

# Gilded Age

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**The Gilded Age** in United States history is the late 19th century, from the 1870s to about 1900. The term was coined by writer Mark Twain in *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*, (1873), which satirized an era of serious social problems disguised by a thin gold gilding.

The Gilded Age was an era of rapid economic growth, especially in the North and West. American wages, especially for skilled workers, were much higher than in Europe, which attracted millions of immigrants. The increase of industrialization meant, despite the increasing labor force, real wages in the US grew 60% from 1860 to 1890, and continued to rise after that.<sup>[1][2]</sup>

However, the Gilded Age was also an era of poverty as very poor European immigrants poured in. Railroads were the major industry, but the factory system, mining, and finance increased in importance. Immigration from Europe, China and the eastern states led to the rapid growth of the West, based on farming, ranching and mining. Labor unions became important in industrial areas. Two major nationwide depressions --the Panic of 1873 and the Panic of 1893 --interrupted growth and caused social and political upheavals.

The South after the American Civil War remained economically devastated; its economy became increasingly tied to cotton and tobacco production, which suffered from low prices. Blacks in the South, which is where most blacks lived in the US, were stripped of political power and voting rights, and economically disadvantaged. The political landscape was notable in that despite some corruption, turnout was very high and elections between the evenly matched parties were close. The dominant issues were cultural (especially regarding prohibition, education and ethnic and racial groups), and economic (tariffs and money supply). With the rapid growth of cities, political machines increasingly took control of urban politics. Unions crusaded for the 8-hour working day; middle class reformers demanded civil service reform, prohibition, and women's suffrage. Local governments built schools and hospitals; private ones were founded by local philanthropists. Numerous religious denominations were growing in membership and wealth; they expanded their missionary activity to the world arena. Catholics and Lutherans set up parochial schools and the larger denominations set up many colleges and hospitals.



"The Breakers," a Gilded Age mansion in Newport, Rhode Island

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## Industrial and technological advances

The Gilded Age was a period of economic growth as the United States jumped to the lead in industrialization ahead of Britain. The nation was rapidly expanding its economy into new areas, especially heavy industry like factories, railroads, and coal mining. In 1869, the First Transcontinental Railroad opened up the far-west mining and ranching regions. Travel from New York to San Francisco now took six days instead of six months.<sup>[3]</sup> Railroad track mileage tripled between 1860 and 1880, and then doubled again by 1920. The new track linked formerly isolated areas with larger markets and allowed for the rise of commercial farming, ranching and mining, creating a truly national marketplace. American steel production rose to surpass the combined total of Britain, Germany, and France.<sup>[4]</sup> London and Paris poured investment money into the railroads through the American financial market centered in Wall Street. By 1900, the process of economic concentration had extended into most branches of industry—a few large corporations, called "trusts", dominated in steel, oil, sugar, meat and farm machinery. Through vertical integration these trusts were able to control each aspect of the production of a specific good, ensuring that the profits made on the finished



May 10, 1869 Celebration of completion of the Transcontinental Railroad.

product were maximized, and by controlling access to the raw materials, prevented opponents from entering the marketplace. This practice would lead to a sole producer of a certain manufactured good and meant no competition in the marketplace to lower prices.<sup>[5]</sup>

Increased mechanization of industry is a major mark of the Gilded Age's search for cheaper ways to create more product. Frederick Winslow Taylor observed that worker efficiency in steel could be improved through the use of machines to make fewer motions in less time. His redesign increased the speed of factory machines and the productivity of factories while undercutting the need for skilled labor. This mechanization made some factories an assemblage of unskilled laborers performing simple and repetitive tasks under the direction of skilled foremen and engineers. Machine shops grew rapidly, and they comprised highly skilled workers and engineers. Both the number of unskilled and skilled workers increased, as their wage rates grew.<sup>[6]</sup> Engineering colleges were established to feed the enormous demand for expertise. Railroads invented modern management, with clear chains of command, statistical reporting, and complex bureaucratic systems.<sup>[7]</sup> They systematized the roles of middle managers and set up explicit career tracks. They hired young men ages 18–21 and promoted them internally until a man reached the status of locomotive engineer, conductor or station agent at age 40 or so. Career tracks were invented for skilled blue-collar jobs and for white-collar managers, starting in railroads and expanding into finance, manufacturing and trade. Together with rapid growth of small business, a new middle class was rapidly growing, especially in northern cities.<sup>[8]</sup>

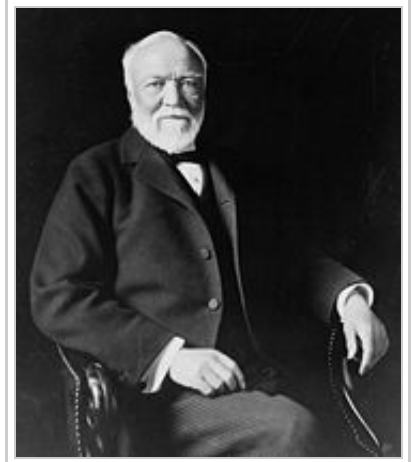
The United States became a world leader in applied technology. From 1860 to 1890, 500,000 patents were issued for new inventions—over ten times the number issued in the previous seventy years. George Westinghouse invented air brakes for trains (making them both safer and faster). Theodore Vail established the American Telephone & Telegraph Company and built a great communications network.<sup>[9]</sup> Nikola Tesla invented a remarkable number of electrical devices, including an induction motor, making the use of alternating current more feasible; Thomas Edison, in addition to inventing hundreds of electrical devices, co-founded General Electric corporation. Oil became an important resource, beginning with the Pennsylvania oil fields. The U.S. dominated the industry into the 1950s. Kerosene replaced whale oil and candles for lighting. John D. Rockefeller founded Standard Oil Company and monopolized the oil industry<sup>[10]</sup>—which mostly produced kerosene before the automobile created a demand for gasoline in the 20th century.<sup>[11]</sup>

## Economic growth

During the 1870s and 1880s, the U.S. economy rose at the fastest rate in its history, with real wages, wealth, GDP, and capital formation all increasing rapidly.<sup>[12]</sup> For example, between 1865 and 1898, the output of wheat increased by 256%, corn by 222%, coal by 800% and miles of railway track by 567%.<sup>[13]</sup> Thick national networks for transportation and communication were created. The corporation became the dominant form of business organization, and a scientific management revolution transformed business operations. By the beginning of the 20th century, per capita income and industrial production in the United States led the world, with per capita incomes double that of Germany or France, and 50% higher than Britain.<sup>[14]</sup> The United States' growth caused foreigners to ask, as British author W. T. Stead wrote in 1901,

"What is the secret of American success?"<sup>[15]</sup> The businessmen of the Second Industrial Revolution created industrial towns and cities in the Northeast with new factories, and hired an ethnically diverse industrial working class, many of them new immigrants from Europe.

Wealthy industrialists and financiers such as John D. Rockefeller, Jay Gould, Henry Clay Frick, Andrew W. Mellon, Andrew Carnegie, Henry Flagler, Henry H. Rogers, J. P. Morgan, Leland Stanford, Charles Crocker, Cornelius Vanderbilt would sometimes be labeled "robber barons" by their critics,<sup>[16]</sup> who argue their fortunes were made at the expense of the working class.<sup>[17]</sup> Their supporters argued that they participated in great acts of philanthropy.<sup>[18]</sup> For instance, Andrew Carnegie donated over 90% of his wealth and said that philanthropy was their duty—the "Gospel of Wealth". Private money endowed thousands of colleges, hospitals, museums, academies, schools, opera houses, public libraries, and charities.<sup>[19]</sup> John D. Rockefeller donated over \$500 million to various charities, slightly over half his entire net worth.



Scottish immigrant Andrew Carnegie led the enormous expansion of the American steel industry.

This emerging industrial economy quickly expanded to meet the new market demands. From 1869 to 1879, the US economy grew at a rate of 6.8% for NNP (GDP minus capital depreciation) and 4.5% for NNP per capita. The economy repeated this period of growth in the 1880s, in which the wealth of the nation grew at an annual rate of 3.8%, while the GDP was also doubled.<sup>[20]</sup> Economist Milton Friedman states that for the 1880s, "The highest decadal rate [of growth of real reproducible, tangible wealth per head from 1805 to 1950] for periods of about ten years was apparently reached in the eighties with approximately 3.8 percent."<sup>[21]</sup>

Real wages (adjusting for inflation) rose steadily. Economic historian Clarence D. Long estimates that (in terms of constant 1914 dollars), the average annual incomes of all American nonfarm employees rose from \$375 in 1870 to \$395 in 1880, \$519 in 1890 and \$573 in 1900, a gain of 53% in 30 years.<sup>[22]</sup> Australian historian Peter Shergold found that the standard of living for industrial workers was higher than in Europe. He compared wages and the standard of living in Pittsburgh with Birmingham, England, one of the richest industrial cities of Europe. After taking account of the cost of living (which was 65% higher in the U.S.), he found the standard of living of unskilled workers was about the same in the two cities, while skilled workers in Pittsburgh had about 50% to 100% higher standard of living as those in Birmingham, England. According to Shergold the American advantage grew over time from 1890 to 1914, and the perceived higher American wage led to a heavy steady flow of skilled workers from Britain to industrial America.<sup>[23]</sup>

The unequal distribution of wealth remained high during this period. From 1860 to 1900, the wealthiest 2% of American households owned more than a third of the nation's wealth, while the top 10% owned roughly three fourths of it.<sup>[24]</sup> Historian Howard Zinn argues that this disparity along with precarious working and living conditions for the working classes prompted the rise of populist, anarchist and socialist movements.<sup>[25]</sup> French economist Thomas Piketty notes that economists during this time, such as Willford I. King, were concerned that the United States was becoming increasingly inegalitarian to the point of becoming like old Europe, and "further and further away from its original pioneering ideal."<sup>[26]</sup>

There was a significant human cost attached to this period of economic growth,<sup>[27]</sup> as U.S. industry had the highest rate of accidents in the world.<sup>[28]</sup> In 1889, railroads employed 704,000 men, of whom 20,000 were injured and 1,972 were killed on the job.<sup>[29]</sup> The U.S. was also the only industrial power to have no workman's compensation program in place to support injured workers.<sup>[28]</sup>

## Rise of labor unions

Craft-oriented labor unions, such as carpenters, printers, shoemakers and cigar makers, grew steadily in the industrial cities after 1870. These unions used frequent short strikes as a method to attain control over the labor market, and fight off competing unions.<sup>[30]</sup> They generally blocked women, blacks and Chinese from union membership, but welcomed most European immigrants.<sup>[31]</sup>

The railroads had their own quite separate unions.<sup>[32]</sup> An especially large episode of unrest (estimated at eighty thousand railroad workers and several hundred thousand other Americans, both employed and unemployed) broke out during the economic depression of the 1870s and became known as the Great Railroad Strike of 1877, which was, according to historian Jack Beatty, "the largest strike anywhere in the world in the 19th century."<sup>[33]</sup> This strike did not involve labor unions, but rather uncoordinated outbursts in numerous cities. The strike and associated riots lasted 45 days and resulted in the deaths of several hundred participants (no police or soldiers were killed), several hundred more injuries, and millions in damages to railroad property.<sup>[34][35]</sup> The unrest was deemed severe enough by the government that President Rutherford B. Hayes intervened with federal troops.



New York police violently attacking unemployed workers in Tompkins Square Park, 1874.

Starting in the mid-1880s a new group, the Knights of Labor, grew rapidly. Too rapidly, for it spun out of control and failed to handle the Great Southwest Railroad Strike of 1886. The Knights avoided violence, but their reputation collapsed in the wake of the Haymarket Square Riot in Chicago in 1886, when anarchists allegedly bombed the policemen dispersing a meeting.<sup>[36]</sup> Police then randomly fired into the crowd, killing and wounding a number of people, including other police, and arbitrarily rounded up anarchists, including leaders of the movement. Seven anarchists went on trial; four were hanged even though no evidence directly linked them to the bombing.<sup>[37]</sup> One had in his possession a Knights of Labor membership card.<sup>[37]</sup> At its peak, the Knights claimed 700,000 members. By 1890, membership had plummeted to fewer than 100,000, then faded away.<sup>[38]</sup>

Strikes organized by labor unions became routine events by the 1880s as the gap between the rich and the poor widened.<sup>[39]</sup> There were 37,000 strikes between 1881 and 1905. By far the largest number were in the building trades, followed far behind by coal miners. The main goal was control of working conditions and settling which rival union was in control. Most were of very short duration. In times of depression strikes were more violent but less successful, because the company was losing money anyway. They were successful in times of prosperity when the company was losing profits and wanted to settle quickly.<sup>[40]</sup>

The largest and most dramatic strike was the 1894 Pullman Strike, a coordinated effort to shut down the national railroad system. The strike was led by the upstart American Railway Union led by Eugene V. Debs and was not supported by the established brotherhoods. The union defied federal court orders to stop blocking the mail trains, so President Cleveland used the U.S. Army to get the trains moving again. The ARU vanished and the traditional railroad brotherhoods survived, but avoided strikes.<sup>[41]</sup>

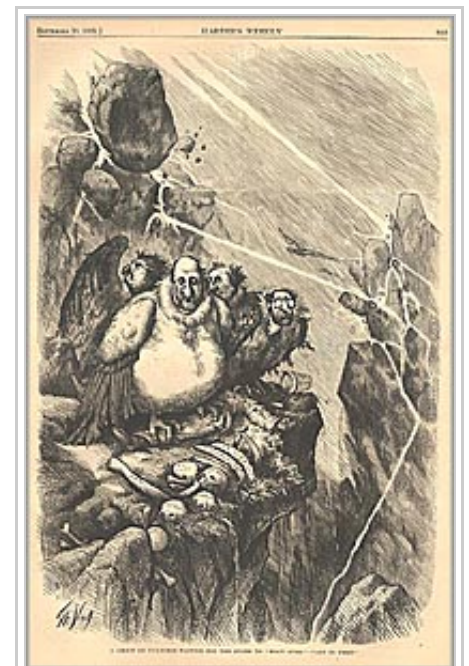
The new American Federation of Labor, headed by Samuel Gompers, found the solution. The AFL was a coalition of unions, each based on strong local chapters; the AFL coordinated their work in cities and prevented jurisdictional battles. Gompers repudiated socialism and abandoned the violent nature of the earlier unions. The AFL worked to control the local labor market, thereby empowering its locals to obtain higher wages and more control over hiring. As a result, the AFL unions spread to most cities, reaching a peak membership in 1919.<sup>[42]</sup>

Severe economic recessions—called "panics"—struck the nation in the Panic of 1873 and the Panic of 1893. They lasted several years, with high urban unemployment, low incomes for farmers, low profits for business, slow overall growth, and reduced immigration. They generated political unrest.<sup>[43]</sup>

## Politics

Gilded Age politics, called the Third Party System, was characterized by intense competition between the two parties, with minor parties coming and going, especially on issues of concern to prohibitionists, labor unions and farmers. The Democrats and Republicans fought over control of offices, which were the rewards for party activists, as well as major economic issues. Turnout was very high and often exceeded 80% or even 90% in some states as the parties drilled their loyal members much as an army drills its soldiers. Competition was intense and elections were very close. In the southern states, lingering resentment over the Civil War was still present and meant that much of the south would vote Democrat. After the end of Reconstruction in 1877, competition in the south took place mainly inside the Democratic Party. Nationwide, turnout fell sharply after 1900.<sup>[44]</sup>

The major metropolitan centers underwent rapid population growth and as a result, had many lucrative contracts and jobs to award. To take advantage of the new economic opportunity, both parties built so-called "political machines" to manage elections, reward supporters and pay off potential opponents. Financed by the "spoils system," the winning party distributed most local, state and national government jobs, and many government contracts, to its loyal supporters. Large cities became dominated by political machines in which constituents supported a candidate in exchange for anticipated patronage. These votes would be repaid with favors back from the government once that candidate was elected; and very often candidates were selected based on their



*A Group of Vultures Waiting for the Storm to "Blow Over"--"Let Us Prey."* Cartoon denouncing the corruption of New York's Boss Tweed and other Tammany Hall figures, drawn in 1871 by Thomas Nast and published in *Harper's Weekly*.



willingness to play along with the spoils system. Perhaps the largest example of a political machine from this time period is Tammany Hall in New York City, led by Boss Tweed.<sup>[45]</sup>

Political corruption was rampant, as business leaders spent significant amounts of money ensuring that government did not regulate the activities of big business - and they more often than not got what they wanted. Such corruption was so commonplace that in 1868 the New York state legislature legalized such bribery.<sup>[46]</sup> Historian Howard Zinn argues that the U.S. government was acting exactly as Karl Marx described capitalist states: "pretending neutrality to maintain order, but serving the interests of the rich."<sup>[47]</sup>

Major scandal reached into Congress with the Crédit Mobilier of America scandal, and disgraced the White House during the Grant Administration. This corruption divided the Republican party into two different factions: the Stalwarts led by Roscoe Conkling and the Half-Breeds led by James G. Blaine. There was a sense that government-enabled political machines intervened in the economy and the resulting favoritism, bribery, inefficiency, waste, and corruption were having negative consequences. Accordingly there were widespread calls for reform, such as Civil Service Reform led by the Bourbon Democrats and Republican Mugwumps. In 1884, their support elected Democrat Grover Cleveland to the White House, and in doing so gave the Democrats their first national victory since 1856.<sup>[48]</sup>

The Bourbon Democrats supported a free market policy, with low tariffs, low taxes, less spending and, in general, a Laissez-Faire (hands-off) government. They argued that tariffs made most goods more expensive for the consumer and subsidized the trusts (monopolies). They also denounced imperialism and overseas expansion.<sup>[49]</sup> By contrast, Republicans insisted that national prosperity depended on industry that paid high wages, and warned that lowering the tariff would be a disaster because goods from low-wage European factories would flood American markets.<sup>[50]</sup>

Presidential elections between the two major parties were so closely contested that a slight nudge could tip the election in the advantage of either party, and Congress was marked by political stalemate. With support from Union veterans, businessmen, professionals, craftsmen and larger farmers, the GOP (the Republicans) consistently carried the North in presidential elections.<sup>[51]</sup> The Democrats, often led by Irish Catholics, had a base among Catholics, poorer farmers, and traditional party members.

Overall, Republican and Democratic political platforms remained remarkably constant during the years before 1900. Republicans generally favored inflationary, protectionist policies, while Democrats favored hard-money, free trade and other Laissez-Faire policies.

## **Ethnocultural politics: pietistic Republicans versus liturgical Democrats**

From 1860 to the early 20th century, the Republicans took advantage of the association of the Democrats with "Rum, Romanism, and Rebellion". Rum stood for the liquor interests and the tavernkeepers, in contrast to the GOP, which had a strong dry element. "Romanism" meant Roman Catholics, especially Irish Americans, who ran the Democratic Party in most cities, and whom the reformers denounced for political corruption and their separate parochial school system. "Rebellion" stood for the Democrats of the Confederacy, who tried to break the Union in 1861, as well as their northern allies, called "Copperheads."<sup>[53]</sup>

Demographic trends boosted the Democratic totals, as the German and Irish Catholic immigrants were Democrats and outnumbered the English and Scandinavian Republicans. The new immigrants who arrived after 1890 seldom voted at this time. During the 1880s and 1890s, the Republicans struggled against the Democrats' efforts, winning several close elections and losing two to Grover Cleveland (in 1884 and 1892).

Religious lines were sharply drawn.<sup>[54]</sup> In the North, about 50% of the voters were pietistic Protestants (especially Methodists, Scandinavian Lutherans, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Disciples of Christ) who believed the government should be used to reduce social sins, such as drinking. They strongly supported the GOP, as the table shows. In sharp contrast, liturgical groups, especially the Catholics, Episcopalians, and German Lutherans, voted for the Democrats. They saw the Democratic party as their best protection from the moralism of the pietists, and especially the threat of prohibition. Both parties cut across the class structure, with the Democrats more bottom-heavy and the GOP better represented among businessmen and professionals in the North.<sup>[55]</sup>

Voting Behavior by Religion, Northern USA Late 19th century <sup>[52]</sup>		
	% Dem	% GOP
<b>Immigrant Groups</b>		
Irish Catholics	80	20
All Catholics	70	30
Confessional German Lutherans	65	35
German Reformed	60	40
French Canadian Catholics	50	50
Less Confessional German Lutherans	45	55
English Canadians	40	60
British Stock	35	65
German Sectarians	30	70
Norwegian Lutherans	20	80
Swedish Lutherans	15	85
Haugean Norwegians	5	95
<b>Natives: Northern Stock</b>		
Quakers	5	95
Free Will Baptists	20	80
Congregational	25	75
Methodists	25	75
Regular Baptists	35	65
Blacks	40	60
Presbyterians	40	60
Episcopalians	45	55
<b>Natives: Southern Stock (living in North)</b>		
Disciples	50	50
Presbyterians	70	30
Baptists	75	25
Methodists	90	10

Many cultural issues, especially prohibition and foreign language schools, were hard-fought political issues because of the deep religious divisions in the electorate. For example in Wisconsin the Republicans tried to close down German-language Catholic and Lutheran parochial schools, and were defeated in 1890 when the Bennett Law was put to the test.<sup>[56]</sup>



Prohibition debates and referendums heated up politics in most states over a period of decades, as national prohibition was finally passed in 1919 (and repealed in 1933), serving as a major issue between the wet Democrats and the dry GOP.<sup>[57]</sup>

The political realignment in 1896 has often been used by historians to date the end of the Gilded age and the start of the Progressive Era.<sup>[58]</sup>

## Immigration

Prior to the Gilded Age, the time commonly referred to as the old immigration saw the first real boom of new arrivals to the United States. During the Gilded Age, approximately 10 million immigrants came to the United States in what is known as the new immigration. Some of them were prosperous farmers who had the cash to buy land and tools in the Plains states especially. Many were poor peasants looking for the American Dream in unskilled manual labor in mills, mines and factories. Few immigrants went to the poverty-stricken South, though. To accommodate the heavy influx, the federal government in 1892 opened a reception center at Ellis Island near the Statue of Liberty.<sup>[59]</sup>

These immigrants consisted two groups: The last big waves of the "Old Immigration" from Germany, Britain, Ireland and Scandinavia, and the rising waves of the "New Immigration", which peaked about 1910. Some men moved back and forth across the Atlantic, but most were permanent settlers. They moved into well-established communities, both urban and rural. The German American communities spoke German, but their younger generation was bilingual.<sup>[60]</sup>

The "New Immigration" were much poorer peasants and rural folk from southern and eastern Europe, including mostly Italians, Poles and Jews. Some men, especially the Italians and Greeks, saw themselves as temporary migrants who planned to return to their home villages with a nest egg of cash earned in long hours of unskilled labor. Others, especially the Jews, had been driven out of Eastern Europe and had no intention of returning. (The option of Israel did not yet exist.)<sup>[61]</sup>

Historians analyze the causes of immigration in terms of push factors (pushing people out of the homeland) and pull factors (pulling them to America). The push factors included economic dislocation, shortages of land, and antisemitism. Pull factors were the economic opportunity of good inexpensive farmland or jobs in factories, mills and mines.<sup>[62]</sup>

The first generation typically lived in ethnic enclaves with a common language, food, religion, and connections through the old village. The sheer numbers caused overcrowding in tenements in the larger cities. In the small mill towns, however, management usually built company housing with cheap rents.<sup>[63]</sup>

### Chinese immigrants

Asian immigrants—Chinese at this time—were hired by California construction companies for temporary railroad work. The European Americans strongly disliked the Chinese for their alien life-styles and threat of low wages. The construction of the Central Pacific Railroad from California to Utah was handled largely by Chinese laborers. In the 1870 census, there were 63,000 Chinese men (with a few women) in the entire U.S.; this number grew to 106,000 in the 1880.<sup>[64]</sup> Labor unions, led by Samuel Gompers strongly opposed the

presence of Chinese labor. Immigrants from China were not allowed to become citizens until 1950; however, as a result of the Supreme Court decision in *United States v. Wong Kim Ark*, their children born in the U.S. were full citizens.<sup>[65]</sup>

Congress banned further Chinese immigration through the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882; the act prohibited Chinese laborers from entering the United States, but some students and businessmen were allowed in on a temporary basis. The Chinese population declined to only 37,000 in 1940. Although many returned to China (a greater proportion than most other immigrant groups), most of them stayed in the United States. Chinese people were unwelcome in urban neighborhoods, so they resettled in the "Chinatown" districts of large cities. The exclusion policy lasted until the 1940s.<sup>[66]</sup>

## Rural life

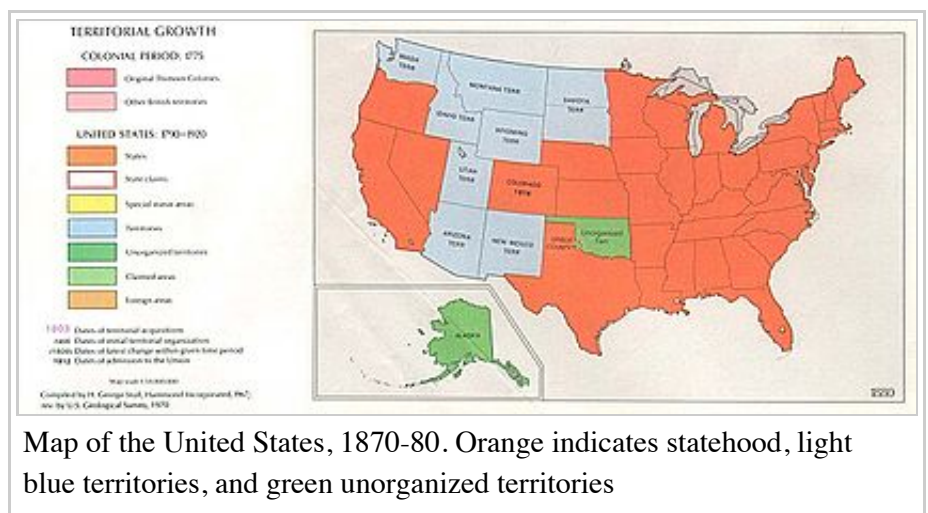
A dramatic expansion in farming took place.<sup>[67]</sup> The number of farms tripled from 2.0 million in 1860 to 6.0 million in 1905. The number of people living on farms grew from about 10 million in 1860 to 22 million in 1880 to 31 million in 1905. The value of farms soared from \$8.0 billion in 1860 to \$30 billion in 1906.<sup>[68]</sup>

The federal government issued 160-acre (65 ha) tracts virtually free to settlers under the Homestead Act of 1862. Even larger numbers purchased lands at very low interest from the new railroads, which were trying to create markets. The railroads advertised heavily in Europe and brought over, at low fares, hundreds of thousands of farmers from Germany, Scandinavia and Britain.<sup>[69]</sup>

Despite their remarkable progress and general prosperity, 19th-century U.S. farmers experienced recurring cycles of hardship, caused primarily by falling world prices for cotton and wheat.<sup>[70]</sup>

Along with the mechanical improvements which greatly increased yield per unit area, the amount of land under cultivation grew rapidly throughout the second half of the century, as the railroads opened up new areas of the West for settlement. The wheat farmers enjoyed abundant output and good years from 1876 to 1881 when bad European harvests kept the world price high. They then suffered from a slump in the 1880s when conditions in Europe improved. The farther west the settlers went, the more dependent they became on the monopolistic railroads to move their goods to market, and the more inclined they were to protest, as in the Populist movement of the 1890s. Wheat farmers blamed local grain elevator owners (who purchased their crop), railroads and eastern bankers for the low prices.<sup>[71]</sup>

The first organized effort to address general agricultural problems was the Grange movement. Launched in 1867, by employees of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Granges focused initially on social activities to counter the isolation most farm families experienced. Women's participation was actively encouraged.



Map of the United States, 1870-80. Orange indicates statehood, light blue territories, and green unorganized territories

Spurred by the Panic of 1873, the Grange soon grew to 20,000 chapters and 1.5 million members. The Granges set up their own marketing systems, stores, processing plants, factories and cooperatives. Most went bankrupt. The movement also enjoyed some political success during the 1870s. A few Midwestern states passed "Granger Laws", limiting railroad and warehouse fees.<sup>[72]</sup>

## Urban life

Society itself underwent significant changes in the period following the Civil War, most notably the rapid urbanization of the North.<sup>[73]</sup> As a result of increasing demand for unskilled workers, most European immigrants went to mill towns, mining camps and industrial cities. New York, Philadelphia and especially Chicago saw rapid growth. Louis Sullivan became a noted architect using steel frames to construct skyscrapers for the first time while pioneering the idea of "form follows function". Chicago became the center of the skyscraper craze, starting with the ten-story Home Insurance Building in 1884–1885 by William Le Baron Jenney.<sup>[74]</sup>

Expansion required a better transportation system than horse-drawn street cars. Electric trolleys and street railways were the rage in the 1880s, followed by elevated railways and subways in the largest cities.<sup>[75]</sup> Most factory workers, however, lived in nearby tenements and walked to work. As immigration increased in cities, poverty rose as well. The poorest crowded into low-cost housing such as the Five Points and Hell's Kitchen neighborhoods in Manhattan. These areas were quickly overridden with notorious criminal gangs such as the Five Points Gang and the Bowery Boys.<sup>[76]</sup> The living conditions were as such that the death rates in these crowded urban tenements vastly exceeded those in the countryside.<sup>[28]</sup>



The Home Insurance Building in Chicago, built in 1885, was the world's first skyscraper

## South and West

### South

#### Agriculture's Share of the Labor Force by Region, 1890

Northeast	15%
Middle Atlantic	17%
Midwest	43%
South Atlantic	63%
South Central	67%
West	29%
	Source <sup>[78]</sup>

The South remained heavily rural and was much poorer than the North or West.<sup>[79]</sup>

In the South, Reconstruction brought major changes in agricultural practices. The most significant of these was sharecropping, where tenant farmers "shared" up to half of their crop with the landowners, in exchange for seed and essential supplies. About 80% of the Black farmers and 40% of white ones lived under this system following the Civil War. Most sharecroppers were locked in a cycle of debt, from which the only hope of escape was increased planting. This led to the over-production of cotton and tobacco (and thus to declining prices and decreased income), exhaustion of the soil, and increased poverty among both the landowners and tenants.<sup>[80]</sup>



There were only a few scattered cities; small courthouse towns serviced the farm population. Local politics revolve around the politicians and lawyers based at the courthouse. Mill towns, narrowly focused on textile production or cigarette manufacture, began opening in the Piedmont region especially in the Carolinas. Racial segregation and outward signs of inequality were everywhere, and rarely were challenged. Blacks who violated the color line were liable to expulsion or lynching.<sup>[81]</sup> Cotton became even more important than before as poor whites needed the cash that cotton would bring. But cotton prices were much lower than before the war, so everyone was poor. White southerners showed a reluctance to move north, or to move to cities, so the number of small farms proliferated, and they became smaller and smaller as the population grew. Many of the white farmers, and most of the blacks, were tenant farmers who owned their work animals and tools, and rented their land. Others were day laborers or very poor sharecroppers, who worked under the supervision of the landowner. There was little cash in circulation, since most farmers operated on credit accounts from local merchants, and paid off their debts at cotton harvest time in the fall. Although there were small country churches everywhere, there were only a few dilapidated elementary schools. Apart from private academies, there were very few high schools until the 1920s. Conditions were marginally better in newer areas, especially in Texas and central Florida, with the deepest poverty in South Carolina, Mississippi, and Arkansas.<sup>[82]</sup>

The vast majority of American blacks lived in the South, and as the promises of emancipation and reconstruction faded, they entered the nadir of race relations.<sup>[83]</sup> Every Southern state and city passed Jim Crow laws that were in operation between 1876 and 1965. They mandated de jure (legal) segregation in all public facilities, such as stores and street cars, with a supposedly "separate but equal" status for blacks. In reality, this led to treatment and accommodations that were dramatically inferior to those provided for white Americans, systematizing a number of economic, educational and social disadvantages. Schools for blacks were far fewer and poorly supported by taxpayers, although Northern philanthropies and churches kept open dozens of academies and small colleges.<sup>[84]</sup>

In the face of years of mounting violence and intimidation directed at blacks during Reconstruction, the federal government was unable to guarantee constitutional protections to freedmen and women. In the Compromise of 1877 President Hayes withdrew Union troops from the South; "Redeemers" (white Democrats) acted quickly to reverse the groundbreaking advances of Reconstruction. Black political power was eliminated in the 1880s and in the 1890s new laws effectively blocked over 90% of the blacks from voting (with some exceptions in Tennessee; blacks did vote in the border states).<sup>[85]</sup>

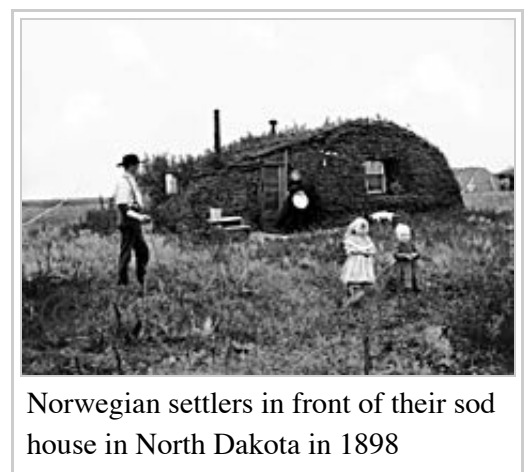
## The West

In 1869, the First Transcontinental Railroad opened up the far west mining and ranching regions. Travel from New York to San Francisco now took six days instead of six months.<sup>[3]</sup>

After the Civil War, many from the East Coast and Europe were lured west by reports from relatives and by extensive advertising campaigns promising "the Best Prairie Lands", "Low Prices", "Large Discounts For Cash", and "Better Terms Than Ever!". The new railroads provided the opportunity for migrants to go out and take a look, with special family tickets, the cost of which could be applied to land purchases offered by the railroads. Farming the plains was indeed more difficult than back east. Water management was more critical, lightning fires were more prevalent, the weather was more extreme, rainfall was less predictable. The fearful stayed home. The actual migrants looked beyond fears of the unknown. Their chief motivation to move west was to find a better economic life than the one they had. Farmers sought larger, cheaper and more fertile land; merchants and tradesman sought new customers and new leadership opportunities. Laborers wanted higher paying work and better conditions. With the Homestead Act providing free land to citizens and the railroads selling cheap lands to European farmers, the settlement of the Great Plains was swiftly accomplished, and the frontier had virtually ended by 1890.<sup>[86]</sup>



Map of the United States, 1870-80. Orange indicates statehood, light blue territories, and green unorganized territories



Norwegian settlers in front of their sod house in North Dakota in 1898



## Indian assimilation



Temporary quarters for Volga Germans in central Kansas, 1875

Indian policy was set by the national government (the states had very little role), and after 1865 the national policy was that Indians either had to assimilate into the larger community or remain on reservations, where the government provided subsidies. Reservation Indians were no longer allowed to roam or fight their traditional enemies. The U.S. Army role was to enforce the laws. Expansion into the plains and mountains by miners, ranchers and settlers led to conflicts with the Indians of the West. By 1880 the buffalo herds, a foundation for the hunting economy had disappeared. The violence petered out in the 1880s and practically ceased after 1890.<sup>[87]</sup>

Indians individually had the choice of living on reservations, with food, supplies, education and medical care provided by the federal government, or else living on their own in the larger society and earning wages, typically as a cowboy on a ranch, or manual worker in town. Reformers wanted to give as many Indians as possible the opportunity to own and operate their own farms and ranches, so the issue was how to give individual Indians land owned by the tribe. To assimilate the Indians into American society, reformers set up training programs and schools, such as the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, that produced many prominent Indian leaders. The anti-assimilation traditionalists on the reservations, however, resisted integration seeing a loss of their traditional way of life.

In 1887, the Dawes Act proposed to divide tribal land and parcel out 160 acres (0.65 km<sup>2</sup>) of land to each head of a family. Such allotments were to be held in trust by the government for 25 years, after which time the owners gained full title to the land, so they could sell it or mortgage it. As individual Indians sold off their land, the total held by the native community shrank by almost half. The individualized system undermined the traditional communal organization of the tribes. Furthermore a majority of Indians responded to intense missionary activity by converting to Christianity. The long-term goal of Dawes Act was to integrate Indians into the mainstream; the majority accepted integration and were absorbed into American society, leaving a trace of Indian ancestry in millions of American families. Those who refused to assimilate remained in poverty on the reservations, supported to the present time by Federal food, medicine and schooling. In 1934, national policy was reversed again by the Indian Reorganization Act which attempted to protect tribal and communal life on the reservations.<sup>[88]</sup>

## Farming

A dramatic expansion in farming took place.<sup>[67]</sup> The number of farms tripled from 2.0 million in 1860 to 6.0 million in 1905. The number of people living on farms grew from about 10 million in 1860 to 22 million in 1880 to 31 million in 1905. The value of farms soared from \$8.0 billion in 1860 to \$30 billion in 1906.<sup>[68]</sup>

The federal government issued 160-acre (65 ha) tracts virtually free to settlers under the Homestead Act of 1862. Even larger numbers purchased lands at very low interest from the new railroads, which were trying to create markets. The railroads advertised heavily in Europe and brought over, at low fares, hundreds of thousands of farmers from Germany, Scandinavia and Britain.<sup>[69]</sup>

Despite their remarkable progress and general prosperity, 19th-century U.S. farmers experienced recurring cycles of hardship, caused primarily by falling world prices for cotton and wheat, coupled with drought in the wheat regions.<sup>[89]</sup>

Along with the mechanical improvements which greatly increased yield per unit area, the amount of land under cultivation grew rapidly throughout the second half of the century, as the railroads opened up new areas of the West for settlement. A similar expansion of agricultural lands in other countries, such as Canada, Argentina, and Australia, created problems of oversupply and low prices in the international market, where half of American wheat was sold. The wheat farmers enjoyed abundant output and good years from 1876 to 1881 when bad European harvests kept the world price high. They then suffered from a slump in the 1880s when conditions in Europe improved. The farther west the settlers went, the more dependent they became on the monopolistic railroads to move their goods to market. Wheat farmers blamed local grain elevator owners (who purchased their crop), railroads and eastern bankers for the low prices.<sup>[71]</sup>

In the South, Reconstruction brought major changes in agricultural practices. The most significant of these was sharecropping, where tenant farmers "shared" up to half of their crop with the landowners, in exchange for seed and essential supplies. About 80% of the African American farmers and 40% of its white ones lived under this system following the Civil War. Most sharecroppers were locked in a cycle of debt, from which the only hope of escape was increased planting. This led to the over-production of cotton and tobacco (and thus to declining prices and decreased income), exhaustion of the soil, and increased poverty among both the landowners and tenants.<sup>[80]</sup>



Grange poster hailing the yeoman farmer, 1873.

The first official organized effort to address general agricultural problems was the Grange movement. Launched in 1867, by employees of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Granges focused initially on social activities to counter the isolation most farm families experienced. Women's participation was actively encouraged. Spurred by the Panic of 1873, the Grange soon grew to 20,000 chapters and 1.5 million members. The Granges set up their own marketing systems, stores, processing plants, factories and cooperatives. Most went bankrupt. The movement also enjoyed some political success during the 1870s. A few Midwestern states passed "Granger Laws", limiting railroad and warehouse fees.<sup>[72]</sup>

## Family life

Few single men attempted to operate a farm; farmers clearly understood the need for a hard-working wife, and numerous children, to handle the many chores, including child-rearing, feeding and clothing the family, managing the housework, and feeding the hired hands.<sup>[90]</sup> During the early years of settlement, farm women played an integral role in assuring family survival by working outdoors. After a generation or so, women increasingly left the fields, thus redefining their roles within the family. New conveniences such as sewing and washing machines encouraged women to turn to domestic roles. The scientific housekeeping movement



was promoted across the land by the media and government extension agents, as well as county fairs which featured achievements in home cookery and canning, advice columns for women in the farm papers, and home economics courses in schools.<sup>[91]</sup>

Although the eastern image of farm life on the prairies emphasizes the isolation of the lonely farmer and the bleakness of farm life, in reality rural folk created a rich social life for themselves. For example many joined a local branch of the Grange; a majority had ties to local churches. It was popular to organize activities that combined practical work, abundant food, and simple entertainment such as barn raisings, corn huskings, and quilting bees.<sup>[92]</sup> One could keep busy with scheduled Grange meeting, church services, and school functions. The womenfolk organized shared meals and potluck events, as well as extended visits between families.<sup>[93]</sup>

Childhood on western farms is contested territory. One group of scholars argues the rural environment was salubrious for it allowed children to break loose from urban hierarchies of age and gender, promoted family interdependence, and in the end produced children who were more self-reliant, mobile, adaptable, responsible, independent and more in touch with nature than their urban or eastern counterparts.<sup>[94][95]</sup> However other historians offer a grim portrait of loneliness, privation, abuse, and demanding physical labor from an early age.<sup>[96][97][98]</sup>

## Art

Some well-known painters of the Gilded Age include: Winslow Homer, Thomas Eakins, John Singer Sargent, Mary Cassatt, James Abbott McNeill Whistler, Childe Hassam, John Henry Twachtman and Maurice Prendergast.<sup>[99]</sup>

**New York** The New York Art world took a major turn during the Gilded age, seeing an outgrowth of exhibitions and the establishment of major auction houses with a focus on American Art.<sup>[1]</sup> (<http://gildedage.omeka.net/>) The Gilded Age was pivotal in establishing the New York Art world in the international art market.<sup>[100]</sup>

### New York Art Galleries, Clubs, and Associations During the Gilded Age

- American Art Association<sup>[101]</sup>
- American Watercolor Society<sup>[102]</sup>
- Ashcan School
- Brummer Gallery<sup>[103]</sup>
- Century Association<sup>[104]</sup>
- Colony Club
- Cottier Gallery <sup>[105]</sup>



The Chess Players, Thomas Eakins (1876)

- Grand Central Art Galleries<sup>[106]</sup>
- Lotos Club<sup>[107]</sup>
- Montross Gallery <sup>[108]</sup>
- National Association of Portrait Painters<sup>[109]</sup>
- Salmagundi Club<sup>[110]</sup>
- Union League Club of New York<sup>[111]</sup>



The Cup Of Tea, Mary Cassatt (ca. 1879)

## Women's roles

During the Gilded Age, many new social movements took hold in the United States. Many women abolitionists who were disappointed that the Fifteenth Amendment did not extend voting rights to them, remained active in politics, this time focusing on issues important to them. Reviving the temperance movement from the Second Great Awakening, many women joined the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in an attempt to bring morality back to America. Its chief leader was Frances Willard (1839-1898), who had a national and international outreach from her base in Evanston, Illinois. Often the WCTU women took up the issue of women's suffrage which had lain dormant since the Seneca Falls Convention. With leaders like Susan B. Anthony, the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) was formed in order to secure the right of women to vote.<sup>[112]</sup>

Many young women worked as servants or in shops and factories until marriage, then typically became full-time housewives. However black, Irish and Swedish adult women often worked as servants. Career women were few. The teaching profession had once been heavily male, but as schooling expanded many women took on teaching careers.<sup>[113]</sup> If they remained unmarried they could have a prestigious, poorly paying lifetime career.<sup>[114]</sup> At the end of the period nursing schools opened up new opportunities for women, but medical schools remained nearly all male. Business opportunities were very rare, unless it was a matter of a widow taking over her late husband's small business. However the rapid acceptance of the sewing machine made housewives more productive and opened up new careers for women running their own small millinery and dressmaking shops.<sup>[115]</sup>

## Social thought

Science also played an important part in social thought as the work of Charles Darwin became popular. Following Darwin's idea of natural selection, English philosopher Herbert Spencer proposed the idea of social Darwinism. This new concept justified the stratification of the wealthy and poor, and it was in this proposal that Spencer coined the term "survival of the fittest."



This 1902 cartoon from the *Hawaiian Gazette* shows WCTU activist using the water cure to torture a brewmaster as the Anti-Saloon League mans the pump

Joining Spencer was Yale University professor William Graham Sumner whose book *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other* (1884) argued that assistance to the poor actually weakens their ability to survive in society. Sumner argued for a laissez-faire and free-market economy. Few people, however, agreed with the social Darwinists, because they ridiculed religion and denounced philanthropy.

Henry George proposed a “single tax” in his book *Progress and Poverty*. The tax would be leveled on the rich and poor alike, with the excess money collected used to equalize wealth and level out society.

The Norwegian American economist Thorstein Veblen argued in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) that the “conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure” of the wealthy had become the basis of social status in America.

In *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (1887), the reformer Edward Bellamy envisioned a future America set in the year 2000 in which a socialist paradise has been established. The works of authors such as George and Bellamy became popular, and soon clubs were created across America to discuss their ideas, although these organizations rarely made any real social change.<sup>[116]</sup>

## Religion

The Third Great Awakening which began before the Civil War returned and made a significant change in religious attitudes toward social progress. Followers of the new Awakening promoted the idea of the Social Gospel which gave rise to organizations such as the YMCA, the American branch of the Salvation Army, and settlement houses such as Hull House, founded by Jane Addams in Chicago in 1889.<sup>[117]</sup>

The Third Great Awakening was a period of religious activism in American history from the late 1850s to the 20th century. It affected pietistic Protestant denominations and had a strong sense of social activism. It gathered strength from the postmillennial theology that the Second Coming of Christ would come after mankind had reformed the entire earth. The Social Gospel Movement gained its force from the Awakening, as did the worldwide missionary movement. New groupings emerged, such as the Holiness movement and Nazarene movements, and Christian Science.<sup>[118]</sup>

The Protestant mainline denominations (especially the Methodist, Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Congregational churches) grew rapidly in numbers, wealth and educational levels, throwing off their frontier beginnings and becoming centered in towns and cities. Leaders such as Josiah Strong advocated a muscular Christianity with systematic outreach to the unchurched in America and around the globe. Others built colleges and universities to train the next generation. Each denomination supported active missionary societies, and made the role of missionary one of high prestige. The great majority of pietistic mainline Protestants (in the North) supported the Republican Party, and urged it to endorse prohibition and social reforms.<sup>[119][120]</sup> See Third Party System

The awakening in numerous cities in 1858 was interrupted by the American Civil War. In the South; on the other hand, the Civil War stimulated revivals and strengthened the Baptists, especially.<sup>[121]</sup> After the war, Dwight L. Moody made revivalism the centerpiece of his activities in Chicago by founding the Moody Bible Institute. The hymns of Ira Sankey were especially influential.<sup>[122]</sup>

Across the nation, “drys” crusaded, in the name of religion, for the prohibition of alcohol. The Woman's Christian Temperance Union mobilized Protestant women for social crusades against not only liquor, but also pornography and prostitution, and sparked the demand for women's suffrage.<sup>[123]</sup>

The Gilded Age plutocracy came under harsh attack from the Social Gospel preachers and with reformers in the Progressive Era who became involved with issues of child labor, compulsory elementary education and the protection of women from exploitation in factories.<sup>[124]</sup>

All the major denominations sponsored growing missionary activities inside the United States and around the world.<sup>[125][126]</sup>

Colleges associated with churches rapidly expanded in number, size and quality of curriculum. The promotion of "muscular Christianity" became popular among young men on campus and in urban YMCA's, as well as such denominational youth groups such as the Epworth League for Methodists and the Walther League for Lutherans.<sup>[127]</sup>

## See also

- American frontier
- Belle Époque in France
- Gay Nineties
- History of the United States (1865–1918)
- Nadir of American race relations
- Presidency of Ulysses S. Grant
- Ventfort Hall Mansion and Gilded Age Museum (Gilded Age Museum)

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