Whole Lotta Notes

The Era of Good Feelings

As James Madison approached the end of his presidency in 1816, a fellow Virginian and Republican—James Monroe—was elected as his successor. Monroe’s presidency was a continuation of the so-called “Virginia Dynasty,” since all of the presidents between 1801 and 1825 were from Virginia. The fading Federalist Party ran a candidate in the 1816 election for the last time, securing only 34 electoral votes compared to Monroe’s 183 votes. Monroe came to the presidency with a solid political background; he had served as a U.S. senator, he was twice the governor of Virginia, he was President Madison’s Secretary of State, and he had also served a short time as President Madison’s Secretary of War. He fought in the Battle of Trenton during the Revolutionary War at the age of 18.

Monroe was not considered a president with outstanding intellect, nor was he considered a strong leader, but he was regarded as extremely dedicated, levelheaded, and sincere. Jefferson once said that if you turned Monroe’s soul inside out, it would be found spotless. Whatever his limitations, he surrounded himself with promising Republican leaders, including John Quincy Adams, Secretary of State and son of former Federalist President John Adams; William Crawford, Secretary of Treasury; and John C. Calhoun, Secretary of War.

Monroe’s presidency spanned the end of the Revolutionary generation and the emergent age of nationalism. The country was at peace and the economy was thriving when Monroe embarked on a goodwill tour of New England shortly after his inauguration in 1817. He was warmly welcomed everywhere he went—even Boston, which had become a center of wartime dissent for the Federalists during the War of 1812. The Columbian Centinel, a Federalist newspaper in Boston, went so far as to announce that an “Era of Good Feelings” had been ushered in.

This phrase has often been used to describe Monroe’s presidency, but it is, unfortunately, somewhat misleading. The first few years of Monroe’s presidency were blessed with peace, liberty, and progress. However, the prosperity following the War of 1812 collapsed, the Panic of 1819 took hold, and a resurgence of sectionalism erupted.

The Panic of 1819 marked the end of the economic expansion that followed the War of 1812. It featured deflation, depression, bank failures, foreclosures, unemployment, a slump in agriculture and manufacturing, and overcrowded debtors’ prisons. It was the first national economic panic since Washington took office.

Many factors contributed to the Panic of 1819, including a downturn in exports and strong price competition from foreign goods. The falling prices impaired agriculture and manufacturing, triggering widespread unemployment. Another major cause was the risky lending practiced by banks in the west. The Second Bank of the United States tightened their credit lending policies and eventually forced these “wildcat” frontier banks to foreclose mortgages on countless farms and similar high-risk debtors, which resulted in bankruptcies and prisons full of debtors. The Panic of 1819 affected the entire country.

Although the country experienced hard times, little of the blame fell on President Monroe. He was easily elected for a second term in 1820, winning all of the electoral votes but one. Monroe was the only U.S. president to be re-elected after presiding over such a major financial crisis.

Sectional concerns over tariff issues, banking policy, sale of public land, and slavery began to divide the United States into three distinct regions: north, south, and west. While the lines of sectionalism were being drawn, Henry Clay came up with a plan called the “American System” that drew upon the nationalism Americans were still feeling after the War of 1812. Clay’s plan for developing profitable American markets had three main parts: a strong banking system to provide abundant credit, a protective tariff to ensure successful eastern manufacturing, and internal improvements, such as a network of roads and canals. Clay’s American System was meant to build the national economy and bind the country together both economically and politically.

Two parts of Clay’s System were implemented—protective tariffs and the Second Bank of the United States. The third provision, internal improvements such as roads, faced fierce opposition from many within the Republican Party, especially Monroe. They objected on the grounds that the Constitution did not explicitly provide for federal government spending on national developments. President Monroe vetoed any bill that provided funds for roadway- or canal-building projects (the National Road or Cumberland Road being the major exception), leaving it up to the states to provide their own infrastructures.

Before the War of 1812, duties averaged about 12.5 percent, and during the war, Congress doubled all tariffs. In 1816, when the additional revenue from high tariffs was no longer needed to fund the war, a new act kept duties at the same wartime levels. The tariff was a protective measure because the British began dumping cheap goods in the United States, often at a cost far below that of American manufacturers. This protective tariff was the first in United States history—the first of many to come. The British were strangling American industry with their cut-rate goods, and to protect the fledgling industrial sector, Congress kept the tariff rates high.

The tariff issue created clear sectional divisions. Eastern manufacturers, represented by Henry Clay, favored high tariffs that would protect them from foreign competition. Northern constituents, represented by Daniel Webster from New Hampshire, were against the tariff because they feared it would affect their shipping trade and cripple their newly developing manufacturing businesses.

Southerners resented the high prices they had to pay for imports because of the high tariff, and they felt the tariff limited the foreign market for southern goods by inhibiting international exchange. They began a long campaign against the duties, hoping that freer trade would revive the cotton economy. Southerners were represented by John C. Calhoun, who originally supported the tariff but turned against it, claiming that it was enriching New England manufacturers at the cost of the South.

Westerners were split on the tariff issue. The Northwest favored high duties in order to protect its agricultural production, while the Southwest favored low duties for the same reason the Southerners did—they produced cotton.

The national banking policy was another important political issue, although the regional lines were less sharply drawn on this subject than they were on the tariff issue. Northerners voted against a re-charter of the Bank of the United States, while Southerners favored the institution.

Westerners favored the new Bank before the Panic of 1819, which created open opposition to the institution. The Second Bank of the United States stopped allowing payment of debts in paper and instead demanded payment in specie—metallic gold and silver coins—which were in short supply after the War of 1812 due to a large trade deficit with Britain. The hardest hit sector was Western farmers who could not pay their loans to the Bank because they could not obtain the specie that was demanded. The Second Bank of the United States then forced western branches to foreclose on farms with outstanding loans. Westerners began to call for reform and the end of the Bank of the United States.

Land policy in the early nineteenth century was another reason for sectional differences. In 1818, the government sold nearly 3.5 million acres of public land due to a lenient credit policy, which in turn led to falling land prices. Sectional attitudes were clear—the West wanted cheap land, while the North and South felt the public land should be sold for as much as possible. Northerners were afraid that cheap land in the west would draw laborers, leaving the north with a shortage of workers that would force an increase in wages. Southerners were afraid of the competition that might develop when the western lands were settled and planted.

Slavery was the most problematic sectional issue the young nation faced. The leaders of the Constitutional Convention had made many compromises over what politicians at the time called the “peculiar institution”—slavery—in order to get the United States Constitution passed. In 1808, Congress abolished African slave trade without major incident, and by 1819, there were 11 free states and 11 slave states, maintaining a balance in the Union. Most Northerners opposed the institution. In contrast, Southerners wholeheartedly supported and defended slavery, as did most of the West, since many Westerners came from Virginia, Kentucky, and other southern slave states.

While the lines of sectionalism were beginning to be drawn nationally, there remained a few foreign policy issues for the United States to straighten out with Britain and Spain. From 1817 to 1819, the Monroe administration negotiated various foreign policy issues with these two countries. In the Rush-Bagot Agreement of 1817, the United States and Britain agreed to a limited naval presence on the Great Lakes, eventually resulting in the demilitarization of the entire border. The spirit of this agreement gave rise to the tradition of an unfortified border between the United States and Canada.

At the Convention of 1818, the United States and Britain negotiated three important points. The vague northern limit of the Louisiana Purchase was settled along the 49th parallel, from the Lake of the Woods to the Rocky Mountains. The United States was also granted the right to share the Newfoundland and Labrador fisheries. And the third point of agreement was that the Oregon Country would be open to joint occupation by both the British and Americans for 10 years.

During that same year, the Monroe administration recognized increasing problems with Spanish Florida. Seminole Indians frequently came from Florida into American territory to raid border towns, and American criminals and slaves who escaped across the border into Florida could not be recovered. Secretary of War Calhoun authorized General Andrew Jackson to clear the raiding Seminoles from American soil. His order allowed him to pursue the Indians into Spanish territory but did not authorize him to attack any Spanish posts. Jackson, clearly exceeding his instructions, proceeded to push his way through Florida, destroying Seminole settlements, hanging two Indian chiefs, and capturing two Spanish forts. Spain demanded the return of its territory, reparations, and punishment of Jackson, but did not have the military might to back up their demands. Much of Monroe’s administration believed that Jackson had gone too far, but Secretary of State John Quincy Adams instead took the offensive in the Adams-Onís Treaty. In 1819, during negotiations with the Spanish Minister to Washington, Luis de Onís, Adams bargained for Spain to cede all of Florida for $5 million—which the United States actually paid to Americans who held claims against Spain—in exchange for America’s abandonment of claims to Texas, thus setting the western boundary of the Louisiana Purchase.

The Missouri Compromise

During the early nineteenth century, the sectional lines between the free north and the slave south were being gradually drawn. Slavery began to gain prominence as a national issue, and the South became solidly united behind the institution of slavery as it became more critical to their economic success. By 1819, the United States was comprised of an equal number of free and slave states—11 of each.

In 1812, Louisiana had entered the Union, and the balance of the Louisiana Purchase was organized into the Missouri Territory. As the population trickled westward, many Southerners and their slaves settled the region north and west of St. Louis. In 1819, the settlers petitioned the House of Representatives for admission of the state of Missouri as a slave state, since the population exceeded the required 60,000. Missouri was the first area west of the Mississippi to apply for statehood that was entirely part of the Louisiana Purchase.

Missouri’s petition became another sectional issue and led to the end of the “Era of Good Feelings.” Northerners opposed adding Missouri as a slave state because it would upset the current balance of free and slave states. During the debate over Missouri’s admission, Congressman James Tallmadge of New York introduced an amendment stating that no more slaves could be brought into Missouri and that all slaves born in Missouri after the territory became a state would be freed at the age of 25.

Southerners were extremely concerned about the Missouri emancipation amendment and felt the future of the slave system might depend on it being vetoed. They were aware that the amendment could set a damaging precedent for all of the Louisiana Purchase and any land west of the Mississippi. They also held concerns that if Congress abolished slavery in Missouri, they could attempt to do likewise in all of the southern states.

Population growth in the north had led to a majority for the northern states in the House of Representatives. However, because the Senate had equal representation from each state and there was an equal number of free and slave states, the Senate was split on the issue. The House of Representatives passed the Tallmadge Amendment on a strictly sectional vote, but the Senate rejected it, with some Northern Federalists joining the South to spite the Republicans.

Congress was deadlocked for some time over admission of Missouri as a slave state. The primary issues were political and economic balance. Northerners were concerned that Missouri—and any other new slave states—would be over-represented in Congress based on the Three-Fifths Compromise, which said 60 percent of slaves were counted in determining a state’s delegation to the House of Representatives. A secondary issue that was voiced by Northerner abolitionists was the moral question of slavery. However, the morality of slavery did not influence the solution to the problem at hand.

Henry Clay of Kentucky played a leading role in developing what would be called the “Missouri Compromise.” Missouri was admitted as a slave state, and Maine was separated from Massachusetts and admitted as a free state. This compromise preserved the balance between northern and southern states, as well as free and slave states. In addition, Congress prohibited slavery in all other parts of the Louisianan Purchase north of the line of 36° 30’—the southern boundary of Missouri. This second part of the Compromise was rather ironic, considering Missouri was north of the designated no slavery line.

The Missouri Compromise lasted for 34 years. Both sides had yielded something in the compromise, but both felt they had gained something as well. Northerners were satisfied with the compromise because it kept the balance in the Senate between free and slave states. Southerners felt they won a victory with the Missouri Compromise because at that time most Americans felt it was unlikely that the area north and west of Missouri would ever be settled.

While the controversy had subsided for the time, many Americans were beginning to see the South’s “peculiar institution” as an issue that would eventually have to be confronted. The Missouri Compromise avoided the slavery question, but it did not resolve it.

John Marshal

Despite the growing division over the issue of slavery in America, Chief Justice John Marshall and the Supreme Court worked to reinforce the feelings of nationalism that developed after the War of 1812. Marshall was a Revolutionary War survivor, and his experience led to strong feelings of national loyalty. Although he had six colleagues on the Supreme Court, Marshall’s position as Chief Justice—along with his personality, logic, and forcefulness—resulted in many rulings that reflected his personal view of the Constitution and his belief in a powerful central government.

During Marshall’s 34 years on the bench, many important cases were considered by the Court. Several of the most famous cases involved three major principles: contract rights protection, the supremacy of federal legislation over the laws of the states, and regulation of interstate commerce.

In 1810, the contract rights case of Fletcher v. Peck came before the Supreme Court. Members of the Georgia legislature were bribed in 1795 to sell 35 million acres in Mississippi for a small amount to private speculators. The following year, a new Georgia legislature rescinded the sale. The case was taken to the Supreme Court, and Marshall, speaking for the Court, ruled that the original sale was a legal contract—regardless of whether or not it was fraudulent—and therefore protected by the Constitution. The ruling was historically significant because it protected property rights against popular pressures, and it also clearly asserted the Supreme Court’s right to invalidate state laws that conflicted with the Constitution.

In the case of Dartmouth College v. Woodward (1819), the state of New Hampshire tried to alter the college’s charter, which had been granted in 1769 by King George III. A New Hampshire court ruled that Dartmouth was to be changed from a private to a public institution. Dartmouth appealed the case to the Supreme Court, where Marshall ruled that the original charter must stand because it was a contract and could not be altered or canceled without consent of both parties.

The Marshall Court ruled that the Constitution protected contracts against state encroachments. The significance of Marshall’s ruling was far reaching because it effectively safeguarded private corporations from domination by the states’ governments. Unfortunately, the case also set the precedent for giving corporations the ability to skirt governmental controls. Once the states became aware of this dilemma, they generally wrote into charters the ability to make changes so that it was part of the contract.

A case in which the Marshall court upheld the power of the federal court over that of the states was the 1816 case of Martin v. Hunter’s Lessee. The state of Virginia confiscated land owned by a British Loyalist named Denny Martin Fairfax. Virginia granted David Hunter 800 acres of the confiscated lands, and Fairfax brought suit against Hunter for return of the land. The Treaty of Paris (1794) and Jay’s Treaty (1795) seemed to make it clear that Fairfax was the rightful owner of the property, but the Virginia court upheld the grant to Hunter.

The Supreme Court and Justice Marshall overruled the Virginia court, declaring that the land belonged to Fairfax and voided the grant to Hunter. The Court’s ruling rejected “compact theory,” the idea that the states were equally sovereign to the federal government. This ruling was significant because it enforced the rights of the Supreme Court, which held appellate jurisdiction over state courts. Thus, Marshall’s ruling upheld the Supremacy Clause of the Constitution.

McCulloch v. Maryland (1819) is often considered John Marshall’s single most important interpretation of the Constitution, because it dealt with the division of power between the federal government and the states. The state of Maryland, in order to protect its local banks, placed an annual tax on the Bank of the United States and other “foreign” banks. The Maryland branch of the Bank of the United States refused to pay, and Maryland brought suit against the chief bank employee, called the “head cashier,” John W. McCulloch.

Marshall upheld the constitutionality of the Bank of the United States, using Hamilton’s bank message of 1791 to support his position. He argued that the Bank’s legality was implied in many of the powers specifically granted to Congress. Since the bank was legal, the Maryland tax was unconstitutional, for “the power to tax involves the power to destroy,” which was exactly what many states had in mind with respect to the Bank. The Marshall Court’s ruling in favor of McCulloch used a “loose” interpretation of the Constitution and, with the ruling, strengthened federal authority and the implied powers of Congress.

Two years later in the case of Cohens v. Virginia (1821), Marshall once again defended the power of the federal government. The Cohen brothers were illegally selling lottery tickets in the state of Virginia, and the state authorities tried and convicted them. The brothers appealed to the Supreme Court, and Marshall upheld Virginia’s right to forbid the sale of lottery tickets. The case reaffirmed the Supreme Court’s right to review all state court judgements in cases involving the Constitution or powers of the federal government.

In 1824, Marshall handed down his last great decision in Gibbons v. Ogden, the “steamboat case,” which involved the regulation of interstate commerce. In 1808, Robert Fulton and Robert Livingston pioneered commercial use of the steamboat and held a monopoly of steamboat navigation on the Hudson in New York. In 1815, Aaron Ogden purchased exclusive rights to operate a ferry between New York and New Jersey. When Thomas Gibbons, who held a federal trade license, set up a competing line, Ogden sued him.

The case was presented to the Supreme Court, where Marshall decided in favor of Gibbons, destroying Fulton’s and Livingston’s monopoly and reminding New York that Congress alone controlled interstate commerce. Marshall’s decision once again checked the power of the states and upheld the sovereign power of the federal government.

Many of Marshall’s decisions while on the bench aided the economic development of the United States and created a nationally uniform environment for business. Marshall’s landmark decisions also confirmed the Supreme Court’s power of judicial review and firmly established the Judiciary as the most powerful branch of the federal government. In a broader sense, his decisions acknowledged the idea of judicial limitation on legislative powers and made the Supreme Court a vital part of America’s system of government.

The Monroe Doctrine

At the great European conference, the Congress of Vienna (1814-1815), the monarchs of Europe gathered to return the continent to its status before the French Revolution. The European powers banded together to eradicate democratic movements that threatened their thrones. In 1821, the Holy Alliance—Russia, Austria, Prussia, and France—quashed liberal movements in Italy. Then in 1822, at the Congress of Verona, the alliance decided to put down Spanish rebels, and in 1823, France crossed the Spanish border and restored the Spanish king to absolute authority. Rumors spread quickly that the autocratic alliance would next send armies to the revolted colonies of Spanish South America and restore the king to power there as well.

Britain had profited from the breakup of the Spanish monarchy in South America by developing a thriving commerce with the Spanish republics. In 1823, the British foreign minister, George Canning, sought to join with the United States and renounce any interest in acquiring any South American territory and declare opposition to any French interference with the South American colonies. Secretary of State Adams recognized that while the proposal was flattering, it was not in the best interest of the Untied States. He pointed out that the alliance with Britain would mean abandoning the possibility of someday adding part of South America to the United States. He felt the U.S. should proclaim a unilateral policy against the restoration of Spain’s colonies. Adams told Monroe, “It would be more candid, as well as more dignified, to avow our principles explicitly to Russia and France, than to come in as a cockboat in the wake of the British man-of-war.”

Monroe agreed with the arguments Adams made and decided to include a statement of American policy that reflected those arguments in his seventh annual message to Congress in December of 1823. The “Monroe Doctrine,” as it was later called, had two main points. First, Monroe proclaimed that the era of colonization in the Americas had ended: "The American continents, by the free and independent condition which they have assumed and maintain, are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers." Europe’s political system was different than that of the New World, and he felt the two should not be mixed. He stated that any attempts by European powers to extend their political system to the Western Hemisphere would be seen as a threat to the nation’s “peace and safety.” The second point Monroe made in his policy statement was that the United States would not interfere with existing European colonies in North or South American and would avoid involvement in European affairs.

At the time, since the Monroe Doctrine was not a treaty or a law, it drew little attention either in the United States or abroad. In reality, the U.S. didn’t have the power to enforce this unilateral announcement. However, Monroe and his staff knew that the British Navy, the most powerful in the world, would protect South America so that their markets remained open to British trade. Monroe’s Doctrine gave voice to a spirit of patriotism in the United States and did eventually become one of the cherished principles of American foreign policy.

The Growth of American

Between 1790 and 1820, the population of the United States more than doubled to nearly 10 million people. Remarkably, this growth was almost entirely the result of reproduction, as the immigration rate during that period had slowed to a trickle. Fewer than 250,000 immigrants entered the United States due to doubts about the viability of the new republic and travel restrictions in Europe during the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars.

Soon after Napoleon’s final defeat in 1815, immigration to the United States began to increase. Competing shippers who needed westbound payloads kept transatlantic fares low enough to make immigration affordable, and migrants were interested in the prospect of abundant land, high wages, and what they saw as endless economic opportunities. Many also migrated to America because Europe seemed to be running out of room, and numerous people were displaced from their homelands. For the next several decades, the number of immigrants continued to rise. In the 1820s, nearly 150,000 European immigrants arrived; in the 1830s, nearly 600,000; by the 1840s, nearly 1.7 million; and during the 1850s, the greatest influx of immigrants in American history—approximately 2.6 million—came to the United States.

During the 1800s, most European immigrants entered the United States through New York. Ships would discharge their passengers, and the immigrants would immediately have to fend for themselves in a foreign land. It did not take long for thieves and con-men to take advantage of the newcomers. Some of the immigrants brought infectious diseases with them to the States. In 1855, the New York legislature, hoping to curb some of these problems, turned the southern tip of Manhattan into an immigration receiving center. The immigration center recorded their names, nationalities, and destinations; gave them cursory physical examinations; and sometimes assisted them with finding jobs.

By 1860, the number of states had more than doubled to 33 from the original 13. Russia, France, and Austria were the only other countries in the western world that were more populous than the United States. Forty-three cities in the United States boasted populations of more than 20,000 people.

Most of the immigrants coming to the United States came from Ireland and Germany, but some also came from China, Britain, and the Scandinavian countries. In the 1840s, Ireland experienced a potato blight when a rot attacked the potato crop, and nearly two million people died of disease and hunger. Tens of thousands of Irish fled the country during the “Black Forties,” many of them coming to America. By the end of the century, more Irish lived in American than in Ireland, with nearly 2 million arriving between 1830 and 1860. As they arrived in the United States, they were too poor to move west and buy land, so they congregated in large cities along the eastern coast. By 1850, the Irish made up over half the populations of Boston and New York City.

The Irish accepted whatever wages employers offered them, working in steel mills, warehouses, and shipyards or with construction gangs building canals and railways. As they competed for jobs, they were often confronted with “No Irish Need Apply” signs. Race riots were common between the Irish and the free African Americans who competed for the same low-status jobs.

As a rule, Irish immigrants lived in crowded, dirty tenement buildings that were plagued by high crime rates, infectious disease, prostitution, and alcoholism. They were stereotyped as being ignorant, lazy, and dirty. They also faced severe anti-Catholic prejudices. Partially due to the hostility they faced, the Irish cultivated a strong cultural identity in America, developing neighborhood newspapers, strong Catholic churches, political groups, and societies.

Although most Irish had a rough start in America, many eventually improved their position by acquiring small amounts of property. The Irish eventually controlled the police department in New York City, driving around in police vans called “paddy wagons.”

In the 1820s and 1830s, state constitutions were revised to permit universal white-male suffrage, and as a group, the Irish found their way into American politics and were able to exert a remarkable political influence. They primarily followed the Democrats and Andrew Jackson, who was the son of an Irish colonist. Irish votes enabled Jackson to defeat John Quincy Adams in the election of 1828. By the turn of the twentieth century, the Irish had established political machines such as New York’s “Tammany Hall” and virtually ran the municipal government in and around New York.

During the eighteenth century, many Germans moved to America in response to William Penn’s offer of free religious expression and cheap land in Pennsylvania. Consequently, when a new wave of Germans immigrated to America starting in the 1830s, there were already enclaves of Germans in the United States. Between 1830 and 1860, more than 1.5 million Germans migrated to American soil. Many of them were farmers, but many were also cultured, educated, professional people who were displaced by the failed democratic revolution in Germany in 1848.

In contrast to the Irish, the Germans possessed modest amounts of material things and, as a result, were able to afford to settle in rural areas in the Midwest, such as Ohio and Wisconsin. They often migrated in families or groups, enabling them to sustain the German language and culture in their new environments. The German communities preserved traditions of abundant food, beer, and music consumption. Their culture contributed to the American way of life with such things as the Christmas tree and Kindergarten (children’s garden), but their cultural differences often garnered suspicion from their “native” American neighbors.

America had always been a land of immigrants, but for many American “natives,” the large influx of immigrants in the 1840s and 1850s posed a threat of unknown languages and customs. Some Americans feared that foreigners would outnumber them and eventually overrun the country. The natives saw the mass settlements of Irish and German Catholics as a threat to their hard-won religious and political liberties. This hostility rekindled the spirit of European religious wars, resulting in several armed clashes between Protestants and Catholics.

In 1849, nativists formed a group in New York called the “Order of the Star Spangled Banner,” which developed into a political party called the “American Party.” When asked about the organization, members refused to identify themselves saying, “I know nothing,” which eventually led the group to be labeled the “Know-Nothing” Party. The anti-Catholic group won many elections up until the 1850s, when the anti-Catholic movement subsided and slavery became the focal issue of the time. Throughout this critical growth period in America, immigrants were helping to form the United States into one of the most ethnically and racially diverse societies in the history of the world.

The Growth of Industry

In the eighteenth century, British inventors perfected a series of machines for mass production of textiles, which initiated the European Industrial Revolution and gave Britain a head start in industrial production. For many years, the British carefully guarded their industrial secrets, forbidding the export of machines or even descriptions of them and restricting the departure of informed mechanics.

The British could not keep its secrets forever, and in 1789, Samuel Slater left Britain in disguise and arrived in America with the plans in his head for a textile machine that would spin cotton. He contracted with a merchant-manufacturer in Rhode Island to build the machine, and in 1791, he created the first efficient American machinery for spinning cotton thread. By 1815, there were 130,000 cotton spindles turning in 213 factories. Slater is often called the “Father of the Factory System” in America.

Slater’s cotton thread machine was a fabulous invention, but there was a shortage of cotton fiber to spin since it took an entire day for one slave to pick one pound of fiber and separate it from the seeds. In 1793, another mechanical entrepreneur, Eli Whitney, graduated from Yale and spent some time as a tutor on a cotton plantation in Georgia. While there, Whitney devised a mechanism for removing the seeds from the cotton fiber that was 50 times more effective than the handpicking process, thus inventing the cotton “gin” (short for “engine”). Whitney hoped to improve the life of slaves with his cotton gin by making the tedious process of removing seeds less burdensome and to perhaps even eliminate the need for slaves altogether.

The machine was fairly simple to create, and by the time Whitney secured a patent in 1794, a number of copies had already been created. Although he did not see much profit from the cotton gin, Whitney had unintentionally begun a revolution. Cotton production soared, the South became tied to King Cotton, and planters cleared more and more land for cotton growth. The North prospered from the fiber as it was shipped to the New England factories and processed in Slater’s cotton thread machine. The Industrial Revolution had arrived in America.

Up to this point in American history, manufacturing occurred in the household or in small local shops. Growth of the textile production industry was slow until Jefferson’s embargo in 1807 and import restrictions during the War of 1812—both actions stimulated domestic production. As the Industrial Revolution took hold in America, it created the factory system and transformed agricultural production, communication, and transportation across the United States.

New innovations advanced the Industrial Revolution. One of the most basic inventions of the time was adopted from Europe—the preservation of food by canning. By 1820, several major canneries were in full production in Boston and New York.

In 1798, Eli Whitney developed another innovation that spurred continued industrial growth in the north. Whitney won a government contract to manufacture muskets. He developed machine tools to make the parts of the musket so they were virtually identical, allowing them to be interchangeable. Based on Whitney’s invention, factories for the mass production of firearms were built in the northern states. By the 1850s, Whitney’s method for making muskets led to widespread adoption of the idea of interchangeable parts and eventually became the basis of modern assembly-line production methods.

It has been said that Eli Whitney both started and ended the Civil War. He started it by inventing the cotton gin, which made raising cotton more profitable and led to an increase in slavery. He ended it by developing a manufacturing process based on interchangeable parts that the North used in its factories, enabling the North to produce far more war goods than the South.

The 1840s brought a host of inventions. In 1844, Charles Goodyear patented the process for vulcanizing rubber, making it stronger and more elastic. Also in 1844, Samuel Morse transmitted the first intercity telegraph message 40 miles from Baltimore to Washington. The message itself was borrowed from the Bible by the daughter of the Commissioner of Patents and said, "What hath God wrought?" It took a while for Morse’s invention to catch on, but by 1861, the connections between cites spanned all the way to San Francisco, putting distant people in almost instant communication with one another.

In 1846, Elias Howe invented the sewing machine, which was then perfected by Isaac Singer. This invention gave another boost to northern industrialization, specifically the ready-made clothing industry. Machine-made clothes fit better and were less expensive than homespun clothes. The sewing machine also opened up a new line of employment for women, who began working in the clothing factories.

The many technical advances shaped all aspects of Americans’ lives—social, cultural, political, and economic. Living conditions were improved with luxuries such as central heat, indoor plumbing, underground water lines, sewer systems, and improved lighting. Technological advances spurred laws of “free incorporation,” allowing corporations to be created without applying for individual charters from the legislature. Various regions of the north began to specialize in specific industries based on their locations and the availability of natural resources. For example, New England became the center for textile mills, while Pennsylvania led in production of iron.

As these innovations and technical advances were taking place, the Boston Associates, a group of merchants headed by Francis Cabot Lowell, added a new dimension to factory production. Many of the early factories used Samuel Slater’s cotton spinning machines and set up hand looms, but the weavers could not keep up with the machines. In 1813, in Waltham, Massachusetts, Lowell combined the spinning machines with power weaving machines at the Boston Manufacturing Company plant. Lowell focused on mechanization of the entire process for mass-producing standardized cloth. The cloth was plain and rather coarse, but durable and cheap.

The Boston Associates used the Boston Manufacturing Company as a model for new factories. In 1823, they harnessed the power of the Merrimack River at East Chelmsford, Massachusetts to develop a new plant. The town was appropriately renamed Lowell and within three years had over 2,000 inhabitants. By 1850, factories based on the Waltham model produced one-fifth of the nation’s total output of cotton cloth.

In the new Lowell textile factories, the Boston Associates developed a labor system that employed young, unmarried women. By the 1820s, young women came to the factory towns from farms all over New England. The women lived in boardinghouses that were strictly supervised, and they earned between $2.50 and $3.25 per week, about half of which went for room and board. Often, the young women were not working to support themselves, but sending most of the money they made back home. Many worked simply for the excitement of meeting new people and to escape the confines of the farm for a few years before they married. A variety of educational and cultural opportunities offset, to some degree, unsafe and unhealthy conditions during the twelve-hour days and six-day workweeks.

As the Lowell factories experienced booming growth, the conditions for the workers changed. The cities in which the textile factories operated became dirty, bleak industrial cities. Wage cuts and deteriorating working conditions became the norm. As the demand for cheap labor grew, child workers also became vulnerable to exploitation in the factories. Over half of the nation’s industrial workers in 1820 were children under the age of 10 who were both physically and mentally abused. Factory owners increasingly turned to Irish and German immigrants to operate their machines.

During the 1830s and 1840s, textile prices and mill wages dropped. Workers organized strikes where they “turned out” to protest 12-hour work days, wage cuts, and increasing costs for room and board. Although the protests were well attended, they did not force a reversal of management policy.

Skilled artisans and craftsmen could no longer compete with the low prices and high volume of factory goods, and many were forced to take factory jobs. The influx of these skilled workers into the workforce renewed the demand for better working conditions and a shorter workday. Prompted by the moniker, “Northern wage slave,” many laborers undertook efforts to establish unions and create political organizations dedicated to advancing the interests of workers. In a landmark decision by the Massachusetts Supreme Court in the case of Commonwealth v. Hunt (1842), the court ruled that forming a trade union was not illegal. While on the surface this ruling looked to be significant for organized labor, it soon proved to be more of a symbolic gesture. Trade unions provided only marginal benefits for the workers of this time, and it would be nearly a century before they could meet management on even terms.

By 1850, Samuel Slater’s factory system had been fine-tuned, and industry was booming in the east. The New England and the mid-Atlantic states had become the main centers of manufacturing and commerce. The primary products coming from the industrial centers in the north and mid-Atlantic at the time were textiles, lumber, clothing, machinery, and woolen goods.

The Effects of Industry

Early American factories were usually owned by individuals, families, or partners. As mechanization became more widespread and the scale and complexity of businesses increased, a substantial capital investment was required to open a factory. Although it was a slow process, these factors led more and more firms to “incorporate” ownership.

Prior to the 1860s, most manufacturing was conducted by unincorporated companies. Organizing a corporation required a special act of a state legislature. Many people believed that only projects that were in the public interest, such as roads, railways, and canals, were entitled to the privilege of incorporation. Businessmen also often viewed corporations as monopolistic and corrupt and as a threat to the individual enterprise. It took years for corporations to be regarded as agencies of free enterprise.

Between the 1820s and the 1850s, the northeast became the premier region for industry. Along the Hudson and Delaware Rivers, the concentration of factories and mills rivaled that of the most industrialized areas of Britain. By 1860, American industry employed over one million workers in 140,000 companies, with an output amounting to $1.9 billion.

Not only did the growth of industry encourage the formation of corporations, but it also shaped American society in a variety of other ways. It reduced the need for foreign products and moved the country closer and closer to self-sufficiency. During the War of 1812, Americans sunk a large amount of capital into manufacturing, and that trend continued after the war as profits and the prestige associated with the business increased.

The rapid growth of industry prompted a rapid growth of cities. Prior to 1840, commerce dominated the activities and location of major cities in America. The growth of industry required new concentrations of people at places convenient to waterpower or raw materials.

The four Atlantic seaports of New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Boston were the largest American cities due to their strategic locations. By 1860, New York was the first American city to boast a population of more than one million. Urbanization was both a consequence of economic growth and a positive force in its promotion. As American society became more concentrated and urban due to the effects of industrialization, people had more time for recreation. People of all classes went to theatres to watch a wide range of performances, such as Shakespeare’s tragedies, minstrels, operas, magic shows, and acrobatic troupes. The theatres encouraged a boisterous atmosphere, so most “respectable” women did not attend.

Blood sports were another popular form of entertainment. Dog fighting, cockfighting, and prizefighting were all fashionable and encouraged frenzied betting. Racing was also a popular leisure activity of the time. Foot races, boat races, and horse races attracted thousands of spectators, with nearly 100,000 attending a horse race at Union Track on Long Island in 1845.

Westward Movement

By the mid-nineteenth century, the American economy that had been based on local commerce and small-scale farming was maturing into a dynamic, wide-reaching capitalist marketplace. As the industrial revolution in the northeast altered the economy and intensified the process of urbanization, an agricultural empire began to emerge in the west.

By 1860, more than one-half of the American population was located west of the Appalachian Mountains. Conditions along the entire Atlantic seaboard stimulated migration to the western regions. The soil in New England was incapable of producing agricultural crops beyond a subsistence level, resulting in a steady stream of men and women moving west to take advantage of the rich land in the interior of the continent. Many people in the Carolinas, Virginia, and the Deep South also moved westward because they had exhausted the soil. A lot of them moved near the Mississippi River because it provided a means for getting their products to coastal markets.

In the early nineteenth century, life was grim for the first pioneer families, who were poorly fed, ill-clad, and housed in hastily built dwellings. Many trudged on foot over hundreds of miles, dragging crude carts loaded with their scanty possessions. More fortunate pioneers traveled on horseback or in wagons—the best known was the canvas-topped Conestoga “covered wagons,” pulled by horses or oxen. These wagons were waterproof, enabled pioneers to travel farther, and allowed families to travel together and bring more of their possessions.

As the nineteenth century wore on and more and more settlers moved west, conditions improved. Many became farmers as well as hunters, and flourishing settlements began to change the face of the west. Land speculators bought large tracts of the cheap land, sold their holdings for a profit, and moved still farther west, making way for new settlers. Artisans and merchants soon followed the farmers west. Rapid growth in the west was the norm. Chicago, Illinois in 1830 was simply a trading village with a fort, but long before some of its original settlers died, it had become one of the largest and richest cities in the nation.

Farmland in the west was easy to acquire. A new land law in 1820 reduced the minimum price of government land from $1.64 to $1.25 per acre and the minimum plot size from 160 to 80 acres. Westerners continued to push for greater relaxation of land laws, and under the Preemption Act of 1830, squatters were allowed to stake out claims ahead of the governmental land surveys and later get 160 acres at the minimum price of $1.25 per acre. Then, after the 1862 Homestead Act, land could be claimed by merely occupying and improving it.

Pioneer families first had to clear the trees and grub out the stumps and underbrush, but then they could grow their own grain, vegetables, and fruit. They also ranged the woods for wild game, fished the nearby streams, and raised livestock. They usually planted their first crop in a natural glade, and then year by year they pushed back the trees until the land was cleared. They discovered corn was very versatile—it could be fed to livestock or distilled into liquor—and it rapidly became the Western farmers’ staple market item. Much of the Westerner’s harvest was sent down the Ohio-Mississippi River system to the booming Cotton Kingdom in the south. The Mississippi River and its tributaries provided a natural highway for western commerce.

Westerners were continually finding ways to bring more land into cultivation. Unfortunately, when they reached the sticky black soil of the treeless prairies, their wooden plows would break, making it nearly impossible to plant. The innovators of the time helped the farmers overcome the challenges they faced. In 1837, John Deere invented a steel plow that could break the soil and was light enough to be pulled by horses.

In 1834, Cyrus McCormick invented a mechanical mower-reaper that transformed the scale of American agriculture. Farmers using hand-operated sickles and scythes could only harvest half an acre of wheat a day, while McCormick’s reaper and two men could work twelve acres a day. McCormick’s success attracted other inventors, and soon there were mechanical seeders that replaced the need to sow seed by hand and mechanical threshers to separate the grains of wheat from straw.

With all of the technological advances and continual movement to the west, farming had become a major commercial activity by the 1850s. Large-scale, specialized, cash-crop agriculture dominated the trans-Allegheny west. Soon, the volume of agricultural products became more than the South could consume. However, before the farming community could do more than ship their produce downriver, a transportation revolution would have to occur that would enable them to send foodstuffs east and west.

The Transportation Revolution

In the late eighteenth century, primitive methods of travel were still in use in America. Waterborne travel was uncertain and often dangerous, covered-wagon and stagecoach travel over rutted trails was uncomfortable, and all types of travel were very slow. Americans were aware that a transportation network would increase land values, stimulate domestic and foreign trade, and strengthen the American economy.

In 1794, a private company completed the Philadelphia-Lancaster Turnpike, a broad, paved highway that was similar to the good European highways at that time. It was called a “turnpike” because as drivers approached the tollgate they were confronted with a barrier of sharp spikes that was turned aside when they paid their toll. The completion of the Lancaster Turnpike resulted in a turnpike-building boom that lasted nearly 20 years. By 1821, nearly 4,000 miles of turnpikes had been completed, mostly connecting eastern cities. Money needed to build the new turnpikes was coming primarily from state governments and in some cases from individuals.

Constructing decent roads over the Appalachians and in the west was a more difficult task than building those in the east. Although states’ rights proponents regularly blocked spending federal funds for internal improvements, one notable exception was the Cumberland Road. In 1811, the federal government began to construct a turnpike—Cumberland Road, also called the “National Road”—which stretched 591 miles from Cumberland, in western Maryland, to Vandalia, in Illinois. The project was completed in 1852 with a combination of federal and state aid, with different states receiving ownership of segments of the highway.

Americans benefited from the new turnpikes; however, it was not yet economical to ship bulky goods by land across the great distances in America. Businessmen and inventors began concentrating on improving water transportation. In 1807, Robert Fulton sent the first commercially successful steamboat, the Clermont, from New York City up the Hudson River to Albany. Skeptics initially thought the project would never work and nicknamed the boat “Fulton’s Folly.” The Clermont made the run of 150 miles at about five miles an hour, proving that it was an efficient vessel. Thereafter, use of the steamboat spread rapidly, with steamers making the run from New Orleans as far north as Ohio. By 1830, there were more than 200 steamers on the Mississippi.

As early as the 1820s, the successes of the steamboat were clear. Steamboats played a vital role in opening the west and south to further settlement. They stimulated the agricultural economy of the west by providing better access to markets at a lower cost. Farmers quickly bought land near navigable rivers, because they could now easily ship their produce out. Villages at strategic points along the waterways evolved into centers of commerce and urban life. In the 1830s and 1840s, the port of New Orleans grew to lead all others in exports.

Steamboats were also much more comfortable than other forms of land transportation at the time. The General Pike, launched in 1819, set the standard for luxurious steamers with marble columns, thick carpets, ornate mirrors, and plush curtains. Luxury steamers evolved into floating palaces where passengers could dine, drink, dance, and gamble as they traveled to their destinations.

While steamboats were conquering western rivers, canals were under construction in the northeast to further improve the transportation network. In 1817, the New York legislature endorsed Governor DeWitt Clinton’s plan for connecting the Hudson River with Lake Erie—the Erie Canal. Completed in 1825, the canal ran 363 miles from Albany to Buffalo. The completion of the canal reduced travel time from New York City to Buffalo from 20 days to six, reduced the cost of moving a ton of freight from $100 to $5, and moved the country a step closer to linking the Mississippi Valley and the Atlantic Ocean. The canal also provided a water route from New York to Chicago, via the Great Lakes, and marked the beginning of Chicago’s rapid growth.

The Erie Canal was immediately a financial success, paying for itself within seven years. The success of the “Big Ditch” sparked a canal-building mania that lasted for more than a decade and resulted in around 3,000 miles of waterways by 1840. Ohio built the Ohio and Erie Canal, running from the Ohio River to Cleveland, and Indiana built the Wabash and Erie Canal. Both were feeders that supplied farmers west of the Appalachians with water connections to the east.

The Erie Canal had broad economic implications. The value of land along the route increased, new cities in New York such as Rochester and Syracuse sprang up, industry in New York boomed, and farming in the Old Northwest attracted thousands of newcomers who could now easily ship their goods to market on the east coast.

Both the turnpike and the canal contributed to the emerging national economy, but the most significant development was the railroad. Railroads were faster and cheaper than canals to construct, and they did not freeze over in the winter. Since many states had overextended by borrowing heavily to finance their canals, much of the early railroad growth was developed by private investors.

In 1828, development of the first railroad began in Baltimore, and four years later the Baltimore and Ohio (B&O) Railroad reached 73 miles. By 1833, the Charleston and Hamburg Railroad extended 136 miles west of Charleston. The Panic of 1837 slowed railroad construction, but by 1840 the United States had over 3,000 miles of tracks, nearly double the mileage in all of Europe. And by 1860, the U.S. saw development of over 30,000 miles of railroad tracks, three-fourths of which were in the industrializing north. There were several southern railway lines, but no one single southern railway system.

Early railroad pioneers faced several challenges: Tracks with steep grades and sharp curves required more powerful locomotives, sparks from wood-burning engines caused fires, brakes were ineffective, and wooden rails topped with iron straps wore out quickly and broke loose, causing dangerous crashes. The intent of most early railroad builders had been to monopolize the trade of certain districts, not to establish connections with competing centers, so few of the tracks were coordinated into railroad systems. Frequently, railroads went so far as to use tracks of different widths to prevent other lines from using their tracks.

Eventually, all of these railway obstacles were overcome. Modifications in locomotive design enabled trains to negotiate sharp curves, engines that could burn hard coal appeared, better brakes were developed, and the iron T-rail combined with crossties increased durability of the tracks. Rail gauges also gradually became standardized, linking the various rail lines together.

Water travel was generally more comfortable than the train, but railway travel became the most popular from of transport because it was economical, reliable, and fast. Trains traveled more than twice as fast as a stagecoach and four times as fast as a steamboat.

The development of so many railroads changed American society. The railroad provided indirect benefits by encouraging settlement and expansion of farming, thus transforming agriculture. Much more of the fertile prairie could be developed because the farmers now had access to national markets via the train. American cities were also influenced by railway development. Eastern seaports, along with other intermediate centers like Cincinnati, benefited from an increase in exportable goods.

Other forms of transportation were also working to bind the United States together and to the rest of the world. In 1845, the first clipper ship, the Rainbow, was launched. Clipper ships were long, narrow, and built for speed. With their taller masts and numerous sails, they could outrun a steamer if there was a good breeze. While in operation, clippers carried highly demanded tea from China to America and transported goods to the prospectors in California. Clippers lasted less than two decades because, although they were fast, they did not have much cargo space.

In 1860 in the far west, the Pony Express was established as a form of transportation for carrying mail. Daring pony riders carried mail from Missouri to California in ten days—an amazing feat for the times. The riders changed horses at stations every 10 miles, and rode summer or winter, day or night, good weather and bad. The Pony Express only lasted 18 months, succumbing to Samuel Morse’s telegraph machine.

The transportation revolution in the United States had been spurred by the desire of the Easterners to tap into all that the west had to offer. Turnpike, canals, steamboats, and railways forged a truly continental economy. Transportation innovations cut the cost and increased the speed of moving goods, helping to create a national market and provide a stimulus for regional specialization. Westerners, with their boundless prairies and swiftly growing population, became important producers of commercial agriculture, supplying both the North and the South with food. Northerners supplied the West and the South with textiles and other manufactured goods. Southerners supplied the North with cotton, the raw material they needed to produce their textiles.

The movement of goods over long distances to the various regions required a supporting infrastructure, which stimulated the growth of market towns where merchants, bankers, warehousemen, retailers, and other middlemen provided the services needed to move the goods from producers to consumers. More extensive markets increased competition, pushing manufacturers to produce better and cheaper products in order to capture a larger share of the market.

Transportation innovations encouraged a new sense of connectedness among Americans, encouraging a deeper sense of nationalism. The transportation revolution pushed nineteenth-century America through the process of integrating an entire continent into a single cultural and economic entity.

King Cotton

In the late eighteenth century, a recent Yale graduate named Eli Whitney had aspirations of practicing law. However, like many modern college graduates, Whitney had a debt to repay for his education. To that end, Whitney left his home in Massachusetts to take a tutoring position on a Georgia plantation.

Whitney found himself in the midst of an active agricultural economy. Tobacco, rice, and sugar were vital crops, and cotton cultivation was showing great promise. A stable slave culture was in place in the south, providing labor for southern plantations. However, the time-consuming process for harvesting cotton limited the prosperity of plantation owners.

Whitney’s employer, Catherine Greene, asked the educated Whitney if he could devise a solution. He set aside his aspirations to practice law and began tinkering with plans for a hand-crank machine that would separate the sticky cotton from its seeds. Whitney successfully created such a machine in 1793, along with a larger version that could be powered by horses or water.

With the development of the cotton “gin” (short for engine), cotton rapidly surpassed tobacco, rice, and sugar as the number one southern crop. Cotton production increased 800% over the next ten years with assistance from Whitney’s invention. The cotton gin brought Southerners unprecedented prosperity.

With the ability to process cotton at a faster rate, southern plantation owners needed to increase their labor force. The already large slave system in the south became larger as slaves were smuggled into the country (slave importation had been deemed illegal from 1808 on). Slave women were encouraged, and in some cases enticed with promises of freedom, to have children and build up the slave owner’s labor force, all to increase the cotton harvest. Already prosperous southern plantation owners grew even wealthier with the bounties brought by Whitney’s cotton gin. Ironically, Whitney had hoped his invention would reduce the need for slave labor, but its effect was just the opposite.

This thriving cotton industry led to the rise of large-scale commercial agriculture. Not only did increased cotton milling result in an increased numbers of slaves, but planters also worked to augment their land ownership to make more money. Some land was taken from the Indians, who were being removed from the southeast during this period. Also, large plantation owners were buying out smaller plantations to increase their land holdings, and those planters who were bought out moved westward. The motto of Southerners became “Cotton is King,” and they were happy to serve a ruler who provided such prosperity.

Southerners were not the only ones benefiting from the cotton boom. Eighty percent of the south’s cotton went to England by way of northern shippers. These shippers were able to buy cotton wholesale and sell it at a premium, since England’s most important manufactured good was cotton cloth. One-fifth of the population in England earned a living from the manufacture of this cloth, and 75 percent of the cotton used in England’s production came from the United States. Since England was so dependent on the south’s cotton and the north’s transportation of it, both the north and the south were able to benefit heavily from this export.

The many people who gained wealth from cotton were willing to disregard the indications that a one-crop economy could not be sustained. Planters ignored the fact that King Cotton was hard on the soil, especially with the frenzied harvesting that was taking place during this era.

There were other drawbacks to the cotton industry, as well. The cotton gin made production potential greater, but it also made the labor source more unstable. The slaves required to operate the cotton gins could get sick or injured in great numbers, rendering plantation owners unable to harvest the crops growing on their land. The cotton-based economy also promoted a decidedly unequal socio-economic structure. An excess of poor whites and slaves lived in the south, while a few wealthy plantation owners monopolized the industry. At a time when democracy was being celebrated, the majority of the south was under the control of a minority of prosperous plantation owners.

Southern Culture

By the mid nineteenth century, the south had developed into an aristocracy, with wealthy plantation owners at the top of the social ladder. In 1850, only a small minority—approximately 1,750 families—owned more than 100 slaves each. This small group of people carried significant political and social power.

Southern aristocrats used their wealth to send their children to the finest schools, which were often in the north or overseas. Many of their young men returned home feeling called to public service, and the south produced a high proportion of statesmen. Southern women ran the households, including managing female slaves who cooked, cleaned, and performed nearly all the household chores. Although there were abolitionist rumblings among white men at this time, virtually none of their wives supported the abolition effort.

While democracy was the goal throughout the entire United States, the aristocracy of the south weakened the foundation of a democratic society. Since wealth bought southern aristocrats the opportunities for education at private institutions, efforts for state-supported public education were hindered. The gap between the rich and the poor continued to widen.

Even as the rich were controlling the south, it was the smaller plantation owner who truly represented the southern lifestyle. Only one-fourth of white Southerners owned slaves, and of that number, many had small cotton farms and most owned fewer than ten slaves each. In fact, over six million residents in the south owned no slaves at all.

In addition to the large and small plantation owners, residents in the south included poor white families. These families were often called “white trash” by other Southerners, who believed they were lazy. Rather, most poor whites were unable to work efficiently due to malnutrition and parasitic illness caused by a poor understanding of safe and healthy food preparation.

Poor whites were classified by location. The term “lowland whites” identified mechanics, tradesmen, and small cotton farmers who lived among the southern population. Hoping to someday achieve the American Dream of prosperity, they staunchly supported the slave system. Many lowland whites worked their entire lives with the hope of one day owning at least one slave—someone to whom they could feel superior.

Another class of people competed with the underprivileged whites on the social ladder—the free blacks. By 1860, approximately 250,000 free black men and women lived in the south. Many had been freed during the Revolution, while others were emancipated mulattoes, the offspring of white planters and their black slave mistresses. Although they had their freedom, most states had laws limiting blacks’ rights. In some cases, free blacks were captured by unscrupulous slave traders and resold into slavery, so emancipation was no guarantee of a prosperous life.

Another 250,000 free blacks lived in the north, where they were also denied basic rights, including the right to vote and, in some cases, the right to a public education. Irish immigrants often threatened or caused harm to free blacks out of resentment, since the two groups often competed for the same menial jobs.

The bottom rung of the southern aristocracy was not surprisingly held by slaves. By 1860, nearly four million slaves inhabited the southern region of the United States. Although slave importation had been deemed illegal from 1808 on, many slave traders continued to smuggle slaves in and were rarely prosecuted for these violations.

Abolitionists were gearing up for battles which they hoped would result in freedom for all slaves, but at the same time arguments were being made for maintaining the slave system. Supporters of slavery argued that the U.S. slave system provided slaves with a much better lifestyle than they would have in other countries. They pointed to the self-sustaining slave population as evidence, using the argument that slaves were voluntarily cohabitating and reproducing with one another, a luxury not afforded slaves in other countries. Proslavery rhetoric also argued that the typical slave was better off than the typical northern worker and that slavery civilized blacks and allowed them to learn about Christianity.

However, the primary argument for slavery was always economical. Slaves were no doubt an economic necessity for both the north and the south. Slave owners lived in fear of a slave revolt, which could destroy their profitability, but they saw the risk as a necessary evil to maintain the prosperity brought by King Cotton.

Condition of Slaves

The conditions in which slaves existed in the nineteenth century varied from region to region—and even from house to house. Wise slave owners recognized the value of slaves as human capital, since by 1860 slaves were worth approximately $1,800 each. As such, while most slaves travailed in the fields cultivating crops, dangerous work, such as roof repair, was often hired out to more expendable labor sources.

Most slaves resided in the Deep South, an area stretching from South Carolina and Georgia to Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. This region became known as the “black belt” for its abundance of slaves.

Hard work was a mainstay of the slave lifestyle. Since slaves did not earn wages like other workers, their source of motivation was an overseer—often another slave who had been given increased responsibility—who wielded a whip to flog the unproductive or inefficient laborers. Physically, emotionally, and legally, slaves were reduced to property, given no civil or political rights.

Slaves did not even have the right to legally enter into marriage, although many slave owners allowed their slaves to participate in unionizing ceremonies and to live as married couples. Most slaves practiced some form of religion, usually a hybrid faith mixed from Christian and African elements. They often incorporated the African “responsorial” system of punctuating sermons with verbal agreement. Most slave children in the Deep South lived in two-parent households, where forced separations did not happen very often.

Forced separations typically occurred when a slave owner died or encountered financial difficulties. In these situations his slaves were often sent to auction. Most auctions were multi-purpose events, selling humans alongside cattle and horses. No regard was given to keeping families together at these auctions. In fact, it was rare that families who came to auction together stayed together.

These terrible auctions, along with the appalling conditions most slaves dealt with daily, fed the growing abolitionist movement. The dispute over slavery would eventually be resolved, but not before the country turned on itself in civil warfare.

Election of 1824

As James Monroe’s second presidential term was coming to an end in 1824, a heated battle ensued to select his replacement. With the Federalist Party losing steam, all four presidential candidate front-runners were self-declared Republicans.

Three of the candidates were well-known because of their current political roles. William Crawford and John Quincy Adams were serving in Monroe’s administration as Secretary of the Treasury and Secretary of State, respectively. Speaker of the House Henry Clay also threw his hat in the ring. The fourth contender was General Andrew Jackson, a senator from Tennessee known for his success in defeating the British at New Orleans in 1815.

Jackson and Adams, who emerged as the front-runners, were a study in contradiction. Adams, a staunch nationalist and a typical New Englander, was reserved and aloof, while Jackson, the westerner and war hero, glad-handed his way to political popularity. Jackson avoided taking a firm position on most issues, preferring instead to be vague and not offend any voters.

Jackson’s plan to be everything to every voter worked. When the popular votes were counted, he carried 42 percent to Adams’ 31 percent. Clay and Crawford each took around 12 percent of the popular vote. However, the electoral system complicated what was an otherwise simple voting process.

At this time, states differed on how electoral votes were assigned. Some states assigned electoral votes to reflect the popular vote, while other states assigned electoral votes according to the votes of their legislature. When the electoral votes were counted in 1824, no one candidate held the required majority to be named president. Jackson had 99 electoral votes, Adams held 84, Crawford earned 41, and Clay garnered 37 electoral votes.

According to the Twelfth Amendment to the Constitution, the decision now went to the House of Representatives, who would select a winner from the top three electoral vote-earners—in this case, Jackson, Adams, and Crawford. Although Clay could not be chosen as President, he held a great deal of power in the selection process through his role as Speaker of the House.

Secretary of Treasury William Crawford was not seriously considered in the selection process due to health problems that left him partially paralyzed and with limited sight. Again, the choice came down to Adams and Jackson.

Henry Clay was the polar opposite of John Quincy Adams—Adams a puritanical, moral man and Clay a hard-living gambler with an urge to duel—however, Clay did not feel the animosity toward him that he felt toward Jackson. Clay had championed his “American System,” which promoted tariffs to support American manufacturers, a national bank, and domestic improvements at the federal government’s expense, all in the name of country unity. Jackson did not support Clay’s American System, so Clay gave his endorsement to John Quincy Adams, who was selected as the sixth President of the United States.

Clay’s support did not go unrewarded. Days after Adams was selected as President, he chose Clay as his Secretary of State, a coveted position because frequently the individual in this role went on to be president. Clay’s appointment caused an uproar among Jackson’s supporters, who believed that Clay and Adams had conspired to get Adams into office—Clay scratching Adams’ back by giving him the presidential nod, and Adams returning the favor with a prime position in his cabinet. This tumult was labeled the “Corrupt Bargain” of 1824.

Since Adams was such a moral man, it is unlikely that the accusations of corruptness were accurate. However, Jackson’s supporters took the idea and ran with it, using it to launch their campaign for Jackson as president in the 1828 election, even as Adams was taking office in 1824. The Jacksonians’ efforts to derail Adams’ presidency were the primary cause of Adams serving only one presidential term.

Election of 1828

As Andrew Jackson’s supporters worked to put him first in line for the 1828 election, the public began to learn more about him. Labeled “Old Hickory” by supporters who drew parallels between the war hero and a sturdy hickory tree, Jackson represented the New West as a land of hardiness and stamina.

A plantation and slave owner, Jackson’s political beliefs were not easily labeled as either federalist or antifederalist, although Jackson did support states’ rights and initiatives and did not believe in a supreme central government. This was a bone of contention between Jackson and Henry Clay, whose influence resulted in Jackson losing the 1824 presidential election. Jackson also strongly believed that government should be run “by the people,” with individuals accepting limited terms in office and then returning to the private sector to avoid the corruption that tended to follow career politiciDuring the early nineteenth century, a wave of suffrage efforts was sweeping the nation to guarantee voting rights for all white men, regardless of property ownership or taxes paid. Between 1812 and 1821, six new western states granted universal white manhood suffrage. During the same period, four eastern states significantly reduced land ownership voting requirements for white males.

As these efforts gained momentum and the constituency grew to include less wealthy voters, more emphasis was placed on the “common man.” Politicians, including Jackson, had to rethink their campaign strategies to maximize their appeal. Jackson had already earned respect as a war hero, and with his strategy to identify himself as a common man just like the people he would represent, he was able to garner the necessary votes to beat Adams and earn the presidency in 1828. As in the election of 1824, Jackson again beat Adams in the popular vote, but this time he gained 178 electoral votes to Adams’ 83. He accepted his office, the first president from the west, clothed in black in honor of his recently deceased wife, Rachel.ans.

As Jackson took office, his theory of limiting staffers’ terms stirred both positive and negative emotions. His predecessor, John Quincy Adams, had resisted replacing the previous administration’s staff with his own as long as the staffers remained productive. However, this caused Adams to lose support of those who expected a political post in exchange for their efforts. Conversely, Jackson believed in appointing his own staff comprised of his supporters, which also allowed him to eliminate the Adams and Clay supporters from his administration. This system of political back-scratching came to be known as the Spoils System, and was present on a wide-scale at all levels of government.

The Spoils System had several negative consequences. Often, the individuals who were appointed were unskilled at best, and incapable at worst, of fulfilling the responsibilities of their posts. Furthermore, the Spoils System could be abused. Occasionally, corrupt individuals were placed in offices that they ultimately abused, stealing millions of dollars from the government. This system also created scandals as politically motivated supporters of one candidate worked hard to uncover—or in some cases, fabricate—offensive stories about the opposition. Although Jackson did not employ the Spoils System on the grand scale as some who followed him as chief executive, he certainly had a hand in developing its practice.

New Political Parties

The political revolution stirred up by Jackson’s alternative staffing methods also resulted in the shift from a one-party political system to a two-party system. Although both Andrew Jackson and John Quincy Adams called themselves Republicans in the 1824 election, it was apparent that their political beliefs were not aligned. Between 1824 and 1828, the supporters of each candidate polarized into two political parties—the National-Republicans, those who supported Adams and would later become known as the Whig Party, and the Democratic-Republicans, who worked to get Jackson elected and who would later shorten their name to the Democratic Party.

Along with new political parties came new attitudes. The suffrage movement brought power to the common man, and the common men responded by turning out in droves to vote.

Additionally, with the new attitudes reflecting the demise of aristocracy, the common man now expected politicians to cater to them. It was during this time that modern methods of politicking, including banners, parades, parties, and incentives began to be employed. Although not nearly on the national scale of later elections, this was the premier era of baby-kissing and hand-shaking as a means to election. In an effort to be more organized, nominating conventions were held to select candidates, and the caucus system was eliminated.

The Democratic Party was picking up steam with Jackson’s election in 1828. In accordance with the “common man” ideals, Democrats denounced Henry Clay’s “American System” and supported states’ rights. Democrats also defended the Spoils System as a necessary element of an efficient government.

The Whig Party, although out of power in the executive branch, was also further defining itself. Its roots were firmly entrenched in Alexander Hamilton’s Federalist ideals, including supporting a national bank and a strong central government that would finance improvements within United States borders. Northern industrialists and merchants flocked to the Whig Party because it emphasized protecting their industries through high tariffs. Both Northern and Southern opponents to Andrew Jackson were drawn to the Whig Party.

The Whig Party, which served as the backbone for the modern Republican Party, toyed with moral reform early on. It believed that a strong federal government could—and should—use its power to resolve society’s concerns. These social welfare efforts were, and continue to be, a strong barrier between political parties.

Tariff of 1828

Andrew Jackson was elected as President of the United States because the American people saw him as the “everyman.” His leadership during the Battle of New Orleans in 1819 gave him the respect of wealthy businessmen, and his simple roots resonated with those who were struggling to carve their own niche. However, his popularity did not ensure that he would avoid scandal and resentment during his presidency.

Jackson’s supporters, angry over John Quincy Adams’ win in the 1824 election, strategized to sabotage his presidency. They pushed a proposal through Congress that would raise tariffs significantly on manufactured items such as wool and textiles. Since Adams was a New Englander and any hike in tariff duties would be enthusiastically supported there, Jacksonians hoped to portray Adams as favoring his home region over the south and west.

The Jacksonians expected a backlash from their somewhat outrageous tariff proposal, which was exactly their purpose. They hoped to push this tariff through to embarrass Adams and his administration and to assist Jackson in getting elected in 1828.

As it turned out, Jackson did not need the tariff to be elected; his popularity got him elected in 1828. However, the proposal was still on the table. It finally passed in 1828, and instead of being an embarrassment to Adams, it wreaked havoc during Jackson’s presidency and came to be called the “Tariff of Abominations.”

When the tariff went into effect, Southerners complained long and loudly. While other parts of the country were experiencing a boom, the economy in the south was stalling. Manufacturing interests, especially in the north, could gain assistance from a “protective tariff,” but Southerners felt the financial strain of the tariffs due to their reliance on northern commodities. Residents of the south felt they were being treated unfairly, and they rallied against the Tariff of 1828 and against Jackson himself.

South Carolina

South Carolina, in particular, acted out against the Tariff of 1828. South Carolinans campaigned heavily against the tariff, justifying their arguments with the principles set out in the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions written in the previous century by Jefferson and Madison to support states’ rights. They also supported their case by arguing that the U.S. Constitution allowed states to individually nullify federal laws for the whole union.

The South Carolina legislature published a pamphlet titled “The South Carolina Exposition,” which offered persuasive arguments for nullifying the Tariff of 1828, stating that it was unjust and unconstitutional. South Carolina eventually revealed that the author of “The South Carolina Exposition” was none other than John C. Calhoun, Vice President of the United States. Calhoun was raised in South Carolina and supported the efforts to nullify the Tariff of 1828.

Supporters of nullification, who came to be known as the “nullies,” attempted to pass nullification through the South Carolina state legislature, but their efforts were impeded by the Unionists, a small but determined group of men who believed that states did not hold nullification rights. Although other states made rumblings about joining South Carolina’s cause, none ever actually did, and South Carolina fought the tariff battle alone.

The nullification cause benefited from Calhoun’s leadership. Calhoun was serving as Jackson’s Vice President, but he had fallen out of Jackson’s favor as his successor thanks in part to Martin Van Buren’s efforts. Van Buren, who was Secretary of State, delighted in any situation that widened the divide between Jackson and Calhoun.

One infamous situation that caused a rift between Jackson and Calhoun, and helped confirm Van Buren as Jackson’s favorite, was the Peggy Eaton affair. Peggy, the wife of Secretary of War John Eaton, had been accused of adultery prior to her marriage to John. The gossip mill speculated that Peggy had cheated on her first husband with John, causing her first husband to commit suicide. Even though John married Peggy, the shroud of dishonor stayed with her.

Jackson had lived through similar scandals surrounding his wife, Rachel. He and Rachel had married, erroneously believing that her divorce from her first husband had been finalized. When the mistake was discovered, Jackson had the divorce finalized and he and Rachel remarried, this time legally. Still, Jackson’s detractors accused Rachel of being an adulteress, and Jackson blamed those accusers for her illness and eventual death.

Not wanting Peggy Eaton and her husband to suffer the same fate, Jackson demanded that his cabinet and their wives treat Peggy as their social equal. However, Calhoun’s wife, Floride, continued to snub Eaton and directed her friends to do the same. Calhoun, hoping to keep domestic harmony, followed Floride’s lead, much to Jackson’s dismay. However Van Buren, a widower who had no worries about marital discord, was free to lavish Eaton with attention, putting him in the President’s favor.

Van Buren also took every opportunity to point out where Calhoun’s opinions differed from Jackson’s, particularly where federal aid to local projects was concerned. One major project that sought federal aid was the national road-building effort. In 1830, Congress passed a proposal for a road in Kentucky to run from Maysville to Lexington. Calhoun supported this effort and championed the use of federal dollars for the Maysville Road construction, since it would eventually be linked to a national road.

However, Jackson exercised his veto power. He acted partially out of his continued animosity for Henry Clay (whose home state would benefit entirely from the Maysville Road), and partly out of his belief that providing federal aid for a single state project was unconstitutional. Supporters of the Maysville Road project were quite angry, and they began calling Jackson “King Andrew” because they believed he had abused his power as President.

Calhoun was dismayed at Jackson’s rejection of both the Maysville Road proposal and of him as Jackson’s political successor. Jackson made his feeling clear about Calhoun on April 13, 1830, during an annual event honoring the birthday of ex-President Thomas Jefferson. During the party, at which both Jackson and Calhoun were present, every toast given extolled states’ rights—until Jackson’s turn, that is. His toast, “Our Union—It must be preserved!” left no doubt about his position, or about his opposition to Calhoun.

Calhoun immediately followed Jackson’s toast with one of his own extolling states’ rights, but for Calhoun, it was apparent that his differences with Jackson would limit his political aspirations. Still, he was determined to fight for his home state, and having lost his hopes for ascending the political ladder, Calhoun switched his focus to championing the south.

Calhoun was not the only prominent figure fighting for South Carolina’s rights. Senator Robert Y. Hayne followed Calhoun’s example of leadership during an event that would come to be known as the Hayne-Webster debate.

Hayne was serving in the Senate when a fellow senator, Samuel A. Foot of Connecticut, proposed a restriction on the sale of western lands still owned by the federal government. Believing that this proposal was an attempt to restrict western expansion and the inevitable political influence of a strong western region, Missouri Senator Thomas Hart Benton appealed to the South to join forces with him to defeat the proposal. Governor Hayne recognized the potential benefits of an alliance with the emerging west and he quickly stepped forward.

Hayne was soon drawn into a debate to justify his position. The proposal to restrict western expansion was originated by Samuel Foot, but it was the eloquent and dynamic orator Daniel Webster, a senator from Massachusetts, who engaged in verbal sparring with Hayne. Although Hayne was an able speaker in his own right, he was no match for the awe-inspiring Webster.

During the debate, Daniel Webster was able to steer Hayne toward another sensitive issue—nullification. Webster underscored nationalism and the destruction which could befall a nation that allows one state to nullify a federal law, making himself out to be a unifier and Hayne a divider. Hayne made attempts to steer the debate back to the interpretation of the Constitution regarding the sale of federal lands, but the damage was done. Daniel Webster won the debate with his argument for nationalism, and Hayne lost public support for his interpretation of the Constitution.

Tariff of 1832 and Clay’s Compromise

South Carolina stood firm against the Tariff of 1828 with such acts of defiance as lowering the flags to half-mast. These displays made President Jackson realize that intervention was necessary. John C. Calhoun still carried some influence with the president, who at Calhoun’s urging encouraged Congress to enact the Tariff of 1832. This new tariff reduced the rate of the Tariff of 1828. However, producers in the south remained distraught over the high tariffs and resisted this compromise, as well.

Again, the nullies asked the South Carolina legislature to nullify the tariff, which would affect the entire union. This time, the legislature agreed. In fact, the legislature went further by choosing Robert Y. Hayne as the new South Carolina governor, selecting Calhoun to fulfill Hayne’s spot in the Senate, and threatening to secede from the Union if the tariffs were not reduced.

However, President Jackson was tired of threats from the nullies, and disgusted by the idea that one state could nullify a federal law and secede from the union. His response was firm. He met their challenge by raising an army and sending it to South Carolina. Shortly after his re-election, in his annual message on December 4, 1832, Jackson stated his intention to enforce the tariff, although he too encouraged Congress to reduce the burdensome tariff rates.

Jackson followed his speech six days later with the Nullification Proclamation, which further denounced South Carolina’s action. With his army standing ready to enforce the tariff, Jackson called South Carolina’s bluff. He called upon Congress to develop a “Force Bill” to authorize his use of army personnel to enforce the tariff. Existing legislation already granted him that power, but Jackson felt that a new and specific bill would strengthen his case against South Carolina.

With South Carolina painted into a corner, Calhoun, who had resigned his vice presidency to lead the nullification cause, pleaded with his old friend Henry Clay to help him draft a solution. Clay, who had been embroiled in the scandals surrounding the 1824 presidential election, responded with a compromise proposal. Under Clay’s plan, the high tariffs that burdened the South would be reduced by ten percent over an eight-year period. The Compromise Tariff of 1833 was passed by a small minority in Congress, but it finally brought about significant tariff change.

The new rates were not as low as the Southerners would have liked, but they were more pleased with the compromise than they were with the Force Bill, which they called the “Bloody Bill.” In response, although the South Carolina legislature voted to rescind its nullification of the tariff acts, it also nullified Jackson’s Force Bill. By then the nullification of the Force Bill was a moot point, but it allowed South Carolina to feel a small taste of victory. However, the issues of nullification and succession had stirred the first rumblings that would eventually lead to the Civil War.

Nineteenth Century Banking

In the early 1800s, the United States government did not print paper money but instead minted gold and silver coins called specie. The value of these coins was determined by the value of the metal in the coins themselves. People wanted a safe place to keep their savings of gold and silver coins, so they stored them in banks, which had strong vaults and other measures of security. The bank would give the depositor a receipt, or banknote, as a claim against the gold or silver that had been deposited. When depositors wanted to withdraw money, they would take the banknote to the bank and exchange it for coins. People did not always have to withdraw their money to make purchases, because often sellers would accept the banknotes as payment. Thus banknotes circulated from hand to hand while the gold and silver that backed them, or guaranteed their value, remained in the bank.

Banks often accumulated very large deposits of gold and silver from many individual depositors. Since most of this gold and silver never left the vault, banks would loan out a portion of it for a fee in interest, defraying their costs for operating the bank, while making a profit for themselves. When a bank made a loan it generally issued banknotes, again redeemable for coin, to the borrower. Consequently, a bank would have not only the original depositor’s receipts circulating as money but also the banknotes it had loaned, resulting in more banknotes circulating than it had coins to cover them. Of course, the bank would be holding valuable interest-bearing debts in the form of loans and mortgages, but these were payable in the future, often over many years, while the bank was obligated to redeem its banknotes for coin money on demand. If the slow and steady income from loans and mortgages no longer satisfied those holding notes, then the bank could become bankrupt. In the ensuing legal troubles many people might lose their savings and the bank’s notes would become worthless, which could be a serious economic blow to both individuals and communities. Therefore, it was very important for banks to keep the public confidence in order to avoid a “run” on the bank where many worried holders of the bank’s notes might try to withdraw their coins all at once.

A conservative loan policy was the best long-range tool not only to keep the public confidence, but also to foster safe development of the economy. There were many pressures on a bank to loan more than it should, however. The biggest pressure was the potential for profit. In theory, the more a bank loaned, the more interest it was owed and the more money it made. But again, this depended on people not removing their coins from the bank. An additional pressure on banks in the early nineteenth century was the great need for capital to expand industry, develop the frontier, and improve such infrastructure as roads and canals. As a source for the large sums of money needed, banks played a vital role in development activities that could not have been financed by individual lenders. Loaning investment capital was a public benefit, but bankers were often pressured to make loans for the civic good that were neither wise for the bank, nor in the long run wise for the public.

For example, one banking practice that was detrimental to the economy could occur when there was a strong market for agricultural products one year. The following year, farmers would pressure banks for loans to expand their operations. In light of the previous year’s record, this would look like a good investment to a bank, which would be inclined to lend more than it normally would to farmers. If the farmers produced a heavy crop due to their improvements, their produce might exceed the demand on the open market, causing prices to drop. Farmers’ net revenue might then be no more than before the bank financed their expansion. Unfortunately, they still would have loan payments to make. This additional burden might cause them to reduce their spending and perhaps contract their operations. Some farmers could even be forced into defaulting on their loans and lose their farms, causing the bank to lose the money it loaned as well as the interest it would have made.

After several years of this process, agricultural products might become scarce and prices for them would rise. Farmers would want to cash in on the new boom with a loan for expansion, and the cycle would begin again. This same process could take place in any area of production or manufacturing. While investment capital is a good thing, excessive speculative lending has the effect of producing a roller coaster, boom-and-bust economy that is less productive for everyone than a more even-growth economy fostered by cautious lending habits.

Following the War of 1812, the United States entered an era of strong economic growth. Trade and industry flourished and grew, while at the same time the western frontier expanded with settlement and farming. These activities often required large sums for investment, a safe place to store earnings, and a regulated means to transfer money or credit from bank to bank or region to region. Banks provided all of these services.

State and federal governments also needed repositories for their funds. States, therefore, chartered banks within their territory to handle their government’s financial transactions. These state-chartered banks were not owned by the state but were privately held. Their state charter gave them certain advantages over ordinary banks but also subjected them to additional oversight by the state. They were therefore generally well-regulated, responsibly managed institutions that also provided banking services for individuals and businesses. Additionally, there were many smaller, local banks, most of which were responsible, though some were inclined to overextend credit and put their depositors’ funds at risk.

State banks regulated the credit practices of smaller banks by redeeming for gold any of the smaller banks’ notes that were passed to the state bank as a loan or mortgage payment. This practice required the smaller banks to be prepared to pay out from their deposits. They were consequently less likely to allow an excessive number of their banknotes to be in circulation. A state bank could also loan money to smaller banks to help them through a crisis if the smaller bank was financially sound, which encouraged responsible lending practices in smaller banks.

The Bank

One area of particular concern among bankers, businessmen, and government leaders was banking on the frontier. Frontier land was cheap, and speculators would buy large tracts expecting the price to go up as settlers entered the region. In order to finance their investments, speculators borrowed as much as they could from “wildcat” banks that sprang up to cater to this demand. These banks were themselves often speculative in nature, being more interested in making a fast dollar than building a secure banking business. Their excessive loan practices caused many more banknotes to be in circulation in the United States than there were deposits to cover them. Hard-pressed banks were sometimes forced to suspend specie payments to depositors and noteholders wanting to withdraw coins. Confidence in banknotes dropped, causing them to lose value, and more of them were needed to purchase the same amount of goods.

A similar situation of unstable currency had existed after the Revolutionary War. Alexander Hamilton as Secretary of Treasury proposed a national bank that would issue banknotes of stable value. Among other benefits, Hamilton felt such a bank would tie the interests of the wealthy to the interests of the government and, therefore, to Americans in general. The federal government would supply one-fifth of the new bank’s initial capital, much of it in government bonds. Private investors would supply the other four-fifths. After much debate, Congress created the First Bank of the United States, and President Washington signed it into law amid grave misgivings in 1791. Thomas Jefferson had opposed the bank saying it vastly exceeded what was specified in the Constitution and that it opened “a boundless field of power, no longer susceptible of any definition.” Hamilton countered that the power to charter corporations was inherent in government and that the Constitution authorized Congress to pass any laws “necessary and proper for carrying into execution . . . powers vested by the Constitution in the government of the United States.” (Art. I, Sec. VIII, para.18) This provision came to be known as the “elastic clause” for its opening to a broad interpretation or “loose construction” of the powers granted to the government by the Constitution. The Bank’s charter ran out in 1811 and was allowed to lapse because of a turn of the political tide in favor of strict construction as well as deep concerns over the large proportion of British ownership in the Bank. Absence of a central bank hurt trade and hampered the war effort in 1812. Inflation and the risk-taking behavior of frontier banks threatened the nation’s financial stability. Frontier banks were beyond the regulatory reach of the state banks, however, because the state banks had no means to compel banks outside their state to exchange their notes for specie. In addition, on the frontier there was no cooperative network of banks to ensure sound practices as there was from one state to another. This situation prompted the federal government to charter the Second Bank of the United States in 1816. Like state banks and the First Bank of the United State, the Second Bank of the United States was privately owned. All federal funds were deposited in the Bank making it a powerful source of investment capital, and its federal charter extended its reach throughout the states and into the frontier. The government intended that the Bank’s size and consistent practices would help regulate the speculative frontier banks. Unfortunately, the first managers of the Second Bank of the United States did not understand its role in the economy. Almost immediately, the Bank fell into practices of overextending credit, especially among its western branches, which loaned ten times more banknotes than it had gold and silver on deposit. For several years a boom in frontier land values masked the danger to the country, but in 1819 land values declined and many frontier borrowers were unable to make their loan and mortgage payments. Wildcat banks were unable to meet their obligations, which created financial difficulties for their creditors and depositors, and so on throughout the economy. Foreclosures and bankruptcies were a painful reality to many in this era when the debtor’s prison was still a legal institution. The Panic of 1819 caused many business failures and was a general hardship for great numbers of people for the three years it continued.

The Second Bank of the United States had badly overextended credit, and many of its loans had defaulted in the panic, nearly causing it to fail. Only by taking the severest measures did it remain solvent. To save itself, the Bank refused to extend credit to smaller banks that were also financially in trouble. These banks, in turn, were forced to implement drastic measures such as calling in loans and foreclosing on mortgages in order to stay afloat. Though these steps saved the financial structures and institutions that supported the economy, they were hard on many individuals and businesses and even caused failures among banks. Consequently, public opinion was critical of the Second Bank of the United States in the aftermath of the panic.

In addition, many state banks felt that their authority to regulate credit within their state was threatened by a national bank such as the Second Bank of the United States. The State Bank of Maryland persuaded the Maryland Legislature to impose a tax on out-of-state banks, including the Second Bank of the United States. The federal government refused to pay the tax, whereupon Maryland sued the head cashier at the Maryland branch of the Bank of the United States, John W. McCulloch.

The case of McCulloch v. Maryland went to the U.S. Supreme Court, which was led by Chief Justice John Marshall. The Court ruled in favor of McCulloch. In writing the majority opinion, Marshall stated that “a power to create implies a power to preserve.” By this he meant that the government has the right to exercise its power and authority to protect an entity that it has legally created. Marshall went on to say, “the power to tax involves the power to destroy,” by which he conveyed the court’s opinion that a state government has no authority to exercise destructive power over a legitimate and constitutional entity chartered by the federal government.

Another significant aspect of the McCulloch case was Marshall’s defining the doctrine of “loose construction” of the Constitution. Loose construction allows the government to act outside what is specifically stated in the Constitution. Previously many people, particularly Jefferson and the Republicans, had insisted on “strict construction,” whereby the federal government is confined to do exactly what is expressly stated in the Constitution, no more and no less. Marshall argued, however, that the Constitution was derived from the consent of the people and this allowed the government to act for the people’s benefit. He also stated that the tenets of the Constitution were not strictly set but were adaptable to circumstances and that whatever means were appropriate to achieve a desirable end, so long as they were not prohibited or morally wrong, were within the bounds of the intent of the Constitution. Often using Hamilton’s exact words, Marshall’s argument for a broad interpretation of the Constitution expanded the powers of the federal government. In particular, Marshall upheld the legality and appropriateness of the creation of the Second Bank of the United States by the federal government.

Jackson and the Bank War

In its first years, the Second Bank of the United States weathered an economic panic and an important court case. These were not, however, to be the last of its troubles. Other forces were at work that would oppose and eventually destroy the Second Bank of the United States.

Early in the 1820s, Henry Clay, a representative from Kentucky and political rival of Jackson, advocated and helped implement what became known as the American System for developing a strong national economy. This system had three parts: tariffs to generate income and protect U.S. businesses, a transportation system of roads and canals, and a strong banking system that could make loans for large projects. Clay felt that the Second Bank of the United States was an indispensable part of this plan, and he approved the Bank’s now-cautious approach to credit and banking.

Following the Panic of 1819, the Second Bank of the United States functioned to stabilize the economy. It prevented the worst of the cycles of boom and bust that characterized this volatile period, by restraining unsound lending practices of smaller banks, especially the frontier wildcat banks. Since the Federal government deposited its substantial revenues of gold and silver in the Bank of the United States, the notes that the Bank issued were more uniform and stable in value than the notes of other banks.

The Second Bank of the United States was not a government-owned bank, but a privately chartered institution headed at that time by Nicholas Biddle. Through his policies, Biddle was able to force smaller banks to refrain from excessive printing of banknotes, which was a major contributor to inflation. Requiring other smaller banks to maintain adequate reserves prevented bank failures that were ruinous to businesses and individuals alike. Though restrained from potentially making larger profits, the banking industry was healthier overall, which helped to insure public confidence in the financial system and uninterrupted growth of the economy.

Some people, however, felt that the Bank, and in particular its president Nicholas Biddle, had too much power to restrict the speculative and potentially profitable business dealings of smaller banks. Westerners were especially critical of the Bank because they felt it suppressed their opportunities while it bolstered the economy of the manufacturing East. Many people also believed that the Bank had the potential to be abused since a private bank is not accountable to the people. Its size and its favored status as the repository of Federal funds enabled the Bank to reap substantial profits for itself through loans to large businesses. The idea of the citizens’ money going into a private bank to be lent out for a profit for the bank’s owners seemed undemocratic and contrary to the ideals of the new Republic. Resentment was also high that the federal deposits that made the Bank so much money did not earn the public coffers any interest. Many people also disapproved of the fact that the Bank’s stockholders included a substantial number of foreign owners. The idea that foreign nationals could wield political and economic power in the United States due to their influence over the Bank, and consequently over the U.S. economy, was a powerful argument against the Bank. The fact that the Bank had made loans and provided other advantages to politicians who supported it added to public worries over the wisdom of such a national bank.

In 1828, Andrew Jackson was elected president on the Democratic Party ticket. He was a war hero and, though he began life in poverty, by the time he moved to Washington he was a wealthy plantation owner in Tennessee. Jackson was often portrayed as a rude backwoodsman, but in fact he was neither ignorant nor crude. His sympathies were with those who lived in the south and the west, in diametric opposition to those in the north and the east.

New Englanders were suspicious of Jackson because their livelihood and future lay in manufacturing, which benefited from high tariffs and financial coordination through central authority. The South, where there was little manufacturing, suffered high prices on account of import tariffs, and the West chafed under the regulatory thumb of the Second Bank of the United States. To frontier businessmen, the Bank was stealing their financial resources by demanding specie payments for the banknotes of frontier banks. They also resented what they considered to be the Bank’s stifling of opportunity. If they engaged in speculation that might be highly profitable but also included risk, they felt this was their business and they should be free to do as they wished.

Frontiersmen felt a government that was so far away and had so little to do with their lives should not be able to dictate business practices to them. They found the idea of loose interpretation of the Constitution as defined by Chief Justice John Marshall to be repellent and dangerous. Westerners felt they were on the losing side of loose construction and heartily believed the government should stick to exactly what was enumerated in the Constitution and no more. Jackson agreed with the Westerners that the lives and fortunes of Americans should not be dictated by government let alone a bank, and especially one that was not even a public entity.

Americans’ strong and opposing opinions over the Bank of the United States made for an ideal political rallying point. Years before, Henry Clay had endorsed the Bank as one of the pillars of the American System of economic growth and nation building. He now had aspirations for the presidency in 1832 on the Whig ticket, and the Second Bank of the United States became a pawn in the game of election politics.

Predictably, for both philosophical and political reasons, Jackson came down against the Bank, calling it “the moneyed monster.” He claimed the Bank was an illegal monopoly, and vowed that if he were re-elected he would not renew the Bank’s charter when it ran out in 1836. The stage was set for a political battle, called the Bank War, over the Bank of the United States.

Though the Bank’s 20-year charter would not end for more than four years, Daniel Webster and Henry Clay sent a bill through Congress in 1832 to renew the Bank’s charter immediately. Clay felt that this would hurt Jackson’s chances for re-election because if Jackson signed the bill and renewed the charter, he would anger his powerful western constituency, which felt economically restrained by the Bank. But if Jackson refused to sign the bill, he would lose the support of wealthy eastern businessmen. Jackson bitterly commented, “The Bank is trying to kill me, but I will kill it!”

The bill to renew the Bank’s charter passed Congress, but Jackson refused to sign it, calling the Bank unconstitutional even though the Supreme Court had upheld the Bank’s constitutionality thirteen years before in McCulloch v. Maryland. Until this time, U.S. presidents had made a point to defer to the intent of the Founding Fathers for equality among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. By vetoing the recharter bill, and thus dooming the Bank, Jackson rejected the decision of the Supreme Court and overrode the will of the Congress. In this way he exercised the innately greater power of the executive branch of government over the other two branches and coincidentally earned himself the nickname of King Andrew I. Ironically, Nicholas Biddle, president of the Bank, had earlier been labeled Czar Nicholas I. Thus the two presidents, one of government and one of business, were metaphorically criticized for their arrogance in wielding power.

Andrew Jackson’s presidential victory over Henry Clay in 1832 led him to believe that the people had given him a mandate concerning immediate destruction of the Bank. Though its charter would not run out until 1836, in 1833 Jackson ordered Secretary of Treasury Roger B. Taney to methodically remove all federal funds from the Bank by using them as the government’s operating capital. In addition, no new government funds were to be deposited with the Bank. Instead, new funds were to be deposited in various state banks, which came to be known as “pet banks.”

Within just a few months, federal deposits in the Second Bank of the United States dropped by half. Fearful that the Bank now had more notes circulating than could be supported by its deposits and desperate to save the Bank, Biddle called in many of the Bank’s loans, especially those to other banks. This unexpected demand placed a hardship on smaller banks and businesses, driving some to bankruptcy and causing a minor financial downturn called “Biddle’s Panic.” Biddle was criticized for the severity of his actions, but even so the Bank was nearly failing by the time its federal charter ran out in 1836. It was then rechartered as the State Bank of Philadelphia.

With the stabilizing influence of the Second Bank of the United States gone, many banks resumed their old habits of overextending credit and printing too many banknotes. This caused paper currency to become unreliable, and speculative loaning, especially in the West, mushroomed to dangerous levels. In order to rein in this printing and lending spree, Jackson had the Treasury issue a Specie Circular—an order to other banks that only specie (metallic gold or silver money) might be used to purchase public land on the frontier. The Specie Circular had such a negative effect on land sales that it triggered a recession in 1837.

Jackson’s presidential term ended in 1836. Popular with the people to the end, his immediate economic legacy was fiscal instability for the country, which resulted in the Panic of 1837 during his successor, Martin Van Buren’s, presidency. His unshakable opinion remained, however, that over the long term an immensely powerful national bank held in private hands was a danger to democracy.

After the Panic of 1837, Van Buren separated government from banking by creating a government treasury to safeguard federal money. This move was generally unpopular since it removed federal funds from the state banks and reduced the pool of capital available for lending. Nevertheless, the Independent Treasury Bill passed Congress in 1840, and the institution continued until the twentieth century when it became part of the Federal Reserve System.

Native Americans and the New Republic

From the time the first colonies were settled in America, relations between the Native American Indians and white settlers ranged from respected friends to hated enemies. Into the 1800s, Americans who were still in competition with the Indians for land and resources considered them to be uncivilized and barbaric. But many Americans admired the Indians and valued their contributions to American history and culture. These people hoped that with time the Indians could be peaceably assimilated into American society. Even before the Revolution, churches and religious organizations sent missionaries among the Indians to try to convert them to Christianity. In 1787, the Society for Propagating the Gospel among Indians was founded for that purpose. The federal government joined the effort to “civilize” Native Americans that had first been undertaken by the colonies and the churches. In 1793, Congress designated $20,000, a substantial sum for the time, to provide literacy, farming, and vocational assistance to Native Americans.

The United States recognized Indian tribes as separate nations of people entitled to their own lands that could only be obtained from them through treaties. Due to inexorable pressures of expansion, settlement, and commerce, however, treaties made with good intentions where often perceived as unsustainable within just a few years. The Indians felt betrayed and frequently reacted with violence when land promised to them forever was taken away. For the most part, however, they directed their energies toward maintaining their tribal identity while living in the new order.

By 1830, most of the territories east of the Mississippi River had become states. The Democratic Party, led by President Andrew Jackson, was committed to economic progress in the states and to settlement and development of the western frontier. These goals put the government in conflict with the more than 125,000 Native Americans who still lived east of the Mississippi. By this time, many Indians had given up nomadic hunting and had adopted a more settled way of life. In particular, the Cherokees, Creeks, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Seminoles tried to live in harmony with their white neighbors who called them the Five Civilized Tribes. The real conflict between the government and the Indians was the land held by the Indians through legal treaties. White pioneers, frustrated by the lack of opportunity in the settled areas, pushed hard for new lands to purchase and farm, while states containing Indian territories resented the existence of lands within their borders over which they had no authority and from which they collected no revenue.

The Treaty of 1791 recognized the Cherokees’ right to a substantial portion of northeastern Georgia. The Cherokees were very successful at adapting to a new way of life, farming the land, raising cattle, growing cotton, and even owning slaves to work their plantations. Missionaries established schools and helped the Cherokees in their new lives. One Cherokee, Sequoyah, devised the Cherokee syllabic alphabet of 85 characters so that his people could write down and preserve their thoughts. With a written language, the Cherokee were able to publish their own newspaper, The Cherokee Phoenix.

The Cherokees established their own governing body called the Cherokee National Council. In 1808, the Cherokee National Council developed a legal system, and in 1827 wrote a constitution enacting a system of tribal government to regulate affairs within the borders of their lands. Their government included an electoral system and a legislative, judicial, and executive branch. One tenet of the constitution was that on their own lands the Cherokee were not subject to the laws of Georgia. Treaties with the U.S. government recognized the Cherokee Nation, but the State of Georgia objected to having an independent Indian nation within its boundaries. Believing that the laws of Georgia should be sovereign throughout their state, Georgians passed legislation claiming jurisdiction over the Cherokee Nation in 1828.

These political actions coincided with increasing economic pressures to open this area to white settlement and development. The Cherokee land was coveted for agricultural production at a time when the population of the state was increasing and demand for farmland was high. In addition, gold was discovered in the region and many whites were eager to mine it.

The Indian Removal Act

In the face of mounting opposition to federal protection for autonomous Indian nations in Georgia and other states—opposition that threatened to become violent—President Jackson decided to move the Indians to lands west of the Mississippi River. He felt this offered the best hope to preserve peace and protect the Indians from being scattered and destroyed. Opening new land to white settlement would also increase economic progress. Jackson insisted that the Indians receive a fair price for their lands and that the government pay all expenses of resettlement.

In 1830 at the request of Jackson, a bill went before Congress authorizing moving the Indians across the Mississippi. Daniel Webster and Henry Clay opposed the Indian Removal Bill, but its most bitterly outspoken opponent was Davy Crockett. Having served in the army under Jackson, Crockett was a Jacksonian Democrat until he and the president parted ways over treatment of the Indians. In the next Tennessee congressional election, the Democrats threw their support to another candidate, and Crockett was defeated. Disgusted with partisanship, Crockett left the arena of national politics and went to Texas, delivering, as was the custom, a resounding rendition of his farewell speech at every stop along the way. Within a year he perished defending the Alamo.

Congress passed the Indian Removal Act, which provided for the resettlement of all Native Americans then residing east of the Mississippi to a newly defined Indian Territory in what is now Oklahoma. There the Indians were to be free to pursue their lives without interference. This removal was intended to be voluntary, but groups of Indians were strongly pressured to go. The legislation affected not only the Indians in Georgia, but over 100,000 Native Americans in other states, including all of the Five Civilized Tribes.

Little recognition was given to the fact that the Indians of the east were not familiar with how to subsist in the harsh conditions of the Great Plains or that the remuneration they received for their lands would benefit them little there. In addition, many tribes harbored ancient hostilities for other tribes. The Indian Removal Act made little provision for separation of groups. Once in the territory, Indians were left to get along however they might.

Nevertheless, many Indian groups, already surrounded by white settlements, accepted the government decree and moved west. The Choctaws of Mississippi made the trek from 1831 through 1833, and the Creeks of Alabama in 1836. Only nominally voluntary, these migrations often turned into forced marches during which many perished. The Choctaws lost one-fourth of their people before arriving in Oklahoma, while the Creeks lost 3,500 of the 15,000 who began the journey. The Cherokees were not happy with the relocation plan and resisted being forced to move. In 1831, the Cherokees turned to the courts for defense against the Indian Removal Act and against the Georgia Legislature’s nullification of Cherokee laws. Three times their cases went to the Supreme Court. In Cherokee Nation v. Georgia, Chief Justice John Marshall ruled that the Cherokee had “an unquestionable right” to their lands, but that they were "not a foreign state, in the sense of the Constitution" but rather a “domestic, dependent nation” and so could not sue in a United States court over Georgia’s voiding their right to self-rule. Although this was a blow to the Cherokee case against Georgia, it cast doubt on the constitutionality of the Indian

Removal Act.

In Worcester v. Georgia in 1832, the Court reversed itself and ruled that the State of Georgia could not control the Cherokee within their territory. The case revolved around two missionaries, Samuel Austin Worcester and Elizur Butler, who were welcomed by the Cherokee but who had not obtained a license under Georgia law to live on Cherokee lands. Worcester and Butler were ordered by Georgia to take an oath of allegiance to the state or leave Cherokee land. They refused and were arrested. The missionaries were consigned to hard labor on a chain gang for 16 months while the case was being decided. Later they would accompany the Cherokees on their long trek to Oklahoma. In 1992, the Georgia legislature formally pardoned Worcester and Butler.

In a third case, the Court agreed that crimes committed in Cherokee Territory were beyond the jurisdiction of the State of Georgia. This case involved a Cherokee named Corn Tassel who had been convicted in a Georgia court of murdering another Indian. Corn Tassel’s attorney appealed the conviction on the grounds that the killing had taken place in Cherokee territory, so Georgia had no right to try him. The Supreme Court sided with the Cherokees and found that the Georgia ruling was unconstitutional. President Jackson, however, made it clear that he would tolerate no independent nation within the borders of the United States. When he publicly backed Georgia, Corn Tassel was hanged. The Cherokees then understood that even the Supreme Court could not save their cause.

In backing Georgia against the Supreme Court, President Jackson was responding to pressures in several different areas. Political pressure to open Indian lands to white settlement had been mounting for some time. With increasing conflicts of interest between settlers and Indians came an ever-greater likelihood of violence not only for the Cherokees but for all Native Americans living east of the Mississippi. In addition, Jackson believed in states’ rights and wanted to limit federal power, including the power of the Supreme Court. He was also understandably concerned with the dangers inherent in granting political autonomy to groups of people wanting to establish separate laws and governments that could supersede the laws and government of a state. For these reasons he was at odds with Marshall’s Court, which felt obligated to uphold the provisions of the treaties that had already been made with the Indians. Jackson made no effort to obscure the fact that while the Court might rule whatever it pleased, the executive branch was not constrained to follow the ruling.

The Sac (Sauk), and Fox tribes of Illinois and Wisconsin were also affected by the Indian Removal Act. One Sac chief signed a treaty abandoning Indian lands east of the Mississippi, and he moved the tribes to Iowa. Chief Black Hawk, however, along with a faction from the tribes, revolted against forced removal from the land of their ancestors. In 1832, they returned to their Illinois lands and conducted a campaign of raids and ambushes. The United States Army responded and violently suppressed what the government considered an Indian insurrection. Black Hawk was captured and imprisoned in St. Louis in 1833. Among the regular army troops involved in this action was Lieutenant Jefferson Davis of Mississippi, while Captain Abraham Lincoln served with the Illinois volunteers. Thirty years later these two men would head the Confederate and Union governments during the Civil War.

In the case of the Seminoles in Florida, callous and misguided decisions by the government contributed to the bloodiest Indian conflict in U.S. history. The Seminole Indians were ordered to merge with their ancestral enemy, the Creeks, for relocation. The Creeks were slaveowners, and many of the Seminoles had escaped from Creek slavery. The Seminoles were justifiably outraged and several hundred, joined by runaway black slaves, refused to leave Florida and move west. They retreated to the swamps of the Everglades, where they fought a bitter and protracted war with the United States Army. Over seven years (1835-1842), this conflict claimed the lives of 1,500 U.S. soldiers. In 1837, Chief Osceola was captured by treachery under a flag of truce and sent to a prison where he soon perished. Three thousand Seminoles were then forced to relocate to Oklahoma in a bitter forced march. Another 1,000 hid in the Everglades, however, and continued to fight for five more years. Some were never captured, and the Seminole tribe became divided by this struggle.

Jackson and Van Buren

Historians are divided on President Andrew Jackson’s feelings toward Indians. Some claim he was a virulent Indian hater and cite as evidence the fact that he commanded the American troops that killed nearly 900 Creeks in the Battle of Horseshoe Bend in 1814. On the other hand, Jackson led an invasion of Florida in 1818 to capture runaway slaves and punish those who aided them. There he ordered Indians, Spanish, and British alike hanged or otherwise killed. Rather than claim simply that Jackson was an Indian hater, it might be more accurate to say that he was a man of his times, and the times were violent. Jackson was a practical, action-oriented person, who felt it was clear that the time of the Indian nations within the states was over. That being the case, he saw no reason to prolong their inevitable departure. On the contrary, in light of the political and economic advantages to Indian removal, he insisted it be accomplished as quickly as possible.

Having served two terms, Jackson chose Martin Van Buren, his Secretary of State, to run as the Democratic candidate in 1836. Van Buren won against the newly organized, conservative Whig Party and continued the Jacksonian political tradition of championing the rights of individual citizens to prosper in America. Primarily this had been achieved by restraining monopolistic and oppressive business, as Jackson had considered the Bank of the United States to be. Making sure that new land was available for settlement had been another important part of Jackson’s political strategy.

Unlike Jackson, Van Buren was sociable, diplomatic, and not given to making strong partisan statements. His presidency was mostly concerned with countering the recession that followed the demise of the Bank of the United States and the Jacksonian policy of insisting that western lands be paid for in gold or silver. Speculation had grown out of control, banks went under, and the banknotes that served as paper currency became worthless or highly unstable in value. In addition, instabilities in the British economy and the failure of two major British banks had negative repercussions in the United States.

Unemployment in the U.S. reached 30% as wages dropped precipitously, often by half. Public relief was not considered a province of the government at that time, so hundreds of thousands of destitute people had no other assistance than what was provided by charities and volunteer organizations.

The Van Buren years suffered other difficulties, as well. A wheat crop failure forced grain prices to intolerable levels, triggering food riots in New York just as he was taking office. Later that year, Antonio López de Santa Anna wiped out the legendary force at the Alamo, and the American Sam Houston led an army that captured the Mexican general and forced him to relinquish the portion of Texas north of the Rio Grande. The Mexican government complained, but Texas wanted to join the Union. This presented a serious problem to the United States because Texas would join as a slave state and upset the delicate political balance in the country.

The Jacksonian legacy was to remove the difficult Indian element in order to allow settlement and entrepreneurship to progress unrestrained by native resistance. Van Buren inherited this situation and the mechanisms that had been established to deal with it. Distracted by economic and political matters and pressured by his mentor Jackson, Van Buren allowed the issue of the Cherokees of Georgia to be resolved by their removal to the Indian Territory in the manner conceived by the administration before him.

In 1836, the Bureau of Indian Affairs was created to handle relations with the Indians. It had no control, however, over white expansion westward. The Bureau was unable to honor many of the agreements made with the Indians. The frontier that the Bureau had claimed as a permanent settlement location for the Indians turned out to last only into the 1850s as Americans continued to push westward.

n the fall of 1838, the U.S. government, now under Van Buren, ordered the forcible removal of the Cherokees from Georgia to the Indian Territory in present-day Oklahoma. Of the 18,000 that began the 1,000 mile, 116-day trek, 4,000 perished on the way of illness, cold, starvation, and exhaustion. The U.S. Army oversaw the march and forced a continuous pace at rifle and bayonet point disregarding the terrible hardship of the travelers. For this reason, the journey is known as the Trail of Tears. Some historians partially blame the Cherokee leaders for failing to make preparations to leave during the time they were given. Regardless of who was responsible, however, the circumstances of suffering and death remain a tragic chapter in American history. In all, between 1831 and 1839 about 46,000 Indian people were relocated across the Mississippi River.

American Culture and Reform (1800-1860)

Transcendentalism

In his 1794 book The Age of Reason, Thomas Paine advanced a religious philosophy called Deism that struck at the tenets of organized religions, particularly Calvinism as it was practiced by the Puritans. Paine claimed that churches were “set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit.” These thoughts were shocking to Americans who were imbued with a strong religious tradition. At the same time, Paine’s ideas appealed to many Americans who were likewise steeped in the rationality of the Enlightenment period and who had difficulty aligning Calvinist doctrine with reason.

Calvinism held that the essential nature of infants was evil. This belief was called “infant damnation.” Calvinism also subscribed to a belief that there were only a certain few who were “elect” by God from the beginning to be saved. All others were doomed after death regardless of their beliefs or actions in life. Many people objected to the ideas of infant damnation and the powerlessness of the individual to achieve salvation. Paine’s Deism, by contrast, claimed that human nature was essentially good and that salvation was within reach of every person through faith and good works. Deists believed in a “clockwork” universe. They felt that God had created the world and all the laws that governed it, and then He allowed events to play themselves out as they would without further divine intervention. Deists believed that the laws of the world are knowable to humanity by the application of logic and reason. This contrasted with the Calvinist idea that true knowledge is only obtained by divine revelation as expressed in the Bible. A number of the Founding Fathers, including Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, became Deists.

A new Protestant sect, the Unitarians, formally expressed the philosophy of Deism. Unitarians believed in a single divine deity, the Supreme Being, as opposed to the Holy Trinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit worshipped by most Christians. They also believed in free will, salvation through good works, and the intrinsically moral nature of human beings, including infants and children. The Unitarian creed was rational, optimistic, and non-dogmatic. Unitarianism appealed to many intellectuals and free thinkers of the day.

Others who were unhappy with the Puritan religion chose to return to the Episcopal faith, which was associated with the Anglican Church of England. The Irish and Scots in the United States were already largely Presbyterian. A similar religious group, the Congregationalists, often merged with the Presbyterians in small communities since they differed little in creed. In these ways the religious landscape was changing in the early 1800s, especially among the established, educated people of New England. But the pace of change across the country was soon to quicken.

The Romantic Movement at the turn of the nineteenth century gave expression to a growing conviction throughout Europe and America that there was more to experiencing the world than could be inferred by logic and more to living than could be satisfied by the acquisition of material things. People felt a need to balance reason and calculation with emotion and spirit. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant first framed doubts over rationality as a cure-all for human problems and needs in his Critique of Pure Reason, published in 1781. Sympathetic poets and authors transmuted his ideas into literary works that were meant to be as much apprehended by the soul as understood by the intellect. In England, writers such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, and Tennyson, to name a few, breathed life into Romanticism through their poetry. The Romantics revered nature and felt that contemplation of natural scenes would lead to realization of fundamental truths.

In America, Emerson and Thoreau helped formalize the Romantic Movement into Transcendentalism, a philosophy that reads almost like a faith. The Transcendentalists infused the Romantic impulse with mysticism, a belief in the possibility of direct communion with God and knowledge of ultimate reality through spiritual insight. In part, this was fueled by newly translated Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic texts, which contained elements of mysticism. A thread of the mystic also ran through American Puritanism and in the Quaker faith even more so. Quaker doctrine subscribed to a belief in an Inner Light, which was a gift of God’s grace. The Inner Light expressed itself as divine intuition or knowledge unaccountable by ordinary derivations of thought.

For Transcendentalists, truth is beyond, or transcends, what can be discovered using evidence acquired by the senses. Like the Quakers, Transcendentalists believed that every person possesses an Inner Light that can illuminate the highest truth and put a person in touch with God, whom they called the Oversoul. Since this sort of knowledge of truth is a personal matter, Transcendentalism was committed to development of the self and had little regard for dogma or authority

Ralph Waldo Emerson took up the Transcendentalist banner after studying at Harvard to be a Unitarian minister. He left what he called the “cold and cheerless” Unitarian pulpit to travel in Europe and talk to Romantic writers and philosophers, including Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Thomas Carlyle. Returning to America, he lived in Concord, Massachusetts, near Boston, where he composed poetry and wrote essays. He supported himself through annual lecture tours and was a very popular speaker.

In 1837 at Harvard, Emerson delivered his influential “American Scholar” lecture that exhorted Americans in the arts to stop turning to Europe for inspiration and instruction and begin developing an American literary and artistic tradition. Emerson preached the philosophy of the Oversoul and the organic, ever-changing nature of the universe, stressing self-reliance, individualism, optimism, and freedom. Though not inclined toward political activism, by the eve of the Civil War, Emerson became an ardent abolitionist.

Another Transcendentalist, Henry David Thoreau, wrote essays that have had a profound effect on modern thought. His philosophy of individualism and conscious nonconformism is expressed in his book Walden: Or Life in the Woods (1854) where he describes living a full emotional and intellectual life for two years while residing in a tiny cabin he made himself and existing in every other way at a barely subsistence level. His other work of note is the essay On the Duty of Civil Disobedience. Thoreau was against Texas joining the Union because it would be a slave state. He felt that the United States had involved itself in the Mexican War on behalf of Texas and, therefore, he refused to pay a tax that he felt would support the war effort. For this he was briefly jailed. Thoreau’s tactic of passive resistance was later emulated by Mahatma Gandhi in India in his resistance to British rule and by Martin Luther King, Jr. in his non-violent approach to gaining civil rights.

Romanticism encouraged writing literature of remarkable emotional effects. In the early nineteenth century, Washington Irving (Legend of Sleepy Hollow), James Fenimore Cooper (Last of the Mohicans), and Edgar Allen Poe (The Pit and the Pendulum) made their marks as gifted authors. In the early 1850s, however, in addition to Thoreau’s Walden, American writers produced a dazzling set of classic works inaugurating a golden age in American literature. In this time frame, Nathaniel Hawthorne published The Scarlet Letter and the House of the Seven Gables, Herman Melville produced Moby-Dick, and Walt Whitman composed Leaves of Grass. These were a new breed of distinctly American authors, writing on American subjects and from a uniquely American perspective steeped in native Transcendentalism. Until this time American literature was considered second rate if it was considered at all. In the wake of these contributions, Europe began to look to America for thought and inspiration of true quality.

The Second Great Awakening

At the turn of the nineteenth century, America was still a devotedly church-going nation. Most Americans felt a traditional religious faith to be the foundation of moral character, and many worried that over time the religious imperative would wane into token gestures and empty social structures. These concerns increased with news of the cruelties and excesses of the French Revolution done in the name of reason.

In 1795, Timothy Dwight became president of Yale College, described as a “hotbed of infidelity.” Determined to counter the secular trend in American thinking, Dwight sponsored a series of religious revivals that fired the collective soul of the Yale student body and spread across New England, igniting a religious movement called the Second Great Awakening. The sermons preached from the pulpits of this great revival did not attempt like the old-time Puritans to pressure a captive congregation with dire predictions of a vengeful God’s omniscient power and arbitrary judgments. Rather, they spoke of a benevolent Father whose most passionate desire was the salvation of every one of His children down to the most lost sinner.

At a religious assembly, a person could be saved by faith alone during a conversion experience. Unusual behaviors such as “speaking in tongues” or convulsive fits of religious ecstasy sometimes accompanied these experiences. The only absolute requisite to salvation, however, was an acceptance of Christ’s sacrifice as atonement for one’s sins. All people were free to accept this gift or not. But the fires of everlasting hell, described in lush and vivid imagery, awaited those who turned their backs.

The Second Great Awakening soon spread to the frontier. Beginning in the South and moving northward along the frontier to the Old Northwest, a new institution, the camp meeting, ignited a spiritual fervor that converted thousands and altered the religious landscape of America forever. Many traditional churches were swept away in this new awakening. Others reformed to counter the firestorm of the evangelical preacher.

Camp meetings were generally held in the fall after harvest but before the rigors of winter. For the participants who often traveled considerable distances, religious revivals probably combined the attractions of a retreat, a camp-out, and a much-earned vacation. As many as 25,000 people gathered at revival meetings to hear the gospel preached by charismatic orators who “rode the circuit” from camp to camp.

Besides the spiritual message, revival meetings offered entertainment in an age when other diversions for the average person were either of the homegrown variety or of a quiet, literary nature. A free-wheeling, fire-and-brimstone revival provided an acceptable emotional and social outlet for people of the frontier who were mostly engaged in farming and other rural, labor-intensive agricultural pursuits. Of particular importance, women could attend and participate in religious revivals at a time when many social outlets available to men, such as taverns and fraternal organizations, were neither considered appropriate nor allowed for women. This offered revival preachers a natural female constituency that contributed immeasurably to their success.

In the south, black slaves and freed men and women could also attend segregated, companion revivals. The emotional, spiritual, and social opportunity of such a gathering can scarcely be appreciated in the modern age for its intensity. These meetings gave rise to a rich and remarkable tradition of black preachers who provided not merely social and spiritual but political cohesion to much-beleaguered black communities in the difficult times to come.

Western New York hosted so many revival meetings patronized by the hellfire-and-brimstone variety of preacher that it came to be known as the “burned-over district.” With the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825, commerce and industry boomed, particularly around Utica in Oneida County. This attracted great numbers of people seeking a fresh start in life. Such seekers were prime subjects for conversion by revivalists because of the social nature of a revival. At a camp meeting, a person joined hundreds, perhaps thousands, of others on an essentially egalitarian basis. Though many were drawn to the meetings for the social aspect, they were easily caught up in the event and followed through with conversion.

The women of Utica were particularly concerned with the spiritual health of their community, and since women did not generally work outside the home they had the time to organize community activities. The Oneida County Female Missionary Society raised sufficient money to support the revival movement in the area for a number of years. The role of women in the Second Great Awakening can scarcely be over-emphasized. Women were converted in equal numbers with men, but once converted tended to be even more solid adherents to their church than their male counterparts. Viewed as the moral center of the family, a woman was responsible for her husband’s and children’s spiritual well being. Women took this responsibility seriously and sought to fulfill it through church participation and, later in the century, through organizing charitable and benevolent associations aimed at social reform.

Evangelists were aware that their power to make converts rested substantially in their influence with women. The new gospels emphasized the importance of the role of women in bringing their families to Christian life. They placed an equal value on the spiritual worth of men and women, in contrast to earlier religions that tended to minimize women’s importance in the spiritual as well as secular spheres. This gender egalitarianism in religious matters marked a break with the past and offered women the opportunity to acquire standing in the community without treading on the secular prerogatives of their husbands. Once this door was opened to them, women continued to play a crucial role in religious life and went on to become pioneers and crusaders in nineteenth century social reform.

Many prominent preachers frequented the pulpits of the burned-over-district. Among them, William Miller gained a following of around 100,000 with a Biblical interpretation of the Second Coming of Christ on October 22, 1844. Failure of the prophecy to materialize did not wholly quench the Millerite movement, which became known as Seventh Day Adventist.

Perhaps the greatest evangelist was the former lawyer Charles Grandison Finney, who conducted an intense, sustained revival in the burned-over-district from 1826 to 1831. Beginning in Utica, he made his way in stages to Rochester and New York City. Church membership grew by tens of thousands wherever he held revivals. A spellbinding orator, Finney preached a theology in pointed contrast to Puritan Calvinism. Salvation could be had by anyone through faith and good works, which he felt flowed from one another. People were the captains of their own fate, and since Judgment Day could come at any time, his hearers should take immediate action to ensure the redemption of themselves and their loved ones.

Finney was a master of showmanship and participatory psychology. His revival agenda included hymn singing and solicitation of personal testimonials from the congregation. He placed an “anxious bench” in the front of the assembly for those teetering on the brink of commitment to Christ. The moment of holy redemption for a bench-sitter became a dramatic event. Finney encouraged women to pray aloud and denounced alcohol and slavery from the pulpit. He felt that mass, public conversions were more effective than the old-style, solitary communion because they emphasized the fraternal nature of church membership. Finney later became president of Oberlin College in Ohio, the first U.S. college to admit women and blacks and a hotbed of abolitionism and evangelical zeal.

The crusading spirit of religious evangelism carried over into secular life and expressed itself in a number of reform movements. Temperance, suffrage, prison reform, and abolition all received an infusion of energy from evangelical vigor. In addition, the traveling preacher expanded the horizons of imagination beyond the local sphere and even beyond the borders of the nation. Supporting a mission in a foreign country or among Native Americans in the West became a binding cause for many churches. Reports from missionaries in such exotic places as Africa, India, or Hawaii were awaited with breathless expectation. As an enticement to listen to their religious message, missionaries often provided medical, technical, and educational benefits to the people in the locale of their mission. In these ways, the Second Great Awakening contributed to changing not just the nation, but the world.

Revivalism did not affect the wealthier, better-educated parts of society that gravitated to Episcopal, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, and Unitarian churches as much as it did rural and frontier communities that tended to be Baptist or Methodist. The Baptist faith proved ideal for conditions on the frontier. Baptists believed in a literal reading of the Bible that required no authoritarian interpretation. They also subscribed to the concept of the possibility of any person obtaining salvation through his or her own free will. Above all, however, they believed that a church was its own highest authority and thus avoided the difficulties and delays of petitions to and approvals from a distant hierarchical organization.

A group of Baptists could form their own church on the spot and choose a preacher from among themselves. The Baptists were egalitarian in their creed, believing that all people were equal before God regardless of their economic, social, or educational standing. The simplest farmer in Kentucky was on par in native dignity with every other person in the Republic. These beliefs and the Baptists’ uncomplicated organization were highly appealing to small communities of self-sufficient, independent-minded people.

The Methodists, however, were most successful at reaping the benefits of religious revivalism of the early 1800s by establishing a system of itinerant preachers on horseback, or circuit riders. Francis Asbury began the practice when the frontier was scarcely west of the Appalachian Mountains. Hardy and fearless, Asbury rode the rugged backwoods trails and preached thousands of sermons to farmers, pioneers, and backwoodsmen and their families.

Peter Cartwright, the most famous of the Methodist frontier preachers, delivered his highly charged sermons for 50 years in the frontier region bordering the Ohio River. Uneducated himself, he along with other Methodist evangelists considered education a hindrance to converting souls since conversion is not a matter of the mind but of the spirit. Energy, sincerity, and a powerful message of faith and redemption were the necessary requisites for a Methodist circuit rider. Their approach seems justified since by 1850 the Methodist Church had more members than any other Protestant sect in the country.

Churches came to reflect deep divisions that paralleled sectional interests in the country far beyond issues of religious doctrine or socio-economic stratification. By 1845, both the Baptist and Methodist Churches split over slavery. Presbyterians suffered a similar schism in 1857. The Northern churches of these denominations believed in abolishing slavery while Southern congregations felt their economic well-being was bound to a slaveholding system. The conflict over human bondage thus broke first in the communities of religion, which served as heralds to the South’s secession from the Union and, ultimately, to the American Civil War.

Utopian Movements

A number of cooperative communities were launched in the 1800s as experiments in alternative social organizations and Christian living according to scriptural interpretations. This was not a new phenomenon in the New World. The Jamestown colonists, the Puritans, the Quakers, and others had all made the difficult and dangerous voyage across the sea in order to live by their own beliefs.

Reformers in the aftermath of the Second Great Awakening sought to get away from authoritarian power structures but still provide for all members of the group. Brook Farm, New Harmony, the Shaker and Amana communities, and Oneida Colony were typical trials of utopian communes. Generally socialistic, these communities failed to thrive in America’s capitalistic culture once the vision and dedication of the original founders was gone. Their histories as alternative patterns of living are valuable, however, for their insight into human relationships and social structures.

New Harmony, founded in 1825 in Indiana by wealthy Scottish textile manufacturer Robert Owen, ironically perished early from lack of harmony among its participants. The Amana communities in New York and Iowa were also short-lived, fading away by the end of the 1850s.

Brook Farm in Massachusetts, noted as a transcendental literary and intellectual haven, suffered from indebtedness, in part from a disastrous fire and in part from lack of incentive for the members to be productive, since the fruits of the labor of all were shared equally by all, regardless of contribution. Lasting only five years, the experiment in “plain living and high thinking” was forever memorialized as the basis for Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel The Blithedale Romance.

The Shaker communities, founded by an Englishwoman, Ann Lee, who came to America in 1774, practiced strict sexual abstinence since they believed the Christian millennium was imminent and therefore saw no reason to perpetuate the human race. Ann Lee died in 1784, but the sect continued to prosper on the strength of its fervent and joyful religious life. The Shakers admired simplicity and made an art of designing buildings and furniture of distinctive, harmonious beauty. By the 1830s, there were 20 Shaker communities, and by 1840 the Shakers had a membership of some six thousand. Shaker communities existed for another 100 years, though dwindling slowly. Their rule of celibacy and communal holding of property discouraged new converts. Because of their high ideals and lack of controversial practices, the Shaker communities lived in harmony with their neighbors.

By contrast, the Oneida colony practiced free love, birth control, and eugenic selection of parents. These life-style anomalies proved unpalatable to most Americans and caused ongoing problems with the surrounding community. Founded in 1847 in Vermont by John Humphrey Noyes, the colony soon had to relocate to more-tolerant New York. Noyes’s doctrine of “Bible Communism” insisted selfishness was the root of unhappiness. Owning property and maintaining exclusive relationships encouraged selfishness and destructive covetousness of what others have. Therefore, the keys to happiness were communal ownership of property and what Noyes termed “complex marriage” where every woman was married to every man in the group.

The Oneidans shared work equally and supported their enterprise by manufacturing such things as steel traps, silk thread, and silverplate tableware. Yielding to external pressure, the Oneida colony gave up complex marriage in 1879, and communal ownership of property soon followed. The group eventually transformed itself into a joint-stock company manufacturing stainless steel knives and tableware. Thus Noyes’s communistic utopia ended as a capitalist corporation.

In New York in the 1820s, Joseph Smith was visited with a vision and claimed to have received golden plates that detailed a new religion he called the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or Mormonism. In 1831 Smith founded a small community in Ohio. The Mormon faith was cooperative in nature, which rankled the individualistic temper of the times. But the colony was efficient and successful, which attracted converts. Strife with the local inhabitants caused the colony to relocate to Missouri and then to Illinois, where in 1839 they founded the town of Nauvoo. Five years later Nauvoo was the largest town in the state. Rumors of polygamy and other social irregularities incensed the moral rectitude of neighboring non-Mormons. Smith and his brother Hyrum were arrested, and while in jail they were attacked by a mob and killed.

Leadership of the Mormons was taken up by Brigham Young who led the sect to the site of what is now Salt Lake City. The Mormons were highly successful in Utah, but so staunchly independent that they raised the ire of the United States government, which sent troops against them in 1857. The issue of polygamy delayed statehood for Utah until 1896. Though no longer communal in nature, Mormonism remains a dynamic influence in the state of Utah, and the Mormon faith is recognized as a major religion in the United States.

Subordination of the individual to the group seems to be the one common thread among the utopian experimental communities. Beyond that, their doctrines, practices, and fates make each group uniquely individual. They reflected the idealistic, reform-minded spirit of their age, and remain as monuments to human courage to live differently on the basis of principle and religious conviction.

Reform might be labeled the touchstone of the nineteenth century. The movements begun then often did not bear fruit until the twentieth century, and some are still in the process of becoming fully realized. Reforms such as prison reform, corporate reform, sanitation, and child labor were mostly accomplished through court cases. Women’s rights, the universal right to vote, and temperance from alcohol relied on grass-roots movements, consciousness raising in the form of parades, petitions, and lectures, and ultimately, legislation. But the test of the nation came over reform from the practice of slavery, which sparked a terrible war. The first reforms of the era were of religion and philosophy. When the hearts and minds of the people changed, social and political reform became an unstoppable force.

Humanitarian Reforms

The Age of Reform--the decades prior to the Civil War--was a period of tremendous economic and political change. Many Americans believed that traditional values were undercut by the emerging industrial and market economy and they supported humanitarian and social reforms in an effort to create a new moral order. Some reformers, including those who embraced transcendentalism, promoted the divinity of the individual and sought to perfect human society. A number of experimental communal "utopias" were formed to further this effort.

Other reformers were driven by more traditional religious impulses, such as the Protestant revivalism known as the Second Great Awakening. Charles Grandison Finney, the greatest of the revival preachers, denounced both alcohol and slavery. The Shaker, Amana, and Mormon communities were among those that blended religion and secular institutions to further human perfectibility. Many middle-class women took the opportunity to broaden their experiences beyond the domestic sphere by participating in various reform movements. A defining characteristic of this era was that women played public, leading roles in many of the crusades to reform American society.

The emphasis on human perfectibility led some reformers to provide care for the physically and mentally afflicted. Thomas H. Gallaudet, a graduate of Yale who studied the education of deaf-mutes in Paris, opened the first American school for the deaf at Hartford, Connecticut, in 1817. His son, Edward, founded the Columbia Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, which is now known as Gallaudet University. Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe did similar work with the sightless in Boston. He founded in 1832 the Perkins Institution and the Massachusetts Asylum for the Blind. Howe received international acclaim by teaching a blind, deaf, and mute, twelve-year-old girl to communicate through sign language.

As part of the humanitarian reforms sweeping America, asylums were also funded for social deviants and the mentally ill. Criminals of all kinds—including debtors—and the indigent insane were confined together indiscriminately in crowded, filthy prisons during the early decades of the nineteenth century. In Pennsylvania and New York, the idea that criminals should be reformed led to experiments in solitary confinement. Strict rules of silence were imposed, in an attempt to provide prisoners with the opportunity to contemplate their mistakes and become penitent. Therefore, prisons literally became "penitentiaries," or "reformatories." In 1821, Kentucky became the first state to abolish imprisonment for debt. As working-class men won the right to vote, debtors' prisons eventually disappeared from the American scene.

Dorothea Dix, a remarkably selfless woman, abandoned a successful teaching career in 1841 to begin a life-long crusade to improve conditions for the mentally impaired. After touring asylums and poorhouses in Massachusetts, she reported to the legislature that the indigent insane were treated as violent criminals: "Chained, naked, beaten with rods, and lashed into obedience." Dix traveled extensively and ultimately persuaded 20 state legislatures and the federal government to establish mental health asylums, including St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, D.C. At her urging, Congress passed a bill granting public lands to the states to fund hospitals for the mentally and physically impaired. President Franklin Pierce, however, did not want the federal government involved in charity work and vetoed it. Despite that singular setback, Dorothea Dix clearly influenced governmental policy during the Age of Reform.

Social Reforms

Educational reform was another effort Americans pursued to perfect society during this period. In the early nineteenth century, Americans had the highest literacy rate in the western world, and yet there was no statewide system of free elementary schools anywhere in the United States. Reformers were influenced by Thomas Jefferson's vision of an educated electorate, and the desire to inculcate students—including increasing numbers of non-English and non-Protestant immigrants—with traditional American values. Public education, they argued, would foster equal opportunity and social stability.

The leading figure in the public school movement was Horace Mann. He served as the secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education from its creation in 1837 until 1848, when he was elected to the Congress. Mann was the driving force behind better school buildings, expanded curricula, and improved teacher training and higher salaries. Boston set the pace with free public high schools in the 1820s, for both boys and girls. By the Civil War, most northern states had tax-supported public schools at the elementary and high school levels. Public education lagged, however, in the western frontier regions and throughout most of the South.

Women played an increasing role in public education during the reform era. Catharine Beecher, a sister of Harriet Beecher Stowe, encouraged women to enter the teaching profession because their "natural" role suited them to the care and nurturing of children. Thus, Beecher combined the "cult of domesticity" with educational reform. By 1850, most elementary school teachers were women, although some were hired because they could be paid considerably less than men. At the secondary level, Emma Willard in 1821 established the Troy Female Seminary in New York. Oberlin College in Ohio became the first institution of higher learning to admit African Americans and female students—four women enrolled in 1837. That same year, Mary Lyon founded Mount Holyoke Seminary, which later became the first women's college. During the Age of Reform, educational opportunities for women expanded, although most were not encouraged to pursue higher education.

The temperance movement, the greatest of the evangelically inspired reforms, also attracted those who believed in human perfectibility. During the early 1800s, Americans consumed two to three times the amount of alcohol per capita than today. Alcohol abuse was rampant among men and women from every walk of life. Drunkenness, the reformers claimed, lay at the root of nearly every social problem—including crime, poverty, labor absenteeism, and domestic violence. Advocates of temperance had been active since the publication of Dr. Benjamin Rush's An Inquiry into the Effects of Spirituous Liquors upon the Human Mind and Body in 1784, but the campaign against alcohol during the reform era was imbued with an unprecedented moralistic fervor. This was, in large measure, because women dominated the rank-and-file membership roles of many local temperance societies. The temperance movement attracted the largest numbers of female reformers, and served to introduce them to other crusades—especially women's rights and abolitionism. In 1826, the assault upon "demon rum" became a national movement with a confederation of local societies called the American Temperance Union. Within a decade, the A.T.U. boasted a membership of 1.5 million, and an additional five hundred thousand Americans had taken the "cold water pledge" and vowed to forsake all alcohol. In 1840, a group of reformed alcoholics led by John B. Gough, known as the "poet of the d.t.'s," organized the Washington Temperance Society and began touring the country, giving impassioned speeches to audiences of "drowned drunkards." Temperance songs, such as "Dear Father, Drink No More," and melodramatic fiction also were employed in the fight against liquor. The Glass, for instance, told the story of a young boy who was locked in a closet by his drunken mother and forced to gnaw off one of his arms to prevent starvation. The most popular temperance novel was Timothy Shay Arthur's Ten Nights in a Bar-Room, and What I Saw There, a tragic tale of a family destroyed by drink. Only copies of Uncle Tom's Cabin sold in greater numbers during the 1850s.

Maine became the first state to prohibit the sale of alcohol, in 1851. The leader of the prohibition campaign was Neal Dow, a Quaker businessman who served as the mayor of Portland. A dozen other states passed similar "Maine laws," although in most cases they were not rigorously enforced or were soon repealed. This shift in objectives from temperance to prohibition was generally led by well-to-do reformers and industrialists. Employers were particularly interested in imposing discipline among their laborers, many of them Irish or German immigrants who resented legislative attempts to curb their social drinking. The phenomenal success of the temperance movement in reducing alcohol consumption during this period was due not to legal coercion, but moral suasion and self-improvement.

Women’s Rights

The spirit of reform was prevalent in the field of women's rights. Many women played a central role in a wide range of antebellum moral crusades—especially in support of temperance and the abolition of slavery—and their experiences in a male-dominated culture led to the first American feminist movement. This era witnessed the beginning of the quest for equality between the sexes, but the chief strides were made decades later. Following the Revolutionary War, women were encouraged to become models of "Republican Motherhood," in an effort to nurture and shape succeeding generations of American citizens. The emerging market economy during the early nineteenth century widened the gulf between the workplace and the home, and had a tremendous impact on the social roles of middle-class men and women. The result was an increasing emphasis on the "separate spheres" concept. That is, men were the "bread-winners" and political leaders; women were expected to be the guardians of morality and benevolence. The family home was now a refuge from the harsh realities of the office or factory, and the special province of the wife and mother.

Some women enthusiastically embraced the "cult of domesticity," reveling in their increased influence and leadership within the home. Catharine Beecher, for example, in 1841 wrote Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies, a best-selling guidebook for wives and mothers in which she instructed them on their myriad household duties. Sarah J. Hale, editor of the popular Godey's Lady's Book, explained that her magazine scrupulously avoided political topics because "other subjects are more important for our sex and more proper for our sphere." Working-class women did not have the opportunity to stay home and cultivate the "domestic virtues," but for many middle-class women their growing independence within the family justified a life revolving around their husband and children.

Some women naturally found the domestic sphere to be confining. Americans were also marrying later and bearing fewer children. This meant that many women had the inclination and the time to participate in the women's rights movement. During the Age of Reform, women faced legal discrimination in virtually every aspect of their lives. They were prohibited from voting or holding public office, and forfeited their property rights when they married. A wife could not sign a contact, draft a will, or sue in court, without her husband's permission. Most professions were closed to women, with the notable exceptions of teaching and writing, and females had less access to higher education. The legal status of women was essentially that of a white child or black slave. Margaret Fuller, a prominent transcendentalist and the editor of The Dial, wrote in Woman in the Nineteenth Century: "Many women are considering within themselves what they need and what they have not."

Some female abolitionists turned their attention also to the women's crusade. Sarah and Angelina Grimké, daughters of a southern slaveholder, railed against "domestic slavery" as well as black bondage, and defiantly declared, "Whatever is right for man to do is right for woman." Angelina married the western abolitionist Theodore Dwight Weld, in 1838, but chose to retain her maiden name. Sojourner Truth, a former slave, divided her time between addressing abolitionist audiences and women's rights groups.

Most famously, Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were two female delegates to the World Anti-Slavery Convention held at London in 1840. When they were denied full participation because of their gender, they returned to America determined to campaign for equal rights. They organized the first women's rights convention held at Seneca Falls, New York, in July 1848. The three hundred delegates adopted a "Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions," drafted primarily by Stanton, that was patterned on the Declaration of Independence. "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal." The document listed the "repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman," and called for a redress of grievances.

Among the resolutions adopted by the convention, only one was not ratified unanimously--the demand that women be granted the right to vote. One hundred delegates, including thirty-four men (among them Frederick Douglass) signed the declaration, although some later requested the removal of their names due to the public outcry and scorn heaped upon the "amazons" of Seneca Falls. Thus was launched the modern women's rights movement in America.

The first truly national women's rights convention was held in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1850. Susan B. Anthony, an unmarried Quaker who had been active in the temperance movement, shortly thereafter assumed the leadership role in the drive for legal equality and the right to vote. Progress was limited in these years, however. More than a dozen states, led by Mississippi in 1839, granted some property rights to married women. Additionally, some extraordinary women hurdled the barriers to career advancement.

Elizabeth Blackwell, in 1849, became the first female to graduate from a medical college. Her sister-in-law, Antoinette Brown Blackwell, was the first ordained female minister in the United States. Progress was also made in the field of higher education for women. Lucy Stone, yet another of Elizabeth Blackwell's sisters-in-law and a graduate of Oberlin College, married Henry Blackwell in 1855. She popularized the feminist practice of retaining her maiden name after marriage; those who did so were called "Lucy Stoners." A final feminist symbol, named for Amelia Bloomer, was a style of dress that combined a short skirt over full-length pantalets. "Bloomers," introduced by the well-known actress Frances Kemble, were a practical outfit that afforded women freedom of movement without a loss of modesty. Typically, however, bloomers were ridiculed as too radical and unfeminine. Although some progress was made during these years, the entire women's rights crusade took a back seat to other reform movements--most especially to abolitionism.

Abolitionism

The crusade against slavery was the most significant of the reform era movements. Slavery existed in all of the original 13 American colonies, but by the middle of the eighteenth century some Americans began to speak out against human bondage. The Society of Friends--the Quakers--became the first group to take a public stand in support of the abolition of slavery. The devotion of the Quakers was paralleled, in varying degrees, by other religions. As the Revolutionary War approached, the moral arguments against slavery were bolstered by secular concepts drawn from the Enlightenment, including individual freedom and political equality.

Spurred on by the ideals of the Declaration of Independence and the American Revolution, opposition to slavery grew throughout the United States. Northern states, in part due to economic conditions, inaugurated gradual emancipation programs. Since the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 prohibited slavery in that region, by the first decade of the nineteenth century all the states that would be free by the time of the Civil War were on the road to manumission. Additionally, Congress prohibited foreign slave trade in 1808.

Slavery may appear to have been dying out in the United States, but the invention of the cotton gin in 1793 made it economically viable in the southern states. Furthermore, slavery was more than just a labor system—it was an institution to control the black race in America. Racism alone prevented the abolition of slavery during the Age of Reform. Southerners defended slavery as a "necessary evil," and argued that they could not free millions of slaves without destroying their economy and their society. Many Northerners had economic ties to the "peculiar institution," and still others worried about their own futures if they were suddenly competing in the marketplace with millions of free African Americans. Most northern states restricted the political rights and civil liberties of their black citizens. Lydia Maria Child, an active reformer in many fields, captured this Northern spirit when she wrote, "Our prejudice against colored people is even more inveterate than it is at the South."

The abolition movement grew slowly during the first decades of the nineteenth century. In late December 1816, a prominent group of men, dominated by Southerners, gathered in Washington and founded the American Colonization Society. Judge Bushrod Washington, nephew of the first president, presided. Henry Clay, a Kentucky slaveholder and national political figure, praised the aim of the society to "rid our country of a useless and pernicious, if not dangerous, portion of its population"—free blacks.

Several years later, the first African Americans arrived in what became the Republic of Liberia. Its capital, Monrovia, was named for the slaveholding president who supported the goals of the American Colonization Society. Colonization, however, had no real chance of success. Only a tiny fraction of the African American population removed to Liberia, due to the costs involved and the opposition of free blacks who rightly viewed America as their homeland. Most white abolitionists, too, soon turned to other methods to combat slavery. Nonetheless, during the 1850s Martin Delany, a free black doctor and journalist, preached economic self-sufficiency and the creation of separate African American communities in Africa, Canada, or Latin America. As late as the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln seriously considered establishing black colonies in Latin America and the Caribbean.

A new intensity and enthusiasm galvanized the abolition movement during the reform era. African Americans were active in the crusade from the start. The first African American newspaper, Freedom's Journal, was founded in New York in 1827, and within a few years there were more than 50 antislavery societies in black communities. David Walker, a free black who moved from North Carolina to Boston, was one of the Journal's agents. He published in 1829 a radical pamphlet, Walker's Appeal . . . to the Colored Citizens of the World, that scornfully rejected colonization, and warned whites of the destruction they faced, "If we have to obtain our freedom by fighting."

Although Walker died the following year, his call for slave rebellion led southern states to outlaw black education and crack down on "incendiary" publications from the North. In an unfortunate coincidence of timing, Nat Turner, a literate slave, led two-dozen followers on a bloody rampage in Southampton County, Virginia, in August 1831. About 60 whites were killed before the insurrection was brutally crushed and Turner executed. Nat Turner's rebellion was blamed by terrified southern whites on northern abolitionists. Any lingering hopes for gradual and voluntary emancipation by state legislatures died with Nat Turner. Southerners soon were defending slavery not as a necessary evil, but as "a positive good.

Most white abolitionists rejected the violent approach advocated by David Walker. William Ellery Channing, Lyman Beecher, and Charles Grandison Finney, to name a few, were motivated by evangelical revivalism. Benjamin Lundy, a Quaker, published in Baltimore the most influential antislavery newspaper of the 1820s, The Genius of Universal Emancipation. Among his staff was William Lloyd Garrison, who moved to Boston and started his own abolitionist weekly. Garrison embodied a more radical approach to abolitionism than his mentor. The first issue of The Liberator, dated January 1, 1831, carried a message that Garrison forcefully continued to deliver: "I am in earnest—I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch—AND I WILL BE HEARD." Garrison demanded immediate, uncompensated emancipation, and equal rights for black Americans. He lambasted the Constitution for permitting slavery to exist, refused to engage in political action to attain his goals, and called upon northern states to secede from the Union if slavery was not abolished by the "wicked" Southerners. Garrison led the way in founding the New England Anti-Slavery Society in 1832, and served as the first president of the American Anti-Slavery Society the following year. The chief financial backing for the national society came from two wealthy New York merchants, Arthur and Lewis Tappan. Within a decade, there were about 2,000 affiliates of the American Anti-Slavery Society, enrolling 200,000 members. Women played a major role in the abolitionist movement. Lucretia Mott founded the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society in 1833, and the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women was a network of local organizations. African Americans, including Sojourner Truth and Maria Stewart, addressed "promiscuous" audiences of men and women in New England. Abby Kelley, a Quaker, and Angelina and Sarah Grimké, who converted to Quakerism before leaving their southern home, were among the more celebrated female platform speakers. Angelina and Sarah contributed much of the primary research from southern newspapers and firsthand testimonials to Theodore Dwight Weld's graphic exposé of the peculiar institution, American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses. Weld, who was married to Angelina, was a revivalist preacher trained by Charles Grandison Finney and a leading western abolitionist.

Many escaped slaves made particularly effective speakers. Henry Bibb and William Wells Brown, both escapees from Kentucky, were prominent African American abolitionist orators. Frederick Douglass was the greatest African American abolitionist and a mesmerizing speaker. His autobiography, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, traced the remarkable life of a young slave who taught himself to read and write before escaping from Maryland in 1838. Douglass founded the North Star, an abolitionist newspaper, in Rochester, New York, and continued the crusade for racial equality.

Despite their growing numbers, antislavery crusaders were never more than a small minority of Northerners. They were also the subjects of physical threats. Garrison, for example, was paraded around Boston in 1835, with a rope hanging from his neck, by what was described as a "well-dressed" mob. Two years later, the movement had its first martyr. In Alton, Illinois, across the Mississippi River from slave-holding Missouri, Elijah P. Lovejoy was murdered while defending his abolitionist newspaper office. Cassius Marcellus Clay faced the same threat in Lexington, Kentucky, and mounted two small brass cannons to guard the doors of the True American. Violence was averted, however, when Clay's press was dismantled and shipped out of the state.

To further the cause of freedom for the slaves and freedom of the press, thousands of petitions were sent to Congress urging the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia. In 1836, however, the House passed a "gag rule," that automatically tabled antislavery petitions without debate. Many Northerners, who previously gave little thought to abolition, now viewed their own civil liberties as being in jeopardy. John Quincy Adams, then a representative from Massachusetts, led the fight against the gag rule until its repeal in 1844.

The petition drive was one form of political action employed by abolitionists. Some leaders of the movement, most notably William Lloyd Garrison, continued to rely solely on moral suasion. Increasingly frustrated by their lack of progress, however, Douglass, Weld, and the Tappan brothers were among those abolitionists calling for a political war against slavery. In 1840, they organized the Liberty Party, and nominated for president James G. Birney, a former Kentucky slaveholder. Birney received only 7,000 popular votes in the ensuing election. Four years later, again with Birney heading the ticket, the Liberty Party increased its vote count to 62,000. The abolitionists probably cost the Whigs the electoral vote of New York, thereby ensuring the election of Democrat James Knox Polk. In 1848, the Free Soil Party played a significant role in the election, and foreshadowed the founding of the Republican Party in the 1850s. Ultimately, the abolitionist crusade proved to be the most powerful of all the reform era movements, forever changing the history of the United States.