

By the late 1880's America had reached the Age of Invention, a time of segregation, and an era of political corruption. Respectively, at the forefront of each were people such as Thomas Edison, the Supreme Court, and political bosses. While aspects of the economic, social, and political arenas thrived on the outside, the reality of the development of each severely damaged lower class citizens, women, immigrants, African Americans, and farmers. America in the 1880's had rightfully earned the term by Mark Twain as "The Gilded Age".

In the 1880's, economic prosperity was defined by the successful inventions of people such as Thomas Edison. The birth of the light bulb changed the average laborers' workday to a far longer day. The ability for workers to work a greater number of hours established a system of mass production. With mass production came the need for great efficiency, and thus assembly lines were formed. The rapid increase of domestic goods brought America into the light of the global economy. Three men in particular saw this boom in industrialization. According to Document 10, they were the "captains of industry". Andrew Carnegie, Cornelius Vanderbilt, and John D. Rockefeller built up a monopoly on the respective goods: steel, steamships and railroads, and oil. This horizontal consolidation caused America to look prosperous. However, this, no illegal, monopoly hurt American constituents. Labor forces such as the Knights of Labor that formed in 1869, protested for an 8 hour work day, equal pay for men and women, laws on child labor, and an increase in sanitation. Once again, what seemed successful actually hurt the average American at the time. Andrew Carnegie used Carl Darwin's "survival of the fittest", Social Darwinism, to solidify his capitalist views (Doc. 11).

As invention, business, and economy affected industry workers; segregation affected immigrants and African Americans. In an America where economic prosperity was held above all else, immigrants were negatively impacted, (Doc. 1). They were seen as unskilled workers and therefore were of no use to the thriving American industry. This kind of social rejection did in no way parallel to American ideals. However, it was through people such as Jane Addams, that they were able to be upheld. In the 1880's she created the Hull House to teach immigrants English and turn them into efficient workers. On an entirely different social scale were women. Susan B. Anthony argued for women's suffrage, leading Congress to introduce a suffrage amendment to the Constitution. But perhaps the most noticeable social change was seen through the segregation of African Americans. Through America's very own Constitution, Jim Crow laws were accepted. It was deemed by the Supreme Court that nowhere in the 14th Amendment was segregation prevented. In the case of Plessy vs. Ferguson, the Supreme Court deemed African Americans and whites to be separate but equal. Through this came the exploitation of sharecropping. African Americans were forced into a never ending cycle of financial debt. As seen in Document 4, African Americans primarily lived on sharecropped farms, and if they didn't, whites still had the majority of rented and owner operated farms. Social mobility was virtually impossible not only through farming, but education as well. According to Document 6, a greater number of African Americans were unable to write, as there were fewer institutions for blacks to go to for an education due to segregation.

On the political side of the spectrum, democracy was clearly not upheld to the standards upon which it was established in America. Marked by political corruption, the 1880's were full of political bosses offering to help anyone in need as long as they received the person's vote. Such scandal made this political period one of the less significant ones. Presidents such as Rutherford B. Hayes, James A. Garfield, Chester A. Arthur, Grover Cleveland, and Benjamin Harrison lacked the support needed to have a significant impact. Rather it was people such as William Jennings Bryan and his enthusiasm for the use of silver as another source of backing American money that gained support. Such support came from western miners and farmers. Silver was mined in the west and farmers needed a standard that was less expensive than the current Gold Standard. With the monopoly on railroads by men such as Vanderbilt, sending goods from west to east was not an inexpensive process. Bryan argued on behalf of the miners and farmers (Doc. 12), making the political system not seem so corrupt.

Mark Twain termed 1880's America "The Gilded Age" for a reason. "The Gilded Age" was seen as full of inventions, prosperous men, and political gurus. But the reality was damage to the lower class Americans, African Americans, women, and farmers. The economic, social, and political side of America in the 1880's would eventually come to hurt America in the late 1920's and early 1930's.