

American Society and Economy Transformed (1815-1860)

By Jack

Last time, we discussed the changes in government and economics from 1815-1840. Now we look at the steps forward made to technology and society, although I will leave it to you to decide if they were good steps. During the period from 1815 to 1860, American society and technology were transformed forever, and America began to look more like it does today. This was a time of industrialization and urbanization, but also one of religious and societal reforms.

Anyway, the most amazing difference you can see is the population boom that turned many sparsely populated areas into urban sprawls and, thanks to Jackson's persecution of the Native American Indians, began to colonize the west. Some statistics: in 1790 there were 4 million people in the United States, most East of the Appalachians. By 1840, there were 17 million, 1/3 of them west of the Appalachians, expanding into newly claimed territory.

All these people needed somewhere to live, and because of the work that could be found in the cities, those cities began to swell in population. In 1820, most major cities were seaports, and New York was the biggest, with a population of over 100,000! However, by 1860, there were eight major cities with a population of over 100,000, and New York's population rose to 800,000. This huge number of people inhabiting the major cities led to a large inequality between the rich and the poor. The richest 4% of Boston owned 2/3 of all the wealth in the city by 1848.

Many of the poor in these cities were immigrants to America, mostly from Germany or Ireland. They came to get a new, better life, but in almost all cases ended up working in factories, working all day in loud and dangerous conditions with very little pay at the end. Despite this, many immigrants were hated because they were seen as taking American jobs (much like today's South American immigrants?), and many job offers mentioned "Irish need not apply".

With all this new labor force available, America entered into a period of industrialization. I think this can be best demonstrated by the rise of the Middlesex company Woolen Mills between 1817 and 1843. Production increased from 4 million to 323 million yards of fabric during this period, thanks to new technology and an influx of people willing to use it for little pay. I believe that this mechanization, more than any of the other changes in this period, shaped American history, although it's hard to choose between it and the invention of the railroad (coming up next). I didn't say I thought it was a good change, but it definitely influenced our modern world.

The last change was in transportation. Canals were used up to and into the 1830s, but interest in them waned thanks to a new toy: the railroad. In the 1850s, there was a huge boom in railroad building, which connected the Great Lakes to states along the Atlantic coast.

It wasn't just economic and technological advanced that was prevalent in this period, Americans also experience a second "Great Awakening", which began in New England in the 1790s, but soon spread all over the country. Camp meetings, where large audiences listened to many different preachers, who told them to ask for forgiveness and await the second coming of Christ, were very popular. They made a lot of converts, including Charles Finney, a lawyer-turned-preacher who preached a message using words everyone could understand. His message was that anyone could achieve salvation and human nature didn't have to be dominated by sin. He was very radical for his time!

With all this religion going on, it's not very surprising that people began to look at some of the less savory parts of American society and tried to improve them. The first was alcohol abuse, was becoming quite a problem. Men were getting so drunk off and on the job that even factory owners knew something had to be done. The American Society for the Promotion of Temperance was formed in 1826, and many men took "temperance pledges" and swore off liquor. This was probably the most effective solution of all problems tackled in this period, as it cut alcohol consumption in half by the 1840s.

Public education was the next thing to be radically improved, by making school education mandatory

and by encouraging practical skills over learning the classics. Slavery was also tackled, and the American Colonization Society was formed to pay slave-owners for their slaves, free them, and send them back to Africa. There was a problem with this, which was that many former slaves didn't *want* to go back to Africa. They were now African-Americans. Many members of the American Colonization Society, while they agreed that slavery was wrong, still believed that blacks were inferior to whites. This one didn't really help much.

Womens' rights were the next issue. Many women spoke out about this, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who hosted the Seneca Falls Conference, where a Declaration of Sentiments was created. It started "All men *and women* are created equal...". However, despite all this work towards equal rights for women, it was almost 70 years after the Seneca Falls Conference before anything was done about it.

This concludes my look at the period of American history from 1815 to 1860, and the many advancements and reforms that occurred within it.

Sources:

http://college.cengage.com/history/lecturepoints/part01_lecture11/part01_lecture11.html