

The term “Gilded Age” was coined by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner in their 1873 book, ‘The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today’

The Gilded Age commonly is in reference to...

1. major population growth in the United States
2. major advancements in industrialization
3. extravagant displays of wealth and excess of America’s upper-class
4. a rapid advance in societies infrastructure unmatched by regulation.

Discoveries, Inventions and Industry

2nd Industrial Revolution involved several developments within the chemical, fuel and steel industries. Other key developments include the introduction of steam-driven steel ships, the early development of airplanes (not for passengers), perfection of canning, mechanical refrigeration and other food preservation techniques and the development of the telephone. It is highlighted by the mass production of consumer goods.

- o 1882, gold discovered in Idaho, in Native American territory. Multiethnic boomtowns quickly rise, promoted by the railroad.
- o 1885 Noah Kellogg discovers his gold mines also contain lead and zinc. Sells them to a Portland Oregon businessman. Demand for mines increases significantly.
- o Alexander Graham Bell, first telephone, 1876
- o From 1860-1890, over 500,000 invention patents were issued – over ten times the number issued in the previous 70 years.
- o George Westinghouse invented air brakes for trains (making them both safer and faster).
- o Theodore Vaill established the American Telephone Company.
- o Thomas Edison invented the integrated power plant capable of lighting multiple buildings simultaneously, founding General Electric. He invented the phonograph in 1877 and electric light in 1879
- o Oil became an important resource, beginning with the Pennsylvania oil fields. Kerosene replaced whale oil and candles for lighting.
- o John Rockefeller created Standard Oil Company to consolidate the industry.
- o Cash registers, stock tickets and typewriters are all introduced

Presidential Politics

- o “Bourbon Democrat” refers to a conservative member of the Democratic party, especially one who supported President Cleveland. They represented banking interests, supported banking and promote laissez-faire capitalism, and opposed protectionism and imperialism and US overseas expansionism, and fought to the gold standard to be tied to money.
- o “Mudslinging” – trying to win an advantage in elections by referring to negative aspects of an opponent of a policy rather than emphasizing one’s own positive attributes or preferred policies.
- o President Garfield assassinated by Charles Guiteau, who was upset for being overlooked for a Federal appointment

Employment and the Economy

- o Many new jobs: Between 1880-1900, clerical workers tripled in number, and business managers increased from 68,000 to more than 318,000
- o Economic growth produced contradictory efforts. With abundant and diverse natural resources, industries became competitive in the world marketplace. However, miners and loggers tended to ‘cut and run’, despoiling streams and forests in the process. Economic growth and development transformed natural landscapes throughout the United States.
- o Workers averaged three months unemployment every year (c.1895)
- o Business people created industrial towns and cities in the Northeast with new factories.
- o Gilded Age was rooted in industrialization, especially heavy industry like factories, railroads and coal mining.
- o During this era, American manufacturing production surpassed the combined total of England, Germany and France.
- o Domestic railroad mileage tripled between 1860 and 1880, and tripled again by 1920.
- o Technological improvements in transportation allowed for the introduction of marketing products throughout the nation, not just regionally or locally as it had been.
- o Increased mechanization of industry is a major mark of the Gilded Age’s search for cheaper ways to create more products.
- o Frederick Winslow Taylor observed that worker efficiency in steel could be improved through the use of machines to make fewer motions in less time. His redesign increased the speed of factory machines and the productivity of factories while undercutting the need for skilled labor.
- o Demand for both skilled and unskilled workers increase.
- o Engineering colleges were established to feed the demand for expertise.
- o Steady yet rapid growth of wages in the middle class.
- o The focus on capital (profit!) inspired the economic consolidation of the nation’s financial markets in Wall Street. This consolidation began with the railroad industry, but soon afterward would extend to most branches of industry.
- o “Trusts” – a monopoly of corporations who controlled most of a particular market. Trusts came to dominate in the steel, oil, sugar, and meatpacking markets, as well as in the manufacture of agricultural machinery.
- o By 1877, the emergence of a national railroad system signaled the rise of big business. The railroad industry produced America’s first business bureaucracies, employing large workforces to maintain, schedule, operate and staff trains which traversed 93,000 miles of track.

Much corruption in politics at all levels of government

Growing Economic Instability

- o 1st May 1886, 350,000 workers in 11,562 business establishments went out on a one-day strike as part of the eight-hour-workday movement.
- o In Chicago, home of military anarchists, 40,000 workers participated in the strike.
- o While labor unions became increasingly popular in the late-1800s, their successes were also tempered by a series of strikes.
- o Great Southwest Railroad Strike of 1886
- o Haymarket Square Riot 1886 a strike to protest the death of two strikers the day before turns deadly when a bomb goes off, killing a police officer and seven others.
- o Homestead Strike (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) in 1892 was an organized attempt by 10,000 workers to bring about better wages and working conditions at a steel plant owned by Andrew Carnegie and Henry Clay Frick; Frick relied upon a private security force – the Pinkertons – and 8,000 state militia to put down the strike. Nine strikers and seven Pinkertons die in the ensuing violence, and there was an assassination attempt on Frisk. The steelworkers union, the Amalgamated Association of Steel and Iron Workers, was virtually crushed.
- o Pullman Strike – Pullman refused to meet with workers to discuss intolerable conditions, to which a national railroad strike was orchestrated by Eugene Debs. The strike was halted by court injunction and Debs arrested by federal troops, an action upheld by the Supreme Court in 1895.

Immigration

- o 1890, start of major wave of new immigrants from Ireland, Russia, Poland, England, Germany and Scandinavia. Approximately 10 million immigrants arrive throughout the era.
- o Ellis Island built, 1892
- o Statue of Liberty was a gift from the French, 1886
- o “Birds of passage” – men who were recruited by American employers who, after coming to America to make some money, were planning to return home. They represent 40% of all immigrants.

Andrew Carnegie

“Amassing wealth is one of the worst species of idolatry” he said. At the time he began to devote his fortune to education and improvement of the poorer classes, he was earning \$25 million a year.

Alfred Mahan writes “The Influence of Sea Power Upon History”, putting forth a prescription for how America could become a great naval power.

The end of the Gilded Age coincided with the Panic of 1893, a deep economic depression which lasted four years

The Panic of 1893 follows the burst of the “Railroad Bubble”. Overexpansion leads rail companies to go under, and the overstretched credit causes more than 500 banks to collapse.

Represents the beginning of the end of the Gilded Age.

Society and Culture

- o Class conflict becomes evident
- o “Conspicuous consumption” – A term coined by Thorstein Veblen to describe the expensive tastes of the very rich.
- o Widespread belief in the Horatio Alger myth of moving from rags to riches.
- o Urban areas grew more befouled by smokestacks and congested with new factories and workshops. Rapid construction of fire-vulnerable apartment buildings is prevalent.
- o The railroad industry served to centralize city centers and standardize definitions of time used throughout the nation.
- o Providers of goods and services celebrated (created...) a “standard” American viewed as white, native-born, middle class, heterosexual and Protestant. This image assumed special significance in the marketing of consumer products and in the appeal of new forms of leisure activities.
- o Expansion of entertainment as a profit-making venue, sometimes in collision with more traditional endeavors.
- o Social Darwinism – A theory arguing that competition among all individuals, groups, nations or ideas drive the social evolution/progression of human societies.
- o Jim Crow laws persist in the South.
- o Attorney Clarence Darrow argues that poverty, not biology, created crime.
- o “Yellow Journalism” – a type of journalism which downplays legitimate news in favor of eye-catching headlines which sell more newspapers. It often exaggerates news events, emphasizing scandals and sensationalism.
- o The Dawes Severalty Act, 1887 – Intended to abandon the Indian reservation system and integrate Indians into mainstream society. It was not particularly successful.

Events During

the Gilded Age

c.1877- abt.1896

Supreme Court cases

- o United States v. Harris 1883
Court ruled it unconstitutional for federal government to penalize crimes such as assault and murder, even if they are racially motivated hate crimes.
- o Ker v. Illinois 1886
Held that a fugitive kidnapped from abroad could not claim any violation of the Constitution laws or treaties of the United States.
- o Stone v. Farmers’ Loan and Trust Co 1886
State law regulation railroads must allow the railroad to make a profit. Leaves unanswered what a ‘fair’ profit is.