Alternate history is fun, and perhaps no more of a fun question to think about is about the possibility of what if the Industrial Revolution had started somewhere else – if it even could start someplace else. To answer this question requires an analysis of what caused the Industrial Revolution in Britain to even begin, and of course, the enclosure of the commons is one of the most notable reasons that it was able to – it lead to a massive surplus of labor. With that massive surplus of labor, it meant that a factory-based workforce was easily obtainable. For this to happen elsewhere, this would rely on a similar switch from an agrarian-focused society to a society more focused on other means of productions to allow for an excess workforce required for the switch to textile productions that the first Industrial Revolution saw.

Thus, perhaps the only other place in the world where this could have happened as easily would have been the United States, and it may have only taken one or two changes in order to happen; namely, it would have required the Bank of the United States to have been continued under Jefferson and for Alexander Hamilton’s “American School” proposal to be more effective at getting people off of the farm and into industry. The United States, while still a new nation at this point, had many of the advantages that Britain had at this time: it had an abundance of natural resources, of coal, of wise inventors and entrepreneurs, and ways to move and sell these things, it just lacked the initial funds and people to be the first ones to be able to do so. It might have meant that the United States expanded west slowly, but by the later half of the 19th century, of the time of the second Industrial revolution, it’s likely the expansion would have picked right back up.

By the time of the second Industrial Revolution, it definitely becomes easier to see that the same thing could have – or almost did – happen first in the United States. A disputed patent claims that the Bessemer process may have also been discovered in the United States, and the Bessemer process was what allowed for railways in both Britain and the United States to expand exponentially. By now, the United States was just as rapidly trying to develop its own industry, and though many ideas originated still in Britain at this time, it’s just as possible to believe that they may have started in the United States as well had the tables been turned.