

Econ. 623 American Economic History
George Mason University, Fall 2025
Mondays 4:30–7:10
Horizon Hall 3001

Instructor: Noel D. Johnson

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Office Location: Buchanan Hall D154

Office Hours: TBA

Course Webpage: Canvas

Course Description

In this course we will read and discuss a selection of articles about U.S. Economic History. The format of the course is thematic – I will not be teaching the narrative of U.S. history. I place a lot of emphasis on teaching you how to consume cutting-edge empirical research from economics journals. You will also be writing your own research paper. There is no required text and all of the readings are downloadable from the internet.

Course Requirements

Eighty percent of success is showing up – Woody Allen

Hear the words of Snoop Dogg: “[The syllabus, you gotta do it, you gotta read it!](#)”

- Research paper worth 10% of your final grade.
- Research paper presentation worth 30% of your final grade.
- Oral midterm exam worth 30% of your final grade.
- Oral final exam worth 30% of your final grade.

Communication

I will post the syllabus, readings, and announcements to the class web page on Canvas.

Email is the best way to get in touch with me. You can contact me at: njohnsoL@gmu.edu.

Lectures will be in person. However, from time to time it may be convenient for us to communicate using zoom. Zoom is free. [Follow the instructions at this link to get started.](#)

My personal zoom meeting room link is:

[Click this link to join zoom meeting](#)

Meeting ID: 912 315 3945

Passcode: 3J5KNG

A Note on the Paper

Your topic can be from any time-period before 1960 ('persistence' papers are a partial exception). It need not be related to the economic history of the United States. The paper **should test or attempt to study a specific hypothesis using historical data**. The test need not be econometric. While it is normal to expect that an economics research paper will involve some modeling and simple regressions it is also possible to produce a good paper making clever use of tables and graphs. What is essential is that you learn how to make an argument and sustain or reject it on the basis of empirical evidence. You might seek to apply an existing model to different data or repeat a test that already exists in the literature using different time periods. The final work should be about 15 pages in length, double-spaced in Times Roman 12 pt. font.

The final draft of the paper must be submitted by 11 pm on **December 8th**. **I will only accept pdf's emailed to me. The subject line of your email should be "AEH Essay" and the file name should be "your last name AEH Essay"**. I will take a letter grade (10%) off your paper grade if you don't submit it when it is due. I will take an additional letter grade (10%) off for every 24 hour period you don't hand it in.

I strongly encourage Ph.D. students to write the paper in L^AT_EX. This is the standard among most researchers in economics today and you might as well learn it now rather than later. Here is a source to get you started:

<http://www.maths.tcd.ie/~dwilkins/LaTeXPrimer/>

Here is another one...

<https://www.tug.org/begin.html>

Presentations

Thirty percent of your course grade is determined by your paper presentation.

I encourage the use of slides for your presentation, but try not to over-do it. If you have questions on what is over-doing it, please refer to this book:

- Tufte, E. (1983). *The visual display of quantitative information*. Graphics Press.

I will grade your presentations on "content" (how well you have framed and answered your research question) and "style" (how well you present the material).

Since you're writing the paper in L^AT_EX, you should probably also make your presentation slides using the L^AT_EX presentation environment known as Beamer. Here are some sample slides and tips

on how to make a good presentation:

https://paulgp.github.io/beamer_tips.html

The Oral Exams

There will be two oral exams in this class. The way they will work is that I will distribute a sign-up sheet and you will choose one of the 15 minute time slots. The slots will all be either during our normally scheduled class time (for the midterms) or during our assigned final exam period (for the finals). Then, when that time slot arrives we will meet on Zoom. Before the exam, I will let you all know two or three of the topics I will be asking you about. For example, we will learn the Malthusian Model early in the semester. So, I may tell you that one of the questions I ask you will be about the Malthusian Model. I will then expect you to be able to use the Whiteboard in Zoom to show the model in its initial equilibrium and then to use the model to answer a question like, “What happens in the model when there is a technological innovation?”. I guarantee you that at least one of the questions I ask you will be about one of these topics I have told you I will ask about. The exam will almost certainly not take the entire 15 minutes allotted.

I’m requiring you to be either on a laptop or desktop with your camera on for the exam. No phones. This is because you will have to use the Whiteboard functionality of Zoom

Recommended Texts

There are no required texts for this class that must be purchased. Most of the readings can be downloaded from either JSTOR, the NBER Working Papers archive, EconLit, or the course webpage. You are required to acquire these papers and read them before the week they are listed on the syllabus. You are expected to know the papers on the course reading list for the exams.

In addition to the papers listed in the Course Outline below, you may wish to purchase a general text on U.S. economic history. Good choices would be:

- Jeremy Atack and Peter Passell. *A New Economic View of American History*, (Norton: New York, 1994).
- Jonathan Hughes and Louis Cain. *American Economic History*, (Addison Wesley: 2006).

Also, some of the articles require knowledge of econometric techniques. I will attempt to explain the methods used when they come up, however, this is not an econometrics class and you may wish to have a more detailed treatment of the methods at your disposal. It is a fact of the economist’s life that empirical methods are very, very, important. Even if you don’t plan on using econometrics for your dissertation or in your own research or work, you will look like a fool (and will often be treated like one) if you don’t understand the basics. A few excellent sources for the basics (plus some more advanced material) are:

- Joshua Angrist and Jorn-Steffen Pischke, *Mastering Metrics: The Path from Cause to Effect*. (Princeton University Press, 2014).
- Cunningham, S. (2020). *Causal Inference: The Mixtape*.
- Huntington-Kline, N. (2021). *The Effect: An Introduction to Research Design and Causality*.

A good place to get advice on how to write a paper is, D.N. McCloskey. *Economical Writing*. Waveland Press, 2000

If you are a Ph.D. student I also highly recommend William Thomson, *A Guide for the Young Economist*. (MIT Press: 2011).

Some Important Dates

First Day of Classes: **8/25**

Labor Day (no class): **9/1**

Fall Break (no class): **10/13**

Thanksgiving Recess: **11/26-11/30**

Last Day of Classes: **12/8**

Final Exam: **12/15 from 4:30pm to 7:15pm**

Final Paper Due: **12/8 by 11pm**

PLEASE NOTE: COURSE POLICIES

1. George Mason University Honor System and Code

Honor Code

George Mason University has an Honor Code, which requires all members of this community to maintain the highest standards of academic honesty and integrity. Cheating, plagiarism, lying, and stealing are all prohibited.

All violations of the Honor Code will be reported to the Honor Committee.

Plagiarism (statements from Mason Web Site)

Plagiarism means using the exact words, opinions, or factual information from another person without giving that person credit.

<http://mason.gmu.edu/montecin/plagiarism.htm#plagiarism>

Please familiarize yourself with the Honor System and Code, as stated in the George Mason University Undergraduate Catalog. When you are given an assignment as an individual, the work must be your own. Some of your work may be collaborative; source material for group projects and work of individual group members must be carefully documented for individual contributions.

<http://mason.gmu.edu/montecin/plagiarism.htm>

2. Class Registration

Students are responsible for verifying the accuracy of their own schedules. Students need to check PatriotWeb regularly to verify that they are registered for the classes that they think they are. This is particularly important since students are no longer dropped for nonpayment.

Faculty may not allow a student who is not registered to continue to attend class and may not grade the work of students who do not appear on the official class roster.

Deadlines each semester are published in the Schedule of Classes available from the Registrar's Web Site registrar.gmu.edu

After the last day to drop a class, withdrawing from this class requires the approval of the dean and is only allowed for nonacademic reasons.

Undergraduate students may choose to exercise a selective withdrawal. See the Schedule of Classes for selective withdrawal procedures.

3. Accommodations for students with disabilities:

If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please see me and contact the Office of Disability Resources at 703-993-2474. All academic accommodations must be arranged through that office.

The need for accommodations should be identified at the beginning of the semester and the specific accommodation has to be arranged through the Office of Disability Resources. Faculty cannot provide accommodations to students on their own (e.g. allowing a student extra time to complete an exam because the student reports having a disability).

Course Outline

Week 1: Introduction

- Peptalk on research from David Weil
- Chapter 1 in Jeremy Atack and Peter Passell. A new view of american history from colonial times to 1940, 1994
- Paul M Romer. Why, indeed, in america? theory, history, and the origins of modern economic growth. *American Economic Review*, 86(2):202–206, 1996
- Nathan Nunn. The historical roots of economic development. *Science*, 367(6485), 2020

Week 2: Measurement and Causality

- Pages 291 to 300 of David A Freedman. Statistical models and shoe leather. *Sociological methodology*, pages 291–313, 1991
- Marginal Revolution University: [Ceteris Paribus](#)
- Marginal Revolution University: [Selection Bias](#)
- Marginal Revolution University: [Randomized Trials](#)
- Bellemare, “A Primer on Linear Regression”
- Bellemare, “A Primer on Causality”

Week 3: Colonialism as a Natural Experiment

- Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson, and James A Robinson. The colonial origins of comparative development: An empirical investigation. *American economic review*, 91(5):1369–1401, 2001
- Melissa Dell. The persistent effects of peru’s mining mita. *Econometrica*, 78(6):1863–1903, 2010

Week 4: Institutions and Antecedents

- Federalist No. 10. Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay. The Federalist Papers. Any edition, any publisher.
- Douglass C North and Barry R Weingast. Constitutions and commitment: the evolution of institutions governing public choice in seventeenth-century england. *The journal of economic history*, 49(4):803–832, 1989
- Steven CA Pincus and James A Robinson. What really happened during the glorious revolution? Technical report, National Bureau of Economic Research, 2011
- Naomi R Lamoreaux. The mystery of property rights: A us perspective. *The Journal of Economic History*, pages 275–306, 2011

Week 5: Industrialization

- Robert C Allen. Why the industrial revolution was british: commerce, induced invention, and the scientific revolution 1. *The Economic History Review*, 64(2):357–384, 2011
- Claudia Goldin and Kenneth Sokoloff. The relative productivity hypothesis of industrialization: The american case, 1820 to 1850. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 99(3):461–487, 1984

Week 6: Cities

- Donald R Davis and David E Weinstein. Bones, bombs, and break points: the geography of economic activity. *American Economic Review*, 92(5):1269–1289, 2002
- Hoyt Bleakley and Jeffrey Lin. Portage and path dependence. *The quarterly journal of economics*, 127(2):587–644, 2012

Week 7 (10/20): Oral Midterm Exams

Week 8: Health & Disease

- Preface and Introduction from Werner Troesken. *The pox of liberty: how the constitution left Americans rich, free, and prone to infection*. University of Chicago Press, 2015
- Brian Beach, Karen Clay, and Martin Saavedra, “The 1918 Influenza Pandemic and its lessons for COVID-19”, *Forthcoming in the Journal of Economic Literature*.
- Marcella Alsan and Marianne Wanamaker. Tuskegee and the health of black men. *The quarterly journal of economics*, 133(1):407–455, 2018

Week 9: Infrastructure

- Richard Hornbeck and Daniel Keniston. Creative destruction: Barriers to urban growth and the great boston fire of 1872. *American Economic Review*, 107(6):1365–1398, 2017
- Dave Donaldson and Richard Hornbeck. Railroads and american economic growth: A “market access” approach. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 131(2):799–858, 2016

Week 10: The Legacy of Slavery

- Richard Hornbeck and Suresh Naidu. When the levee breaks: black migration and economic development in the american south. *American Economic Review*, 104(3):963–90, 2014
- Gavin Wright. The civil rights revolution as economic history. *The Journal of Economic History*, 59(2):267–289, 1999

Week 11: The Great Depression

- Price Fishback. Us monetary and fiscal policy in the 1930s. *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, 26(3):385–413, 2010

- Christina D Romer. The great crash and the onset of the great depression. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 105(3):597–624, 1990
- Gary Richardson and William Troost. Monetary intervention mitigated banking panics during the great depression: quasi-experimental evidence from a federal reserve district border, 1929–1933. *Journal of Political Economy*, 117(6):1031–1073, 2009

Week 12: Inequality & Recent Developments

- Philip T Hoffman, David S Jacks, Patricia A Levin, and Peter H Lindert. Real inequality in europe since 1500. *The Journal of Economic History*, 62(2):322–355, 2002
- Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez. Inequality in the long run. *Science*, 344(6186):838–843, 2014
- Nicholas Bloom, Charles I Jones, John Van Reenen, and Michael Webb. Are ideas getting harder to find? *American Economic Review*, 110(4):1104–44, 2020

Week 13: Student Paper Presentations

Week 14: Student Paper Presentations

12/15 from 4:30pm to 7:15pm: Final Oral Exams