

AP United States History
Unit 6: The Nation Expands
Topic- American Society in the Gilded Age

Explain the causes of increased economic opportunity and its effects on society.

Corporations' need for managers and for male and female clerical workers, as well as increased access to educational institutions, fostered the growth of a distinctive middle class. A growing amount of leisure time also helped expand consumer culture.

A Modern American Culture Emerges in the Gilded Age

During the Gilded Age, a modern American society and culture emerged that those of us who live in the present would begin to recognize. For the first time, a middle class (albeit a small one) developed which had disposable income to spend on consumer items, enjoyed reading newspapers, magazines, and novels, and both professional and college sports became incredibly popular. As immigrants and migrants became the majority of factory workers, a new class of college-educated professionals began to take on managerial and clerical positions in the workplace. American life during the period was also enhanced by a sense of philanthropy, as some of the wealthiest entrepreneurs of the day began to donate large sums of money to create libraries, museums, theaters, and colleges and universities to enrich the lives of the general public.

As large-scale American companies developed, new and well-educated professionals were needed to manage their affairs. While a blue collar worker, so named because of the color of their uniforms, is a laborer (an unskilled worker), a white collar worker was new to the American workplace. White collar workers include the following: secretaries, accountants, lawyers, managers, consultants (today), and executives. Each of these new professions required a higher level of education and expertise than what was required of the average factory worker or day laborer. For the first time, these highly skilled, well-educated workers would form the backbone of America's new middle class. Though much smaller in number than the (unskilled) blue-collar factory workers who made up the majority of the workforce at the time, this new class of workers commanded better wages and because of their status had much more leisure time than their unskilled counterparts. The new state colleges and universities which sprang up due to the passage of the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862, such as the University of Wisconsin, the University of Nebraska, Kansas State University, the University of California, Oklahoma State University, and the Texas A&M University helped give rise to a new class of workers in the West. These new universities trained engineers, medical doctors, lawyers, and teachers. While in the East, a new phenomenon was occurring, as small liberal arts colleges tailored just for women began making their appearance during the Gilded Age, such as Mount Holyoke College, Vassar College and Wellesley College. In the new liberal arts colleges, women learned the skills necessary to become teachers, nurses, and secretaries, which allowed them to step into working in a corporation for the very first time. This enabled a small number of families to have the disposable income— mentioned earlier, to enjoy the ability to visit theaters, eat in restaurants (once reserved only for the very wealthy), shop in the new department stores, and to enjoy dancing, Vaudeville shows, amusement parks, spectator sports, and popular music. With their income, these families built medium-sized Victorian Era homes with nice furniture and lived in areas on the edge of the major cities, as the train, trolley, and streetcar systems allowed them to be able to more easily commute into the heart of the cities for their work.

Some business leaders argued that the wealthy had a moral obligation to help the less fortunate and improve society, as articulated in the idea known as the Gospel of Wealth, and they made philanthropic contributions that enhanced educational opportunities and urban environments.

By the 1890s, a number of the wealthiest entrepreneurs in American history, led by Andrew Carnegie, began to espouse a doctrine that he referred to himself, as the Gospel of Wealth. Authored by Carnegie himself, the Gospel of Wealth, stated that the wealthiest in American society should use their money to benefit the public by investing in the creation of institutions that could enrich the experiences of average American families. This practice is known as philanthropy. Carnegie, Rockefeller, and Morgan built libraries, theaters, museums, performance halls, and colleges and universities. In fact, most of the largest libraries and performance halls in America were built by these wealthy entrepreneurs during the Gilded Age. Duke University was endowed by the Duke Brothers, whose cigarette manufacturing business was one of the most lucrative in the South. But, the other major university in the South, to be created using the money of a wealthy entrepreneur, was created by the heirs to the Vanderbilt fortune, after the death of Cornelius Vanderbilt, in Nashville, Tennessee. Today, along with Duke University, Vanderbilt University is also one of the finest institutions of higher learning in the world. While endowments funded universities, theaters, and other public institutions that were promoted by the philanthropy of the period, it is important to note that the Gospel of Wealth also contained another inherent message. It stated the basic tenets of Social Darwinism, as Carnegie went on to say that only certain people were to become successful and that giving money to the poor would never be a solution for them— because, in his words, those who do not have wealth, do not have the ability to manage their own affairs. In other words, it was the duty of those who were born to be wealthy and successful to take care of those who are not because those who are poor, lived in poverty because they were incapable of taking care of themselves. However, other thinkers and philosophers of the period promoted a different view— one of taking care of their fellow citizens, and it was this Social Gospel movement which championed an alternative vision of American society to that of Andrew Carnegie and those who espoused the Gospel of Wealth.

Explain how different reform movements responded to the rise of industrial capitalism in the Gilded Age.

A number of artists and critics, including agrarians, utopians, socialists, and advocates of the Social Gospel, championed alternative visions for the economy and U.S. society.

While wealthy industrialists espoused philanthropy and the ideal that only a select few could manage American society, others championed a different point of view— one which sought to use the church and the power of the federal government to right the wrongs of a society that by 1893 was suffering from another devastating financial depression. Members of the Social Gospel Movement began to preach that Americans had a duty to take care of one another and that our society should be one that works for everyone— God's Kingdom on Earth. For those who adhered to the Social Gospel, it was important to provide food, housing, and shelter for immigrants and those in need. They also favored some of the ideals of the labor union movement, which included: providing workers with safer working conditions and bringing an end to the practice of child labor. These reformers wanted to see the federal government step in and regulate the practices of large-scale industrial corporations. But, there was also this sense that people could be perfected, and so could society. Americans had a duty to make their society better for everyone and to take the money from the church coffers and put it to good use. One such organization that came out of the Social Gospel Movement was the Salvation Army. To this day, the Salvation Army takes donations and gives them to families and children in need. Another organization to come out of the Social Gospel Movement was the YMCA, or Young Men's Christian Association. This organization was created to give families and their children a place to go in the growing industrial cities of America where they could become physically fit. In YMCA gymnasiums, two sports— basketball and volleyball were created so that families and children could play indoors during the cold winter months. The Social Gospel Movement also supported the temperance movement and in particular, women played an important role in organizing this movement which saw the consumption of alcoholic beverages rise as more and more immigrants, whose cultures contained a strong background for brewing alcoholic beverages came into the country in ever-increasing numbers. It also sought to play a role in politics and like the groups that would come after it, it sought

to create reform legislation that would try to regulate business and put an end to poverty and heinous practices like child labor, for example. Farmers, socialists, and utopians who came to believe that the federal government could do more to level the playing field for all Americans sought to regulate banks, railroads, and to rid the nation of what they saw as corruption in politics that made it easier for big businesses to run amok. These groups would change American politics and the result of their desire for reform would later influence the development of progressivism.

Many women sought greater equality with men, often joining voluntary organizations, going to college, and promoting social and political reform.

During this period, American women began to assert their voices as never before. As the Victorian Era came to an end, it was replaced by the Gibson Girl— someone who appreciated activity and independence, which foreshadowed the direction that American women were going into by 1900. Women were attending colleges and beginning to work as teachers, nurses, and secretaries. A new class of female professionals became an important part of the American middle class. Women became political leaders and gave voice to what would become known as progressivism. Women had always played a major role in the temperance movement, but women became the leaders of the movement by the dawn of the twentieth century. Remember, too, that it was American women who opened the first and most successful settlement homes for immigrant families and their children. By 1900, women were also leading the charge to earn the right to vote for themselves. From 1890-1920, women will play a tremendous part in changing the face of America. It is also important to keep in mind that it was a woman who stood up to lynching and segregation— Ida B. Wells. As American women became an important component of the workforce, college educated, and socially and politically active, it set the stage for women to slowly achieve equal parity with men in American society during the twentieth century.