

Gate-crashing the Party: 500 years of Immigration to America

Online Course ♦ Tuesdays, 10:00-12:00 ♦ September 1–October 20



Every American, except Native Americans, descends from folks arriving from overseas and finding themselves welcomed with hostility by earlier arrivals. We will look at why each major group came, what they faced, and how they coped. Each group carried fear in their baggage but also, except for the African slaves, at least a tincture of hope. Immigration is not a part of American history, but is American history itself, and a story that will dominate the 21st century.

Class 1 – “The Land of Flowers” (ca. 20,000 BCE~1607): The first arrivals across the Bering Strait faced a European scramble to divide up the hemisphere, on our land this started with Spanish colonies along our southeast coasts.

Class 2 – Colonization (ca. 1607 ~1787): From aggressive English seeking profit to Africans driven here by whips, to a multi-cultural society finally confident enough to declare independence.

Class 3 – Growing Pains (1787~1860): Privacy-seeking Germans, starving Irish, and displaced Scots arrive to industrialize the Northeast and settle the Midwest, forcibly displacing the natives. Anti-immigration sentiment (especially anti-Catholic) becomes a powerful political force.

Class 4 – “Go West” (1860~80s): Chinese arrive lured by gold and jobs, and Scandinavians by cheap land. Runaway rapacious capitalism corrupts government and in Western states drives anti-Asian legislation.

Class 5 – Wretched, huddled Ellis Island masses (1880s~1918): The greatest immigrant impact in history—Eastern Europeans and Sicilians fleeing poverty, Jews fleeing hatred—make America the world industrial leader and are thanked by anti-immigrant panic.

Class 6 – Years of Paranoia (1918~60s): Fear of socialists, fascists, and communists force Ellis Island closure and immigrant quotas. WWII creates a new category—refugee—and Cold War politics dominate immigration policy. People of African descent at last are promised assimilation.

Class 7 – Caught Unawares (1960s~2000s): Two unexpected new factors come to dominate the numbers: Latin American migrants and Southeast Asian refugees.

Class 8 – “The Permanently Unfinished Country” (today): Renewed fears of an uncontrolled flood polarizes our never-ending debate about how to define America.