

“Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”

"Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" -- these famous words, written by Thomas Jefferson nearly a quarter millennium ago hold a high value as an American. The way one interprets these seven words today is considerably different than one would interpret them a hundred and fifty years ago, largely depending on your race or sex. The rapid expansion of industrialism in the late 19th and early 20th century positively influenced the United States as we know it today through more equal rights, innovation and an increased focus on health. As America focused on obtaining more equal rights regardless of gender or race, innovation in manufacturing and an increased focus on health the quest for "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" became more aligned with how America is today.

Only a few generations ago it was considered to be commonplace to own another human being. As we look back on the idea of slavery, we must confront the atrocities that America participated in. If it were not for the Civil War, a strong-willed President Abraham Lincoln and the preservation of the Union we may have continued treating other humans as property. Per a recent study by Binghamton University professor Dr. J. David Hacker the Civil War claimed upwards of 850,000 lives.¹ A defining moment in United States history was made as the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution was adopted on December 6, 1865. It is fair to say that the Thirteenth

¹ J. David Hacker. "A Census-Based Count of the Civil War Dead." *Civil War History* 57, no. 4 (2011): 307-348. <http://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed October 6, 2014).

Amendment did not resolve all slavery-related issues with the advent of Jim Crow laws.

Jim Crow laws were known to segregate the races and minimizing African Americans' rights in America. It was commonplace during this time to find laws in most states that "forbade intermarriage and ordered business owners and public institutions to keep their black and white clientele separated."²

The Civil War is known for a variety of reasons such as the massive loss of life, but one must find the positives that came through the Civil War. As the Civil War ended in 1865 it paved the way for extensive growth, leading up to what we know as the Gilded Age. The Gilded Age was a period of expansive growth, both economically and in an increase in immigration from European countries. "The rise of industrialism and the corrupt interplay of business and politics strike the key themes in the Gilded Age"³ as the authors of *The American Promise: A Concise History, Volume 2* point out. Just as elementary physics, thanks to Newton, has taught us that there is an equal and opposite reaction, there was just that for the Gilded Age. Real wages were increasing which caught the eye of European immigrants. Tying into the theme of racism through Jim Crow laws it is not surprising to read of the racism that was inflicted on even more individuals of the melting pot that the United States is. Though there are negatives during this period, America defined its path that is seen today. There was considerable innovation, most notably in production in high volume. It was during this period that Henry Ford started

² National Park Service. "Jim Crow Laws." Martin Luther King Jr. Accessed October 5, 2014. http://www.nps.gov/malu/forteachers/jim_crow_laws.htm.

³ Roark, James L.; Johnson, Michael P.; Cohen, Patricia Cline; Stage, Sarah; Hartmann, Susan M. (2013-08-16). *The American Promise: A Concise History, Volume 2* (Page 477). Bedford/St. Martin's. Kindle Edition.

producing the historic Ford Model T. Henry Ford with the Model T, Samuel Insull with the introduction of electrical transmission, amongst a plethora of others, created disruptive products that interconnected individuals spanning farther than ones mind could imagine.

Most individuals receive their information from major publications but what does one do when they cannot trust the view that is represented? Muckrakers, such as Jacob Riis, provided through investigative journalism the raw facts of what was happening. The muckrakers of the day had a large influence on how labor laws, public health and public perception changed over the years. Jacob Riis, for example, made the startling facts of tenements in New York back in the early 1900s among other things as well. The tenements that the poor, often women, children and immigrants stayed in were cramped, dark and lacked proper ventilation.⁴ The points brought up by Riis about tenements raises health concerns, among a variety of other things. There was as an increase in alcoholism among the poor, in turn violence towards children and women and an increase in public expenditure in the justice system. This vicious cycle was unseen by most during this period, however if it were not for muckrakers such as Riis than public opinion may of not made an outcry towards better health and better standards of living.

America has made great strides towards following through with 'Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.' Mistakes were made along the way, as one would expect, but in the end the period of the late 19th and early 20th century positively influenced the

⁴ Riis, Jacob. "How The Other Half Lives, by Jacob Riis." How The Other Half Lives, by Jacob Riis. Last modified July 11, 2012. Accessed October 5, 2014. <http://www.authentichistory.com/1898-1913/2-progressivism/2-riis/>.

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