Course description: This is a course in North American historical and cultural geography. It is not, however, a comprehensive survey of the region; rather it is a selective examination of aspects of the region’s past. Also, while we generally consider the North American continent as a whole, the main focus is on the United States. Two themes carry much of the discussion: 1) delimiting the emergence of a set of distinctive American cultural regions and their continued influence over time, and 2) exploring the origins and meanings of a number of distinctively American places, structures, cultural features and landscapes.

Course Outline:

Jan  24  Course Introduction – American Cultural Regions (Nations) and Landscapes

31    American Imprints – Encounters, Cultural Hearths and Westward Diffusions

Feb  7    American Imprints – Cityscapes

14    American Regions – New England and New England Extended

21 American Regions – The South and Upper South

28 American Regions – “American Heartland” (Midland)

Mar 6 American Regions – Great Plains and American Wests

13 Midterm Exam

20 EuroAmerican Settlement and Culture in Wisconsin – Immigrants on the Land

27 EuroAmerican Settlement and Culture in Wisconsin – Milwaukee, the “Genuine American City”
SPRING BREAK

Apr 10 American Culture Wars: Iconic Places, Structures and Landscapes

17 American Culture Wars: Politics and Values – Class discussion
Readings: TBA

24 Student reports

May 1 Student reports

8 Student reports and journals due

Readings: Readings for this course come in the form of journal articles and book chapters (usually about two each week), which you may access online through the course website on Learn@UW. Readings are intended to enrich or supplement classroom lectures and discussions. Please read them prior to class, and come to class, if possible, with some reactions to or questions about the readings in mind. We will discuss the week’s readings at some point during each session.

PowerPoints: Pdf files of PowerPoints are available through the course website on Learn@UW usually sometime on the day before or morning of class (I often tinker with them until the last minute). They are made available for note taking and as study aid, not as a substitute for attending class. Most of the PowerPoints contain images and graphics that are not very useful without the commentary and discussion that accompanies their presentation in class.

Evaluation: One midterm exam on March 13, a completed journal due May 8, a student project due May 16. Each is worth one-third of your grade.

Student journals: Everyone is required to maintain a journal in which they record their weekly reactions to lectures, discussions and readings. Be sure to include the readings in your entries. As you write in your journals, you want to demonstrate that you have given some thought to each week’s material, identifying the things that intrigue you or pique your imagination, relating the material to personal experiences, other ideas, or other course materials. If you would like some early feedback on your journal entries, you may turn them in to me after class on Feb 14 and I will return them to you with comments on Feb 21. Completed journals may be turned in anytime after April 17, but no later than the final day of class, May 8, and are worth one-third of your grade.
**Student Projects:** Everyone is required to undertake a semester project that examines the origins, character and meaning of a specific American culturally “iconic” place, structure or landscape. By ‘iconic’ I am referring to something that has popular or symbolic meaning or significance. The subject of your project might be a symbolic place like (to name a few famous ones) the National Mall in Washington DC, a battlefield such as Gettysburg, a monument like Mount Rushmore; or an attraction like Hollywood, Disneyland or Cape Cod. It could be a culturally iconic structure like the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty, Hoover Dam, or the Rose Bowl; or a popular landscape or landscape feature like Niagara Falls or the Wisconsin Dells. You might also consider doing something more “generic”, like Megamalls, McMansions, water parks, etc. You may choose something nearby or something far away; it could be of local, regional or national importance. Once you have come up with a topic your assignment is to “deconstruct” your place, structure or landscape – that is, to do some research that will allow you to describe the factors that shaped it, how it may have changed over time, how it may be representative of broader cultural, social, or political developments of the kinds we discuss in this course, and whether any interesting contestation or controversy may have occurred over its meaning or significance? Think about what you might like to do in the early weeks of the semester, and then check in with me (after class, during office hours, or via e-mail) for topic approval, as well as suggestions on how you might want to narrow and frame the topic. Projects should be approved by the end of February. At the end of the semester (April 24, May 1, or May 8), you will make a very brief presentation (10 minutes or less) of the highlights of your findings to the class. Final project papers of 4-5 pages length (text) are due May 16 or earlier, and are worth one-third of your grade.