **Copyright:** The instructor for this course holds the copyright to the course teaching materials, including lecture slides, discussion questions, exams, and assignments. The copyrights to the readings and films belong to their rights holders (authors, producers, publishers, etc.). Students may not copy or distribute this material without the permission of the instructor. Unauthorized distributions of course materials are serious offenses. For more information, see the [Rutgers University Copyright Policy](https://policies.rutgers.edu/B.aspx?BookId=12007&PageId=459331)  <https://policies.rutgers.edu/B.aspx?BookId=12007&PageId=459331>).
7. **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. See: <https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/documentation-guidelines> <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://webapps.rutgers.edu/student-ods/forms/registration>.  <https://webapps.rutgers.edu/student-ods/forms/registration>).
8. **Statement on Academic Freedom:** Faculty and students alike are free to express their viewpoints at appropriate times in class, including perspectives that differ from most in the Rutgers University community. Students may be exposed to views they find challenging, uncomfortable, or distressing. But, since Rutgers is a public institution, First Amendment speech protections apply. Legally, feelings of discomfort are not sufficient to restrict speech. Pedagogically, exposing people to different ideas—even challenging their most deeply held beliefs—is a feature, not a flaw, of academic life. Free inquiry is essential to a robust learning environment. Students and professors are at our best—and  best able to contribute to society—when we are exposed to a wide range of challenging ideas.
9. **Missed Exams:** All students are expected to take the scheduled midterm and final exams at the designated times.
10. **Canvas:** This course uses the Rutgers Canvas course management system, accessible at <https://canvas.rutgers.edu> (<https://canvas.rutgers.edu>). Click “NetID Login” on the right side of the main Canvas site. Once you log in, you can access the course site by clicking the “Courses” tab. The course site features the syllabus and weekly modules with the reading, viewing, and writing assignments.
11. **Paper Assignments:** All paper drafts and peer reviews must be completed for full credit. You will submit all drafts of your papers electronically on Canvas and they will be checked using Turnitin.
12. **Lateness Policy:** All late paper assignments and exams will be marked down 10 points for every 24-hour period they are late. If you have a severe personal emergency that makes it impossible for you to meet the deadlines, please contact your instructors.

13. **Required Readings:** Many of the reading assignments will be chapters from the following textbook, which is [available free online](https://www.whobuiltamerica.org/reader/table-of-contents):  (<https://www.whobuiltamerica.org/reader/table-of-contents>)

[Who Built America? Open Educational Resource](https://www.whobuiltamerica.org/reader/table-of-contents) 

(<https://www.whobuiltamerica.org/reader/table-of-contents>) (known in its most recent print edition as: Clark, Christopher and Nancy Hewitt, eds. *Who Built America?: Working People and the Nation's History Volume One: To 1877*, Third Edition. Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin Press, 2008).

In addition to the textbook, there are other required readings and videos that will either be assigned to for class meetings and discussion forums. These will be posted as PDF files, Word documents, video files, or web links in the modules on the weekly modules on the course Canvas site. Some of the additional readings are primary source documents written in the past that provide perspectives and insight on historical developments and events. Other additional readings are secondary source commentaries and historical analyses written after the events have taken place.

14. **Assignment Points:** Assignments are assigned points (up to 1,000 total points for all course assignments)

Discussion forums: 200 points (8 discussion forums worth 25 points each; points deducted for late and/or incomplete submissions)


Paper 1: 200 points (50 points for the first draft and peer review; 150 points for the final draft)

Midterm Exam: 200 points

Paper 2: 200 points (50 points for the first draft and peer review; 150 points for the final draft)

Final Exam: 200 points

15. **Final Grades:** Here is how the 1,000 point grade scale translates into final letter grades:

 900 to 1000 points = A	850 to 899 points = B+	750 to 799 points = C+	600 to 699 points = D
	800 to 849 points = B	700 to 749 points = C	0 to 599 points = F

The syllabus, schedule, and assignments are subject to change as the course evolves.

Weekly Class Schedule:

Week 1: Course Introduction

Week 2: The Rise of the Atlantic Proletariat

Week 3: Atlantic World Slavery

Week 4: Colonial Society and Family Labor

Week 5: The American Revolution from Below + Paper 1 Draft Due

Week 6: Writing Conferences

Week 7: Slavery and Abolition + Paper 1 Due

Week 8: The Amistad Revolt and Midterm Exam

Week 9: Wage Labor in the Early Republic

Week 10: Out West: Expansion, Conflict, Immigration

Week 11: America's Second Revolution: Civil War and Reconstruction + Paper 2 Draft Due

Week 12: Writing Conferences

<https://rutgers.instructure.com/courses/368816/modules/1843690> Week 13: No Class (Thanksgiving)

Week 14: The Rise of the Labor Question + Course Conclusion;

<https://rutgers.instructure.com/courses/368816/modules/1843692> Final Paper Due and Final Exam

Final Exam schedule to be announced

Rutgers COVID-19 Information


For up-to-date information about Rutgers and COVID-19, visit <https://coronavirus.rutgers.edu>.

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Additional Help With Writing

[The Rutgers Learning Centers \(https://rlc.rutgers.edu/\)](https://rlc.rutgers.edu/) offers remote writing coaching services to students enrolled in this course. Visit <https://learningcenters.rutgers.edu/student-services/academic-coaching> [↗](https://learningcenters.rutgers.edu/student-services/academic-coaching) <https://learningcenters.rutgers.edu/student-services/academic-coaching> for more information.

Student Affairs

 [The Office of the Dean of Students](http://deanofstudents.rutgers.edu/) [↗](http://deanofstudents.rutgers.edu/) [\(http://deanofstudents.rutgers.edu/\)](http://deanofstudents.rutgers.edu/) provides support to students who may be facing exceptional difficulties that could jeopardize their education. Visit their website to learn more about the type of support they offer and/or to schedule an appointment.

Health & Wellness

[Student Health & Wellness Services \(http://shp.rutgers.edu/current_students/shrp_oss_mhc.html\)](http://shp.rutgers.edu/current_students/shrp_oss_mhc.html) provides health services to students on its various campuses through Student Health Centers.


Resources for Student Success

The faculty and staff at Rutgers are committed to your success. Students who are successful tend to seek out resources that enable them to excel academically, maintain their health and wellness, prepare for future careers, navigate college life and finances, and connect with the RU community. Resources that can help you succeed and connect with the Rutgers community can be found

at [success.rutgers.edu \(http://success.rutgers.edu/\)](http://success.rutgers.edu/), and nearly all services and resources that are typically provided in-person are now available remotely.

Technical Support (<https://rutgers.instructure.com/courses/16096/pages/student-affairs>)

If you need technical assistance at any time during the course or to report a problem with Canvas:

- Visit the [Canvas Video Guide \(https://community.canvaslms.com/community/answers/guides/video-guide\)](https://community.canvaslms.com/community/answers/guides/video-guide)
- Contact the [Rutgers IT Help Desk \(https://it.rutgers.edu/help-support\)](https://it.rutgers.edu/help-support) (<https://it.rutgers.edu/help-support> ) (<https://it.rutgers.edu/help-support>), call 833-OIT-HELP)
- Visit the [Getting Started in Canvas page \(https://community.canvaslms.com/t5/Student-Guide/Student-Getting-Started-Resources/ta-p/579371\)](https://community.canvaslms.com/t5/Student-Guide/Student-Getting-Started-Resources/ta-p/579371)

