

History of Chicago

A graduate class about the Second City

Learn about the history of Chicago at Northeastern Illinois University! Why is it called the Second City and Windy City? How did the Chicago fire influence a path for change and innovation? In this class, you'll experience a high level and intellectual discourse about the city in which we all live.

Whether you're pursuing graduate school or not, see what graduate studies are like in a small classroom setting, led by an expert in the field. NEIU offers a diverse and welcoming higher education environment.

Class details

History of Chicago is an in-person class held each Wednesday from 7:05-9:45 p.m. on NEIU's Main Campus. The class runs from Jan. 21-May 6, 2026. History of Chicago is a single one-time course. You don't have to be enrolled in NEIU's master's degree program in History. There are no prerequisites. No prior knowledge required.

In this class, you will:

- Read and discuss historical studies of Chicago
- Interact with visiting Chicago history scholars
- Examine archival materials
- Complete an original Chicago history project of your own

Connect with us

For more information about the History of Chicago class, contact **Dr. Josh Salzmänn** at j-salzmänn@neiu.edu. For general or application questions, contact **Dr. Nikolas Hoel** at n-hoel@neiu.edu.



Did you know...

You do not need to be a degree-seeking student to take this class. Pique your intellectual curiosity and expand your fascination with Chicago into a meaningful and serious study of its history and many unique facets.

Apply to and enroll at NEIU to begin your studies!

1. Complete a Graduate Student-at-Large (non-degree) application at neiu.edu/apply by Dec. 15, 2025.
2. Send in official transcripts.
3. Register for the History of Chicago class at neiuport.neiu.edu.
4. Pay the class tuition and fees: \$1,432.59 (plus \$30 application fee).

A Glimpse at Chicago's Fascinating History

Chicago's history is a laboratory for studying key processes that made the modern United States—industrialization, immigration, class conflict, architecture, race relations and globalization.

Chicago became a beating heart of American industry in the 19th century. The city's port and railyards sucked up cattle, hogs, grain, lumber and iron ore from the city's vast hinterlands. Chicago's factories formed those raw materials into things like steel, steak, and cereal, and the city's boats and trains carried them off to hungry consumers via the Great Lakes, the Illinois and Michigan Canal, and a web of rails.



The city's slaughterhouses, railyards and factories bought up cheap labor from the waves of Poles, Italians, Germans, and Irish immigrants that fled their homelands. As wage workers poured into the city, Chicago's physical and political infrastructure broke down, spawning: epidemics, street crime, corruption and violent class conflict. Chicagoans responded by forming unions, pioneering the practice of social work, building sewers, erecting skyscrapers, creating parks, establishing schools, universities and modern political machines.

Between the 1910s and 1960s, the Great Migration of African Americans from the Jim Crow South transformed the city and nation. Chicago

lawmakers and residents alike created segregated neighborhoods through redlining, restrictive covenants, violence and the siting of public housing developments. Southern migrants transformed the city's cultural life, helping birth blues and rock n' roll. Black Chicagoans also gave rise to a political tradition that catapulted figures like Jesse Jackson and Barack Obama to national power.

At the twilight of the 20th century, Chicago experienced a simultaneous decline and flourishing. Its blue-collar job base eroded, as industry automated and moved overseas. Many white residents moved to suburbs, and some parts of the city were plagued by joblessness and



violence. At the same time, waves of Latino migrants buoyed the city's population and transformed the city's cultural life. College-educated workers flocked to jobs in the city's expanding "knowledge economy" and "gentrified" many working-class neighborhoods.

Today, Chicago is a global financial, commercial and cultural center, sitting on the edge of 20% of the world's fresh water. It's also marred by terrible gun violence, poverty and corruption. The best way to understand Chicago, with all of its perils and possibilities, is to look to its past.

About Dr. Josh Salzmann

I earned a Ph.D. in Urban History at the University of Illinois Chicago in 2008, and since then I have been teaching and writing about Chicago history at Northeastern Illinois University.

I have published essays in the Chicago Tribune, Crain's Chicago, Smithsonian Magazine. My peer-reviewed academic journal articles have appeared in Enterprise and Society, LABOR, Journal of Illinois History and City of Lake and Prairie.

My first book, *Liquid Capital: Making the Chicago Waterfront* (University of Pennsylvania, 2018), shows how 19th and 20th century policymakers transformed a disease-infested bog on the southwestern shore of Lake Michigan into an intensely managed waterscape supporting a massive metropolis as well as a resource for profit-making, or a form of "liquid capital." It won a 2018 "Superior Scholarly Achievement Prize" from the Illinois State Historical Society and an honorable mention in the 2019 Jon Gjerde Prize competition, which recognizes the best book on Midwest History. I am currently revising my second book, *City of Guns: Chicago and the Transformation of American Firearms Law*, for publication.



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