
The Gilded Age of America

The period between 1877 to the early 1900s was the time after Reconstruction that is characterized by a greatly expanding economy and the appearance of plutocratic, or the rule of the rich, ideals within society known as the Gilded Age. This period also saw the continuation and finally progress of the women's suffrage movement, but unfortunately didn't end with an amendment that gave them the right to vote: it will still take around twenty years for that to happen. These years were very important for the economy of the United States and without it, America probably would not be called a Global Superpower or have the massive economy that it has today.

The Gilded Age led to an increase in the quality of life and increased leisure time for many families across the United States. The Gilded Age was a term created by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner in a satirical novel named *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today* in which they criticized the corruption of the government and congressmen during this era. Mark Twain despised Congress because of their corruption; he even said, "Suppose you were an idiot and suppose you were a member of Congress. But I repeat myself (Mark)."

Even though Mark Twain criticized the government on the grounds of corruption, the government was important because they set the groundwork for the Gilded Age to begin. Several congressional laws set the stage for the Gilded Age to begin; they included: The Railroad Enabling Act of 1866, the Desert Land Grant Act in 1877, and the Stone and Timber Land Act in 1878. These laws gave millions of acres of land and the resources underground to farmers. These laws in combination with railroad expansion and the cessation of Native resistance opened the land west of the Mississippi river for settlement and commerce.

The Supreme Court also contributed by restricted interstate commerce laws that tried to stop federal regulation. Another thing that greatly contributed to the economy at this time were new innovations and demographic changes. New inventions such as Bell's telephone, the Bessemer Converter and the telegraph were very important to the economy because they basically reinvented the way things were done. The Bessemer converter was very important in steelmaking, while the telephone and the telegraph reinvented ways people could communicate. New transportation methods also helped urbanization by concentrating manufacturing to urban areas. The demographics during this era changed drastically because there was a lot of immigration which led to population growth, which in turn led to even more urbanization and industrialization. Approximately 62 million people were living in America by 1890, almost double its number in 1860. Many immigrants worked for very low wages, which meant more money for the employers.

The quality of life also improved drastically and this too increased the American population. People were starting to see that America was becoming a powerful country due to the innovations and economic growth. The Gilded Age also saw the start of many types of businesses and companies that also contributed to the massive economic growth including: mass-marketing companies, mail-order businesses, department stores, chain stores and franchises. Department stores had people traveling many miles to big commercial centers instead of going to shops near home. They appeared in America around the same time that

they appeared in France and England. The emergence of department stores exposed a wide variety of goods in the same place. This revolutionized the consumer market because people could now go to one place in order to get everything they needed. The department stores in these days were very similar to the ones we have today because they bought lots of goods from manufacturers and sold them for a lowered price; they also offered refunds. They also legitimized the appearance of women in public which was revolutionary at the time because of the ideas of the Cult of Domesticity which will be discussed later.

Mail-order businesses were similar to department stores because they sold a very wide variety of items but they brought convenience to people living in rural instead of in urban areas. The first mail-order company was founded by Montgomery Ward in 1872, although the most famous one was founded by Richard W. Sears and A.C. Roebuck in Minneapolis in 1893, it's called Sears, Roebuck and Co. but it's common name is just Sears. The emergence of these two types of businesses (the department stores and mail-order companies) created competition as one would expect in a free market economy. Local businesses would encourage people to take catalogues into their stores and burn them. As a response, mail-order businesses would send their catalogues to the local businesses in unmarked packages. These new businesses allowed people to buy a very wide variety of goods from one place; this increased convenience and expanded the economy. People were greatly affected by the Gilded Age for many different reasons, including the expansion of leisure during this era. Because of the vast expansion of the economy due to the new innovations in technology and transportation, people were making more money than ever before, which meant that they could buy luxury items. The new types of stores enabled them to buy those luxury items without having to go to separate stores. The quality of life improved and this can be proved with the rapid expansion growth in the United States, people weren't dying as quickly. The new circulation of money also probably helped in new medical breakthroughs that kept people alive and increased the average age. This new lifestyle let more people relax and increase their life expectancy.

While there were many improvements that the Gilded Age brought, there were also some very prevalent negatives. One of the most prevalent negatives was the corruption that Mark Twain mentioned in his book. One major scandal that ruined the Grant administration was the Credit Mobilier Scandal. This scandal began in 1864 when Thomas C. Durant bought the Pennsylvania Fiscal Agency which was renamed to Credit Mobilier. Its purpose as a construction company was to build the Union Pacific Railroad. The government first got involved when Oliver and Oakes Ames, the latter being a congressional representative for Massachusetts, bought shares of stocks from this company, thus indirectly buying the Union Pacific Railroad. The government was paying substantial amounts of money to this company to aid in the building of the railroad. The problem arose when Oliver Ames replaced Durant as the owner of the company; this made it seem like Oakes was benefitting from the money that the government was paying for the construction of the railroad. The railroad was financed for about \$50 million more than what was necessary, and Oakes starting selling his shares to congressman at reduced prices so that he wouldn't get exposed and so that there would still be beneficial legislation.

Rumors started floating around in 1867. It became a presidential issue in the 1872 race, several important people including vice-presidential candidate Henry Wilson, incumbent vice president Schyler Colfax, House Speaker James G. Blaine, and James A. Garfield, who would go on to become president. While the Credit Mobilier scandal was very severe, overall the Gilded Age was really important to American history. This scandal was a very negative factor, but another

negative factor was the way women were treated during this era. People believed in the Cult of Domesticity, or the belief the women should stay at home, be more religious, rear children, and be submissive to husbands. Fortunately the NAWSA and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, as well as the evolution of America during the Gilded Age, helped set the groundwork for the suffrage movement of the early 1900s. As stated earlier, department stores legitimized the appearance of women in public. Although it doesn't seem much, women started creating temperance movements and that made them realize that being able to vote would help their cause. Thankfully, the belief in this cult began to diminish during this era.

The Gilded Age was a crucial time in American history although it is not often discussed. If this era didn't occur, America wouldn't be as financially and economically strong as it is today. This era defined the American economy at a time where other countries were experiencing economic growth as well. It also allowed for the progression of women out of their previous social status and into a more important and modern part of society.

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