

Era 6: The Development of the Industrial United States (1870-1900)

Overview

From the era of Reconstruction to the end of the 19th century, the United States underwent an economic transformation that involved the maturing of the industrial economy, the rapid expansion of big business, the development of large-scale agriculture, and the rise of national labor unions and pronounced industrial conflict.

Students can begin to see a resemblance to possibilities and problems that our society faces today. The late 19th century marked a spectacular outburst of technological innovation, which fueled headlong economic growth and delivered material benefits to many Americans. Yet, the advances in productive and extractive enterprises that technology permitted also had ecological effects that Americans were just beginning to understand and confront. In the last third of the 19th century, the rise of the American corporation and the advent of big business brought about a concentration of the nation's productive capacities in many fewer hands. Mechanization brought farming into the realm of big business and turned the United States into the world's premier producer of food--a position it has never surrendered.

This period also witnessed unprecedented immigration and urbanization, both of which were indispensable to industrial expansion. American society, always polyglot, became even more diverse as immigrants thronged from southern and eastern Europe--and also from Asia, Mexico, and Central America. As newcomers created a new American mosaic, the old Protestant European Americans' sway over the diverse people of this nation began to loosen. Related to this continuing theme of immigration was the search for national unity amid growing cultural diversity. How a rising system of public education promoted the assimilation of newcomers is an important topic for students to study.

Students should appreciate the crosscurrents and contradictions of this period. For example, what many at the time thought was progress was regarded by others as retrogressive. Paradoxes abound. First, agricultural modernization, while innovative and productive, disrupted family farms and led American farmers to organize protest movements as never before. Second, the dizzying rate of expansion was accomplished at the cost of the wars against the Plains Indians, which produced the "second great removal" of indigenous peoples from their ancient homelands and ushered in a new federal Indian policy that would last until the New Deal. Third, muscular, wealth-producing industrial development that raised the standard of living for millions of Americans also fueled the rise of national labor unionism and unprecedented clashes in industrial and mining sites between capital and labor. Fourth, after the Civil War, women reformers, while reaching for a larger public presence, suffered an era of retrenchment on economic and political issues. Lastly, the wrenching economic dislocations of this period and the social problems that erupted in rural and urban settings captured the attention of reformers and politicians, giving rise to third-party movements and the beginning of the Progressive movement.