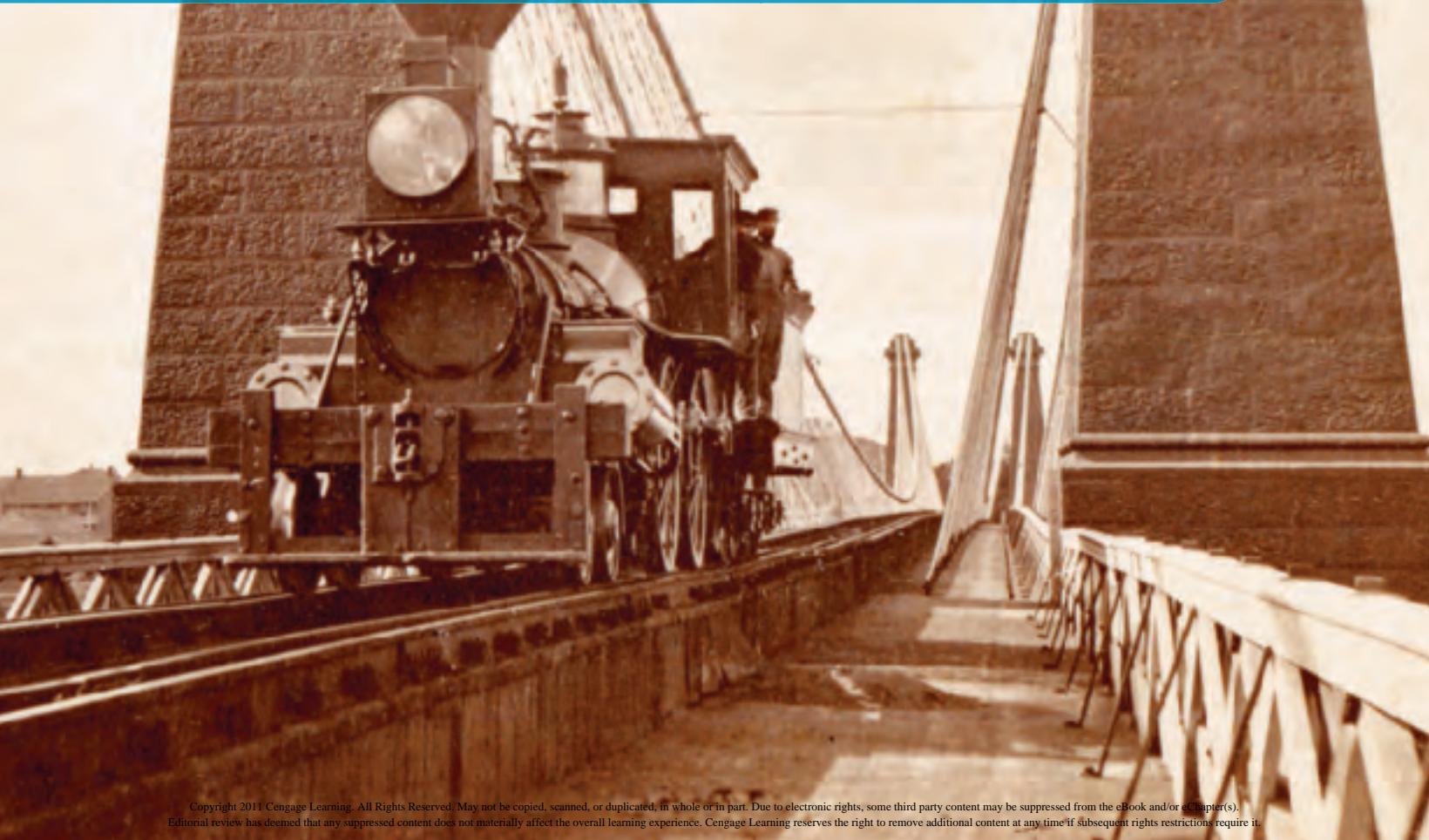


11

Technology, Culture, and Everyday Life

1840–1860





ISAAC SINGER (*National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Gift of the Singer Company/Art Resource, NY*)

her, Singer beat her and had affairs with other women. But in 1850, Singer made significant improvements on a sewing machine similar to one patented in 1846 by Elias Howe, Jr., and within ten years, he was a wealthy man.

Here was a machine everyone wanted. The rise of the New England textile industry in the 1820s had produced mountains of cloth, but textile factories did not stitch pieces of fabric into clothing. Instead, factories hired young women to stitch fabric by hand in their homes. A woman took three hours to stitch a pair of pants by hand; a sewing machine could do the job in thirty-eight minutes. Once the manufacture of sewing machines was adapted to the same sorts of machine tools recently devised to manufacture guns, sewing machines became widely available to the factories eager to purchase them. By saving time, they made clothing cheaper, and gave a boost to the ready-made clothing industry. Contemporaries could not praise sewing machines enough. The *New York Tribune* predicted that, with the spread of sewing machines, people “will dress better, change oftener, and altogether grow better looking.” Sewing machines would create a nation “without spot or blemish.”

This optimistic response to technological change was typical of the 1850s. The term *technology* had been coined in 1829 to indicate the application of science to improving life’s conveniences. Many Americans believed that technology was God’s chosen instrument of progress. Some predicted that the telegraph, another invention of the age, would usher in world peace. The cotton gin, the steam engine, and the mechanical reaper prompted similarly utopian hopes for the future. For New Englander Edward Everett in 1852, the locomotive was “a miracle of science, art, and capital, a magic power...by which the forest is thrown open, the lakes and rivers are bridged, the valleys rise, and all Nature yields to man.”

Yet progress had a darker side. Ralph Waldo Emerson said bluntly, “Machinery is dangerous. The weaver becomes the web, the machinist the machine. If you do not use

IN 1850, ISAAC M. SINGER’S LIFE
was not going well. Thirty-nine and often penniless, he had been an unsuccessful actor, stage hand, ticket seller, carpenter, and inventor. His early inventions had been clever, but not commercially successful. Having deserted his wife and children, he lured Mary Ann Sponsler into living with him by promising marriage. Sponsler nursed him when he was sick and even took up acting to help support him, but instead of marrying

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STEAM LOCOMOTIVE CROSSING THE NIAGARA RAILWAY SUSPENSION BRIDGE, 1860S Suspension bridges like this were developed in the 1850s to bear the great weight of locomotives and railroad cars. (*William B. Becker Collection/American Museum of Photography*)

the tools, they use you.” The newly invented revolver was useless for hunting and of little value in battle, but excellent for violently settling private scores. The farmwomen who had traditionally earned money sewing by hand in their homes were displaced by working-class women who sewed by machine in small urban factories that came to be labeled sweatshops. Philosophers and artists began to worry about the despoliation of the landscape by the factories that made guns and sewing machines, and conservationists launched efforts to preserve natural enclaves as retreats from the evils of progress.

FOCUS Questions

- What technological improvements increased industrial productivity between 1840 and 1860?
- How did technology transform the daily lives of middle-class Americans between 1840 and 1860?
- How did American pastimes and entertainment change between 1840 and 1860?
- How did Americans try to express national distinctiveness in literature and art?

Technology and Economic Growth

Widely hailed as democratic, technology drew praise from all sides. Conservative statesman Daniel Webster praised machines for doing the work of people without consuming food or clothing. Radical labor organizer Sarah Bagley, a textile worker, traced the improvement of society to new technology. American schoolboys, reported a Swedish tourist to the United States in 1849–1851, constantly drew pictures on their slates of steamboats, engines, and other forms of “locomotive machinery.”

The technological improvements that transformed life in antebellum America included the steam engine, the cotton gin, the reaper, the sewing machine, and the telegraph. Some of these originated in Europe, but Americans had a flair for investing in others’ inventions and perfecting their own. Improvements in Eli Whitney’s cotton gin between 1793 and 1860, for example, increased eightfold the amount of cotton that could

be cleaned in a day. Of course, technology did not benefit everyone. The cotton gin entrenched slavery by intensifying southern dependence on cotton. Machine manufacture undercut the position of artisans by rendering many traditional skills obsolete. But by improving transportation and increasing productivity, technology lowered commodity prices and raised living standards for substantial numbers of Americans between 1840 and 1860.

Agricultural Advancement

After 1830, American settlers were edging westward from the woodlands of Ohio and Kentucky into parts of Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, and Missouri, where the flat grasslands of the prairie alternated with forests. Prairie soil, though richly fertile, was root-matted and difficult to break. But in 1837, John Deere invented a steel-tipped plow that cut in half the labor required to till for planting. Timber for houses and fencing was available in nearby woods, and settlements spread rapidly.

Wheat became to midwestern farmers what cotton was to the South. “The wheat crop is the great crop of the North-west,” an agricultural journal noted in 1850. “It pays debts, buys groceries, clothing and lands, and answers more emphatically the purposes of trade among farmers than any other crop.” Technological advances sped the harvesting as well as the planting of wheat. The traditional hand sickle consumed huge amounts of time and labor, and the cut wheat also had to be picked up and bound by hand. But in 1834, Cyrus McCormick of Virginia patented a horse-drawn mechanical reaper that harvested grain seven times faster with half the work force. In 1847, he opened a factory in Chicago, and by 1860 he had sold 80,000 reapers. The mechanical reaper guaranteed that wheat would dominate the midwestern prairies.

Ironically, just as a Connecticut Yankee named Eli Whitney had stimulated the southern economy by inventing the cotton gin, a proslavery southerner named Cyrus McCormick would help the North win the Civil War. The North provided the main market for the **McCormick reaper** and its many competitors; the South, with its reliance on unpaid slave labor, had little incentive to invest in labor-saving agricultural machinery. During the Civil War, McCormick sold more than a quarter of a million reapers, and thus helped keep northern agricultural production high at a time when labor shortages caused by troop mobilization might otherwise have slashed production.

Even as Americans were mechanizing agriculture, they tended to farm wastefully, preferring

to seek “virgin” soil rather than improve “worn out” soil. But some eastern farmers, confronted by competition from the West, began to experiment with improved agricultural techniques. In Orange County, New York, dairy farmers fed their cows the best clover and bluegrass and undertook cleaner dairy processing. The result was a superior butter that commanded more than double the price of ordinary butter. Other eastern farmers turned to soil improvement. By fertilizing their fields with plaster left over from canal construction, Virginia wheat growers raised their average yield from six bushels per acre in 1800 to fifteen bushels by the 1850s. American cotton planters in the Southeast began to import guano (sea bird droppings) from Peru to fertilize their fields in an effort to compete successfully with the fertile soil of the Old Southwest.

Technology and Industrial Progress

Industrial advances between 1840 and 1860 owed an immense debt to the development of effective

machine tools, power-driven machines that cut and shaped metal to precise specifications. In the early 1800s, Eli Whitney’s plan to manufacture muskets by using interchangeable parts actually awaited the development of the machine tools essential to the system (see Technology and Culture). After 1830, American manufacturers began to import machine-tool technology from Britain. By the 1840s, machine tools had greatly reduced the need to hand file parts to make them fit, and they were applied to the manufacture of firearms, clocks, and sewing machines. After mid-century, Europeans began to call this system of manufacturing interchangeable parts the **“American System of Manufacturing”** and to import machine tools manufactured in the United States. After touring American factories in 1854, a British engineer concluded that Americans “universally and willingly” resorted to machines as a substitute for manual labor.

The American manufacturing system had several distinct advantages. Traditionally, damage to any part of a mechanical contrivance had rendered the whole thing useless, because no new part would



THE CLIMAX MOWER The United States became the leading manufacturer of agricultural implements in the nineteenth century. The Pennsylvania company that manufactured this mowing device proudly called it “the most complete and perfect mower in the world.” (Library of Congress)

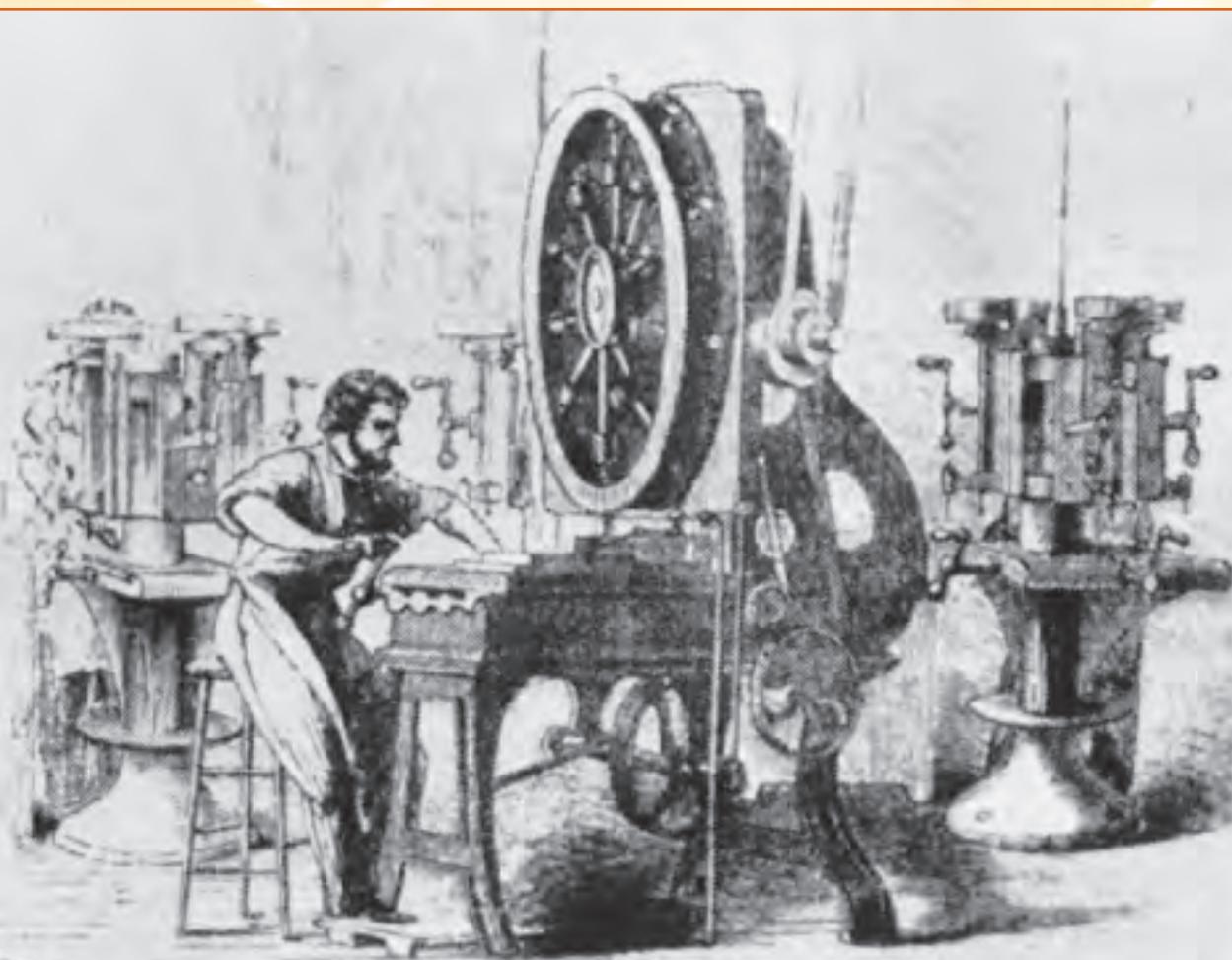


Guns and Gun Culture

Americans liked to boast that they were expert marksmen. A popular song attributed the American victory at the Battle of New Orleans to the sharpshooting skills of the Kentucky militia. But accurate guns were the exception in 1815 and for decades afterward. Musket balls shot out of their barrels at unpredictable angles and began to fall to earth after fifty or sixty yards. In 1835, the American who had commanded at New Orleans became a personal beneficiary of another feature of early nineteenth-century guns: their unreliability.

When a would-be assassin fired two single-shot pistols point blank at President Andrew Jackson, both misfired.

Guns were not only inaccurate and unreliable, they were also expensive. A pre-industrial gunsmith might produce twenty a year. In 1798, as tensions were mounting between Great Britain and France, the War Department issued a contract to Eli Whitney, inventor of the cotton gin, to manufacture ten thousand muskets by 1800. Whitney, who had no experience with gun manufacture, missed his deadline.



GUN MACHINERY During the 1850s, machines like these greatly accelerated the production of guns. The jiggling machine's large revolving wheel had different cutting tools attached to it for shaping the gunlock frames. ("A History of the Colt Revolver from 1836 to 1940" by Charles T. Haven and Frank A. Belden' Courtesy of the Museum of Connecticut History)

But in 1801, in the presence of President Thomas Jefferson, he gave a public demonstration of guns manufactured on the new principle of interchangeable parts that had been pioneered by French gun makers.

If each part of a gun could be machine made and then fitted smoothly into the final product, there would be no need for the time-consuming methods of skilled gunsmiths. In Jefferson's presence, Whitney successfully fitted ten different gunlocks, one after another, to the same musket. The problem was that he cheated on the test by hand filing each lock so it would fit. Whitney's federal contract would not actually be completed for another eight years.

Whitney's problem was that he did not yet have the machinery necessary to make gun parts with sufficient precision to be interchangeable. It was a Maine gunsmith named John Hall who began to construct such machines after 1820 at the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. Hall devised new machines for drilling cast steel gun barrels, drop hammers for pounding pieces of metal into shape, and new tools for cutting metal. Along with other improvements during the 1840s and 1850s, these machine tools made it possible to achieve near uniformity, and hence interchangeability, in manufactured gun parts—innovations that were particularly appreciated with the outbreak of war with Mexico in 1846.

In 1836, another Connecticut inventor secured a patent for a new type of gun. Samuel Colt, who had been working as a traveling showman of popular science, invented a repeating pistol with a rotating chambered breech, called a revolver. At the start of the Mexican-American War, Colt won a federal contract to provide the army with one thousand revolvers. Though they proved to be of little military value, the enterprising Colt was soon traveling the globe to report that his revolvers had won the war.

Eager to broaden his revolvers' appeal, Colt made use of a recent invention, called a grammagraph, to engrave their steel cylinders with images of heroic frontiersmen using Colt pistols to protect their wives and children from savage Indians. As this design feature demonstrated, Colt had a genius for popularizing gun ownership, not just on the frontier but also among respectable citizens in the East. He gave away scores of specially engraved revolvers to politicians and War Department officials. By the 1850s, Connecticut

firms like Smith and Wesson were mass producing Colt's revolver, cutting its price from fifty dollars to nineteen. By 1860, New England had become the center of a flourishing gun industry, manufacturing nearly 85 percent of all American guns.

As guns became less expensive, they became the weapon of choice for both law enforcement and street toughs. At the Astor Place Riot in 1849 (discussed later in this chapter), soldiers from New York's Seventh Regiment fired a volley into an unarmed crowd, killing twenty-two people. Murderers, whose traditional weapons of choice had been knives and clubs, increasingly turned to guns, prompting calls for gun control in the 1850s. In 1857, Baltimore became the first city to allow its police to use firearms, and some New York police captains authorized their men to carry guns. No longer a luxury, guns could be purchased by ordinary citizens in newly specialized gun stores.

Most states legally barred African-Americans from owning guns, and women rarely purchased them. But for white men, gun ownership was becoming a mark of manly self-reliance. Samuel Colt did all he could to encourage this attitude. When the home of a Hartford clergyman was burglarized in 1861, Colt promptly sent the clergyman "a copy of my latest work on 'Moral Reform': a Colt revolver. Two years earlier Dan Sickles, a New York congressman, had created a sensation by openly shooting his wife's lover across the street from the White House. Armed with two pistols, Sickles shot the unarmed man four times, killing him with the final shot. Though Sickles himself was a notorious womanizer, his behavior struck many men as justifiable. President James Buchanan, a political ally, even paid one witness to disappear. Eventually, Sickles was acquitted of murder on the grounds of "temporary insanity." His political career continued to prosper, and in 1863 he picked up another gun to lead a regiment at the Battle of Gettysburg.

QUESTION FOR ANALYSIS

- Historically, innovations in technology have often been linked to one another; an invention in one sphere gives rise to inventions in related spheres. How did this pattern shape the development of gun manufacture?



MCCORMICK'S REAPER Cyrus McCormick's mechanical reaper, patented in 1834, won the most prestigious medal at London's Crystal Palace Exhibition in 1851. That same year, McCormick licensed the British company of Burgess and Key to produce his reapers in England." (Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

fit. The perfection of interchangeable parts made replacement parts possible. In addition, improved machine tools enabled entrepreneurs to push inventions into mass production with a speed that attracted investors. Sophisticated machine tools, according to one manufacturer, increased produc-

tion "by confining a worker to one particular limb of a pistol until he had made two thousand."

After the transmission of the first telegraph message in 1844, Americans also seized enthusiastically on the telegraph's promise to eliminate the constraints of time and space. The speed with which Americans formed telegraph

companies and the ease with

which they strung their lines stunned a British engineer, who noted in 1854 that "no private interests can oppose the passage of a line through any property." Boston developed an elaborate system of telegraph stations that could alert fire companies throughout the city to a blaze in any neighborhood. By 1852, more than fifteen thousand miles of telegraph lines connected cities as distant as Quebec, New Orleans, and St. Louis. (Chapter 13, Technology and Culture, further discusses the telegraph.)

"I can only judge of the speed by putting my head out to spit, which I did, and overtook it so quick, that it hit me smack in the face."

Americans loved railroads, reported one Frenchman, "as a lover loves his mistress." Their love of early railroad travel had a great deal to overcome. Sparks from locomotives showered passengers riding in open cars, and discouraged passengers in closed coaches from opening the windows. (Frontier hero Davy Crockett was an exception: he explained that "I can only judge of the speed by putting my head out to spit, which I did, and overtook it so quick, that it hit me smack in the face.") In the absence of brakes, passengers on trains often had to get off to help stop them. Trains rarely ran at night because they lacked lights. Before the introduction of standard time zones in 1883, scheduling was a nightmare and delays were frequent. Individual railroads used different gauge track, making frequent train changes necessary; even in the 1850s, a journey from Charleston to Philadelphia required eight transfers.

Yet nothing slowed the advance of railroads or cured Americans' mania for them. In 1851, the editor of the *American Railroad Journal* wrote that in the previous twenty years, the locomotive had become "the great agent of civilization and progress, the most powerful instrument for good the world has yet reached." Between 1840 and 1860, the size of the rail network and the power and convenience of trains underwent a stunning transformation. Railroads extended track mileage from three thousand to thirty thousand miles; closed coaches replaced open cars; kerosene lamps made night travel possible; and increasingly powerful engines enabled trains to climb steep hills. Fifty thousand miles of telegraph wire enabled dispatchers to communicate with trains en route and thus reduce delays. By 1860, the United States had more track than all the rest of the world combined.

Railroads represented the second major phase of the transportation revolution. Canals remained in

The Railroad Boom

Even more than the telegraph, the railroad dramatized the democratic promise of technology. In 1790, even European royalty could travel no faster than fourteen miles an hour—by horse. By 1850, ordinary Americans could travel three times as fast—by train.



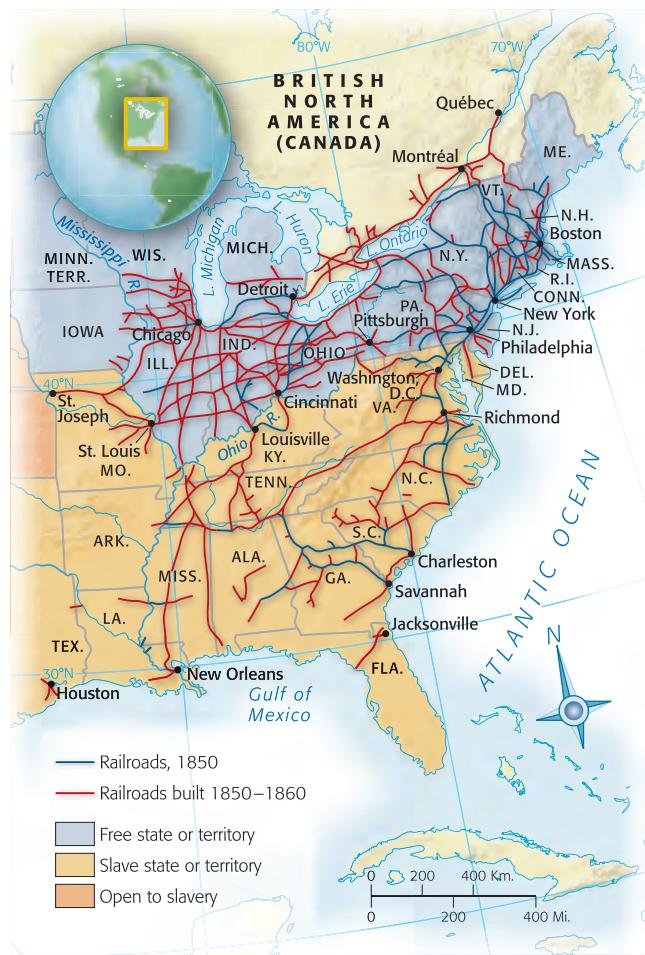
GEORGE INNES, THE LACKAWANNA VALLEY, CA. 1856. This landscape painting was commissioned by the Delaware, Lackawanna, and Western Railroad to celebrate the railroad's growth—specifically, the construction of the line's first roundhouse, just outside Scranton, Pennsylvania. But the tree stumps littering the foreground suggest the painter's concerns over the impact of industrial progress on the American landscape. (*National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Gift of Mrs. Huttleston Rogers 1945.4.1*)

use—the Erie Canal did not reach its peak volume until 1880—but the railroads gradually overtook them, first in passengers and then in freight. By 1860, the value of goods transported by railroads greatly surpassed that carried by canals.

By 1860, railroads had spread like vast spider webs east of the Mississippi River. They transformed southern cities like Atlanta and Chattanooga into thriving commercial hubs. Most important, the railroads linked the East and the Midwest. The New York Central and the Erie Railroads joined New York City to Buffalo; the Pennsylvania Railroad connected Philadelphia to Pittsburgh; and the Baltimore and Ohio linked Baltimore to Wheeling, Virginia (now West Virginia). Simultaneously, intense construction in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois created trunk lines that tied these routes to cities farther west. By 1860, rail lines ran from Buffalo to Chicago, from Pittsburgh to Fort Wayne, and from Wheeling to St. Louis (see Map 11.1).

The dramatic growth of Chicago illustrates the impact of expanding rail links. In 1849, Chicago was just a village of a few hundred people with virtually no rail service. By 1860, it had become a city of one hundred thousand served by eleven railroads. Farmers in the Upper Midwest, who had once shipped their grain, livestock, and dairy products down the Mississippi River to New Orleans, could now send products directly east by railroad. Chicago thus supplanted New Orleans as the main commercial hub of the continental interior.

Rail lines stimulated the settlement of the Midwest. By 1860 Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin had replaced Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York as the leading wheat-growing states. Railroads increased the value of farmland and promoted additional settlement. In turn, population growth triggered industrial development in cities such as Chicago, Davenport, and Minneapolis because the



MAP 11.1 RAILROAD GROWTH, 1850–1860 Rail ties between the East and the Midwest greatly increased during the railroad “boom” of the 1850s.

new settlers needed lumber for fences and houses, and gristmills to grind wheat into flour.

Railroads also encouraged the growth of small towns along their routes. The Illinois Central, which had more track than any other railroad in 1855, made money not only from its traffic but from real estate speculation. Purchasing land for stations along its path, the Illinois Central then laid out towns around the stations. In 1854 Manteno, Illinois was a vacant crossroads; after it became a railroad stop, it grew, by 1860, into a bustling town with hotels, lumberyards, grain elevators, and gristmills. (The Illinois Central even dictated the naming of streets. Those running east and west were named after trees, while those running north and south were numbered.) By

Railroad men seeking financing “must remember that money is power, and that the [financier] can dictate to a great extent his own terms.”

the Civil War, few thought of the railroad-linked Midwest as a frontier region.

As the nation’s first big business, the railroads transformed the way business was conducted. During the early 1830s railroads, like canals, depended on state funding. With the onset of depression in the late 1830s, however, state governments scrapped many railroad projects. Convinced that railroads burdened them with high taxes and blasted hopes, voters in several states amended their constitutions to bar state funding for railroads and canals. Federal aid would not become widely available until the Civil War, and local and county governments could not keep up with the funding needed for the dramatic expansion of the railroad network in the 1850s. Aware of the economic benefits of railroads, people living near them had long purchased government-issued railroad securities and railroad stock. But the large railroads of the 1850s needed more capital than small investors could generate.

Gradually, the center of railroad financing shifted to New York City, where the railroad boom of the 1850s helped make Wall Street the nation’s greatest capital market. The securities of all the leading railroads were traded on the floor of the **New York Stock Exchange**. Railroad expansion also turned New York City into the center of modern investment firms. Investment firms evaluated the securities of railroads in Toledo or Davenport or Chattanooga, then found purchasers for these securities in New York and Philadelphia, Paris and London, and Hamburg. Controlling the flow of funds to railroads, investment bankers began to exert influence over the railroads’ internal affairs. A Wall Street analyst noted that railroad men seeking financing “must remember that money is power, and that the [financier] can dictate to a great extent his own terms.”

Rising Prosperity

Technological advances also improved the lives of consumers by reducing prices on many commodities. For example, clocks that had cost \$50 to fabricate by hand in 1800 could be produced by machine for fifty cents in 1850. At the same time, the widening use of steam power contributed to a 25 percent rise in the average worker’s real income (actual purchasing power) between 1840 and 1860. Earlier factories, which relied on water power, had to shut down when rivers or streams froze. With the spread of steam engines, factories stayed open longer and thus increased workers’ annual wages. Textile workers were among those who benefited: although their hourly wages showed little gain, their average annual wages rose from \$163 in 1830 to \$201 by 1859.

The growth of towns and cities also contributed to an increase in incomes. Farmers living in sparsely settled areas experienced the same seasonal fluctuations as early factory workers. “A year in some farming states such as Pennsylvania,” a traveler commented in 1823, “is only of eight months duration, four months being lost to the laborer, who is turned away as a useless animal.” Densely populated towns and cities, by contrast, offered more opportunities for year-round work. The urban dockworker thrown out of work by frozen waterways might find employment as a hotel porter or an unskilled indoor laborer.

Towns and cities also provided women and children with new opportunities for paid work—as opposed to the unpaid labor they had long performed on farms. The wages of children between the ages of ten and eighteen came to play an integral role in the family economy. Family heads who earned more than six hundred dollars a year could afford to keep their children in school, but many breadwinners made less than three hundred dollars a year. Despite declines in commodity prices, most families lived close to the margin. Budgets of working-class families in New York City and Philadelphia during the early 1850s reveal annual expenditures of five hundred to six hundred dollars, with more than 40 percent spent on food, 25 to 30 percent on rent, and most of the remainder on clothing and fuel. Such a family needed the wages of the children and sometimes the wife, as well as the male head of the household.

The quality of life in urban wage-earning families was not necessarily superior to life in farming communities. A farmer who owned land, livestock, and a house did not have to worry about paying rent or buying fuel and rarely ran short of food. Still, to purchase, clear, and stock a farm could cost as much as five hundred dollars and promised no financial return for a few years. The majority of agricultural workers did not own farms and were exposed to seasonal fluctuations in demand for labor. In many respects, urban wage earners were better off than agricultural workers.

The economic advantages of urban living help explain why so many Americans were moving to cities. During the 1840s and 1850s, American cities provided their residents with an unprecedented range of comforts and conveniences.

The Quality of Life

“Think of the numberless contrivances and inventions for our comfort and luxury,” exclaimed poet Walt Whitman, “and you will bless your star that Fate has cast your lot in the year of Our Lord 1857.” Improvements in the quality of life affected such mundane activities as eating, drinking, and

washing. The patent office in Washington was flooded with sketches of reclining seats, washing machines, mechanical street sweepers, and fly traps. Machine-made furniture began to transform the interiors of houses. Stoves revolutionized heating and cooking.

Yet change occurred unevenly. Technology enabled the middle class to enjoy luxuries formerly reserved for the rich but widened the distance between the middle class and the poor. As middle-class homes became increasingly lavish, the urban poor lived in cramped tenements. Some critical elements such as medicine lagged behind. Nevertheless, the benefits of progress impressed Americans more than its limitations.

“A year in some farming states such as Pennsylvania is only of eight months duration, four months being lost to the laborer, who is turned away as a useless animal.”

Dwellings

During the early 1800s, the randomly sited wood frame houses that had dotted colonial cities began to yield to more orderly brick row houses. Row houses, which were practical responses to rising land values (as much as 750 percent in Manhattan between 1785 and 1815), drew criticism for their “extreme uniformity.” But they were not all alike. Middle-class row houses, with their cast iron balconies, curved staircases, and beautifully finished interiors, were larger and more elaborate than working-class row houses and less likely to be subdivided for occupancy by several families. The worst of the subdivided row houses were called tenements and often inhabited by Irish immigrants and free blacks.

Home furnishings also revealed the widening gap between the prosperous and the poor. Middle- and upper-class families decorated their houses with fine furniture in the ornate, rococo style, along with wool carpeting, wallpaper, pianos, pictures, and gilt-framed mirrors. The mass-production of furniture reduced prices and tended to level taste between the middle and upper classes, while still setting those classes off from everyone else. Some members of the middle class took pains to decorate the public areas of their houses, especially the parlor, as lavishly as possible, in an effort to impress visitors, while furnishing the rest of the house sparsely.

In rural areas, the quality of housing depended largely on the age of the settlement. In new settlements, the standard dwelling was a rude log cabin with planked floors, clay chimneys, and windows



FAMILY GROUP This daguerreotype, taken about 1852, reveals the domestic details so essential to claiming middle-class social status: curtains, a wall hanging, a piano with scrolled legs, a family pet, ladies engaged in music and reading, and a young man staring into space—perhaps pondering how to pay for it all. (*George Eastman House*)

covered by oiled paper or cloth. As rural communities matured, log cabins gave way to insulated balloon-frame houses of two or more rooms. Instead of thick posts and beams laboriously fitted together, a balloon-frame house had a skeleton of two-by-fours spaced at eighteen-inch intervals. The balloon-frame was lighter and stronger than the older post-and-beam method, and it required no technical knowledge of joinery. The simplicity and cheapness of such houses endeared them to western builders.

Conveniences and Inconveniences

By today's standards, everyday life in the 1840s and 1850s was primitive. But contemporaries were

struck by how much better it was becoming. In urban areas, coal-burning stoves were rapidly displacing open hearths for heating and cooking. Stoves made it possible to cook several dishes at once and thus helped diversify the American diet, while railroads brought in fresh vegetables which a century earlier had been absent from even elite dinner tables.

Contemporaries were also grateful for the new urban waterworks—systems of pipes and aqueducts that brought fresh water from rivers or reservoirs to street hydrants. In the 1840s, New York City completed the Croton aqueduct, which carried water into the city from reservoirs to the north. By 1860, sixty-eight public water systems operated in the United States.

Despite these improvements, home comforts remained limited. Coal burned longer and hotter than wood, but left a dirty residue that polluted the air, and faulty stoves could emit carbon monoxide. One architect called stoves “the national curse,” “secret poisoners” that were “more insidious” than “slavery, socialism, Mormonism...tobacco, patent medicines, or coffee.” The American diet continued to be affected by seasonal fluctuations. Only the rich could afford fruit out of season, since they alone could afford the sugar to preserve it. Home iceboxes were rare before 1860, so salt remained the most widely used preservative. One reason antebellum Americans ate more pork than beef was that salt pork didn’t taste quite as bad as salt beef.

Although public waterworks were among the most impressive engineering feats of the age, their impact is easily exaggerated. Only a fraction of the urban population lived near water hydrants, so most houses still had no running water. Taking a bath still required heating the water, pot by pot, on a stove. A New England physician reported that not one in five of his patients took even one bath a year.

Infrequent bathing added pungent body odors to the many strong smells of urban life. In the absence of municipal sanitation, street cleaning was done by private contractors with a reputation for slack performance. Hogs were allowed to roam freely and scavenge (and hogs that turned down the wrong street often landed in the dinner pots of the poor). Mounds of stable manure and outdoor privies added to the stench. Flush toilets were rare, and sewer systems lagged behind water-supply systems. Boston—which boasted more flush toilets than most other cities—had only five thousand for a population of 178,000 in 1860. Conveniences like running water and flush toilets became one more way for progress to set off the upper and middle classes from the poor. Conveniences also sharpened gender differences. In her popular *Treatise on Domestic Economy* (1841), Catharine Beecher told women that technological progress made it their duty to make every house a “glorious temple” by keeping floors swept and furniture polished. Skeptical of this trend toward fastidiousness, another writer cautioned women in 1857 against “ultra-housewifery.”

Disease and Medicine

Despite their improving standard of living, Americans remained vulnerable to disease. **Epidemics** swept through cities and felled thousands. Yellow fever

and cholera together killed one-fifth of New Orleans’s population in 1832–1833, and cholera alone carried off 10 percent of the St. Louis population in 1849. Life expectancy for newborns in New York and Philadelphia during the 1830s and 1840s averaged only twenty-four years.

The transportation revolution actually increased the peril from epidemics by helping them spread from one community to the next. The cholera epidemic of 1832, which was the first truly national epidemic, followed transportation networks out of New York City: one disease route ran up the Hudson River across the Erie Canal to Ohio and down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to New Orleans; the other route followed shipping lines up and down the East Coast.

The failure of physicians to explain epidemic diseases reinforced hostility toward their profession. No one understood that bacteria caused cholera and yellow fever. Physicians clashed over whether epidemic diseases were spread by human touch or by “miasmas,” gases arising from rotten vegetation or dead animals. Neither theory worked. Quarantines failed to prevent the spread of epidemics (an argument against the contagion theory), and many residents of swampy areas contracted neither yellow fever nor cholera (a refutation of the miasma theory). Understandably, municipal leaders declined to delegate more than advisory powers to boards of health, which were dominated by physicians.

Although epidemic disease baffled physicians, surgery made major progress with the discovery of anesthesia. Prior to 1840, young people sometimes entertained themselves at parties by inhaling nitrous oxide or “laughing gas,” which suppressed pain and produced giddiness. Samuel Colt himself had exhibited laughing gas as a showman of popular science. But few recognized its surgical possibilities. Then in 1842, Crawford Long, a Georgia physician who had attended laughing-gas frolics in his youth, employed sulfuric ether (a liquid with the same properties as nitrous oxide) during a surgical operation. Dr. Long failed to follow up on his discovery, but four years later William T.G. Morton, a Boston dentist, successfully administered sulfuric ether during an operation at Massachusetts General Hospital. Within a few years, ether came into wide surgical use.

**One architect called stoves
“the national curse,”
“secret poisoners” that
were “more insidious”
than “slavery, socialism,
Mormonism...tobacco, patent
medicines, or coffee.”**

The discovery of anesthesia improved the public image of surgeons, long viewed as brutes who tortured their patients. It also permitted longer and more careful operations. Nevertheless, physicians' ignorance of the importance of clean hands and sterilized instruments continued to harm patients. In 1843, Boston physician and poet Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. published a paper blaming the spread of puerperal (childbed) fever on the failure of obstetricians to disinfect their hands between one delivery and the next. But doctors only gradually accepted the importance of disinfection. Operations remained as dangerous as the diseases or wounds they tried to heal. The mortality rate for amputations hovered around 40 percent.

Popular Health Movements

Suspicious of orthodox medicine, antebellum Americans turned to a variety of alternative therapies and regimens that promised longer and healthier lives. One popular treatment was hydropathy, or the “water cure,” which arrived from Europe during the 1840s. By the mid-1850s, the United States had twenty-seven hydropathic sanatoriums, which used cold baths and wet packs to provide “an abundance of water of dewy softness and crystal transparency, to cleanse, renovate, and rejuvenate the disease-worn and dilapidated system.” The water cure held a special attraction for women: hydropathy promised to relieve the pain associated with childbirth and menstruation, and sanatoriums proved to be congenial gathering places for middle-class women.

In contrast to the relatively expensive water cure, Sylvester Graham, a former temperance reformer, propounded a health system that anyone could afford. In response to the 1832 cholera epidemic, Graham urged Americans to eat vegetables, fruits, and whole-grain bread (called Graham bread), and abstain from meat, spices, coffee, and tea as well as alcohol. Soon he added to his list of forbidden indulgences “sexual excess”—which for married couples meant having intercourse more than once a month. Many of Graham’s disciples were moral and social reformers. Grahamites had a special table at the Brook Farm community. One of Graham’s followers ran the student dining room at Oberlin College until angry parents and hungry students drove him out. Like other reformers, Grahamites traced the evils of American society

Hydropathic sanatoriums offered “an abundance of water of dewy softness and crystal transparency, to cleanse, renovate, and rejuvenate the disease-worn and dilapidated system.”



“THE ILLUSTRATED PHRENOLOGICAL ALMANAC, 1859”

Phrenologists like Lorenzo Fowler, editor of the *Phrenological Almanac*, divided the brain into distinct “faculties” and argued that each could be improved through proper exercise. (*Historic Cherry Hill*, Albany, N.Y.)

to unnatural cravings. Just as temperance reformers blamed the craving for alcohol and abolitionists, the craving for illicit power, Graham blamed the craving for meat, stimulants, and sex.

Graham was dismissed by Ralph Waldo Emerson as “the prophet of bran bread and pumpkins,” and he was mobbed on three occasions—once by butchers and commercial bakers whose businesses were threatened by his reform principles. But Graham’s doctrines attracted a broad audience. Boarding houses began to set Grahamite tables in their dining rooms. Graham’s books sold well, and his public lectures were thronged. His regime addressed the popular desire for better health at a time when orthodox medicine seemed to do more damage than good.

Phrenology

The belief that each person was master of his or her own destiny underlay not only evangelical religion and popular health movements but also the scientific fad of **phrenology**. Phrenology rested on the idea that the human mind comprised thirty-seven distinct faculties, or “organs,” each located in a different part of the brain. Because the degree of each organ’s development determined skull shape, phrenologists believed, a person’s character could be determined through an examination of the bumps and depressions of the skull.

In the United States two brothers, Orson and Lorenzo Fowler, became the chief promoters of phrenology in the 1840s. Orson originally planned to be a Protestant missionary, but instead became a missionary for phrenology, opening a publishing house in New York City (Fowler and Wells) that mass-marketed books on the subject. When criticized for godlessness, the Fowlers pointed to a huge organ called “Veneration” to prove that people were naturally religious. When criticized for pessimistic determinism, they replied that exercise could improve every desirable mental organ. Lorenzo proudly reported that several of his own skull bumps had been grown. As Orson liked to say, “Self-Made, or Never-Made.”

Americans were drawn to the practicality of phrenology. In a mobile, individualistic society, it promised practitioners a quick way to assess other people. Some merchants used phrenological charts to pick suitable clerks, and some women asked their fiancés to undergo phrenological analysis before the wedding. Easily understood and practiced, and filled with the promise of universal improvement, phrenology was ideal for antebellum Americans. Just as they had invented machines to better their lives, they invented “sciences” that promised personal improvement.

Democratic Pastimes

Between 1830 and 1860, technology transformed leisure by making Americans more dependent on recreations that were manufactured and sold. People purchased entertainment in the form of cheap newspapers and novels as well as affordable tickets to plays, museums, and lectures.

Just as the Boston Associates adopted new technology to produce textiles, imaginative entrepreneurs adapted technology to making and selling entertainment. Men like James Gordon Bennett, one of the founders of the penny press in America, and P.T. Barnum, the greatest showman of the nineteenth century, amassed fortunes by making the public want whatever they had to sell.

Technology also encouraged individuals to become spectators rather than creators of their own amusements. Americans had long found ways to enjoy themselves. Even New England Puritans had indulged in games and sports. After 1830, however, the burden of providing entertainment began to shift from ordinary people to entrepreneurs who supplied ways to entertain the public. Mass entertainment was commercial entertainment, and commercial entertainment encouraged the passivity of those who consumed it.

“Self-Made, or Never-Made.”

Newspapers

In 1830, the typical American newspaper was only four pages long. Its front and back pages were devoted to advertisements, and the two middle pages contained editorials, details of ship arrivals and cargoes, reprints of political speeches, and notices of political events. Fortunately, such papers relied financially not on circulation, but on subsidies from the political groups with which they allied. They could profit without offering the exciting news stories and eye-catching illustrations that later generations of newspaper readers would take for granted.

The 1830s witnessed the beginnings of a stunning transformation in the American newspaper. Technological innovation increased both the supply of paper and the speed of production. The new steam-driven cylindrical presses led to a tenfold increase in the number of printed pages that could be produced in an hour. Enterprising journalists, among them the Scottish-born James Gordon Bennett, responded by introducing the **penny press**, which would rely on mass circulation to turn a profit. In 1833, the *New York Sun* became America’s first penny newspaper, and Bennett’s *New York Herald* followed in 1835. By June 1835, the combined daily circulation of New York’s three penny papers reached forty-four thousand, almost twenty thousand higher than the combined circulation of the city’s eleven dailies before 1833. From 1830 to 1840, the combined daily circulation of American newspapers rose from roughly seventy-eight thousand to 300,000 and the number of weekly newspapers more than doubled.

The penny press also revolutionized the marketing and contents of newspapers. Whereas six-cent papers had been purchased at the printer’s office, penny papers were hawked by newsboys on busy street corners. The penny papers subordinated political and commercial coverage to human-interest stories of robberies, murders, rapes, and abandoned children. They dispatched reporters to police courts and printed transcripts of sensational

"The spirit, pith, and philosophy of commercial affairs is what men of business want."

trials, such as that of Richard Robinson for the hatchet-murder of the beautiful prostitute Helen Jewett in a New York brothel in 1836. Charles Dickens parodied such coverage by naming one fictional American newspaper the *New York Stabber*.

But despite such limitations, as sociologist Michael Schudson observes, "The penny press invented the modern concept of 'news.'" Penny newspapers also invented modern news reporting, employing their own correspondents and using the telegraph to speed the communications process. The best penny papers, including Bennett's *New York Herald* and Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*, pioneered modern financial and political reporting. From its inception, the *Herald* contained a daily "money article" that analyzed financial events. As Bennett observed, "The spirit, pith, and philosophy of commercial affairs is what men of business want." Snooping reporters from the *Tribune* outraged Washington politicians. In 1848, *Tribune* correspondents were temporarily barred from the House of Representatives for reporting that an Ohio Congressman ate his lunch of sausage and bread each day in the House chamber, picked his teeth with a jack-knife, and wiped his greasy hands on his clothing.

The Theater

Theaters, like newspapers, increasingly appealed to a mass audience. Antebellum theaters were large (sometimes seating twenty-five hundred to four thousand people) and drew all social classes. With seat prices ranging from twelve to fifty cents, the typical theater audience included lawyers and merchants and their wives, artisans and clerks, sailors, apprentices, African-Americans, and prostitutes. Prostitutes usually sat in the top gallery, called the third tier, "that dark, horrible, guilty" place. Their presence in theaters was taken for granted, though the public sometimes grumbled when they left the third tier to solicit customers in the more expensive seats.

Theater audiences, according to critics, were notoriously ill-behaved. The lower orders of patrons cracked peanuts, spat tobacco, got drunk, and talked loudly throughout the performance. They stamped their feet, hooted at villains, and threw garbage at characters or performances they disliked. Contributing to such rowdiness was the animosity between the fan bases of different theatrical stars. In 1849, a long-running feud between the leading American actor Edwin Forrest and popular British actor William Macready culminated in the Astor Place riot in New York City, which left twenty-two

people dead. The Astor Place riot demonstrated the broad popularity of the theater. Forrest's supporters included Irish workers who loathed the British and appealed to "working men" to rally against the "aristocrat" Macready. Macready, who projected a polished and intellectual image, attracted the better-educated classes. Had not a range of classes patronized the theater, the deadly riot would probably never have occurred.

The most popular plays were emotionally charged melodramas in which virtue was rewarded, vice punished, and the hero won the beautiful heroine. Melodramas offered theater-goers such sensational features as volcanic eruptions, staged battles, even live horses on stage. Yet the single most popular dramatist in the antebellum theater was William Shakespeare. In 1835, Philadelphians witnessed sixty-five performances of Shakespeare's plays. Americans who never read a line of Shakespeare grew familiar with Othello, Juliet, and King Lear. Theatrical managers adapted Shakespeare to a popular audience. They highlighted sword fights and assassinations, cut some speeches, and occasionally substituted happy endings for sad ones. And they entertained audiences between acts with jugglers and acrobats, impersonations of Tecumseh or Aaron Burr, or the exhibition of a three-year-old child who weighed one hundred pounds.

Minstrel Shows

A stock character in antebellum plays was the Yankee or "Brother Jonathan" figure who helped audiences form an image of the ideal American as a rustic but clever patriot who was more than a match for city slickers and decadent aristocrats. In a different way, the popular minstrel shows of the 1840s and 1850s forged enduring racial stereotypes that buttressed white Americans' sense of superiority by diminishing black Americans.

Minstrel shows featured white performers in burnt-cork blackface who entertained their audiences with songs, dances, and humorous sketches that pretended to mimic black culture. But while minstrelsy did borrow a few elements of African-American culture, most of its contents were white inventions, such as Stephen Foster's song "Massa's in the Cold Ground," which made its first appearance in a minstrel show. The shows' images of African-Americans both expressed and reinforced the prejudices of the working-class whites who dominated the audience. Minstrel troupes depicted blacks as stupid, clumsy, and absurdly musical, and parodied Africanness by naming their performances the "Nubian Jungle Dance" and the "African Fling." At a time of intensifying political conflict over slavery, minstrel shows used stock characters to capture white expectations about black behavior.

These included Uncle Ned, the tattered and docile slave, and Zip Coon, the arrogant urban freeman who paraded around in high hat and long-tailed coat and lived off his girlfriends.

By the 1850s, major cities from New York to San Francisco had several minstrel theaters. Touring professionals and local amateurs brought minstrelsy to small towns and villages. Author Mark Twain recalled how minstrelsy had burst upon Hannibal, Missouri, in the early 1840s as “a glad and stunning surprise.” Minstrel troupes even entertained a succession of presidents in the antebellum White House.

P. T. Barnum

P. T. Barnum was the father of mass entertainment in the United States who well understood how to turn the public's demand for entertainment into profit. As a young man in Bethel, Connecticut, he started a newspaper, the *Herald of Freedom*, which assailed wrongdoing in high places; and throughout his life, he thought of himself as a public benefactor who gave people what they wanted. Yet honesty was never his strong suit. As a small-town grocer in Connecticut, he regularly cheated his customers on the dubious premise that they were trying to cheat him. Barnum, in short, was a Yankee hustler and idealist rolled into one.

After moving to New York City in 1834, Barnum launched his career as an entertainment entrepreneur. He got his start exhibiting a black woman named Joice Heth, whom he billed as the 169-year-old former slave nurse of George Washington. In fact, she was probably around eighty, but Barnum neither knew nor cared, so long as people paid to see her. When audiences began to dwindle, Barnum sent an anonymous letter to a newspaper saying that “Joice Heth is not a human being [but] an automaton, made up of whalebone, india-rubber, and numberless springs.” In response, hundreds of people who had already paid to see Heth returned to determine whether she was machine or living woman. Suspicions of fraud, Barnum knew, only sold more tickets. He was playing a game with the public, and the public played right back.

In 1841, Barnum purchased a run-down museum in New York City, rechristened it the American Museum, and opened a new chapter in the history of popular entertainment. Earlier museums had exhibited stuffed birds and animals, rock specimens, and portraits of famous people—largely for educational purposes. Barnum’s goal, by contrast, was to draw paying customers by stimulating public curiosity. Visitors to the American Museum could see ventriloquists, magicians, albinos, a 25-inch-tall five-year-old whom Barnum named General Tom Thumb, and the “Feejee Mermaid,” billed by Barnum as “positively asserted by its owner to have been taken alive

in the Feejee Islands.” By 1850, the American Museum had become the best-known museum in the nation.

Blessed with a genius for publicity, Barnum recognized that newspapers could invent news as well as report it. One of his favorite tactics was to puff his own exhibits by writing letters to newspapers (under various names) reporting that the scientific world was agog over some astonishing natural curiosity that the public could see for itself at the American Museum. But Barnum’s success rested on more than clever publicity. To secure his museum a reputation for providing safe family entertainment, he provided regular lectures on the evils of alcohol and the benefits of Christian religion. By marketing his museum as family entertainment, Barnum helped break down barriers that had long divided the pastimes of husbands from those of their wives.

“Joice Heth is not a human being [but] an automaton, made up of whalebone, india-rubber, and numberless springs.”



P. T. BARNUM AND TOM THUMB When P. T. Barnum posed with his protégée—whose real name was Charles Sherwood Stratton—sometime around 1850, the twelve-year-old ‘human curiosity’ stood a little over two feet in height. Barnum and Stratton enjoyed a long partnership which brought considerable wealth to both of them. (*National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution/Art Resource, NY*)

Finally, Barnum successfully tapped the public's insatiable curiosity about natural wonders. In 1835, the editor of the *New York Sun* had boosted his circulation by claiming that a famous astronomer had discovered pelicans and winged men on the moon. At a time when each passing year brought new technological wonders, the public was ready to believe in anything, even the Feejee Mermaid.

The Quest for Nationality in Literature and Art

In the early nineteenth century, Europeans took little notice of American literature. "Who ever reads an American book?" taunted one British critic. Americans responded by pointing to Washington Irving, author of "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." Irving's readers showered him

with praise, even naming hotels and steamboats after him, but they had to concede that Irving had done much of his best writing while living in England.

After 1820, the United States experienced a flowering of literature called the **American Renaissance**. Its leading figures included James Fenimore Cooper, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Walt Whitman, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Edgar Allan Poe. In 1800, American authors accounted for a negligible proportion of the output of American publishers. By 1830, 40 percent of the books published in the United States were written by Americans; by 1850, that number had increased to 75 percent.

American writers often sought to depict the national features of the United States—its land and its people—in their work. The quest for a distinctively American culture especially shaped the writings of Cooper, Emerson, and Whitman. It also revealed itself in the majestic paintings of the so-called Hudson River school—the first homegrown American movement in painting—and in the landscape architecture of Frederick Law Olmsted, designer of New York's Central Park.

Roots of the American Renaissance

Two broad developments, one economic and the other philosophical, contributed to the cultural efflorescence of the American Renaissance. First, the transportation revolution created a national market for books, especially fiction. Initially, this market worked to the advantage of British authors, especially Sir Walter Scott. With the publication of

Waverley (1814), a historical novel set in Britain, Scott's star began its spectacular ascent on the American horizon. American readers gobbled up his books; they named more than a dozen towns Waverley; and advertisements for his novels bore the simple caption, "By the author of *Waverley*." Scott's success demonstrated that the public wanted to read fiction and prompted Americans like James Fenimore Cooper to write fiction for the market.

Second, the American Renaissance reflected the rise of a philosophical movement known as romanticism. In contrast to eighteenth-century classicism, which had regarded standards of beauty as universal, romanticism insisted that literature reveal the longings of the individual author's soul. Classicists saw the ideal author as an educated gentleman who wrote to display his learning—especially of ancient Greek and Roman civilization. Romantics valued the emotional expressiveness of literature and its truthfulness to its creator's inner feelings.

The emergence of a national market for books and the influence of romanticism combined to make American literature more democratic. The conventions of classicism viewed literature as a pastime of gentlemen who wrote poetry and essays primarily for one another, and never for profit. In contrast, romanticists accepted the production of books for a national market, and elevated the importance of fiction over poetry and essays. Reading and writing novels did not require knowledge of Latin and Greek or a familiarity with ancient history and mythology; it rested instead on shared human feelings and experiences. Significantly, many of the best-selling novels of the antebellum period—for example, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—were written by women. And one response to Stowe's work was the novel written by an African-American woman: the semi-autobiographical *Our Nig; Or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859), now regarded as a major work of American literature.

In addition, fiction had a subversive quality that contributed to its popularity. Authors could create unconventional characters, situations, and outcomes. Whereas essays usually developed unmistakable conclusions, novels left more room for interpretation by the reader. A novel might well have a lesson to teach, but the reader's interest was likely to be aroused less by the moral of the story than by the development of characters and plot.

Cooper, Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller, and Whitman

James Fenimore Cooper was the first important figure in this literary upsurge. He introduced an enduringly influential American fictional character, the

frontiersman Natty Bumppo ("Leatherstocking"). In *The Pioneers* (1823), Natty is an old man settled on the shores of Lake Otsego in upstate New York. A spokesman for nature against the relentless advance of civilization, Natty blames farmers for wantonly destroying game and turning the majestic forests into wastelands littered with tree stumps. Natty immediately became a popular figure, and in subsequent novels such as *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), *The Pathfinder* (1840), and *The Deerslayer* (1841), Cooper unfolded the frontier hero's earlier life for a reading public eager for what we'd now call the prequel.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (who actually disliked fiction) emerged in the late 1830s as the most influential spokesman for American literary nationalism. As the leading light of the movement known as transcendentalism, an American expression of romanticism, Emerson believed that our ideas of God and freedom are not learned, but inborn. Knowledge, like sight, involves an instantaneous and direct perception of truth. So learned people, Emerson concluded, enjoyed no special advantage in pursuing truth. All persons can glimpse the truth by simply trusting the promptings of their hearts.

This basic premise of transcendentalism posed the exciting possibility that the United States, a young and democratic society, could produce as noble a literature and art as Old World cultures. "Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands draws to a close," Emerson announced in his address "The American Scholar" (1837). The time had come for Americans to trust themselves. Let "the single man plant himself indomitably on his instincts and there abide," he proclaimed, and "the huge world will come around to him."

Emerson's literary nationalism was expressed mainly in his essays, which explored broad themes—"Beauty," "Wealth," and "Representative Men"—in vivid, fresh language. For example, he praised independent thinking by saying the scholar should not "quit his belief that a popgun is a popgun, though the ancient and honorable of the earth affirm it to be the crack of doom." A contemporary said listening to Emerson was like trying to see the sun in a fog; one could see light but never the sun itself. Believing that knowledge reflected God's voice within each individual and that truth was intuitive, Emerson did not present systematic arguments backed by evidence to prove his point. Rather, he relied on a sequence of vivid if unconnected assertions whose truth the reader was supposed to see instantly. (One reader complained that she might have understood Emerson better if she had stood on her head.)

From his home in Concord, Massachusetts Emerson exercised a magnetic attraction for young



MARGARET FULLER Disappointed that his first child was a girl, Margaret Fuller's father decided to educate her as if she were a boy, and she wrecked her health studying Latin, English, and French classics. As an adult, she joined Ralph Waldo Emerson's transcendentalist circle. In 1846, she went to Europe as the *Tribune*'s foreign correspondent. There she met artists and writers, observed the Revolutions of 1848, and married an Italian nobleman. On her return to America in 1850, she, her husband, and their infant son died in a shipwreck off Long Island. (Constance Fuller Threinen/Picture Research Consultants and Archive)

intellectuals who were social misfits, including Henry David Thoreau. A crucial difference, however, separated the two men. Though intellectually adventurous, Emerson was not adventurous in action. By contrast, Thoreau fully lived his ideas. When war with Mexico broke out, he went to jail rather than pay his poll tax, refusing to support a war he regarded as part of a southern conspiracy to extend slavery. This experience led Thoreau to write his abidingly influential essay on "Civil Disobedience" (1849), in which he defended a citizen's right to disobey unjust laws.

"Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands draws to a close."

On July 4, 1845, in a personal declaration of independence, Thoreau moved a few miles from Concord Center to the woods near Walden Pond. He spent two years there living in a small cabin he constructed on land owned by Emerson and providing for his own wants as simply as possible. His purpose in retreating to Walden was to write an account of a canoe trip he took with his brother in 1839—later published as *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. But he wrote a more important book, *Walden* (1854), described by a contemporary as “the logbook of his woodland cruise.” Thoreau filled it with day-to-day descriptions of hawks and the pond, his invention of raisin bread, and his trapping of the woodchucks that ravaged his vegetable garden. But *Walden* had a larger transcendentalist message. Thoreau’s retreat taught him that anyone could satisfy his material wants with only a few weeks’ work each year and preserve the remainder of his time for examining life’s purpose. The problem with Americans, he said, was that they turned themselves into “mere machines” to acquire pointless wealth. For Thoreau, material and moral progress were not as intimately related as most Americans liked to think (see Going to the Source).

Among the most remarkable figures in Emerson’s circle was **Margaret Fuller**, whose status as an intellectual woman distanced her from conventional society. Disappointed that his first child was not a boy, Fuller’s father, a prominent Massachusetts politician, determined to give Margaret the sort of education young men acquired at Harvard.

First drilled in Latin and Greek, she then turned to the German romantics and English literary classics. Her exposure to Emerson’s ideas during a stay at Concord in 1836 pushed her toward transcendentalism, with its vindication of the free life of the spirit over formal doctrines and its insistence on the need for each person to discover truth on her own.

Ingeniously, Fuller managed to turn transcendentalism into a profession. Between 1839 and 1844, she conducted “Conversations” for fee-paying participants drawn from Boston’s elite. Transcendentalism also influenced her feminist classic, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845). Breaking with the prevailing notion of separate spheres for men and women, Fuller contended that no woman could achieve the intellectual fulfillment promoted by Emerson unless she devoted herself

to developing her mental abilities without fear of being called “masculine.” Fuller asserted that “What Woman needs is not as a woman to act or rule, but as a nature to grow, as an intellect to discern, as a soul to live freely and unimpeded, to unfold such powers as were given to her when we left our common home.”

One of Emerson’s qualities was an ability to sympathize with such dissimilar people as the prickly Thoreau, the scholarly Fuller, and the outgoing and earthy **Walt Whitman**. The self-educated Whitman had left school at age eleven and worked his way up from printer’s apprentice to journalist and then editor for various newspapers in Brooklyn, Manhattan, and New Orleans. A familiar figure at Democratic Party functions, he marched in party parades and put his pen to the service of its antislavery wing.

Journalism and politics, in addition to his own rough-and-tumble life, gave Whitman an intimate knowledge of ordinary Americans. The more he came to know them, the more he loved them. Reading Emerson nurtured his own belief that America would be the cradle of a new man in whom natural virtue would flourish untainted by European corruption—a man like Andrew Jackson, that “massive, yet most sweet and plain character.” The threads of Whitman’s early life and career came together in his major work *Leaves of Grass*, a book of poems first published in 1855 and reissued with additions in subsequent years.

Leaves of Grass shattered poetic conventions. Whitman wrote in free verse, meaning that most of his poems had neither rhyme nor meter. His poems were passionate and earthy at a time when delicacy reigned in the literary world. To the dismay of critics, he wrote of “the scent of these armpits finer than prayer” and “winds whose soft-tickling genitals rub against me.” Whitman also introduced himself into his poems, most explicitly in “Song of Walt Whitman” (later retitled “Song of Myself”). He wrote of himself because he viewed himself—crude and plain, self-taught and passionately democratic—as the personification of the American people:

*Comrade of raftsmen and coalmen, comrade of all
who shake hands and welcome to drink and meat,
A learner with the simplest, a teacher of the thought-
fullest.*

By 1860, Whitman had acquired a considerable reputation as a poet. Nevertheless, the small original edition of *Leaves* was ignored or even ridiculed as a “heterogeneous mass of bombast, egotism, vulgarity, and nonsense.” One reviewer suggested that it was the work of an escaped lunatic. But within two weeks of its publication, Emerson, who had never met

“What Woman needs is not as a woman to act or rule, but as a nature to grow, as an intellect to discern, as a soul to live freely and unimpeded.”

Henry David Thoreau, “Walking” (1862)

In the early 1850s, Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) developed two new lectures for the lyceum circuit, titled “The Wild” and “Walking.” He later merged them into the single essay “Walking” that was published one month after his death. “Walking,” a companion essay to his most famous

work *Walden*, expressed his views on natural wildness, the American West, and the need for an American literature rooted in nature. Thoreau’s line, “in Wildness is the preservation of the World,” has become a touchstone of modern environmentalism.

“I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil—to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society. I wish to make an extreme statement, if so I may make an emphatic one, for there are enough champions of civilization: the minister and the school committee and every one of you will take care of that....

Nowadays almost all man’s improvements, so called, as the building of houses and the cutting down of the forest and of all large trees, simply deform the landscape, and make it more and more tame and cheap....

We go eastward to realize history and study the works of art and literature, retracing the steps of the race; we go westward as into the future, with a spirit of enterprise and adventure. The Atlantic is a Lethean stream*, in our passage over which we have had an opportunity to forget the Old World and its institutions....

The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the World. Every tree sends its fibers forth in search of the Wild. The cities import it at any price. Men plow and sail for it. From the forest and wilderness come the tonics

and barks which brace mankind. Our ancestors were savages. The story of Romulus and Remus being suckled by a wolf is not a meaningless fable.** The founders of every state which has risen to eminence have drawn their nourishment and vigor from a similar wild source. It was because the children of the Empire were not suckled by the wolf that they were conquered and displaced by the children of the northern forests who were....

Where is the literature which gives expression to Nature? He would be a poet who could impress the winds and streams into his service, to speak for him; who nailed words to their primitive senses, as farmers drive down stakes in the spring, which the frost has heaved; who derived his words as often as he used them—transplanted them to his page with earth adhering to their roots; whose words were so true and fresh and natural that they would appear to expand like the buds at the approach of spring, though they lay half smothered between two musty leaves in a library—aye, to bloom and bear fruit there, after their kind, annually, for the faithful reader, in sympathy with surrounding Nature.”

Source: Henry David Thoreau, “Walking,” *Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 9, no. 56 (June 1862): [657]–674

*In the underworld of Greek mythology, Lethe was the river of forgetfulness.

**Romulus and Remus, the mythical founders of Ancient Rome, were abandoned as infants in the wilderness but saved by a wolf who fed and protected them.

QUESTIONS

1. What were Thoreau’s views on the ideal relationship between Nature and civilization, and between Nature and the individual? What sorts of “improvements” in his lifetime do you think were shaping his ideas?
2. How was Thoreau responding to Emerson’s call for a distinctively American literature?



Go to the website at www.cengage.com/history/boyerenduring7e for additional primary sources on this period.

Whitman, wrote, “I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed.” Emerson had long called for the appearance of “the poet of America” and his transcendental intuition told him that Whitman was that poet.

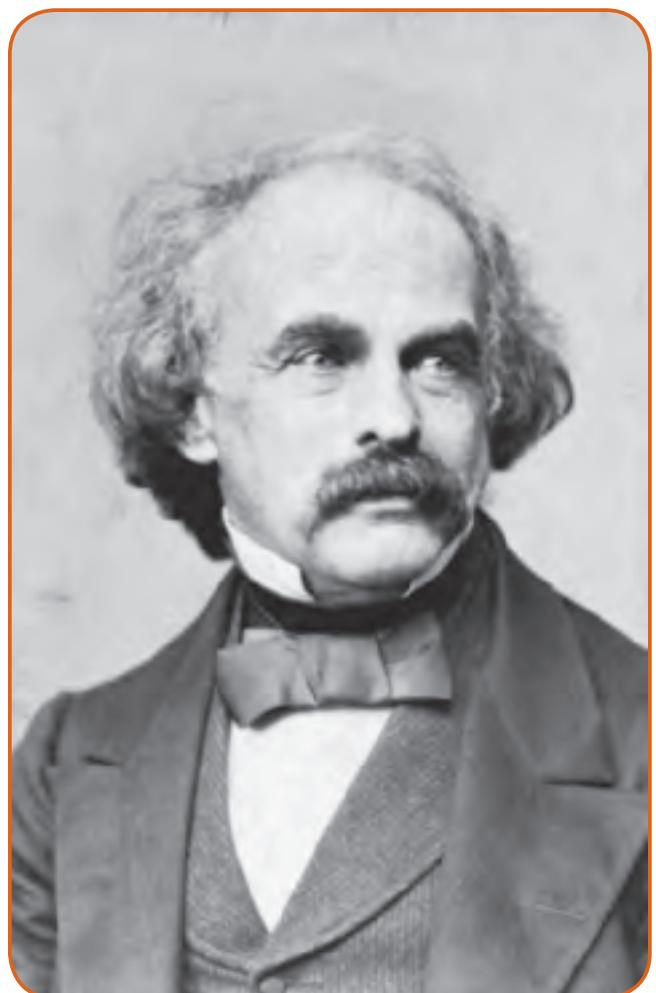
Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe

Two major contributors to the American Renaissance—**Nathaniel Hawthorne** and **Herman Melville**—were best known for writing fiction, and a third, **Edgar Allan Poe**, wrote both fiction and poetry. None heeded Emerson’s call for a literature that would comprehend the everyday experiences of ordinary Americans—what Emerson called “the meal in the firkin [bucket]; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street.” Hawthorne set *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) in Puritan New England; *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) in a mansion haunted by memories of the colonial past; and *The Marble Faun* (1859) in Rome. Poe chose Europe as the setting for several of his short stories—including “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841) and “The Cask of Amontillado” (1846). Melville’s sea-going novels *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847) took place among exotic South Sea islands, and his masterpiece *Moby-Dick* (1851) was set on a whaling ship at sea. If the only surviving documents from the 1840s and 1850s were its major novels, historians would face an impossible task in trying to understand daily life in antebellum America.

The unusual settings favored by these three writers reflected their view that American life lacked the stuff of great fiction. Hawthorne bemoaned the difficulty of writing about a country “where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything but a commonplace prosperity in broad and simple daylight.” In addition, all three writers were more interested in probing the depths of human psychology than the intricacies of social relationships. Their preoccupation with the mental states of their characters grew out of their underlying pessimism about the human condition. Whereas Emerson, Fuller, and Whitman were inclined to believe that social conflicts could be resolved if people would follow the promptings of their better selves, Hawthorne, Poe, and Melville saw individuals as bundles of dark, internal conflicts that might never be resolved.

The pessimism of these dark romantics led them to create characters obsessed by pride and guilt, and driven by a desire for revenge or an unnatural quest for perfection. Their stories were played out on the margins of society, where they were free to explore the complexities of human motivation without dealing with the jarring intrusions of everyday life. For example, in *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne turned to the Puritan past to examine

the psychological and moral consequences of adultery. So intensely did Hawthorne focus on the moral dilemmas of his central characters, Hester Prynne and the Rev. Arthur Dimmesdale, that he conveyed little sense of the social life of the Puritan village surrounding them. Melville, who dedicated *Moby-Dick* to Hawthorne, shared the latter’s dark imagination. Captain Ahab’s relentless and futile pursuit of the white whale that had cost him his leg fails to fill the chasm in his soul and brings death to all his mates except the novel’s narrator, Ishmael. Poe also channeled his pessimism—and possibly his madness—into dark romantic achievements. In perhaps his finest short story, “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839), he employed the Gothic setting of a nightmarish, crumbling mansion to convey the moral agony of a decaying, incestuous family.



NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE This photograph shows Hawthorne in 1850, when *The Scarlet Letter* was published. *The House of the Seven Gables* was published the following year. (© Hulton-Deutsch Collection/Corbis)

Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe deliberately ignored Emerson's call to write about the everyday experiences of Americans. Nor did they follow Cooper's lead by creating distinctively American heroes. Yet each contributed to an indisputably American literature. Ironically, their conviction that the lives of ordinary Americans provided inadequate materials for fiction led them to create a uniquely American fiction marked less by the description of ordinary life than by the analysis of psychological states. In this way, they fulfilled a prediction made by Alexis de Tocqueville that writers in democratic nations, while rejecting many of the traditional sources of fiction, would explore abstract and universal questions of human nature.

Literature in the Marketplace

Even with the decline of the gentleman classicist, the suspicion that commercialism corrupted art did not disappear during the American Renaissance. The reclusive poet Emily Dickinson lived all of her fifty-six years on the same street in Amherst, Massachusetts ("I do not go from home," she said), writing exquisite poems that examined, in her words, every splinter in the groove of the brain. Dickinson refused to publish her work. But in an age that offered few university professorships or artists' fellowships, writers were tempted and often compelled to write for profit. Poe, a notoriously heavy drinker always pressed for cash, scratched out a meager living writing short stories for popular magazines. Thoreau, despite his reputation for aloof self-reliance, craved public recognition. Only after trying and failing to market his poems in 1843 did he turn to the detailed accounts of nature that won him a readership.

Emerson, too, wanted to reach a broader public. After abandoning his first vocation as a Unitarian minister, he reached for a new sort of audience and a new source of income: the lyceum. Lyceums—local organizations for sponsoring lectures—spread throughout the northern tier of states after the late 1820s to meet popular demands for entertainment and self-improvement. Most of Emerson's published essays originated as lyceum lectures given throughout the Northeast and Midwest, including some sixty speeches in Ohio alone between 1850 and 1867. Thanks to newly built railroads and the cheap newspapers that publicized lyceum programs, other speakers followed in Emerson's path. Thoreau presented a digest of *Walden* as a lyceum lecture before the book was published. One stalwart of the lyceum circuit said that he lectured in exchange for "F-A-M-E—Fifty and My Expenses." As Herman Melville pledged, "If they will pay my expenses and give a reasonable fee, I am ready to lecture in Labrador or

on the Isle of Desolation off Patagonia."

As the Grimke sisters had discovered, the age offered women few opportunities for public speaking, and most lyceum lecturers were men. But women were tapping into the growing market for literature. Fiction-writing became the most lucrative occupation open to women before the Civil War. Novelist Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*, published in 1850, went through fourteen editions by 1852. Maria Cummins's *The Lamplighter*, published in 1854, sold forty thousand copies in eight weeks. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, published in 1852, exceeded all previous sales by selling 100,000 copies in just five months. Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose own works sold modestly, bitterly condemned what he called the "d—d mob of scribbling women" who were outselling and outearning him.

Warner and others benefited from advances in printing technology that significantly reduced the price of books. Before 1830, Sir Walter Scott's novels had been issued in three-volume sets that retailed for as much as thirty dollars. As canals and railroads began to carry new books to crossroads stores across the land, publishers in New York and Philadelphia vied to fill the stores' shelves with inexpensive novels. By the 1840s, cheap paperbacks costing as little as seven cents were flooding the market. Those who did not purchase books could read fiction in "story newspapers" such as the weekly *New York Ledger*, which was devoted mainly to serializing novels; the *Ledger*'s subscribers numbered four hundred thousand in 1860. In addition, the spread of public schools and academies contributed to higher literacy and a widening audience for fiction, especially among women.

The most popular form of fiction in the 1840s and 1850s was the sentimental or domestic novel, written mostly by women for women. The typical plot centers on a young girl who is either a poor and friendless orphan, or a wealthy heiress accustomed to financial and emotional support suddenly faced with the necessity of making her own way in the world. In either case, the girl's situation awakens her to inner resources that she hadn't previously recognized, and instills in her a new sense of her value and strength. The moral of Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) was that women had what it took to clean up the messes left by men.

Another popular genre in the antebellum reading market was sensationalist fiction, which drew on

Nathaniel Hawthorne bitterly condemned the "d—d mob of scribbling women" who were outselling and outearning him.



THOMAS COLE, THE LAST OF THE MOHICANS, CORA KNEELING AT THE FEET OF TAMENUND, 1827 One year after James Fenimore Cooper's novel *The Last of the Mohicans* was published, Thomas Cole painted the white captive Cora pleading with Tamenund, Chief of the Delaware, not to be forced into marriage with an evil Indian warrior. In Cole's painting, this human drama is dwarfed by the sublime beauty of the American wilderness. (Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art / Art Resource, NY)

"In wildness is the preservation of the world."

such dark romantic themes as criminality, mystery, and horror, but took them to extremes unknown in the works of Hawthorne, Melville,

or even Poe. The best-selling novel in America before *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was George Lippard's *The Quaker City; or The Monks of Monk Hall, A Romance of Philadelphia Life, Mystery, and Crime*, published in 1845. Based loosely on a real Philadelphia murder, it told the story of Monk Hall, a six-story structure (three floors above ground, three below) filled with secret passageways and trapdoors, where outwardly respectable Philadelphians gathered nightly to carouse, consume drugs, and rape young virgins. Works such as this tapped into the market for sensationalism created in part by the penny press.

So authors such as Hawthorne, Poe, and Melville had to compete with the popular culture of the story newspapers, sentimental fiction, and sensationalism. The philosopher Emerson shared the lecture circuit with the showman P.T. Barnum. Poe sneered that the public's judgment of a writer's merits was nearly always wrong. By and large, however, the major writers of the American Renaissance (with the exception of Melville, whose critical acclaim was delayed to the twentieth century) were not overlooked by their society. Emerson's lectures were highly successful, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* enjoyed respectable sales, and Poe's "The Raven" (1844) was extremely popular. But the writers most likely to achieve commercial success were those who best met certain popular expectations, such as moral and spiritual uplift, horror and mystery, or love stories and happy endings.

American Landscape Painting

At the same time as American writers were trying to create a distinctly American literature, American painters were searching for a national style in art. European neoclassicists had devoted much attention to the dramas and glories of the ancient and medieval past, painting historical scenes and portraits that celebrated the antiquity of their civilizations. In the absence of such traditions, American artists turned to landscape painting. But just as Hawthorne had complained about the lack of shadow and antiquity in American society, American painters lamented that the American landscape had no “poetry of decay” in the form of ruined castles and crumbling temples. In the absence of the evocative ruins that dotted European landscapes, American painters strove to capture the natural grandeur of their own land.

The center of American landscape painting in the nineteenth century was the **Hudson River School**, which flourished from the 1820s to the

1870s. Numbering more than fifty painters, it was best represented by Thomas Cole, Asher Durand, and Frederick Church. None was exclusively a landscapist. Some of Cole’s most popular paintings were allegories, including *The Course of Empire*, a sequence of five canvases depicting the rise and fall of an ancient city and clearly implying that luxury doomed republican virtue. Nor did these artists paint only the Hudson River. Cole’s student Frederick Church, who was internationally the best known of the three, painted the Andes Mountains during an extended trip to South America in 1853. After the Civil War, the German-born Albert Bierstadt adapted Hudson River school conventions to his monumental canvases of the Rocky Mountains.

But American landscape artists did paint countless scenes of the region around the Hudson River. The works of Washington Irving and the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 sparked artistic interest in the Hudson. The special contribution to American art made by the Hudson River painters was to emphasize emotional effect over illustrative accuracy. Thomas

RAINMAKING AMONG THE MANDAN, 1837–1839 George Catlin’s paintings were intended to preserve the faces, customs, and habitats of the Indian tribes who were thought to be going extinct due to advancing civilization. (*National Museum of American Art/Art Resource, NY*)



Cole's dramatic use of rich colors, towering peaks, deep chasms, and massive gnarled trees prompted poet William Cullen Bryant to compare them to "acts of religion." Similar motifs marked Frederick Church's paintings of the Andes Mountains, which used erupting volcanoes and thunderstorms to evoke dread and a sense of majesty.

After 1830, the writings of Emerson and Thoreau along with the paintings of the Hudson River School popularized a new view of nature. Intent on cultivating land, the pioneers of Kentucky and Ohio had deforested a vast area. One traveler complained that Americans would rather view a wheat field or a cabbage patch than a virgin forest. But Romantic writers and artists glorified pristine nature; "in wildness is the preservation of the world," Thoreau wrote. Their outlook blended with growing popular fears that, as one contemporary wrote in 1847, "The axe of civilization is busy with our old forests." As the "wild and picturesque haunts of the Red Man" became "the abodes of commerce and the seats of civilization," this writer concluded, "it behooves our artists to rescue from its grasp the little that is left before it is too late." Cole and other landscape painters often used the motif of the felled tree to express

their concern about the encroachments of civilization on American nature.

Like Cole, the painter **George Catlin** also tried to preserve a vanishing America, but his main concern was the native peoples of the land. Observing an Indian delegation passing through Philadelphia in 1824, Catlin resolved that his life's work would be to paint as many Native Americans as possible in their pure and "savage" state. Journeying up the Missouri River in 1832 he sketched at a feverish pace, and in 1837 exhibited his "Indian gallery," oil paintings and sketches of faces and customs from nearly fifty tribes. Catlin viewed the Indian as a noble savage whose mind, in his words, was "a beautiful blank." His paintings, though intended to preserve what nineteenth-century Euro-Americans called the "vanishing Indian," actually encouraged viewers to believe that Indians were doomed to extinction by the encroachment of civilization—an attitude that quietly justified further white expansion and conquest.

By the 1830s, sprawling urban growth was prompting the development of little enclaves of nature to provide spiritual refreshment to harried city-dwellers. Starting with Mount Auburn Cemetery near Boston in 1831, "rural" cemeteries with



MT. AUBURN CEMETERY, 1847 This "rural" or "garden" cemetery outside Boston was designed to express a romantic view of nature, with its beautiful trees planted along winding lanes. The figures of the man and child indicate the landscape designers' belief in the educational value of the rural cemetery. Among the many prominent Bostonians buried here was humanitarian reformer Dorothea Dix. (*Mount Auburn Cemetery*)

names such as “Harmony Grove” and “Greenwood” sprang up near major cities, offering curving tree-lined lanes and artificial ponds for the enjoyment of strolling city-dwellers. Designed for the living rather than the dead, they quickly became tourist attractions. In a related development, in 1858 New York City chose a plan drawn by landscape architect **Frederick Law Olmsted** and Calvert Vaux for its proposed Central Park. Olmsted and Vaux wanted the park to look as much like the countryside as

possible, showing nothing of the surrounding city. Bordering trees were planted to screen out buildings, drainage pipes were dug to create lakes, and four sunken thoroughfares were constructed to carry traffic unobtrusively across the park. The effect was to make Central Park “picturesque,” meaning that its man-made woods, meadows, and lake should remind visitors of natural landscapes they had seen in pictures. Thus nature was made to mirror art.

CHRONOLOGY 1840–1860

1820	Washington Irving, <i>The Sketch Book</i> .	1846	W.T.G. Morton successfully uses anesthesia. Elias Howe, Jr., patents the sewing machine.
1823	Philadelphia completes the first urban water-supply system. James Fenimore Cooper, <i>The Pioneers</i> .	1849	Second major cholera epidemic. Astor Place theater riot leaves twenty dead.
1826	Cooper, <i>The Last of the Mohicans</i> .	1850	Nathaniel Hawthorne, <i>The Scarlet Letter</i> .
1831	Mount Auburn Cemetery opens.	1851	Hawthorne, <i>The House of the Seven Gables</i> . Herman Melville, <i>Moby-Dick</i> . Erie Railroad completes its line to the West.
1832	A cholera epidemic strikes the United States.	1853	Ten small railroads are consolidated into the New York Central Railroad.
1833	The <i>New York Sun</i> , the first penny newspaper, is established.	1854	Henry David Thoreau, <i>Walden</i> .
1834	Cyrus McCormick patents the mechanical reaper.	1855	Walt Whitman, <i>Leaves of Grass</i> .
1835	James Gordon Bennett establishes the <i>New York Herald</i> .	1856	Pennsylvania Railroad completes Chicago link.
1837	Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar.”	1857	Baltimore-St. Louis rail service completed.
1841	P.T. Barnum opens the American Museum. Edgar Allan Poe, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.”	1858	Frederick Law Olmsted is appointed architect in chief for Central Park.
1844	First telegraph message transmitted.		

CONCLUSION

Technological advances transformed the lives of millions of Americans between 1840 and 1860. The mechanical reaper increased wheat production and enabled agriculture to keep pace with the growing population. The development of machine tools, first in gun manufacture and then in the production of sewing machines, made possible Eli Whitney's system of interchangeable parts and made a range of luxuries affordable for the middle class. Steam power reduced the vulnerability of factories to the vagaries of the weather, extended the employment season, and increased productivity and workers' incomes. The spread of railroads and the invention of the telegraph overcame barriers of space and time.

Many of these developments unified Americans. Railroad tracks threaded the nation together. The telegraph speeded communication and made it possible for Americans in widely scattered areas to read the same news and fiction in their newspapers. The advances in printing that gave birth to the penny press and cheap fiction contributed to a widening of the reading public. Theater audiences from New York to San Francisco attended the same minstrel shows. Advocates of progress hailed these

developments as instruments of ever-expanding happiness. By reducing commodity prices and bringing one-time luxuries within the financial reach of the middle class, technology narrowed the social distance between the middle and upper classes.

Progress, however, carried a price. At the same time that technology was closing the gap between the middle and upper classes, it was widening the gap between those classes and the poor. Progress also posed moral and spiritual challenges. Transcendentalists such as Emerson and Thoreau warned that Americans were growing ever more materialistic and endangering their intuitive access to inborn truth. Novelists Hawthorne and Melville challenged the easy confidence that technology and democracy could liberate Americans from the dilemmas of the human condition. And romantic writers and artists alike feared that the march of progress threatened to devour unspoiled nature. In different ways, Cooper, Emerson, and Thoreau treated the heightened conflict between nature and civilization as a distinctive feature of the American experience. The quest for their own national culture forced Americans to ponder the costs as well as the benefits of technological progress.

KEY TERMS

McCormick reaper (p. 310)

**"American System
of Manufacturing"** (p. 311)

New York Stock Exchange (p. 316)

epidemics (p. 319)

phrenology (p. 321)

penny press (p. 321)

minstrel shows (p. 322)

P.T. Barnum (p. 323)

American Renaissance (p. 324)

James Fenimore Cooper (p. 324)

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Hudson River School (p. 331)

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Frederick Law Olmsted (p. 333)

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