

The City in American History



Crowd protesting lack of street lighting and police protection in The Hill District, Pittsburgh, August 1951. Photograph by Charles "Teenie" Harris. Heinz Family Fund. © Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh

HIST 474 | Fall 2025
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 2:30–3:45PM
Woodburn Hall G21

Instructor: Dr. Michael Allen
Office: Chitwood 220
Office Hours: Mondays & Wednesdays 10:00AM – 12:00PM & by appointment
Email: michael.allen@mail.wvu.edu

INFORMATION

Description

This course provides a survey of how the city has been a major subject of American history. The course examines aspects of urban change in nineteenth-century America, including urban design, capitalist transformation, crime, rioting, politics, popular culture, and the social conflict that emerged around efforts to regulate and reform the metropolis and its diverse populations. Then the course studies the twentieth century, with the city as historical site of urban and regional planning, zoning, Jim Crow spatial ordering, class integration and segregation, urban renewal, social activism and gentrification. The course uses specific cities as case studies as it moves through a largely chronological approach to urban history. The survey emphasizes certain places and themes at the exclusion of others, so consider this simply one opening into American urban history among many possibilities.

Learning Objectives

- Students will identify major historic trends in the development of American cities;
- Students will learn the forces that shaped the rise, crest and decline of American cities;
- Students will understand how the city has been a major historic arena for social change through organized struggle;
- Students will learn the urban policies at local, state and federal levels that have shaped and reshaped American cities;
- Students will understand how cities have been spaces for social organization;
- Students will examine how capitalism has enabled both the rise of American cities and their decline.

Office Hours

I keep office hours to support you, so please make use of them. I also understand that the regular hours may not work for students, and am available to schedule an appointment on campus or virtually. I can likely meet by appointment right before our class meeting time.

Academic Policies

Please familiarize yourself with WVU's academic policies, including those pertaining to academic integrity and standards, inclusivity and equity, COVID-19, class recording, and mental health, among others. You can find these statements here:

<https://tlcommons.wvu.edu/syllabus-policies-and-statements>

Course Delivery and Organization

This course is an in-person lecture and discussion-based class. Course material, including assignments, will be delivered via eCampus, organized by week. I may amend the syllabus as the semester progresses, but all readings are included here.

Assignments and Evaluation

Attendance and Participation	15%
Short Essays	35%
Midterm Paper	20%
Final Paper Proposal	5%
Final Paper	25%

GRADING AND ASSIGNMENTS

Attendance

Attendance is mandatory, but can be excused with instructor permission. You are allowed three unexcused absences before penalties begin to accrue. Excuses will be made for health and mental health reasons as well as personal crises, and can be made for travel or activities related to other courses or university activities. Please confer with me as soon as possible about any requests for an excuse, and do so *before* the session you would need to miss. Unexcused absences will proportionally affect the “Attendance and Participation” portion of your course grade. Given the single weekly meeting time, the class cannot function without your arriving prepared and ready for discussion.

While the use of electronic devices is necessary to access eBooks and PDFs, as well as to enhance learning by looking up things to share with the class or looking up terms and phrases (or translating if English is not your first language), it can be distracting if activity is unrelated to learning. I reserve the right to request that you put electronic devices away if I feel that your use is problematic.

Participation

Each undergraduate student will be responsible for responding to one day’s readings and themes with a brief set of questions for class discussion, taking up no more than 7 minutes. The goal is to spark participation. The student will follow the introductory lecture or presentation by the instructor or guest. These dates will be assigned in week 2.

Graduate students enrolled in the course will make a longer presentation of 10-15 minutes on their assigned dates. These will include reflections on central ideas in the readings.

Short Essays

There will be seven short essay assignments, generally occurring after every two weeks’ worth of readings. These assignments will be posted in advance on eCampus with a starting question or prompt and will require citation of the assigned readings as well as demonstration of your own critical analysis of the historic themes. Essays should be a minimum of 300 words, and will be submitted by the end of the week as noted on the syllabus (that is, you have until the end of that Friday). Each essay will be worth 5% of the overall course grade for a total of 35%.

Midterm Paper

Students will write a midterm research paper on how American cities are depicted in either film or music. The instructor will create lists of suggested films, albums and songs to research. Undergraduate students should submit a 5-7 page paper in a 12-point typeface with citations formatted in the Chicago Manual of Style. Graduate students should submit papers of 7-10 pages with the same requirements. A detailed assignment sheet for the midterm paper will be circulated in week 3. The instructor is glad to discuss potential topics.

Final Paper

The final paper will situate a major course topic within the history of a specific American city. Undergraduate students should submit a 6-8 page paper in a 12-point typeface with citations formatted in the Chicago Manual of Style. Graduate students should submit papers of 10-12 pages with the same requirements. A detailed assignment sheet for the midterm paper will be circulated in week 7. Paper proposals will be submitted and reviewed by the instructor. The final paper proposal is worth 5% of the overall course grade, while the paper is worth 25%.

Late Work/Extensions

Late work will be reduced by half a letter grade (5 percentage points) for each day that it is late. Extensions will be granted on a case by case basis, without judgment. I encourage you to reach out if you anticipate failing to make a deadline, as it is best for both of us to know that in advance (and for you to get an extension).

Grading Scale

A+	98-100%	B	83-86%	C-	70-72%	F	59-0%
A	93-97%	B-	80-82%	D+	67-69%		
A-	90-92%	C+	77-79%	D	63-66%		
B+	87-89%	C	73-76%	D-	60-62%		

READINGS

Required Texts

All required readings will be posted in full on eCampus.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Week 1: Introductions

Thursday 8/21

Introductions

Week 2: Early “American” Cities

Tuesday 8/26

Readings:

John E. Kelly, “Contextualizing Aggregation and Nucleation as Demographic Processes Leading to Cahokia’s Emergence as an Incipient Urban Center,” *Comparative Approaches to Population Aggregation and Early Urbanization* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019).

Brenna Bhandar, “The Political Anatomy of Colonization,” *Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land and Racial Regimes of Ownership* (Duke University Press, 2018).

Due:

Student Profile

Participation Leads Assigned

Thursday 8/28

Readings:

William Cronon, “Taking the Forest” and “A World of Fields and Fences,” *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003).

Morrow Reardon Wilkinson Miller Ltd., *The Santa Fe Plaza: Cultural Landscape Report* (2005), p. 4-5, 23-49; skim maps and photos.

Week 3: From the Colonial City to the Republican City

Tuesday 9/2

Readings:

Vincent Scully, *American Architecture and Urbanism* (New York: Praeger Books, 1969), p. 16-51.

J.B. Jackson, “A Pair of Ideal Landscapes,” *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

Thursday 9/4

Readings:

Dell Upton, “The Grid and the Republican Spatial Imaginary,” *Urban Life and Urban Spaces of the New American Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

Pier Vittorio Auerli, “Appropriation, Subtraction, Abstraction: A Political History of the Urban Grid,” *Log 44* (Fall 2018).

Due Next Day:

Short Essay #1

Week 4: 19th Century Uses and Abuses of the American City

Tuesday 9/9

Readings:

Dell Upton, "The Smell of Danger" and "Noise and Gabble," *Urban Life and Urban Spaces of the New American Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

Lisa Keller, "The Regulated City," *Triumph of Order: Democracy & Public Space in New York and London* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

Thursday 9/11

Readings:

Walter Johnson, "Acts of Sale" and "Life in the Shadow of the Slave Market," *Soul By Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

Phillippe Bourgois, "If You're Not Black, Then You're White: A History of Ethnic Relations in St. Louis," *City & Society* (December 1989).

Week 5: The Invention of the City Park

Tuesday 9/16

Readings:

David Schuyler, "The Ideology of the Public Park," *The New Urban Landscape: The Redefinition of City Form in Nineteenth Century America* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

Frederick Law Olmsted, "Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns," *Civilizing American Cities: A Selection of Frederick Law Olmsted's Writings on City Landscape* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1979).

Andrew Jackson Downing, "The New York Park," *The Horticulturist* 8 (August 1, 1851).

Thursday 9/18

NO CLASS MEETING, Instructor Away

*Due Next Day:
Short Essay #2*

Week 6: Questions of Assimilation and Integration

Tuesday 9/23

Reading:

Carla L. Peterson, "The Draft Riots: July 1863," *Black Gotham: A Family History of African Americans in Nineteenth-Century New York City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

Thursday 9/25

Reading:

Adam Arenson, "Separating the City, County and Nation," *The Great Heart of the Republic: St. Louis and the Cultural Civil War* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2011).

James Wunsch, "The Social Evil Ordinance," *American Heritage* 33.2 (February/March 1982).
<https://www.americanheritage.com/social-evil-ordinance>

Week 7: Industrialization and Its Discontents

Tuesday 9/30

Readings:

Walter Licht, "An Industrial Heartland," *Industrializing America: The Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

William Cronon, "Rails and Water" and "Gateway City," *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991).

Thursday 10/2

Readings:

Mark Kruger, "The St. Louis Commune," *The St. Louis Commune of 1877: Communism in the Heartland* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2021).

Robert F. Zeidel, "Confronting the Barons: Immigrant Workers and Individual Moguls," *Robber Barons and Wretched Refuse: Ethnic and Class Dynamics during the Era of American Industrialization* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020).

Due Next Day:
Short Essay #3

Week 8: The Rise of Urban Inequality and the Gilded Age

Tuesday 10/7

Readings:

Richard Plunz, "Rich and Poor," *A History of Housing in New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

W.E.B. DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), excerpts.

Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), excerpt.

Thursday 10/9

NO CLASS MEETING, Fall Break

Week 9: The Middle Class and the Rise of the Suburbs

Tuesday 10/14

NO CLASS MEETING, Instructor Away

Thursday 10/16

Readings:

Kenneth T. Jackson, "Home Sweet Home: The House and the Yard" and "Romantic Suburbs," *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

Dolores Hayden, "From Ideal City to Dream House," *Redesigning the American Dream: Gender, Housing and Family Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002).

Due:

Midterm Paper

Week 10: Urban Planning and Zoning in the Progressive Era

Tuesday 10/21

Readings:

Richard E. Foglesong, "Planning the City Beautiful," *Planning the Capitalist City: The Colonial Era to the 1920s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

City Plan Commission, *A Major Street Plan for St. Louis* (1917) – skim major sections and maps.

Thursday 10/23

Readings:

Karen Benjamin, "The Segregation Ordinances versus Racial Zoning," *Good Parents, Better Homes, and Great Schools: Selling Segregation before the New Deal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2025).

Due Next Day:

Short Essay #4

Week 11: The Great Depression and the New Deal

Tuesday, 10/28

Readings:

Katelin Penner, "Bringing Catherine Bauer's Vision HOME," *Modern Housing for the 21st Century* (October 30, 2024).

<https://www.modernhous.ing/p/bringing-catherine-bauers-vision>

Thomas Sugrue, "The Coffin of Peace": The Containment of Public Housing," *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005).

Thursday, 10/30

Readings:

Kenneth T. Jackson, "Federal Subsidy and the Suburban Dream," *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

Richard Rothstein, "Own Your Own Home," and "Private Agreements, Government Enforcement," *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2017).

Week 12: The Scales of Urban Renewal After World War II

Tuesday, 11/4

Readings:

Jane Jacobs, "The Missing Link in City Redevelopment (1956)," *Vital Little Plans: The Short Works of Jane Jacobs* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016).

Francesca Russello Ammon, "Armies of Bulldozers Smashing Down Acres of Slums," *Bulldozer: Demolition and Clearance of the Postwar Landscape* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2016).

Listen:

Robert Moses, "Address to the New York City Building Conference (1959)," WNYC.

<https://www.wnyc.org/story/robert-moses-address-to-the-new-york-city-building-conference-luncheon/>

Thursday, 11/6

Readings:

Anthony N. Penna, "Changing Images of Twentieth-Century Pittsburgh," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 43.1 (1976).

Mindy Thompson Fullilove, "Urban Renewal..." and "...Means Negro Removal," *Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America and What We Can Do About It* (New York: New Village Press, 2016).

Due Next Day:

Short Essay #5

Week 13: Federal Interventions and The Urban Crisis in the 1960s and 1970s

Tuesday 11/11

Reading:

Judson L. James, "Federalism and the Model Cities Experiment," *Publius* 2.1 (Spring 1972).
Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, "The Urban Crisis Is Over—Long Live the Urban Crisis!," *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Home Ownership* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

Thursday 11/13

Reading:

Alexander Von Hoffman, "Why They Built Pruitt-Igoe," *From Tenements to the Taylor Homes: In Search of an Urban Housing Policy in Twentieth-Century America* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000).

Akira Drake Rodriguez, "'What Are We Doing to Help Ourselves?'," *Diverging Space for Deviants: The Politics of Atlanta's Public Housing* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2021).

Due:

Final Paper Proposal

Week 14: Contested Cities

Tuesday 11/18

Guest: Austin McCoy, Assistant Professor of History, WVU

Reading:

Derek G. Handley, "'Citizen and Social Action' in Milwaukee, Wisconsin," *Struggle for the City: Citizenship and Resistance in the Black Freedom Movement* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2024).

Benjamin Looker, "Elementary Republics and Little Platoons: The Neighborhood Self-Government Movement," *A Nation of Neighborhoods: Imagining Cities, Communities and Democracy in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

Thursday 11/21

Readings:

Eric Avila, "A Matter of Perspective: The Racial Politics of Seeing the Freeway," *The Folklore of the Freeway: Race and Revolt in the Modernist City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

Mike Davis, "The Case for Letting Malibu Burn," *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998).

Due Next Day:

Short Essay #6

Week 15: Fall Recess

Tuesday 11/25

NO CLASS MEETING: Fall Recess

Thursday 11/27

NO CLASS MEETING: Fall Recess

Week 16: The Neoliberal Turn: Broken Windows to Gentrification

Tuesday, 12/2

Readings:

James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling, "Broken Windows: The Police and Neighborhood Safety," *The Atlantic* (March 1982).

Alex Vitale, "The Police Are Not Here to Protect You," *The End of Policing* (New York: Verso, 2017).

Robin D.G. Kelley, "Thug Nation: On State Violence and Disposability," *Policing the Planet* (New York: Verso Books, 2016).

Thursday, 12/4

Readings:

Neil Smith, "Is Gentrification A Dirty Word?", *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (London: Routledge Press, 1996).

Jason Hackworth, "Saving the City to Kill It," *Manufacturing Decline: How Racism and the Conservative Movement Crush the American Rust Belt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

Davarian Baldwin, "The Schools That Ate New York," *The Shadow of the Ivory Tower: How Universities Are Plundering Our Cities* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2021).

Due Next Day:
Short Essay #7

Week 17: Conclusions

Tuesday, 12/9

TBD

Thursday, 12/11

TBD

Due:
Final Paper