In the century and a half from the end of Reconstruction to the Obama presidency, American politics, society, and culture have undergone massive changes. In 1877 the United States did not yet embrace fifty states. The country's population was 50 million; today it is more than 310 million. Half the population made its living through agriculture; today two percent do so. The population was concentrated in the Northeast and Midwest, where big industrial cities, fueled by waves of immigration, grew in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Women could not vote in 1877, and African Americans were increasingly disfranchised in Jim Crow America. Although sometimes considered "the dangerous nation" since its birth, the United States in 1877 played a minimal role in world affairs; today its might spans the globe, and every international crisis has a Washington dimension. A nation that rode on rails, read by lamplight, and communicated by letter has become a nation linked to the globe and the galaxy by air, electricity, and the instantaneous internet. Conventional family relations, gender roles, and sexual norms have given way to understandings and practices which have upended deep seated assumptions about personality and identity, how those are to be enacted, and the rights associated with them.

How have these changes come about? How do we make sense of them? This course attempts to explain some of the major trends of the last 150 years. Such a vast and complex subject requires selectivity. All these play out against a backdrop of one of the most enduring American questions: What does American freedom mean? Eric Foner's text organizes American history around this very question. Although widely invoked, the idea of freedom has no fixed point. The idea of freedom is as varied as that apotheosized but not defined in the Declaration of Independence (written by someone who owned slaves and did not imagine women voting) and today's groping for the meaning of freedom by groups as diverse as the Tea Party, women's rights advocates, LGBT proponents, religious conservatives, and economic libertarians. The multiple
ways in which ideas of freedom are employed testifies to freedom's enduring appeal and its ongoing contestation and reassessment.

Consistent with the idea of freedom, my goal is that each of you in the class will develop your own interpretation of American history since 1877 and craft an individual idea of freedom, anchored in history, that is applicable to today's world.

Each class session will be a mixture of lecture and discussion. I lecture to provide a narrative vertebra for the course. I also introduce some major controversies about historical interpretations. We discuss as a way of recapturing and assessing the lives and thoughts of previous generations and using them to inform our own. While much of our source material is written and oral, we will also pay particular attention to visual evidence, focusing on American movies and the work of visual artists represented in Oberlin's treasure, the Allen Memorial Art Museum.

Because history invites us to participate in the lives of those who have gone before us and experience the lives of people who occupied different positions in a different society, I hope that by imaginative participation in the lives of our forbears students will gain some regard for the multifaceted complexity and wonder of human existence. History often seems a parade of abstractions, but it is lived by real people in complex ordinary circumstances. People become actors in the great dramas of history even as they pursue their quotidian existence. Two of the major reading assignments — novels about immigrant experience and Anne Moody's autobiography, Coming of Age in Mississippi — help place the abstractions of history in lived experience.

Most classes will be a mixture of lecture and discussion. I'll provide a narrative backbone for the course and introduce some interpretive questions. Foner's text is indispensable in this way. Informed, engaged discussion is essential to learning in this class. You should expect disagreement, which is critical to clarifying interpretations and honing arguments. Discussion needs to be carried out in a respectful, civil manner. Respect for others' opinions necessarily assumes disagreement.

There are four writing assignments, each counting 25 percent of the final grade.

The first, due at class time on March 6, is an essay of approximately eight pages on the immigrant experience. While each of these novels possesses literary merit (Roth and Cather probably ranking highest in this area), I've chosen these novels primarily for what they say about immigrants and American life in the early 1900s. You're welcome to do outside research but it is not necessary. Your essay should focus on what the novels reveal about these people's lives and American history of the period. The novels are readily available in libraries and in inexpensive paperback editions (they are worth owning). Please read one of the following:


Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!* 1918. Alexandra takes charge on the farm in Nebraska.

The second, *due at class time on March 20*, is a timed take home essay exam on material covered in the first part of the course. I will give you essay questions.

The third, *due at class time on April 24*, is a take home essay on the period from 1945 to the late 1960s. I will give you prompts.

The fourth, *due at the time the final exam is scheduled*, is a take home essay in which you assess certain major themes in the course. Midterm grades will be based on all work through March 20. Participation in class discussion will be helpful in resolving borderline grades. Talk!

*All work in the class is governed by the Oberlin College honor code. Please review it carefully. Sign each assignment to indicate that you have observed the code. Suspected violation of the code will be referred to the Honor Committee.*

All reasonable accommodation will be extended to students with documented disabilities. Please confer with me if you are situated in this way.

**Required Texts**

Argersinger, Joanne. *THE TRIANGLE SHIRTWAIST FIRE.*

Foner, Eric. *GIVE ME LIBERTY!*

Jacobs, Meg and Julian Zelizer. *CONSERVATIVES IN POWER.*

Moody, Anne. *COMING OF AGE IN MISSISSIPPI.*
Class Schedule History 104 Spring 2014

F4  Living, Working, Dying:  
The American people in 1880
  Foner, chap. 16

F6  Booming/Gilding/Gifting/Privatizing
  American prosperity, inequality, and philanthropy
  Foner, chap. 16

F11  Peopling the United States:
  Immigration, its attractions, and its discontents
  Foner, chap. 17

F13  Segregating: The nadir of post-Civil War race relations
  Reforming, I: Populists and Progressives
  Foner, chaps. 17 & 18

F18  Visualizing, I:
  Visit to AMAM

F20  Working, Dying, Reforming:
  The Triangle shirtwaist fire
  Argersinger,

F25  Expanding:
  From the halls of Montezuma to the mirrors of Versailles
  Foner, chap. 19

F27  Consuming:
  Mass consumption, mass entertainment
  Foner, chap. 20

M4  Visualizing:
  1930s Hollywood

M6  No class — Essay on the immigrant experience due at class time
M11 Collapsing: The Great Depression
      Reforming, II: The New Deal

      Foner, chap. 21

M13 Blowing, Conserving, Preserving:
The Dust Bowl and New Deal environmentalism

M18 Winning:
      World War II: "Dangerous Nation" at hyperion

      Foner, chap. 22

M20 No class -- *Take home exam due at class time*

M25, 27 No class -- Spring Break

A1 Icing:
The Cold War, from Yalta to Yalu

      Foner, chap. 23
      John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War*, chap. 1

A3 Booming, II:
The age of affluence/the age of anxiety
      Boring: 1950s politics

      Foner, chap. 24

A5 Integrating:
The African American liberation movement

      Foner, chap. 25
      Moody, all

A10 Visualizing: visit to AMAM

A15 Reforming, III: The Great Society
      Peopling, II: The New Immigration

      Foner, chap. 25

A17 Containing:
The American war in Vietnam

      Foner, chap. 25
A22  Liberating:
The sixties -- coming together, coming apart

Foner, chap. 25

A24  No Class – Take home essay due at class time

A24  Loving:
Women’s liberation, LGBT liberation

A29  Reversing:
Reagan and the Right against the Great Society

Foner, chap. 26
Jacobs and Zelizer, all

M1  De-icing:
The end of the Cold War

M6  Globalizing

Foner, chaps. 27

M8  Living, Working, Dying, II:
Americans in 2014

Foning: the course of freedom from 1877 to 2014:
Who, what, when, where, why

Foner, chap. 28

Take home final exam due when final exam for the class is scheduled

1.19.14