

Gilded Age

the term “Gilded Age” came to define the tumultuous years between the Civil War and the turn of the twentieth century. During this era, America became more prosperous and saw unprecedented growth in industry and technology. But the Gilded Age had a more sinister side: It was a period where greedy, corrupt industrialists, bankers and politicians enjoyed extraordinary wealth and opulence at the expense of the working class. In fact, it was wealthy tycoons, not politicians, who inconspicuously held the most political power during the Gilded Age.

Transcontinental Railroad

Before the [Civil War](#), rail travel was dangerous and difficult—but after the war, [George Westinghouse](#) invented the air brake, which made braking systems more dependable and safe.

Soon, the development of Pullman sleeping cars and dining cars made rail travel comfortable and more enjoyable for passengers. It wasn't long before trains overtook other forms of long-distance travel such as the stagecoach and riding horseback.

In 1869, the [Transcontinental Railroad](#) was finished and led to rapid settlement of the western United States. It also made it much easier to transport goods over long distances from one part of the country to another.

This enormous railroad expansion resulted in rail companies and their executives receiving lavish amounts of money and land—up to 200 million acres, by some estimates—from the United States government. In many cases, politicians cut shady backroom deals and helped create railroad and shipping tycoons such as [Cornelius Vanderbilt](#) and [Jay Gould](#).

Robber Barons

Railroad tycoons were just one of many types of so-called robber barons that emerged in the Gilded Age.

These men used union busting, fraud, intimidation, violence and their extensive political connections to gain an advantage over any competitors. Robber barons were relentless in their efforts to amass wealth while exploiting workers and ignoring standard business rules—and in many cases, the law itself.

They soon accumulated vast amounts of money and dominated every major industry including the railroad, oil, banking, timber, sugar, liquor, meatpacking, steel, mining, tobacco and textile industries.

Some wealthy entrepreneurs such as [Andrew Carnegie](#), [John D. Rockefeller](#) and [Henry Frick](#) are often referred to as robber barons but may not exactly fit the mold. While it's true they built huge monopolies, often by crushing any small business or competitor in their way, they were also generous philanthropists who didn't always rely on political ploys to build their empires.

Some tried to improve life for their employees, donated millions to charities and nonprofits and supported their communities by providing funding for everything from libraries and hospitals to universities, public parks and zoos.

Industrial Revolution

The Gilded Age was in many ways the culmination of the [Industrial Revolution](#), when America and much of Europe shifted from an agricultural society to an industrial one.

Millions of immigrants and struggling farmers poured into cities such as [New York](#), Boston, Philadelphia, St. Louis and [Chicago](#), looking for work and hastening the urbanization of America. By 1900, about 40 percent of Americans lived in major cities.

Most cities were unprepared for rapid population growth. Housing was limited, and tenements and slums sprung up nationwide. Heating, lighting, sanitation and medical care were poor or nonexistent, and millions died from preventable disease.

Many immigrants were unskilled and willing to work long hours for little pay. Gilded Age plutocrats considered them the perfect employees for their sweatshops, where

working conditions were dangerous and workers endured long periods of unemployment, wage cuts and no benefits.

Income Inequality

The industrialists of the Gilded Age lived high on the hog, but most of the working class lived below poverty level. As time went on, the income inequality between wealthy and poor became more and more glaring.

While the wealthy lived in opulent homes, dined on succulent food and showered their children with gifts, the poor were crammed into filthy tenement apartments, struggled to put a loaf of bread on the table and accompanied their children to a sweatshop each morning where they faced a 12-hour (or longer) workday.

Some moguls used Social Darwinism to justify the inequality between the classes. The theory presumes that the fittest humans are the most successful and poor people are destitute because they're weak and lack the skills to be prosperous.

Muckrakers

Muckrakers is a term used to describe reporters who exposed corruption among politicians and the elite. They used investigative journalism and the print revolution to dig through "the muck" of the Gilded Age and report scandal and injustice.

In 1890, reporter and photographer [Jacob Riis](#) brought the horrors of New York slum life to light in his book, *How the Other Half Lives*, prompting New York politicians to pass legislation to improve tenement conditions.

In 1902, McClure Magazine journalist Lincoln Steffens took on city corruption when he penned the article, "Tweed Days in St. Louis." The article, which is widely considered the first muckracking magazine article, exposed how city officials deceitfully made deals with crooked businessmen to maintain power.

Another journalist, [Ida Tarbell](#), spent years investigating the underhanded rise of oilman John D. Rockefeller. Her 19-part series, also published in McClure in 1902, led to the breakup of Rockefeller's monopoly, the Standard Oil Company.

In 1906, activist journalist and novelist [Upton Sinclair](#) wrote *The Jungle* to expose horrendous working conditions in the meatpacking industry. The book and ensuing public outcry led to the passing of the Meat Inspection Act and the Pure Food and Drug Act.

Labor Unions Rise

It soon became obvious that the huge disparity between the wealthy and poor couldn't last, and the working class would have to organize to improve their working and living conditions. It was also obvious this wouldn't happen without some degree of violence.

Much of the violence, however, was between the workers themselves as they struggled to agree on what they were fighting for. Some simply wanted increased wages and a better working environment, while others also wanted to keep women, immigrants and blacks out of the workforce.

Although the first labor unions occurred around the turn of the nineteenth century, they gained momentum during the Gilded Age, thanks to the increased number of unskilled and unsatisfied factory workers.

Railroad Strikes

On July 16, 1877, the Baltimore and [Ohio](#) Railroad Company announced a 10-percent pay cut on its railroad workers in Martinsburg, [West Virginia](#), the second cut in less than eight months.

Infuriated and fed up, the workers—with the support of the locals—announced they'd prevent all trains from leaving the roundhouse until their pay was restored.

The mayor, the police and even the National Guard couldn't stop the strike. It wasn't until Federal troops arrived that one train finally left the station.

The strike spread among other railroads, sparking violence across America between the working class and local and federal authorities. At its peak, over 100,000 railroad workers were on strike. Many of the Robber Barons feared an aggressive, all-out revolution against their way of life.

Instead, the strike—later known as the Great Upheaval—ended abruptly and was labeled a dismal failure. Yet it showed America's tycoons there was strength in numbers and that organized labor had the potential to shut down entire industries and inflict major economic and political damage.

As the working class continued to use strikes and boycotts to fight for higher wages and improved working conditions, their bosses staged lock-outs and brought in replacement workers known as scabs.

They also created blacklists to prevent active union workers from becoming employed elsewhere. Even so, the working class continued to unite and press their cause and often won at least some of their demands.

Women in the Gilded Age

Upper-class women of the Gilded Age have been compared to dolls on display dressed in resplendent finery. They flaunted their wealth and endeavored to improve their status in society while poor and middle-class women both envied and mimicked them.

Some wealthy Gilded Age women were much more than eye candy, though, and often traded domestic life for social activism and charitable work. They felt a new degree of empowerment and fought for equality, including the right to vote through women's suffrage groups.

Some created homes for destitute immigrants while others pushed a temperance agenda, believing the source of poverty and most family troubles was alcohol. Wealthy women philanthropists of the Gilded Age include:

Louise Whitfield Carnegie, wife of Andrew Carnegie, who created Carnegie Hall and donated to the Red Cross, the Y.W.C.A., and other charities.

Jane Addams

[Jane Addams](#) is arguably the best-known philanthropist of the Gilded Age. In 1889, she and Ellen Gates Star established a secular settlement house in Chicago known as [Hull-House](#).

The neighborhood was a melting pot of struggling immigrants, and Hull-House provided everything from midwife services and basic medical care to kindergarten, day care and housing for abused women. It also offered English and citizenship classes. Adams received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931.

Populist Party

As drought and depression struck rural America, farmers in the west—who vilified railroad tycoons and wanted a political voice—organized and played a key role in forming the Populist Party.

The Populists had a democratic agenda that aimed to give power back to the people and paved the way for the progressive movement, which still fights to close the gap between the wealthy and poor and champion the needy and disenfranchised.

End of the Gilded Age

In 1893, both the overextended Philadelphia and Reading Railroad and the National Cordage Company failed, which set off an economic depression unlike any seen before in America.

Banks and other businesses folded, and the stock market plunged, leaving millions unemployed, homeless and hungry. In some states, unemployment rose to almost 50 percent.

The Panic of 1893 lasted four years and left lower and even middle-class Americans fed up with political corruption and social inequality. Their frustration gave rise to the Progressive Movement which took hold when President [Theodore Roosevelt](#) took office in 1901.

Although Roosevelt supported corporate America, he also felt there should be federal controls in place to keep excessive corporate greed in check and prevent individuals from making obscene amounts of money off the backs of immigrants and the lower class.