

The Gilded Age

Lesson Overview

Learning Objectives

1. Explain the status of American identity, freedom, and equality in 1876.
2. Analyze the reasons for large-scale industrialization of the United States in the late nineteenth century.
3. Explain how the business class was supported by the culture of the period.
4. Assess the costs and benefits of the rapid industrialization of the United States.

America: A Homogeneous Society?

An editorial by E. L. Godkin in 1865 stated that, "The great lesson which we have learned from the (Civil) war...is that homogeneousness, social as well as political, is the first condition of our national existence." Twenty-five years later, America seemed to be ignoring the lesson as the gap widened between a privileged upper class and the urban and rural poor who struggled to survive.

But Godkin made another point in his editorial that helps clarify the lesson and explain the direction that United States history takes in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. "This government...cannot be carried on, if any portion of the population which lives under it is legally kept in degradation or legally excluded from the enjoyment of any of the rights or privileges possessed by the rest of the community." The belief that everyone is entitled to these rights, regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion, or politics, has sustained America since its inception.

The Industrial Revolution and the history of America in the years that follow often challenged this belief. How have Americans responded to the challenge of creating a homogeneous society in which no one is excluded from exercising their social and political rights? How have these responses transformed America?

Lesson Focus Points

Look for answers to these questions as you study the lesson:

- What is the origin of the term, "The Gilded Age"? What did the term mean? Why did it become associated with late nineteenth century America?
- How and why did Andrew Carnegie become such a success in the steel industry? What was meant by "vertical integration"?
- How did technology affect industrial growth at this time? What notable inventions came into being? Why were inventors like Thomas Alva Edison considered heroes?
- How did financiers like J. P. Morgan facilitate the rise of big business? How powerful was Morgan?
- What is the role of government in regulating business and the economy?
- How did the Industrial Revolution affect the distribution of wealth?
- What developments brought about major changes in the ways people traveled, worked, and played?

Additional Resources

Websites

[American Cultural History](http://kclibrary.lonestar.edu/decade00.html)

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A timeline of American Cultural History, organized by decades from 1900–1999, to help the user gain a broad understanding and appreciation for the culture and history of each time period.