

HIS 402: American History & Identity

Spring 2026

Professor: Dr. Daniel T. Gresham

Office hours: by appointment

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Frequency: M, W, F, 8:30 am–9:20 am

Course description

In the late eighteenth century, author John Crevecoeur asked, “What is an American?” HIS 402 explores the complex response to this simple question through three broad themes. “Myths and identity,” looks at unifying principles and American exceptionalism. Among these are the universal principles of the founding documents, gender equality, and the American penchant to spread democracy throughout the globe. “Ethnicity” considers group distinctiveness and the state’s relationship with native people, immigrants, and African Americans. Finally, “religion” looks at the Catholic experience in the US. Topics include persecutions by the Know Nothings and the KKK, and the Church in the midst of the culture wars. Through primary and secondary source readings, lectures, and discussions, students gain a deeper understanding of essential aspects of American history and identity.

Assessments

Midterm 25%

Students answer one question in essay form during one class period. Students are given the topic beforehand, but not the question, and may consult their notebooks during the exam.

Participation 10%

Students read the assigned texts before class and come prepared to discuss. Participation is assessed through engagement in class discussions as well as periodic written responses. For the written response

students are given 2 minutes to answer one question about the reading for the day or about the discussion of the previous day. Students may use notes and readings for this pass/fail response.

Popular audience essay 40%

Students write 3 separate essays on American identity for a general, educated audience. Students use at least three of the course readings in their essays. Each essay is 1,000 words, double spaced, and footnoted.

Final Essay 25%

Students answer one question in essay form during one class period. Students are given the topic beforehand, but not the question and may consult their notebooks during the exam.

Date	Lecture title	Reading
1/12	Intro	
1/14	Cities of Gold	Coronado's Report on Cibola
1/16	New France	<i>Jesuit Relations</i> , "Quebec and the Hurons"
1/19	Spanish Missions	Palou, <i>Life of Junipero Serra</i>
1/21	Puritan Experience	Winthrop, "Model of Christian Charitie;" Bradford, <i>Of Plymouth Plantation</i>
1/23	Salem Witch Trials	Court documents
1/26	Melting Pot	Crèvecoeur, "What is an American?"
1/28	Founding Fathers	George Washington from <i>Spirits of '76</i>
1/30	Founding Fathers, cont.	Alexander Hamilton from <i>Spirits of '76</i>
2/2	An Industrial Nation?	Hamilton, Report on Manufacturers
2/4	An Agrarian Nation?	T. Jefferson, <i>Notes on the State of Virginia</i> , Chapter 19; J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, Letters from an America Farmer – Letter II.

2/6	Catholics in America	Bishop Kenrick letter to Episcopal leaders, 1841
2/9	Irish Experience	Irish immigrant letter home, 1815; Protestant minister kidnaps “orphans” ESSAY 1 DUE
2/11	Anti-Catholicism	Know Nothing Riot in Philadelphia, 1844
2/13	Origins of American Slavery	O. Equiano, “Horrors of the middle passage;” U. Gronniosaw, “African prince sold into slavery by a rival king.”
2/16	South Defends Slavery	T. Dew, “The Virtues of Slavery”
2/18	Ash Wednesday, no class	
2/20	Black Experience in the US	Mary Reynolds, “Life as a slave;” Charles Remond, Discrimination in the free states; Henry Garnet, “The slave must throw off the slaveholder;” John Rock, “Black pride.”
3/2	Civil War Origins	Mcperson, <i>For Cause and Comrades</i>
3/4	Civil War	Mcperson, <i>For Cause and Comrades</i>
3/6	Reconstruction	F. Douglas, “Free the Slaves then leave them alone”
3/9	Approaches to Freedom	Booker T. Washington, “Atlanta Exposition;” W. E. B. DuBois, “BTW and others”
3/11	Midterm	
3/13	Indian Wars	Peter Cozzens, “Custer’s Last Stand”
3/16	Reservation and Assimilation	Helen Hunt Jackson, “A Century of Dishonor”
3/18	American Exceptionalism	Turner Thesis
3/20	Americanism	Intro by Bishop Ireland to <i>Life of Fr. Hecker</i> ; Leo XIII, <i>Testem Benevolentem</i> ESSAY 2 DUE
3/23	Moral Diplomacy	Woodrow Wilson, “The Meaning of Liberty”
3/25	Reemergence of Nativism	Andre Siegfried, <i>America comes of Age</i>
3/27	Catholics in the 1920s	G. K. Chesterton, “The Spirit of America,” “What is America?”
4/13	Emergence of Women’s Rights	Susan B. Anthony, et al., <i>History of Women’s Suffrage</i>

4/15	Asian American Experience	Anna Wong, "I am growing more Chinese each passing year;" Eddie Fung, "There but for the grace of God go I"
4/17	Civil Rights Movement	MLKJ, "Letter from a Birmingham jail;" Black workingman in the Communist Party
4/20	Post-Civil Rights Bill	Chicago SNCC, "We want Black Power;" Kerner Commission Report
4/22	American Catholics post-V II	Mary Hanna, <i>Catholics and American Politics</i>
4/24	Feminist Movement	<i>Roe v. Wade</i> and Abortion; Edith Stern, "Women are Household Slaves"
4/27	Cold War Moral Diplomacy	Truman Doctrine
4/29	Cold War in America	Whittaker Chambers, Intro to <i>Witness</i>
5/1	American Apex	Ronald Reagan, "Farewell Address" ESSAY 3 DUE
5/4	Beneath the Surface	AIM activist Russell Means testifies at Senate Hearing
5/6	A New American Culture?	"Spiritual Life," from David Brooks, <i>Bobos in Paradise</i>
5/8	American Exceptionalism	Bacevich, <i>Limits of Power</i> , Ch 1
5/11	Final Discussion	
	Final Exam, TBD	