

## The Gilded Age

**Main Idea** Industrialization and urbanization changed American society's ideas and culture in the late 1800s.

**Reading Connection** Which scientist came up with the concept of “survival of the fittest” among animal species, and what does this phrase mean? Read on to find out how the notion of “survival of the fittest” was applied to human society.

In 1873 Mark Twain and Charles Warner co-authored a novel about American politics and society entitled *The Gilded Age*. Historians later adopted the term and applied it to the era in American history that begins about 1870 and ends around 1900. This was a time of tremendous change, in which old ideas of society and culture no longer seemed to apply.

### ★ An American Story ★

In 1872, at the age of 32, William Graham Sumner became a professor of political and social science at Yale College. Sumner's classes were very popular. One of his students, William Lyon Phelps, illustrated Sumner's tough, no-nonsense approach with this example of a class discussion:

**Student:** “Professor, don't you believe in any government aid to industries?”

**Sumner:** “No! It's root, hog, or die.”

**Student:** “Yes, but hasn't the hog got a right to root?”

**Sumner:** “There are no rights. The world owes nobody a living.”

**Student:** “You believe then, Professor, in only one system, the contract-competitive system?”

**Sumner:** “That's the only sound economic system. All others are fallacies.”

**Student:** “Well, suppose some professor of political economy came along and took your job away from you. Wouldn't you be sore?”

**Sumner:** “Any other professor is welcome to try. If he gets my job, it is my fault. My business is to teach the subject so well that no one can take the job away from me.”

—adapted from *Social Darwinism in American Thought*

Professor Sumner was only one of many voices that reflected new ideas about people and how they fit into the new industrial society.

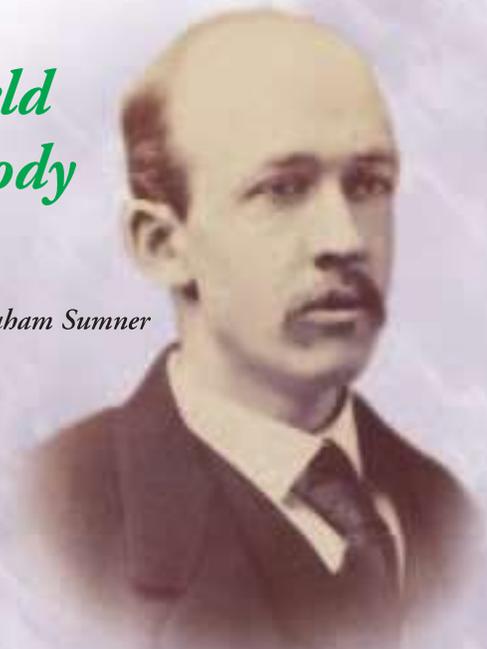
**A Changing Culture** The decades after the Civil War were in many ways a time of marvels. Amazing new inventions led to rapid industrial growth. Cities expanded to sizes never seen before. Masses of workers thronged the streets. Skyscrapers reached to the sky, and electric lights banished the darkness. Newly wealthy entrepreneurs built spectacular mansions.

By calling this era the **Gilded Age**, however, Twain and Warner were sounding an alarm. Something is gilded if it is covered with gold on the outside but made of cheaper material inside. A gilded age might appear to sparkle, but Twain, Warner, and other writers sought to point out that beneath the surface lay corruption, poverty, crime, and great disparities in wealth between the rich and the poor.

Whether the era was golden or merely gilded, it was certainly a time of great cultural activity. Industrialism and urbanization altered the way Americans looked at themselves and their society, and these changes gave rise to new values, new art, and new forms of entertainment.

*“The world owes nobody a living.”*

—William Graham Sumner





### **Picturing History**

**Social Darwinism** Herbert Spencer's application of the theory of evolution to human society found many followers. [How did industrial leaders react to this theory?](#)

One of the strongest beliefs of the era—and one that remains strong today—was the idea of **individualism**. Many Americans firmly believed that no matter how humble their origins, they could rise in society and go as far as their talents and commitment would take them. No one expressed the idea of individualism better than Horatio Alger. Alger, a former minister who eventually left the clergy, wrote more than 100 “rags-to-riches” novels, in which a poor person goes to the big city and becomes successful. Many young people who read these inspiring tales concluded that no matter how many obstacles they faced, success was possible.

**Social Darwinism** Another powerful idea of the era was Social Darwinism, which strongly reinforced the idea of individualism. English philosopher **Herbert Spencer** first proposed this idea. Historian John Fiske, political scientist William Graham Sumner, and the magazine *Popular Science Monthly* all popularized it in the United States.

Philosopher Herbert Spencer applied Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and natural selection to human society. In his 1859 book, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, Darwin argued that plant and animal life had **evolved** over the years by a process he called natural selection. In this process, those species that cannot adapt to the environment in which they live gradually die out, while those that do adapt thrive and live on.

Spencer took this biological theory, intended to explain developments over millions of years, and argued that human society also evolved through competition and natural selection. He argued that society progressed and became better because only the fittest people survived.

Spencer and others who shared his views became known as Social Darwinists, and their ideas were known as **Social Darwinism**. “Survival of the fittest” became the catchphrase of their philosophy. By 1902 over 350,000 copies of Spencer's books had been sold in the United States.

Social Darwinism paralleled the economic doctrine of laissez-faire that opposed any government programs that interfered with business. William Graham Sumner, for example, argued in numerous essays that competition would eliminate those who could not adapt. Not surprisingly, industrial leaders like John D. Rockefeller heartily embraced the theory of Social Darwinism. Rockefeller maintained that survival of the fittest, as demonstrated by the growth of huge businesses like his own Standard Oil, was “merely the working out of the law of nature and the law of God.”

Rockefeller may have appreciated Spencer's interpretation of evolution, but Darwin's conclusions about the origin of new species frightened and outraged many devout Christians as well as some leading scientists. They rejected the theory of evolution because they believed it contradicted the Bible's account of creation. Some American scholars and ministers, however, concluded that evolution may have been God's way of creating the world. Henry Ward Beecher of Plymouth Church in Brooklyn called himself a “cordial Christian evolutionist.” Beecher accepted Spencer's ideas of Social Darwinism and championed the success of American business.

A wealthy and prominent business leader, Andrew Carnegie believed whole-heartedly in Social Darwinism and laissez-faire. At the same time, he thought that those who profited from society owed it something in return. Carnegie attempted to extend and soften the harsh philosophy of Social Darwinism

with the Gospel of Wealth. This philosophy held that wealthy Americans bore the responsibility of engaging in **philanthropy**—using their great fortunes to further social progress. Carnegie himself, for example, donated millions of dollars as the “trustee and agent for his poorer brethren.” Other industrialists also contributed to social causes. 📖 (See page 975 for more information on the Gospel of Wealth.)

**Realism** Just as Darwin had looked at the natural world scientifically, a new movement in art and literature known as realism attempted to portray people realistically instead of idealizing them as romantic artists had done. Realist painters rejected the idealistic depictions of the world of the earlier 1800s. Thomas Eakins, for example, painted President Hayes working in shirtsleeves instead of in more traditional formal dress.

Writers also attempted to capture the world as they saw it. Mark Twain gave his readers a piercing view of American society in the pre-Civil War era in his 1884 masterpiece, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Twain was lauded to have written a true American novel, in which the setting, subject matter, characters, and style were unmistakably American. Henry James and Edith Wharton gave their readers stark and realistic portrayals of the upper class.

**Popular Culture** Industrialization improved the standard of living for many people, enabling them to spend money on entertainment and recreation. Increasingly, urban Americans, unlike rural people, divided their lives into separate units—that of work and home. Saloons played a major role in the life of male workers. Working-class families or single adults who sought excitement and escape could go to amusement parks such as New York’s Coney Island.

Spectator sports such as baseball, football, and the new game of basketball gained popularity. With work becoming less physically strenuous, people also looked for leisure activities that involved physical exercise. Lawn tennis, golf, and croquet became popular.

The many people living in cities provided large and eager markets for other types of entertainment. Vaudeville offered a hodgepodge of animal acts, acrobats, gymnasts, and dancers. Like vaudeville, ragtime music, which was based on the patterns of African American music, echoed the hectic pace of city life.

📌 **Reading Check** **Summarizing** What was the main idea of Social Darwinism?

## The Rebirth of Reform

**Main Idea** The pressing problems of the urban poor in the late 1800s and early 1900s stimulated attempts to reform industrial society.

**Reading Connection** Have you ever participated in a food drive or other community activity to help those in need? Read on to learn how reformers tried to better people’s lives.

The tremendous changes brought about by industrialism and urbanization—along with mounting opposition to corrupt political machines—triggered a debate among Americans as to how best to address society’s problems. While many Americans embraced the ideas of individualism and Social Darwinism, others argued that society’s problems could be fixed only if Americans and their government began to take a more active role in regulating the economy and helping those in need.



### **Picturing History**

**Urban Poverty** The impoverished lifestyle of many Americans like this mother and child in Chicago was a growing concern among social reformers. [What organizations were created to help the urban poor?](#)

**Social Criticism** In 1879 journalist Henry George published *Progress and Poverty*, which quickly became a national bestseller. George observed that despite industrial and social progress, “the gulf between the employed and the employer is growing wider. . . . [A]s liveried carriages appear, so do barefoot children.” George offered a simple solution of land ownership and a “single tax” to make society more equal and also provide the government with enough money to help the poor. Economists have since rejected George’s economic theory. His real importance to American history is that he raised questions about American society and led the way in challenging the ideas of Social Darwinism and laissez-faire economics. Many future reform leaders first became interested in reform because of George’s book.

Lester Frank Ward reached a different conclusion about Social Darwinism than George in his book *Dynamic Sociology*. Ward’s ideas, known as Reform Darwinism, stated that people had succeeded in the world not because of their ability to compete but because of their ability to cooperate. Government, he argued, could regulate the economy, cure poverty, and promote education more efficiently than could competition in the marketplace.

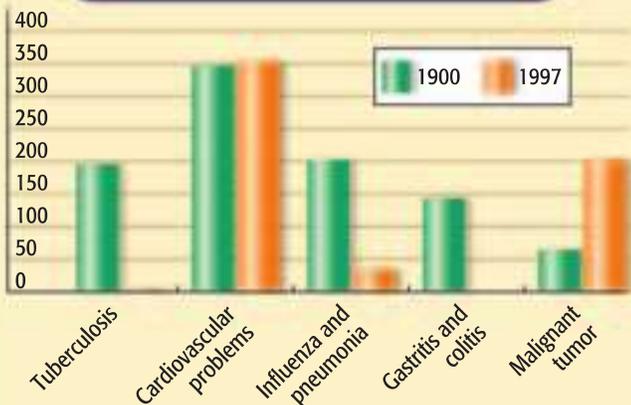
Other critics, such as Edward Bellamy, were more extreme in their ideas. Bellamy described an ideal society based on socialism in *Looking Back, 2000–1887*. The ideas of people such as George, Ward, and Bellamy helped shape the thinking of American reformers in the late 1800s.

Criticism of industrial society also appeared in literature in a new style of writing known as naturalism. Writers such as Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Jack London, and Theodore Dreiser described the power of the natural environment over civilization and told of people whose lives were destroyed through no fault of their own.

**Helping the Urban Poor** Some critics of industrial society became actively involved in reform movements. From about 1870 until 1920, reformers in the **Social Gospel** movement strove to improve conditions in cities according to the biblical ideals of charity and justice. An early advocate of the Social Gospel, Washington Gladden, a minister from Columbus, Ohio, tried to apply what he called “Christian law” to social problems. During a coal strike in 1884, for example, Gladden preached about the “right and necessity of labor organizations,”

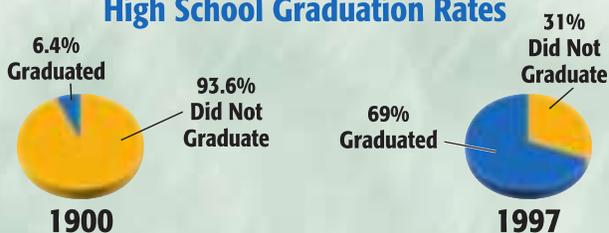
## Social Conditions: Past and Present

### Death Rates for Specific Causes (per 100,000 people)



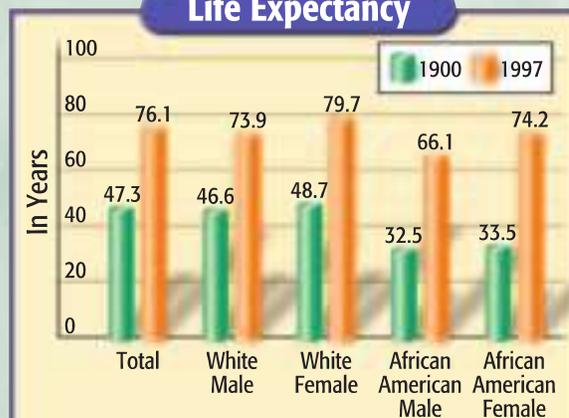
Sources: *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970*; *Statistical Abstract of the United States*.

### High School Graduation Rates



Sources: *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*; *Statistical Abstract of the United States*.

### Life Expectancy



Source: *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*; *Statistical Abstract of the United States*.

### Graph Skills

- Analyzing Graphs** How many people per 100,000 died of tuberculosis in the year 1900?
- Understanding Cause and Effect** Collectively, what do these graphs tell you about social conditions as the twentieth century progressed?

## Profiles IN HISTORY

### Booker T. Washington 1856–1915

Born enslaved on a plantation in Virginia, Booker T. Washington spent his childhood working in the coal mines of West Virginia. At age 16 he heard about the Hampton Institute in Virginia, where African Americans could learn farming or a trade. With little money in his pockets, Washington left home and walked nearly 500 miles to the school, where he was able to work as a janitor to pay for his education.

After Washington completed his degree, Hampton hired him as an instructor in 1879. Two years later, Hampton's founder, Samuel Armstrong, asked Washington to organize an agricultural and industrial school for African Americans in Tuskegee, Alabama. The Tuskegee Institute's beginnings were modest. As Washington recalled, it began with 40 students and a "dilapidated shanty." By 1915 the school had over 100 buildings, about 2,000 students, and an endowment of nearly \$2 million. Washington himself became a nationally known spokesperson for the African American community.



### George Washington Carver 1864–1943

At about 10 years of age, George Washington Carver left his home in Missouri and began traveling on his own. He worked as a servant, hotel clerk, laundry worker, and farmhand in order to get a formal education. In 1894 he graduated from the Iowa State College of Agriculture and Mechanical Arts. Two years later, he became the director of agricultural research at the Tuskegee Institute, where he began experimenting with various crops.

To help Southern sharecroppers overcome their problems of depleted soil, poverty, and poor nutrition, Carver urged them to plant peanuts and soybeans. These plants restored the soil's nitrogen while providing extra protein in the farmers' diets. To make peanut farming profitable, Carver developed over 300 industrial uses for peanuts, including flour, inks, dyes, wood stains, soap, and cosmetics. By 1940 his research had made the peanut the South's second most lucrative crop after cotton.



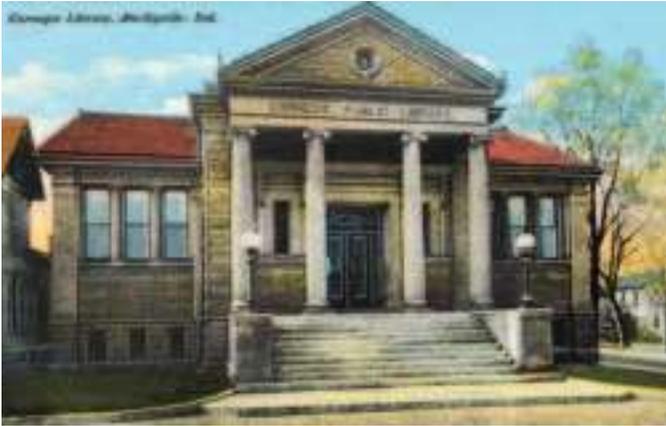
despite the fact that his congregation included top officers of the coal company. Walter Rauschenbusch, a later leader of the movement, believed that competition was the cause of many social problems, causing good people to behave badly. Other ministers opposed certain reform movements. For example, Billy Sunday, a former professional baseball player, in numerous revivals warned people of alcohol. At the same time, he denounced reforms that he thought would threaten traditional society, such as labor unions and women's rights.

The efforts of leaders like Gladden and Rauschenbusch inspired many organized churches to expand their missions. These churches began to take on community **functions** designed to improve society, such as social programs, day care, and helping the poor. The combination of religious faith and interest in reform nourished the growth of the Christian Mission, a social welfare organization that became known as the Salvation Army in 1878. It provided practical aid and religious counseling to the urban poor.

Founded in England, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) tried to help industrial workers and the urban poor by organizing Bible studies, prayer meetings, citizenship training, and fitness activities. One prominent organizer of the American

YMCA was **Dwight L. Moody**, the president of the Chicago YMCA in the late 1860s. A gifted preacher and organizer, Moody organized revival meetings in other American cities. In 1870 Moody met Ira Sankey, a hymn writer and singer. Together they introduced the gospel hymn into worship services in the United States and Great Britain. Moody strongly supported charities that helped the poor, but he rejected both the Social Gospel and Social Darwinism. He believed in helping the poor by redeeming their souls and reforming their character.

The settlement house movement, in some ways an offshoot of the Social Gospel movement, attracted idealistic reformers who believed it was their Christian duty to improve living conditions for the poor. During the late 1800s, reformers such as Jane Addams established **settlement houses** in poor neighborhoods. In these establishments, middle-class residents lived with and helped poor residents, mostly immigrants, by providing everything from medical care and English classes to hot lunches for factory workers. Addams, who opened the famous Hull House in Chicago in 1889, inspired many more such settlements across the country. Their efforts helped shape the social work profession, in which women came to play a major role.



▲ Carnegie Library, Shelbyville, Indiana

**Public Education** As the United States became increasingly industrialized and urbanized, it needed more workers who were trained and educated. In 1870 around 6,500,000 children attended school. By 1900 that number had risen to over 17,300,000. Public schools were often crucial to the success of immigrant children. It was there the children usually became knowledgeable about American culture, a process known as **Americanization**. To assimilate newcomers into American culture, schools taught immigrant children English, American history, and the responsibilities of citizenship. They also tried to instill discipline and a strong work ethic, values considered important to the nation's progress. Americanization could also pose a problem for immigrant children, however, because sometimes parents worried that it would make the children forget their own cultural traditions.

While grammar schools provided basic education, vocational and technical education in high schools prepared students for specific trades. College attendance also rose during this time, aided by the Morrill Land Grant Act. This Civil War-era law gave federal land grants to states for the purpose of establishing agricultural and mechanical colleges. Private colleges gave access to education for women, whose educational opportunities lagged behind men's.

Not everyone had access to school. In the rush to fund education, cities were way ahead of rural areas. Many African Americans, also, did not have equal educational opportunities. To combat this discrimination, some African Americans started their own schools. The leader of this movement was **Booker T. Washington**, who founded the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama in 1881.

Like public schools, free libraries also made education available to city dwellers. One of the strongest supporters of the public library movement was industrialist Andrew Carnegie, who donated millions of dollars toward the construction of libraries all across the United States. These libraries, as well as the various educational and social reform movements that arose in the late 1800s, helped people cope with the harsher aspects of a newly industrialized society.

**Reading Check Explaining** How did the United States try to Americanize immigrants?

**HISTORY**  **Study Central**  
*Online*

For help with the concepts in this section of *American Vision: Modern Times* go to [tav.mt.glencoe.com](http://tav.mt.glencoe.com) and click on **Study Central**.

**SECTION 4 ASSESSMENT**

**Check for Understanding**

- Vocabulary** Define: individualism, evolve, Social Darwinism, philanthropy, settlement house, Americanization.
- People and Terms** Identify: Gilded Age, Herbert Spencer, Social Gospel, Dwight L. Moody, Booker T. Washington.
- Describe** how changes in art and literature reflected the issues and characteristics of the late nineteenth century.

**Reviewing Big Ideas**

- Comparing** How did the Social Darwinists and members of the Social Gospel movement differ in their views of individuals in the industrialized society?

**Critical Thinking**

- Analyzing** Do you think members of the Social Gospel movement and other reformers were successful in helping the urban poor? Explain. **CA HR4, HI3**
- Organizing** Complete a graphic organizer similar to the one below to show how Social Darwinism paralleled the economic doctrine of *laissez-faire*.

Social Darwinism	Laissez-faire

**Analyzing Visuals**

- Examining Photographs** Study the photograph on page 267 of the mother and child. What do you notice in this photograph that reflects the plight of impoverished Americans?

**Writing About History**

- Descriptive Writing** Take on the role of an immigrant in the late 1800s. Write a diary entry in which you describe your feelings about your children becoming Americanized while attending the local public school.

**CA 11WS1.2; 11WA2.4**

