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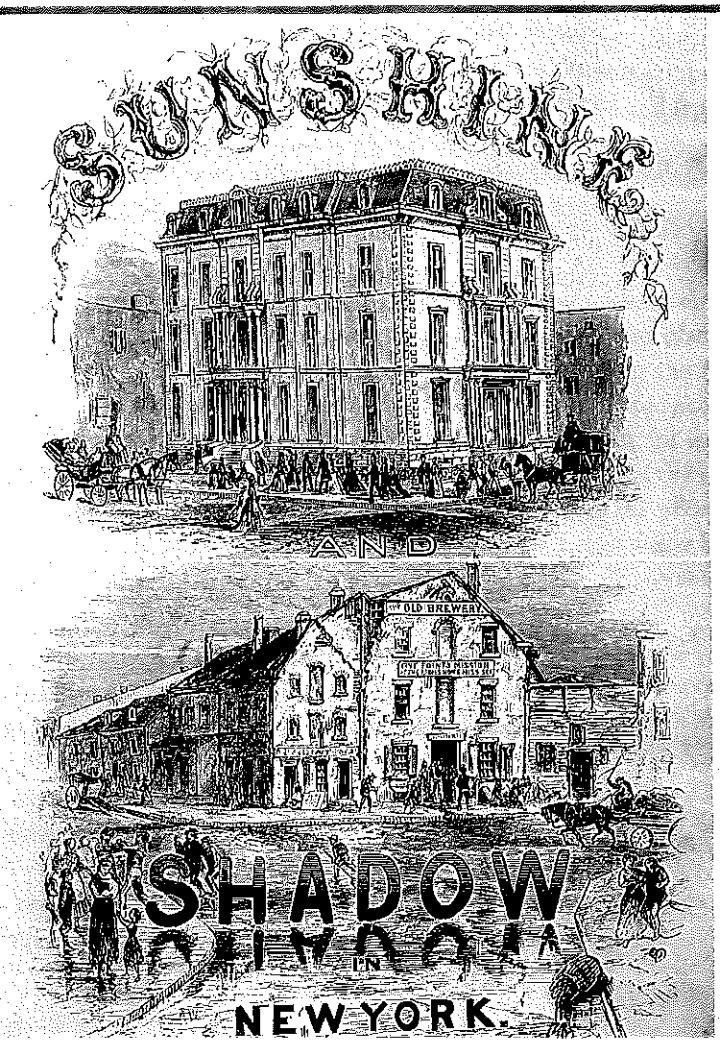
Immigration, Urban Life, and Social Reform in the Free-Labor North

1838–1860



EARLY IN 1849, two Irish travelers, Bridget Murphy and Patrick Kennedy, landed in Boston Harbor after a storm-tossed Atlantic crossing. They had met on the ship bringing them to America, and they married a few months after their arrival. Both were fleeing the potato blight that had devastated Irish agriculture and had left millions of men, women, and children in a state of starvation. The young couple settled into a corrugated metal shack on Noddle's Island in Boston Harbor. They had few resources, but they were willing to work hard, which meant a good deal in a country that was eager for labor. Patrick found a job as a cooper, crafting wooden barrels and Conestoga wagon wheels. Like many newly arrived Irish women, Bridget may have sewed or performed domestic work to help build a nest egg.

The Irish seeking refuge from the famine constituted the young nation's first large-scale wave of immigration, and the Boston Irish formed the first immigrant ghetto in the United States. They coped with overcrowded and dilapidated housing, epidemics of cholera and consumption, inadequate water supplies and abundant raw sewage, and the suspicion and prejudice that New England's more prosperous Protestant majority heaped on impoverished Catholic newcomers.

A decade after their arrival, Patrick's skill as a cooper sustained them economically, and Bridget was pregnant with their first child. Then catastrophe struck. Shortly after his son P. J. was born in 1858, Patrick Kennedy, then in his early thirties, died, probably of cholera or consumption. In 1860, the widowed Bridget was eking out a living for herself and P. J. by running a notions shop.

Sunshine and Shadow

Regular mid-nineteenth-century publications presented the East's industrializing cities — New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore — as fractured societies. According to articles, novels, and city guides, each was really two cities: one orderly, prosperous, and bathed in "sunlight" and the other menacing, poor, and steeped in "darkness" (or "gaslight"). In this frontispiece from the 1868 *Sunshine and Shadow in New York*, the symbolic extremes of day and night were represented by a Fifth Avenue mansion and the Old Brewery, an infamous "thieves' den." Matthew Hale Smith, *Sunshine and Shadow in New York* (1868) — American Social History Project.

Although P. J. Kennedy would eventually become the patriarch of a wealthy and powerful political clan that, two generations later, would produce a president of the United States, his humble origins reflected the circumstances of millions of immigrants in the mid-nineteenth century. Forming a massive movement from Western and Northern Europe, these immigrants were pushed out of their homelands by famine, political upheaval, and economic crisis. They were drawn to the United States by the availability of land, the promise of a better life, and the high demand for labor.

That demand for labor was fueled by the growth of American cities, new technologies and western settlements, a boom in commerce and industry, and rapid increases in agricultural production. Daniel Webster, the senator from Massachusetts, declared, "It is an extraordinary era in which we live, remarkable for scientific research into the heavens, the earth, and what is beneath the earth" and its application "to the pursuits of life." But the economic and technological transformations that Webster exulted required a radical reorganization of the relations between labor and capital. A smaller and smaller percentage of people were able to rise from common laborers to skilled artisans to master craftsmen or from agricultural workers to landowners. Instead, more and more American workers, whether immigrant or native-born, spent their lives earning a wage.

The term *free labor* was used in this period to distinguish workers in the North from the brutalities of legalized slave labor in the South. Still, free laborers were no longer independent in the sense that Thomas Jefferson or even Alexander Hamilton had intended when the nation was new. Free labor still included independent farmers, shopkeepers, and artisans but also growing numbers of people who contracted with employers to work for wages. In prosperous times, such as the late 1840s, jobs were relatively plentiful and wages were generally sufficient to support a family. But in periods of economic crisis, such as the depressions that hit in the 1830s and the 1850s, unemployment skyrocketed, wages plummeted, workers struggled to survive, and once-affluent businessmen went bankrupt. Some merchants, industrialists, professionals, and commercial farmers, however, were able to turn depressions to their advantage, buying land, labor, and goods at low prices, then consolidating their capital until good times returned. Such shrewd business deals spawned a widening gap between rich and poor in American society, a gap that was exacerbated by the massive influx of impoverished immigrants.

Immigration transformed the meaning of race as well as class in the United States. Some native-born white Protestants viewed Irish Catholics in particular as racially inferior and religiously threatening. Lumping Irish Catholics together with African Americans at the bottom of the social hierarchy and suspicious of their loyalty to the Catholic Church and the Pope in

Rome, they forged nativist societies to defend the white, Protestant world they valued. Some employers took similar measures. Relegated to the least skilled jobs and the least desirable neighborhoods, many Irish immigrants found themselves in fierce competition with African Americans.

The growth of cities and industry, the periodic upheavals created by financial panics, and the development of immigrant and poor communities challenged old values and ways of life. For many Americans, the transformations of the 1830s and 1840s fostered a moral crisis. The North was characterized not only by changes in the relations between workers and employers, blacks and whites, and native-born and immigrant residents, but also by increases in poverty and crime; resistance to religious and familial authority; and the spread of prostitution, alcohol use, and disease.

Many Americans, including some who were moved by the spiritual revivals of the Second Great Awakening and members of the growing middle class, believed that these social ills had to be addressed and joined charitable and missionary efforts. By the 1840s, smaller groups of Americans advocated more dramatic changes in society, such as land reform, utopian communities, racial equality, and the rights of workers and women. These movements for social change brought new groups of Americans into the public sphere and reshaped the meaning and structure of politics.

The Transformation of the American Labor Force

When prosperity returned in the early 1840s, technological advances in transportation, communication, and agriculture fueled the nation's rapid urban and industrial growth. Opportunities existed for people even of modest means to enjoy the fruits of this transformation, which created such midlevel occupations as insurance agents, railroad dispatchers, and telegraphers. These were workers who were paid in wages or commissions, but they had hopes of rising to positions as managers or independent entrepreneurs. While many farmers left agriculture for more stable wage labor, some who remained benefited from the expansion of commerce and the growth in wholesale and retail establishments. Aside from two economic slumps in the 1850s, commerce and industry expanded at an unprecedented rate.

As the northern United States became an increasingly market-oriented and industrial society, greater economic competition, urban growth, and westward migration transformed working people's lives. The influx of hundreds of thousands of immigrants from Ireland and Germany in the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s offered a reliable and often cheap solution to the labor shortage created by urban and industrial demands. However, these immigrant workers, as well as native-born white women and free African Americans, found their opportunities for work dictated by their ethnicity, race, and gender. And neither the wage-earning, free-labor North nor the

increasingly distinct slave-labor South conformed to the ideal of a nation of independent landowners.

A Changing World for Northern Working People Technology led to impressive gains in productivity in both agriculture and industry. Compared to a worker in 1800, a worker in 1860 could produce twice as much wheat, twice as much pig iron, and more than four times as much cotton cloth. New power-driven machines — reapers, looms, sewing machines, lathes, and steam boilers — fueled this soaring productivity. Refinements in production processes contributed too, each worker now completing smaller and more simplified tasks. Combined with a growing population, increased productivity led to a staggering increase in national wealth. For instance, between 1840 and 1860 alone, the nation's agricultural output more than doubled in value, and that of its construction, mining, and manufacturing industries grew four times or more.

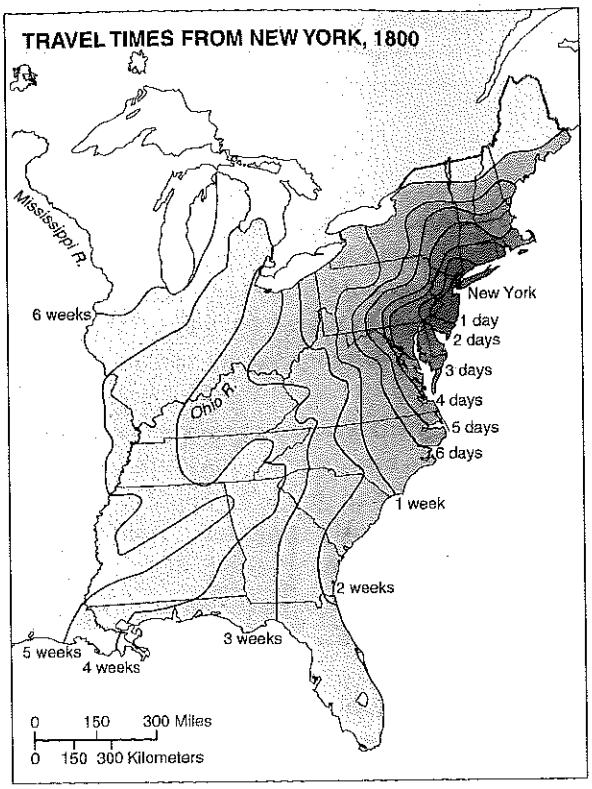
New means of transportation also transformed the economic landscape (Map 8.1). As the canal era gave way to the railroad age, the region beyond the Appalachian Mountains was accessible to easterners and European immigrants as never before. Ten thousand miles of railroad track laid in the 1850s helped to link western farmers to older railroad lines—the New York Central, the Pennsylvania, and the Baltimore & Ohio—and to eastern markets. People and goods now moved at far lower cost, as freight rates dropped by about 95 percent between 1820 and 1860. And the speed of travel increased almost as dramatically. In 1817, the fastest freight shipments from New York to Cincinnati took almost two months. By the early 1850s, shipping freight by railroad between these two cities took only about a week.

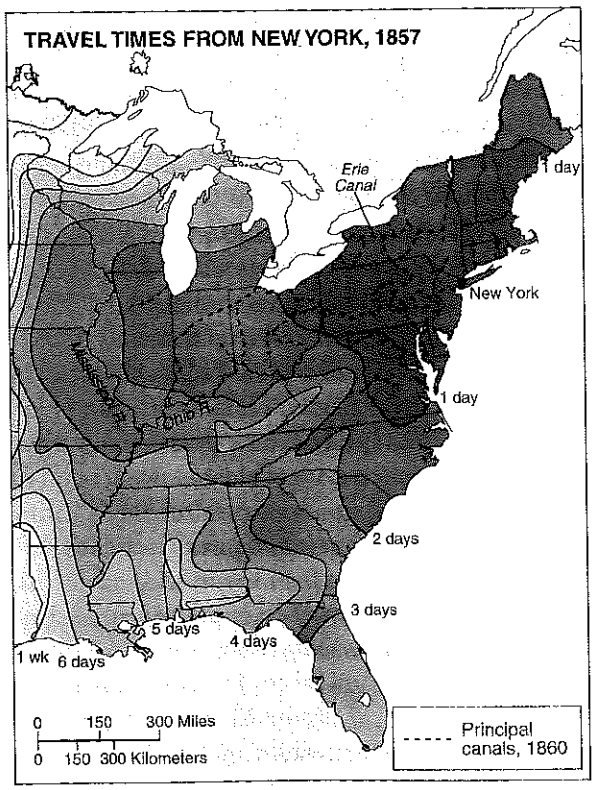
At the same time, technological advances allowed Americans to communicate with each other more readily, even across great distances. During the 1840s, the telegraph made it possible for the first time to send information (including commodity prices and election results) instantaneously across the country. Cheap newspapers, made possible by the steam press, and itinerant lecturers traveling by railroad spread new ideas that sparked ongoing debates throughout the free states. The pleasures and dangers of city life were broadcast to small towns and farming communities. The benefits of frontier life; the possibilities for industrial jobs; the horrors of racial, sexual, and wage slavery; the threat of mass immigration; the saving grace of evangelical conversion or utopian lifestyles—all were proclaimed far and wide across the United States.

The improvements in communication and transportation pulled local markets and scattered communities into regional and interregional networks. As canals and then railroads replaced rivers as the primary link between regions in the 1840s and 1850s, the Northwest exchanged more goods and people with the Northeast than it did with the South. Particularly

MAP 8.1 The Mobility of Goods and People, 1800–1857

Advances in technology made the movement of goods and people across the United States faster and more reliable. In 1800, a traveler from New York City required a full week to reach western New York, an area that was still largely settled by American Indians. By the late 1850s, western New York cities such as Buffalo served as hubs for the transhipment of goods and people between the eastern seaboard and the western frontier of white settlement. It took only one day to reach Buffalo from Chicago and another day to travel on to New York City.



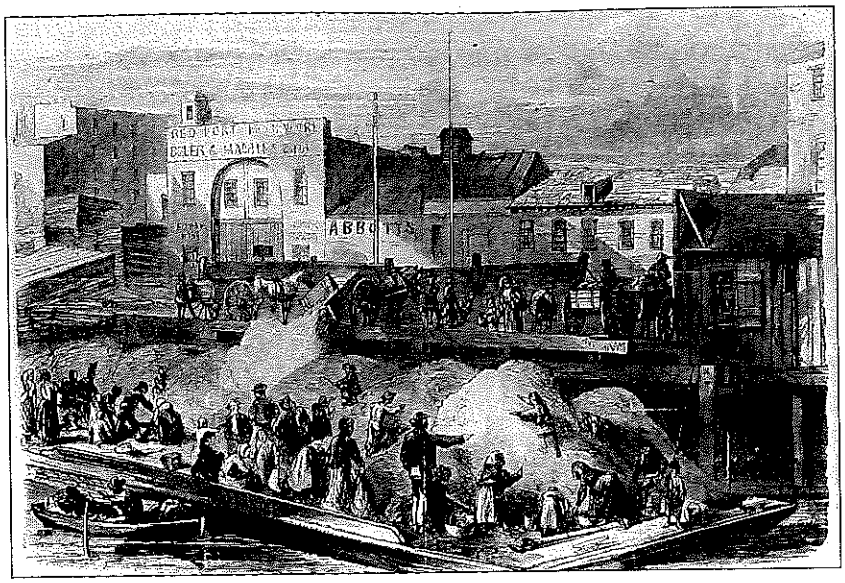


The Lackawanna Valley
George Inness's panoramic painting, commissioned by the Delaware, Lackawanna, and Western Railroad in 1855, placed the symbol of industrialization in a bucolic setting. The railroad's president paid Inness $75 to paint a scene showing three locomotives. The artist gave him only one train but obliged the president's zeal for advertising by painting three tracks leading into the new Scranton, Pennsylvania, roundhouse instead of the one that actually existed. George Inness, oil on canvas, 1855, 33 7/8 × 50 1/4 inches — Gift of Mrs. Huttleston Rogers, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

in cities, the general store gave way to specialty shops that offered wider selections of specific goods—hardware, dry goods, groceries, and so on. Owners, relying on state incorporation laws passed in the 1830s, moved from individual and family-based businesses to selling shares that combined the resources of a larger number of people while limiting each investor's liability. Banks, although still risky ventures, increased in number to create the credit required by merchants who now traded large quantities of goods over long distances. A growing number of capitalists also turned from investing in trade to investing in factories to feed Americans' voracious demand for manufactured goods.

These economic and technological changes led as well to the emergence of a new category of professionals and managers, many of whom were willing to forgo the ownership of land or businesses for the relative security of a salary. The members of this group, who embraced the values and ideals of the emerging middle class, sought to stave off the risks associated with boom-and-bust cycles by investing their savings in new financial institutions such as state banks. At the same time, they bought a growing number of mass-produced consumer products—pianos, chairs, rugs, glass mirrors, silverware, and carriages—to show off their newfound wealth and status.

Wageworkers also hoped to mute the effects of economic downturns. But during hard times, they had to rely primarily on good luck and extensive family and friendship networks. Both were risky supports in bad times. Moreover, workers who were hit by economic recession could no longer hope to eke out survival by relying on goods produced in their local communities. A consumer society was emerging in which workers increasingly



Dumping Ground at the Foot of Beach Street
According to a *Harper's Weekly* editor, this engraving of people scavenging on garbage barges — searching for coal, rags, and other discarded items that might be used or sold to junk dealers — showed how some people in New York were forced to "live upon the refuse of respectable folk." Stanley Fox, *Harper's Weekly*, September 26, 1866 — American Social History Project.

exchanged their wages for the goods they required in order to live. This entailed a further decline in the local self-sufficiency that had characterized rural areas and small towns until the early nineteenth century.

The Shift Away from Agriculture Throughout the nineteenth century, the absolute size of the nation's farm population continued to grow steadily, but the number of people working outside of agriculture grew considerably faster. Moreover, rural as well as urban workers were caught up in the new cash economy. By the 1840s and 1850s, steadily declining prices for manufactured goods allowed farmers to buy more and more items, including stoves, kitchenware, and harnesses. To get the cash needed to purchase these goods, farm families devoted more of their time to producing marketable crops that would command high prices in expanding urban markets. As a result, farmers were soon buying large quantities of food themselves. Ironically, then, the northern farmer, like the northern factory worker, was becoming more dependent on others for basic needs. Rural sellers had to fight to maintain their market position, and competition began to replace cooperation, pitting farmer against farmer. The *New England Farmer* warned

> The cultivator who does not keep pace with his neighbors as regards agricultural improvements and information will soon find himself the poorer in consequence of the prosperity that surrounds him. . . . He will be like a stunted oak in the forest, which is deprived of light and air, by its "towering neighbors."

Farmers were also competing with others far away. Improved transportation brought produce from the West into competition with crops grown on rocky and nearly exhausted New England soil. During 1840, only ten thousand bushels of grain and flour left Chicago for the East; twenty years later, over fifty million bushels followed that route. Much of this increased yield went to feed the people of New England and the Middle Atlantic states, but some went to feed the South, Ireland, and other parts of Europe.

As the center of northern agriculture moved West, so too did the farming population. By 1860, fully one-third of all those born in Connecticut and New Hampshire and four of every ten Vermonters had left their home states in search of a second chance, mostly out West. There were other attractions to western migration. Gold, discovered in California in 1848, provided one powerful magnet. So did a boom in western construction and manufacturing, especially mining (lead, copper, iron) and smelting, lumbering, farm equipment, and food processing (milling, meatpacking, distilling, and brewing). The demand for labor thus drew industrial workers as well as farmers to the West.

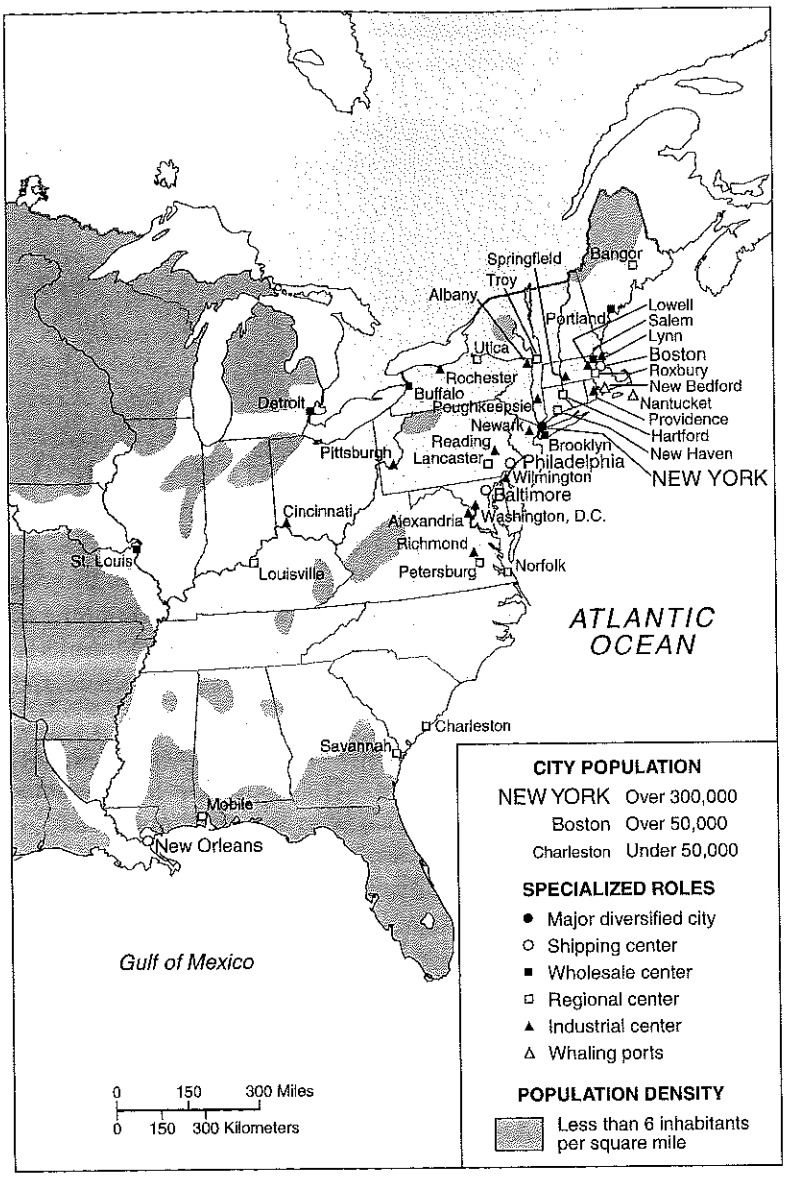
The surge in commerce and industry also swelled the number and size of cities (Map 8.2). In 1790, the entire country claimed only twenty-four towns or cities, defined as locations with populations greater than 2,500, and there were none larger than 50,000. But by 1860, there were nearly four hundred towns and cities, and more than one-third of all northeasterners lived in them. In addition to the many small cities and towns, there were several major metropolises. In the East, New York City and Philadelphia became the dominant manufacturing cities in the nation. Located at key points along the now-bustling East-West trade routes, western urban centers such as Rochester, Buffalo, Pittsburgh, and Chicago also boomed.

Immigrants Swell the Wage Labor Ranks The greatest number of immigrants came to the United States between 1840 and 1859, when over four million arrived. By 1860, nearly one-third of adult white men in the free states were immigrants. A few were well-to-do merchants, manufacturers, and professionals or landowning farmers. A far larger number, many from impoverished rural areas, ended up working as unskilled or low-skilled laborers in industry, construction, or the maritime trades or as domestic servants or casual workers paid by the day (Figure 8.1, p. 386).

Drought, famine, revolution, and political persecution in Europe all contributed to this massive wave of emigrants to the United States. England, for example, had worked for centuries to concentrate land, wealth, religious authority, and political power in the hands of Ireland's pro-English Protestant minority at the expense of the Catholic majority. In pursuit of increased revenue, the largely Protestant landlord class steadily squeezed the

MAP 8.2 The Nation's Major Cities in 1840

In 1840, the eastern seaboard was still the site of the nation's largest cities, including New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. New urban areas were developing, however, to the west and south. These included industrial centers such as Rochester, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, and Richmond and regional centers such as Petersburg, Virginia; St. Louis, Missouri; and Louisville, Kentucky. Port cities such as Norfolk, Charleston, Savannah, and New Orleans were also growing rapidly in the early 1800s.



already impoverished Catholic tenants and landless laborers. Then, in 1845, a potato blight hit Ireland, causing hundreds of acres of the island's most basic foodstuff to blacken and die. The blight continued for five years. Men, women, and children starved to death; the faces of the young were "bloated yet wrinkled and of a pale greenish hue." In the midst of the potato famine, corn, cattle, and dairy products were all produced in Ireland, but landlords sold them abroad for profit rather than giving them to the starving people

at home. "God sent the blight," went an Irish saying, "but the English landlords sent the famine!"

Landlords evicted over a half-million tenant farmers who could no longer pay their rent. At the same time, Ireland's traditional small industries declined under the weight of English competition. People who were lucky found their way onboard ships whose bottom decks were crammed with their countrymen. Although about one in ten died on the journey, nearly 1,700,000 Irish arrived on American shores between 1840 and 1860. Although thousands of Irish immigrants had settled in the United States in previous decades, this massive influx increased prejudice against the Irish among native-born Americans.

Arriving in the same period were more than 1,350,000 Germans. German peasants, too, faced the devastation of the potato blight, agricultural depression, and competition from English goods. At the same time, shoemakers, furniture makers, and other artisans faced the deskilling of their crafts as mass production broke the manufacturing process into discrete tasks, each of which required less and less skill to perform. Economic stagnation was reinforced by political upheaval, as the short-lived revolution of 1848 failed to overturn Prussian rule. In its aftermath, those who had supported the revolution fled their homeland.

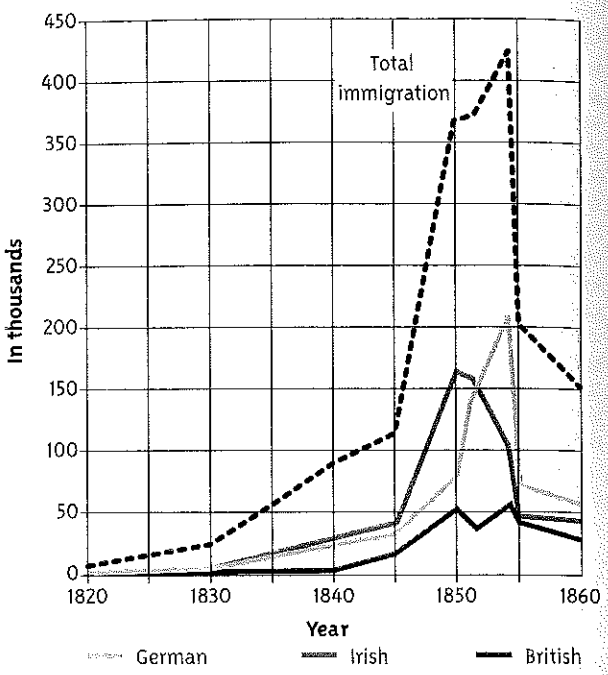


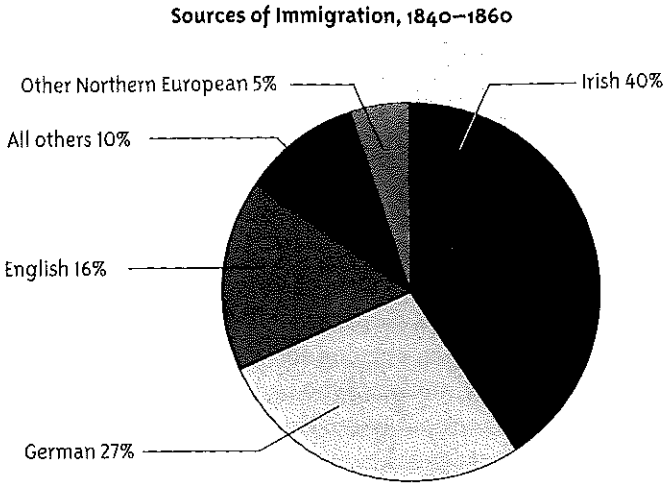
FIGURE 8.1 Immigration to the United States, 1820–1860
The most dramatic increase in immigration to the United States occurred between 1845 and 1855. In that decade, hundreds of thousands of people left Ireland, Germany, and other parts of Northern Europe in hopes of finding a better life in America. With improved economic conditions in Ireland and Germany and the onset of depression and then the Civil War in the United States, immigration declined significantly in the late 1850s and early 1860s. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970* (1975).

Other countries experienced similar exoduses. The English government attacked workers who advocated such democratic reforms as universal manhood suffrage, annual meetings of Parliament, and the secret ballot. This repression led many to seek asylum in the United States. Italian radicals, who were defeated in their attempt to win independence from Austria in 1849, also sought asylum. Scandinavians, too, faced agricultural stagnation and repressive landlords; many came to the United States and settled on America's vast western farmlands. Chinese migrants began arriving as well. Almost all of them were men seeking employment in the cities and mines of the West (Figure 8.2).

The largest concentration of immigrants arrived in the Northeast and settled in seacoast and inland cities in that region. Three-quarters entered the United States through the Port of New York. Although most of these immigrants eventually moved on, those who stayed drove the population of Manhattan from 313,000 to 814,000 between 1840 and 1860 and that of Brooklyn from 11,000 to 267,000 in the same period.

FIGURE 8.2 Sources of Immigration, 1840–1860

The largest group of immigrants to arrive in the United States between 1840 and 1860 came from Ireland, followed by those from Germany and England. Most were driven out by famine, political upheaval, and religious persecution and drawn to America by democratic promises and economic opportunities. Immigrants provided a critical source of skilled and unskilled labor to fuel industrial, commercial, and agricultural development in the northern and western United States.



The Irish Harvest

"In many districts of Ireland," says the caption accompanying this 1852 illustration in a Boston weekly, "there are scenes like this which give unmistakable evidence of prosperity, notwithstanding the reports that are constantly reaching us of want and misery in that unfortunate land." Although the British press depicted the ravages of the Irish potato famine, American publications seemed reluctant to unsettle their readers with disturbing images.

Gleason's Pictorial and Drawing-room Companion, December 11, 1852 — American Social History Project.

"Wretched Indeed": A Novelist Describes Transatlantic Steerage

Herman Melville, the author of Moby Dick, *was a cabin boy on a packet ship sailing between New York and Liverpool, England, in the 1830s. In his novel* Redburn, *Melville describes the conditions of work and life on board the sailing ship* Highlander. *The following selection describes the horrifying conditions and effects of an outbreak of fever on Irish immigrants traveling below decks in steerage.*

The sight that greeted us, upon entering [steerage], was wretched indeed. It was like entering a crowded jail. From the rows of rude bunks, hundreds of meager, begrimed faces were turned upon us; while seated upon the chests were scores of unshaven men, smoking tea-leaves, and creating a suffocating vapor. But this vapor was better than the native air of the place, which from almost unbelievable causes, was fetid in the extreme. In every corner, the females were huddled together, weeping and lamenting; children were asking bread from their mothers, who had none to give. . . .

About four o'clock that morning, the first four died. They were all men; and the scenes which ensued were frantic in the extreme. . . . By their own countrymen, they were torn from the clasp of their wives, rolled in their own bedding, with ballast-stones, and with hurried rites, were dropped into the ocean.

At this time, ten more men had caught the disease. . . .

However this narrative of the circumstances attending the fever among the emigrants on the Highlander may appear . . . the only account you obtain of such events, is generally contained in a newspaper paragraph, under the shipping-head. There is the obituary of the destitute dead, who die on the sea. They die, like the billows that break on the shore, and no more are heard or seen. . . . What a world of life and death, what a world of humanity and its woes, lies shrunk into a three-worded sentence!

Herman Melville, *Redburn* (1849).

Immigrants changed the economic landscape of the North. The lower wages they were paid increased profits for employers and contributed greatly to economic growth. At the same time, having so many workers from different cultures speaking different languages made it hard for labor to organize collectively on its own behalf. Some immigrants, particularly exiled German revolutionaries, held more radical views than did their American counterparts. Others hoped for little more than a steady job and a bare-subsistence lifestyle when they first arrived. Native-born white workers often resented the competition for work from immigrants. While employers sought cheap labor, many also embraced popular prejudices against immigrants. These attitudes ensured that ethnicity would join race as a critical division in American society.

National Origins and American Jobs As both the kinds of work to be done and the kinds of workers seeking jobs multiplied, employers created a more elaborate division of labor. The vast majority of wageworkers before 1840 were native-born white men who were ranked primarily by their skills: artisans, outworkers, laborers, and factory operatives. White women, who entered textile mills in the 1820s, and African Americans, who most often worked as domestic servants or manual laborers, occupied their own well-defined niches near the bottom of this occupational hierarchy. After about 1840, however, the kind of jobs a person could obtain was dictated by national origin as well as by skill, sex, and race. This transformed the face of America's labor force and further complicated the ability of workers to unite around common grievances.

In general, the only work in the United States that was open to Irish men was unskilled and temporary. After the mid-1840s, Irish immigrants dominated day labor in most coastal towns and cities and formed the majority of workers on canals, railroads, and other construction projects. A visiting Irish journalist remarked in 1860, "There are several sorts of power working at the fabric of this Republic: water-power, steam-power, horse-power, Irish-power. The last works hardest of all."

Young Irish women did their share of heavy work. Some families in Ireland kept their sons at home to eke out a living on the land and sent their daughters to America to create a foothold there. With more Irish women than men arriving in the United States and most families impoverished, few Irish women could afford the luxury of leisure. The largest number labored as domestic servants. Beginning in the 1830s and throughout the next two decades, prosperous urban families hired Irish women in swiftly rising numbers. Most families employed only one woman to do all the chores. It was her responsibility to cook, clean, prepare and serve meals, care for the children, mend the family's clothing, and haul all the wood, coal, and water that were needed.

New England textile factories also recruited significant numbers of Irish women. In 1836, fewer than 4 percent of the workers in a typical Lowell factory were foreign-born. But that proportion rose to nearly 40 percent by 1850; most of these were women. By then, the workload of the average Lowell spinner and weaver—immigrant and native born alike—had more than doubled. The heavy work and low wages that had been initially reserved for immigrants became the standard for all textile operatives.

Economic hardship was widespread among Irish immigrants. The real wages—that is, wages adjusted for inflation—for unskilled day laborers rose about 12 percent per decade between 1820 and 1860. Yet most unskilled jobs lasted only a few weeks, sometimes only a day or two, and competition from a growing pool of unemployed laborers made finding work difficult. As a

"They Were Desperate Men and Would Have Work or Food": Day Laborers Protest

This Buffalo, New York, newspaper account describes a protest by 1,000 Irish day laborers at the Welland Canal in August, 1842. The laborers had come in response to the canal company's handbill promising jobs, but when they appeared, they found no jobs were to be had. As in the New York City flour riots that took place five years earlier, a sense of the workers' goals, determination, and concept of justice emerges from this report.

The laborers assembled in immense masses with banners bearing various devices and inscriptions and proceeded to supply their wants with the strong hand. All efforts to arrest their proceedings were unavailing. The Catholic priest resident there informed the authorities that all his efforts to restrain them had proven useless and they were desperate men and would have work or food. The town was completely given up to them, none daring to make any resistance. Several stores and mills were plundered of goods and flour, and an American schooner . . . boarded and plundered of the pork which formed her cargo. We have not heard that any lives were lost, but our informant says it was a terrible thing to see so many hundreds of men frenzied with passion and hunger with no restrain upon the impulses of their wild natures.

Buffalo Commercial Advertiser, August 27, 1842.

result, the average day laborer worked only about two hundred days a year. Because the wages of the unskilled in 1820 were so low, subsequent increases failed to pull the incomes of many Irish immigrants much above bare subsistence. Under these circumstances, temporary unemployment, illness, or the death of a wage earner could quickly lead to economic crisis for a family.

Irish families lived in crowded and decaying neighborhoods. Cholera and other infectious diseases thrived in such neighborhoods, and according to the Boston physician Josiah Curtis, mortality rates there equaled "anything we have been able to discover in European cities." Yet for many Irish in the United States, however difficult their plight, they stood a better chance of survival than did their friends and relatives back home. Irish immigrants, such as Patrick Dunny of Philadelphia, praised America's more democratic atmosphere. He wrote to family and friends back in Ireland that

> People that cuts a great dash at home, when they come here they think it strange for the humble class of people to get as much respect as themselves. For when they come here it won't do to say I had such-and-such and was such-and-such back at home. But strangers here they must gain respect by their conduct and not by their tongue.

"Let the Public Look at These Plague-Spots"

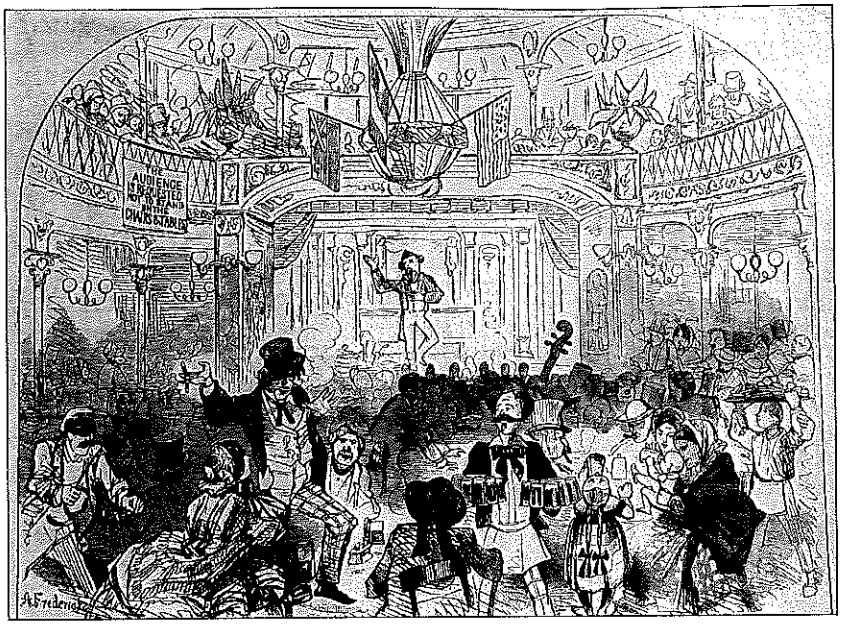
An illustration from an 1860 edition of the *New York Illustrated News* showed a reporter and artist working on a story about the Glennan family, residents of a shanty district near the city's East River called Dutch Hill. Although newspapers and magazines failed to recognize the causes of urban poverty, by midcentury, editors consistently dispatched reporters to cover the "dark background of our civilization." *New York Illustrated News*, February 11, 1860 — American Social History Project.

For Irish Catholics, the growth of the Catholic Church in the United States was also something to applaud. The church provided immigrants with spiritual, social, economic, educational, and charitable services and offered solace in the face of hard work, homesickness, and discrimination.

In some ways, Germany's emigration resembled Ireland's. In Germany, too, crop failures forced many tenants and small landholders off their land and onto ships bound for America. Both peasants and artisans chafed at the tax burdens, social restrictions, and political repression imposed by the German nobility. But the German experience differed from the Irish in several important respects. For one thing, skilled craft workers made up a larger proportion of those leaving Germany. For another, Germany's national crisis produced full-scale revolution in 1848–1849. Craft workers provided much of the driving force and popular following for the revolution. They demanded limits on the length of the working day, free universal education, producers' and consumers' cooperatives, and a guaranteed right to employment. Although they represented only a small percentage of immigrants to the United States, these exiled revolutionaries made their voices heard through German mutual aid societies, newspapers, and labor organizations.

By the 1850s, one-third of German immigrants lived in New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey, the three states favored by the Irish. Even more Germans ventured into Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, Michigan, Iowa, and Wisconsin. Germans were more likely than the Irish to become farmers, shopkeepers, and skilled tradesmen. Given the higher wages earned by German men, a far smaller percentage of German than Irish women worked for wages.

Large numbers of German immigrants entered the traditional skilled crafts as well as jobs tied to the expansion of new consumer industries. Germans excelled in piano and furniture making, the printing trades, cigar making, baking, brewing, and butchering. German-Jewish bakers provided their landsmen with matzohs, bagels, and other specialty foods. Brewers such as Adolph Busch transformed American tastes by offering a more highly carbonated, lighter, and less intoxicating beer — lager — that kept better and longer than English ales, porters, and stouts. Heinrich Steinwig and his sons opened a piano factory in New York City that employed 300 workers by 1860. In deference to middle-class Americans' preference for



A German Beer Garden on Sunday Evening

Although German immigrants did not mix politics and liquor, reformers were disconcerted by the atmosphere of their social establishments. Unlike the bars in Irish neighborhoods, beer gardens catered to whole families. As this 1859 engraving shows, public drinking was only one attraction at a beer garden; but to reformers, the presence of women and children suggested immorality. *Harper's Weekly*, October 15, 1858 — American Social History Project.

English pianos over German and Austrian ones, the Steinwegs Anglicized their name to Steinway and called the company Steinway and Sons. German printers produced cigar labels and other early forms of advertising for U.S. companies and German-language newspapers for their fellow Germans and Austrians in the United States. German entrepreneurs also opened beer gardens, which provided music, food, and drinks for the whole family and kept alive memories of their German language and culture.

Of course, most German immigrants in urban areas ended up as employees rather than owners of these industries, and the pay and working conditions continually declined. Still, the entrance of a significant segment of German immigrants into skilled crafts, farming, and the professions ensured that they, far more than their Irish counterparts, would be accepted as fully "white" by Anglo-Americans, despite the differences in their language and culture. Indeed, a racist editor at the Chicago *Daily Tribune* was delighted to find that "our German population" was "fitted to do the cheap and ingenious labor of the country." They "will live as cheaply and work infinitely more intelligently than the negro," he concluded.

From Europe's northern tier, nearly 40,000 Swedes and Norwegians made their way to the United States in the 1840s and 1850s. Like other Europeans, Scandinavia's small farmers, tenants, and laborers were plagued by agrarian crisis, semifeudal class relations, and political inequality. The downtrodden groups were soon driven to religious dissent, mass protest movements, and emigrant fever.

In the United States, most Scandinavians first settled in Illinois and Wisconsin, then spread into northern Iowa, the Minnesota Territory, and Kansas. About half became farmers, a proportion three times that of the Irish and twice that of the Germans. Other Scandinavian immigrants gravitated toward agriculture-related industries such as lumbering, furniture making, and the manufacture of farm implements. Many women became domestic servants in rural or small town areas.

English, Scottish, and Welsh settlers also found opportunity in America. The British government actively encouraged the expansion and mechanization of industry at the expense of both farmers and traditional craftspeople. These policies fueled mass protest movements and large-scale migration across the Atlantic. Once in the United States, about one-fourth became farmers, and many others became industrial workers. British workers brought with them more skills and greater experience with modern machinery than any other national group. They were also more at home with U.S. language and customs. These two factors helped them to move quickly into some of the most desirable manufacturing jobs.

More than 100,000 people also migrated from Canada to the United States between 1840 and 1860. Some were refugees, fleeing the aftermath of unsuccessful nationalist revolts in the provinces during 1837–1838. Others were victims of British trade policies in the lumber, shipbuilding, and provisioning industries of the Maritime Provinces. Especially numerous were French Canadian farmers fleeing from land speculation and British repression. Some sought farms in Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin. Others obtained wage labor in New England or northern New York State, commonly in textile mills and brickyards or as lumberjacks and farmhands.

Whatever the particular circumstances that drove English, Scottish, Canadian, and Scandinavian peoples to the United States, they were generally more skilled, better educated, and more culturally assimilable than were the Irish or German immigrants and were assumed to share the values and characteristics of native-born whites. This assured many of them entry into better jobs and better schools and provided them with the political influence that would enhance their position in the future.

African Americans in the Free-Labor North No group of native-born workers in the North was more affected by the mass immigration of the mid-nineteenth century than African Americans. Although gradually freed from slavery in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by state legislative action in the Northeast, blacks still suffered enormous disadvantages and discriminations. In most northern states, African Americans had to meet higher standards of residency and property qualifications than did whites in order to vote. Educational facilities were often segregated, and schools for blacks were more crowded and less well funded. Theaters,

public conveyances, and even most white-controlled churches forced African Americans to sit in separate and inferior sections. African Americans were also forced to live in the most dilapidated housing in the least desirable sections of a city.

In addition, white trade unions excluded black workers from their ranks; white employers refused to hire them for any but the most unskilled and lowest-paying jobs; and newly arrived immigrants pushed them out of the few more lucrative occupations—construction, the maritime trades, and carpentry—where they had earlier gained a foothold. Most African Americans, then, worked as day laborers, as domestics, or in the lowest ranks of maritime and construction jobs.

A Black Joke

A racist cartoon from an 1854 edition of the humor magazine *Yankee Notions* inadvertently illustrates the everyday harassment and cruelty to which free African Americans were subjected in the North. At a performance of a play based on Harriet Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, some white members alter a seat reservation card and, to the derisive laughter of the rest of the audience, pin it on a black woman's shawl. *Yankee Notions* (September 1854) — American Social History Project.

Despite the many obstacles they faced, African Americans fought to improve their status within the United States. When whites advocated colonization, a plan to resettle blacks in lands outside the United States, African Americans vigorously objected. In meeting after meeting, they asserted, "This is our home, and this is our country. Beneath its sod lie the bones of our fathers; for it, some of them fought, bled, and died. Here we were born, and here we will die."

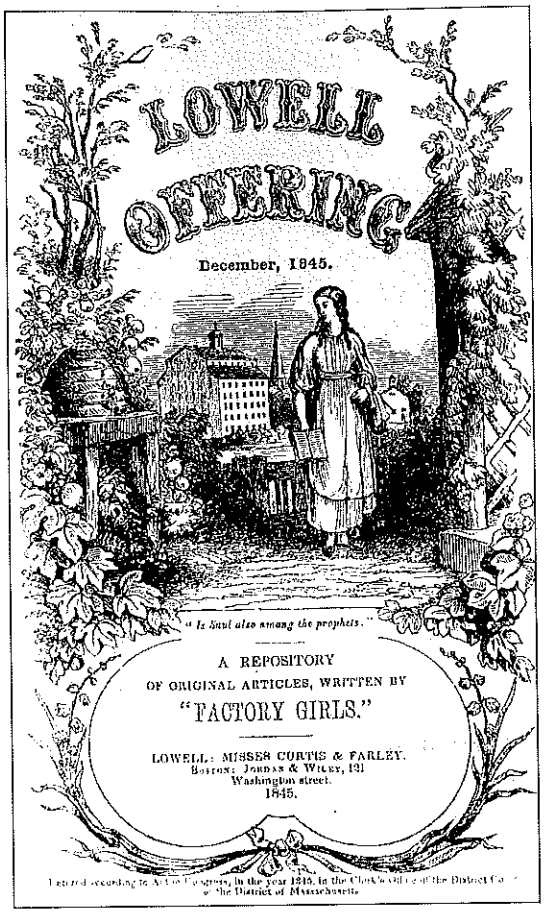
Whether denouncing colonization or organizing to obtain better jobs and schools, African Americans often gathered in churches founded earlier in the century. Churches formed the centerpiece of community life for many northern African Americans, and black ministers often served as political as well as spiritual leaders. Men such as Samuel Cornish, Amos Beman, Henry Highland Garnet, Samuel R. Ward, and J. W. C. Pennington combined religious and educational uplift with campaigns against colonization and slavery. In the 1830s, Reverend Cornish served as editor of the *Colored American*, one of the era's most widely circulated black newspapers. Reverend Beman, who presided over New Haven's African Congregational Church, helped to build a network of free black organizations in his city and state, including a benevolent association, a library club, a temperance society, an employment office, and schools. Not all black ministers were as reform-minded as these, however. Some saw their role as helping parishioners to accept discrimination in this life by focusing on the joys of the next. But despite the different approaches of their ministers, most black churches in the mid-nineteenth-century North offered solace, hope, and a place for community engagement outside the control of whites.

The small number of African Americans who had achieved success in business and the professions also served as spokespersons for their communities. Several, including editor Frederick Douglass, sailmaker James Forten, and teacher Sarah Douglass, were in the forefront of public efforts to improve the lives of freed blacks and to eradicate the institution of slavery. Yet they, too, were subject to discrimination and humiliation at the hands of whites. Douglass, for instance, was a skilled caulker when he escaped slavery. But on reaching the North and freedom, he was refused employment in his trade because his presence would drive white workers away. He struggled as a common laborer, a coachman, and a waiter until, in 1847, he had collected enough funds to establish himself as an abolitionist editor in Rochester, New York. Even as a leading light of the antislavery cause, he often depended for funds on white supporters and audiences, although many viewed him as an aberration from rather than a model for his race. Such prejudices were deeply rooted in native-born white Americans and were quickly embraced by many immigrants.

Wage-Earning Women Expand Their Sphere But Not Their Rights All wage-earning women in the mid-nineteenth century faced a small circle of options, most of them low paying and of low status. In 1840, women (including outworkers) held almost half of all manufacturing jobs in the nation and about two-thirds of those in New England. Because manufacturing expanded rapidly in this period, the numbers of both immigrant and native-born women working in factories grew. The irregular employment and low wages of men put a premium on increasing the family income through the labors of women and children.

Racial and gender discrimination put African American women in a double bind when seeking employment. Teaching and selling homemade goods remained almost the only means by which black women could achieve a modicum of economic independence. Their opportunities in industry were far more restricted than those available to immigrant or native-born white women. Moreover, in the 1840s, as Irish immigrants entered domestic service in growing numbers, the demand for black servants declined markedly, further limiting one of the few occupations available to African American women.

Technological advances sometimes improved the opportunities available to workers, but the invention of the sewing machine in 1846 did not work to women's advantage. The machine did reduce the labor required to make each garment, but employers reaped the benefits. They dropped the rates paid for each completed piece so low that women often worked fifteen to eighteen hours a day on the new machines just to sustain themselves. Furthermore, their social subordination as women, their isolation from one



Lowell Offering

During the 1840s, the *Lowell Offering* published writing by women who worked in the Lowell mills. Contributions to the publication, which was supported by the city's textile companies, promoted the morality and industry of mill women, carped occasionally about working conditions, but avoided any harsh criticism of employers. On the *Offering* cover, a pure textile maiden, book in hand, stood adjacent to a beehive (representing industriousness). By the middle of the decade, the *Offering*'s perspective was challenged by *The Voice of Industry* and other labor reform publications. *Lowell Offering*, December 1845 — American Textile History Museum.

another, and their poverty made these women easy victims of other abuses, such as sexual harassment and the arbitrary withholding of wages.

Female outworkers in large urban areas found themselves in the most destitute circumstances. In 1845, the *New York Daily Tribune* described housing conditions among these workers. Most rented "a single room, perhaps two small rooms, in the upper story of some poor, ill-constructed, unventilated house in a filthy street. . . . In these rooms all the processes of cooking, eating, sleeping, washing, and living are indiscriminately performed." These women, the *Tribune* reported, spent "every cent" of their wages on necessities but still often lacked cash to "buy any other food than a scanty supply of potatoes and Indian meal and molasses for the family." The winter cold brought freezing temperatures to their garrets, yet few could afford warm clothes or fuel.

Some female clothing workers were the wives and daughters of poor day laborers, declining craftsmen, and men seeking work in the West, but many headed their own households and had children to support. Thou-

"Who Shall Practice Virtue Under Circumstances Like These?": Working Women in Philadelphia

In 1829, Robert Dale Owen, son of utopian social reformer Robert Owen, cofounded and coedited the Free Enquirer *weekly newspaper. In this editorial, he commented on a report detailing the deplorable status of working women in the city of Philadelphia.*

The first and obvious conclusion to be deduced from the Philadelphia report is that several kinds of labor are, in that city, most inadequately rewarded; so inadequately that incessant and skillful industry from females engaged in these branches [of industry] is insufficient to procure them an honest support. . . .

I [wish] I could find terms to express the extreme importance which I attach to this subject. Not as it regards alone the poor, destitute victims to whom the report more immediately refers; but as it involves the interests of all the working and all the commercial classes of our country. . . .

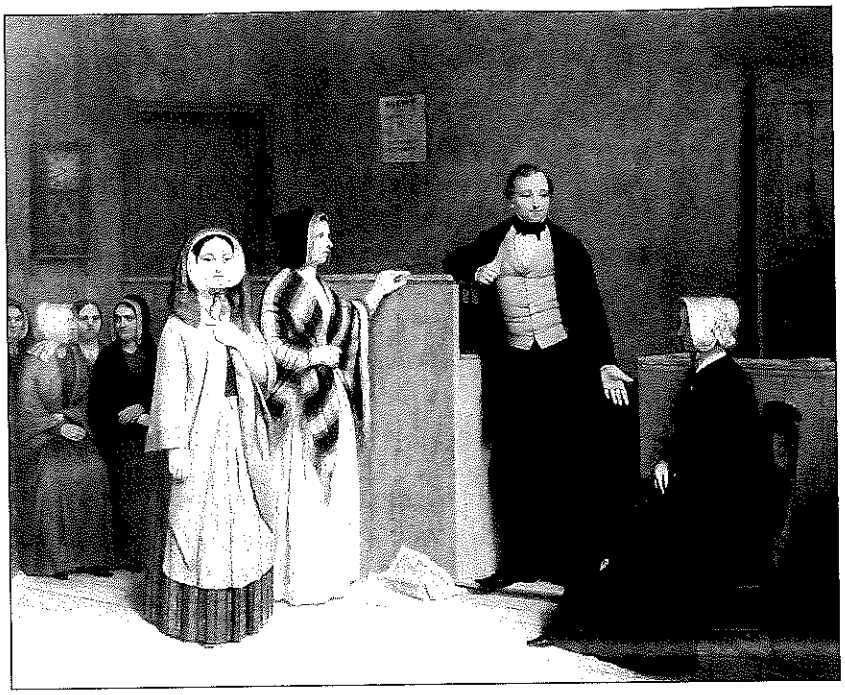
I pray our readers' undivided attention to the facts now presented to them. In Philadelphia, women who are willing to work, and who do work, at tedious, sedentary employments, early and late, day after day, obtain for food and clothing SIXTEEN DOLLARS per annum: that is to say, *if* they be expert, and *if* they be constantly employed. . . . Is there, then, a possiblity for women so employed honestly to maintain themselves?

This is not a tempting, it is a constraining to vice. IT IS A CONDEMNING TO PROFLIGACY UNDER PENALTY OF STARVATION. It is very easy to talk of character and of virtue in a drawing room; but who shall practice virtue under circumstances like these?

Philadelphia *Free Enquirer*, May 6, 1829.

sands labored for Brooks Brothers and other big companies or for contractors and subcontractors. Supplying their own work space, fuel, light, needles, and thread, they received orders and cloth from a merchant or tailor and returned the completed work to him. Fierce competition lowered pitifully low piece rates even further, while isolation in cramped apartments made it difficult for outworkers to band together to defend their common interests.

Isolation also affected the lives of domestic servants. In the 1850s, more than half of all female wage earners were domestics whose wages averaged just over a dollar a week, plus room and board. These women were often on call twenty-four hours a day, six days a week, and under the constant surveillance of their employers. Most found themselves stuck in attics or cellars with little heat or light, eating cold leftovers. Moreover, these women might find themselves subject to sexual advances by male employers or their sons,



The Intelligence Office
This 1849 painting depicted an interview in an employment agency for domestic servants. Although these agencies were ostensibly organized to shield young women from exploitation, they operated more as a reference service to prospective employers to insure against the hiring of women who were deemed unreliable or criminal. William Henry Burr, 1849, oil on canvas, 22 × 27 inches — New-York Historical Society.

with little recourse short of leaving their position. Servants were a mobile lot, but few situations offered more than minimal benefits, and most white servants left the occupation after a few years.

Teaching was one of the few occupations that offered women some real economic independence, yet it, too, was underpaid. As northern states began to require public education at the elementary level, local officials saw the advantage of hiring women at one-third to one-half the salary demanded by men. This was a profession that was open to black as well as white women, although black women were hired only to teach black children and so generally worked under more difficult conditions and for less pay than their white counterparts. Women teachers were constrained by a variety of rules and regulations: they generally had to remain single; attend church regularly; provide their own wood, water, and school supplies; and avoid even the hint of scandal. Still, they were the lucky ones—women who earned wages and respect at the same time.

Urban Mayhem and Middle-Class Reform

New forms of leisure activity offered respite from hard work and social upheaval for women and men from a wide range of ethnic and racial groups. Yet these activities both accompanied and fueled increases in noise, crime, drink, and disorder in urban areas. No doubt middle-class critics

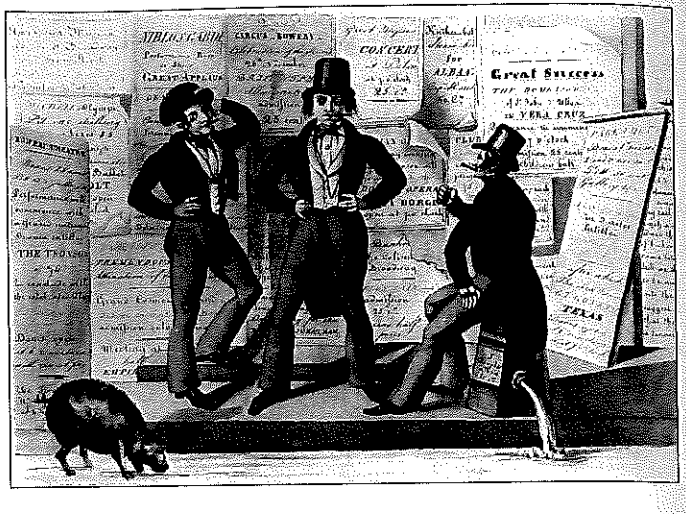
found these boisterous entertainments particularly galling because they often took place right under their noses. The city was only just beginning to divide into distinct neighborhoods defined by income, and in older cities, this change would be very gradual. As late as 1863, according to one resident, New York's fashionable Washington Square area still encompassed lives of "every variety from luxury to poverty, and almost every branch of industry is represented."

Disorderly public conduct, whether on the streets, in saloons and theaters, or at sporting events, deeply affronted affluent urbanites. They increasingly prized dignity, decorum, and strict self-control. To watch a city's public spaces being dominated by the unruly behavior of workers, immigrants, and the poor repelled them and challenged their right to dictate society's moral standards. Consequently, in city after city, taxpayers and the officials they elected decided that it was time to curb such disruptions by investing in a paid police force. Boston established a police force in 1837, and New York established one in 1844, both in response to the riots, strikes, intemperance, crime, and prostitution that now plagued large cities. Responses to perceived urban disorder took other, more far-reaching, forms as well. Native-born members of both the middle and working classes engaged in a range of moral reform campaigns, nativist political organizing, and even violence aimed at immigrants.

Leisure Activities and Class Conflict Men joined militias, volunteer fire companies, and fraternal associations and formed other organizations that brought structure and regularity to leisure activities, such as team sports and choral singing. Immigrants founded societies to preserve their distinctive cultural and political traditions in an unfamiliar setting. Other leisure time activities (such as boxing matches and plays) brought people together from diverse ethnic backgrounds or different social classes. Theater, for instance, once the province of the wealthy, was now open to working people, too. Reduced ticket prices made this possible. In the late 1700s, tickets at New York's Park Theater had cost $2.00 for the boxes, $1.50 in the pit, and $1.00 in the gallery. By the 1830s, these prices had fallen to 75¢, 50¢, and 37¢, respectively. Another popular form of entertainment was P. T. Barnum's American Museum, which offered visitors dwarfs, wax figures, jugglers, snake charmers, bearded ladies, and fortune tellers. In the 1840s, racetracks opened; and in the 1850s, baseball parks and music halls welcomed spectators.

The evolution of the theater reveals the main forces shaping popular leisure and culture in this period. Theaters grew in size and attracted a more diverse audience. Less self-consciously highbrow, theaters now offered many kinds of dramas (including temperance plays such as *The Drunkard* and so-called equestrian dramas featuring horses onstage) as well as comedies,

musical revues, and specialty acts. Blackface minstrel shows (in which white actors crudely portrayed African Americans) mixed antitemperance, anticapitalist, and racist themes and were especially popular with white audiences. But Shakespeare also drew large audiences, owing to Americans' great love of melodramas with strong moral themes and larger-than-life heroes who took their fate into their own hands.

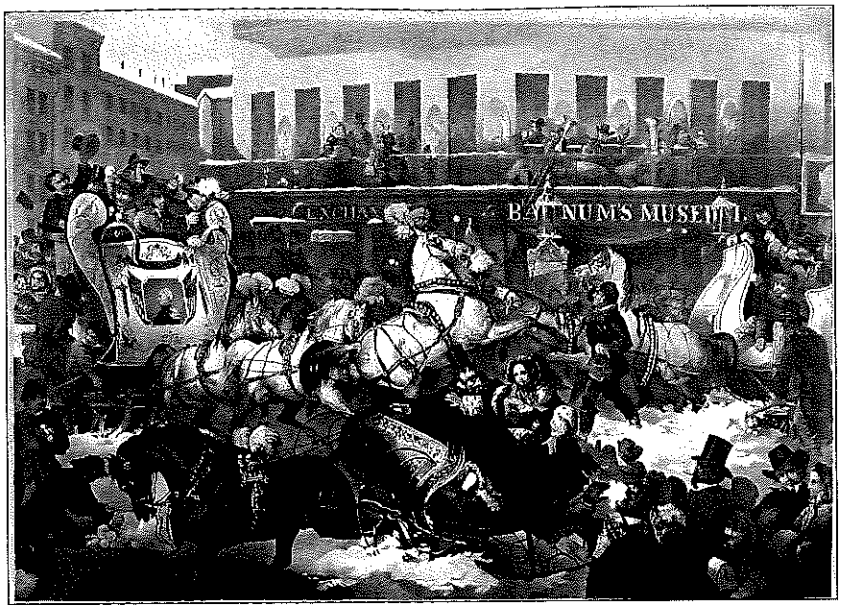


The Soaplocks, or Bowery Boys
This 1847 watercolor depicted the young men who habituated New York's working-class entertainment area: the Bowery. They wore the fashionable long sideburns that gave them the nickname. Around them, posters advertised some of the Bowery attractions the "B'hoys" attended after their workday ended. Nicolino Calyo, c. 1847, watercolor on paper, 10 7/16 × 14 7/8 inches — New-York Historical Society.

Democratic and patriotic themes especially pleased the working-class crowds. Most popular were those plays in which a rough-and-ready American told off (and often knocked down) a pompous aristocratic Englishman. Audiences cheered such confrontations enthusiastically, and Irish immigrants eagerly joined in. "When a patriotic fit seized them," British observer Frances Trollope noted, "and Yankee Doodle was called for, every man seemed to think his reputation as a citizen depended on the noise he made." Thus, working people clamored to see the American actor Edwin Forrest, while elite theatergoers favored the English actor William Macready. When Macready performed at the Astor Place Opera House in May 1849, a mob attacked the theater. In the melee that resulted after the police and the Seventh Regiment were called out, at least 22 members of the crowd were killed, and more than 140 were wounded. As one reporter wrote, the riot revealed "an opposition of classes— . . . a feeling that there is now in our country, what every good patriot hitherto has considered it his duty to deny—a high and a low class."

Clashes between advocates of "high" and "low" culture reinforced growing divisions in the audiences for popular entertainments. Baseball and horse racing, for instance, offered respectable gentlemen a chance to enjoy the sporting life, whereas boxing matches and cockfights attracted working-class crowds. The middle classes praised the sentimental ballads of Swedish singer Jenny Lind; spontaneous outbursts at neighborhood saloons or the racist tunes offered at minstrel shows were more common fare among the poor. This does not mean that workers might not have enjoyed the chance to hear Jenny Lind or that respectable gentlemen were averse to "slumming" in working-class taverns. Rather, the differences in access to various forms of social life were, like access to jobs, determined by class and often by sex and race or ethnicity as well.

Working people also clashed with each other. Boxing matches, for instance, often pitted Irish pugilists against African American or native-born white fighters, feeding ethnic and racial rivalries among the crowds of



Barnum on Broadway

Opening on New York's bustling lower Broadway in 1841, P. T. Barnum's American Museum soon became, as one contemporary observed, "the most visited place in America." Offering a cornucopia of education and entertainment, from archaeological antiquities to human "oddities" (actual and invented), Barnum's was the first institution to encompass the aspirations and predilections of an increasingly diverse urban public. As the chaotic street scene in this 1855 lithograph shows, Barnum's attractions included the building exterior, which featured a band of musicians that was said to play so badly that it drove people *into* the museum. Thomas Benecke, *Sleighing in New York*, 1855. Lithograph — Old York Library.

men in attendance. During the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s, Philadelphia mummers—bands of youths who were often mockingly made up as women or blacks—marched through the city at Christmastime, assaulted members of various ethnic or racial groups, and filled the air with fireworks, gunfire, and loud music. These events clearly reflected real hostilities between groups of working people, but they also ridiculed, annoyed, and harassed individuals higher up the social ladder. In 1843, a newspaper decried the "riotous spirit raging" among the mummers that had turned Philadelphia into a "theater of disorders which practically nullify civil government." In cities throughout

Young Democracy at the Theater

As this 1852 lithograph indicated, it was often hard to tell where the performance really was situated in popular urban theaters. The raucous audience in this print included an aggressively critical German immigrant (in the center wearing a hat) and a tough Bowery "B'hoy" preoccupied with a hasty meal (on the left). *The Old Soldier* (1852) — American Antiquarian Society.

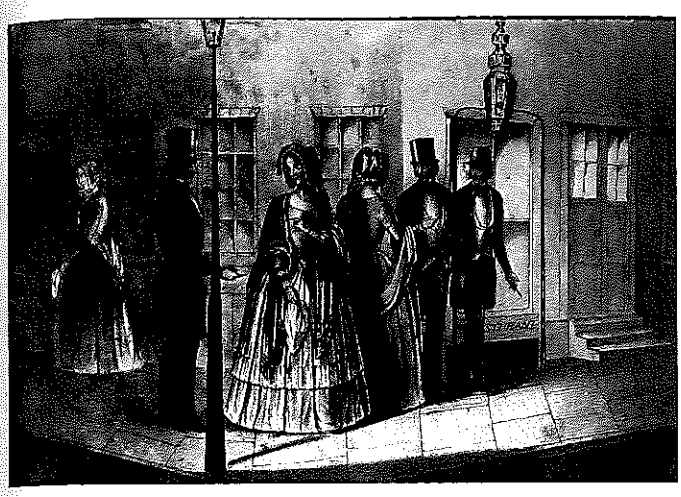
the North, raucous public celebrations of New Year's, July Fourth, and other holidays—replete with boxing matches, cock fights, bull and bear matches, and other violent entertainments—elicited similar expressions of outrage.

Urban Disorder and Family Crises In the late 1840s, New York's chief of police cited another "deplorable and growing evil, the constantly increasing number of vagrant, idle, and vicious children . . . who infest our public thoroughfares." To most middle-class journalists and reformers, these children roamed the streets because their parents were morally bankrupt. An agent of the New York City Children's Aid Society described one mother of such roaming children, saying, "In such a woman there is little confidence to be put." The agent assumed that she had indulged "some cursed vice" that had reduced her to poverty in the first place and that "if her children be not separated from her, she will drag them down, too."

In fact, these children were a byproduct of the social changes and the enormous pressures their impoverished parents faced. Rural American and immigrant families flowed into cities, filling them with children. Although some hard-pressed parents did neglect or abandon their children, most needed their children's help to survive. Sons and daughters might do household chores, run errands, look after younger sisters and brothers—even beg and scavenge for food, wood, and coal or for items that could be sold to junk dealers. Boys as young as eight or nine years of age earned money by peddling hot corn, sweet potatoes, string, pins, or newspapers. Girls worked alongside mothers doing outwork or helped out in more affluent households for a few pennies. The death of one parent (or both) while their children were still young resulted in even more dire economic circumstances and forced many children into the streets to survive as best they could.

These street children seemed to fuel the growing incidence of crime and prostitution, which was reported in lurid detail in the mass-circulation "penny press." Such urban disorders aroused concern among many Americans. Prostitution was the danger most closely associated with impoverished women. In 1832, John McDowall, agent for New York City's evangelical Magdalen Society, proclaimed, "We have satisfactorily ascertained the fact that the number of females in this city, who abandon themselves to prostitution is not less than TEN THOUSAND!!!!!" Although accurate statistics on the incidence of prostitution in the nineteenth century are nearly impossible to obtain, some two hundred "official" brothels, recognized by the police and listed in visitors' guides, existed in New York City in the 1830s. It is likely that the numbers of brothels and prostitutes rose steadily as cities grew.

Like so many other aspects of working-class life in the 1840s and 1850s, prostitution was a product of changing economic relations. With more women needing to earn a living and few chances for them to find full-time, year-round work at a living wage, women fell into prostitution during times



Hooking a Victim
This lithograph printed around 1850 depicted three prostitutes soliciting on a gas-lit city street. Some women chose prostitution as an alternative to (or to supplement) low-wage domestic or sewing work. Reformers and artists alike alternately sentimentalized and demonized prostitutes, viewing them either as betrayed innocents, victimized by poverty or deceitful seducers, or as "abandoned women" who craved sex and liquor. Serrell and Perkins, *New York by Gas-Light. Hooking a Victim*, c. 1850, lithograph — Museum of the City of New York.

of economic crisis. Some turned to it only temporarily or episodically, but others became trapped in this life. Many may have decided that prostitution was not the worst choice a workingwoman could make, offering better wages and hours than the more respectable jobs available to them.

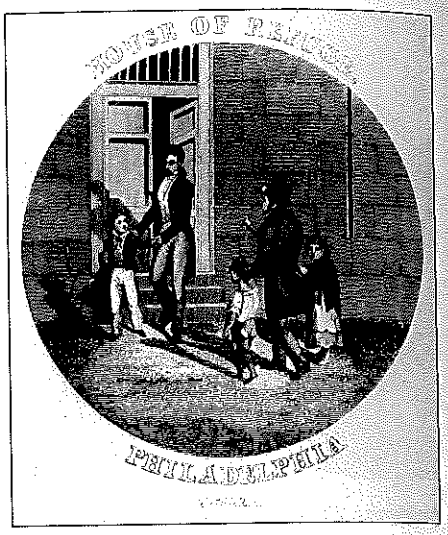
As prostitution increased, certain urban areas gained reputations based on the quality of both their prostitutes and their clientele. In New York, for example, the notorious Five Points district was inhabited, according to the New York *Evening Post*, "by a race of beings of all colours, ages, sexes, and nations." A center of poor black and poor Irish settlement, it was home to numerous bars, gambling dens, and brothels.

Guides printed in such papers as *The Whip* helped more genteel visitors and locals find a better class of brothel. In the early 1840s, they ranked "Princess Julia's" house, located at 55 Leonard Street, as one of the best in New York. A full-time police officer lived across the street, an opera house was down the block, and a former mayor, Edward P. Livingston, lived nearby, on the other side of the Zion Methodist Church, whose black congregants included some of the city's most respectable families. Yet such locations made clear that prostitution was no longer confined to poor neighborhoods. Instead, social investigator William Sanger claimed, it "boldly strikes through our most thronged and elegant thoroughfares." But this elegance did not save prostitutes from disease, assaults, or the inevitable decline in wages that occurred with age.

Middle-Class Efforts at Moral Reform Prostitution became a growing concern among middle-class Americans in cities across the country. In Rochester, New York, a canal town of fewer than 15,000 in 1836, the wives of upwardly mobile bankers, merchants, and professionals formed a local Female Moral Reform Society and discussed such questions as "Ought licentious men be exposed?" Throughout the late 1830s and early 1840s, they prayed for the salvation of prostitutes, condemned the men who bought their services, and circulated religious tracts and periodicals. In 1849, they institutionalized their rescue efforts by founding a Home for Friendless and Virtuous Females to offer refuge to young women who were at risk of becoming prostitutes (although not to those already fallen). Many of these reform-minded women were also active in the city's temperance society;

several helped to found the Rochester Orphan Asylum; and dozens signed petitions on behalf of the abolition of slavery.

Earlier reformers had often argued that social ills were the fault of individuals rather than society. Female moral reformers, however, took a different tack, blaming men, usually well-to-do and native-born, for ruining young women and driving them into a life of prostitution. These reformers believed that disseminating middle-class Protestant values could save society. In the 1850s, for instance, the New York's Children's Aid Society placed poor urban (often Catholic) youngsters with rural Protestant foster parents as the best means of "saving" them from dangerous influences. At times, they "rescued" such young people without their parents' approval. The society's industrial schools and lodging houses also taught street girls that "nothing was so honorable as industrious house-work," thereby preparing them for the kind of domestic service jobs that made the lives of middle-class housewives easier.



House of Refuge
Reformers blamed poverty on the moral failure of working-class households. Giving up on adults, many "missionaries" focused on the children of the poor. This emblem of the Philadelphia House of Refuge declared the reformers' belief in their capacity to convert children into model citizens. C. G. Childs, Philadelphia House of Refuge — Print Collection, Miriam and Ira Wallach Division of Art, Prints, and Photographs, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

Moral reform campaigns appealed not just to well-to-do women, but also to people of lesser means who had high hopes for themselves. The promise of advancement for those who lived right and worked hard spoke to the dreams of many small shopkeepers, farmers, and craftsmen. Among this group, many disapproved of the growing ranks of propertyless laborers below them, with their irreverent and unruly behavior. This disapproval mounted in the 1840s and 1850s as more and more Irish and German immigrants flowed into low-income occupations. In this case, however, many reform-minded Americans blamed the poor for their poverty and provided support to nativist movements.

Nativist Attacks on Immigrants, African Americans, and Workers

Native-born whites had often disparaged immigrant laborers, claiming that the newcomers belonged in the low-paying jobs they held. Massachusetts educator and politician Edward Everett, for example, argued that the Irish should be welcomed to America because "their inferiority as a race compels them to go to the bottom" of the occupational scale, "and the consequence is that we are all, all of us, the higher lifted because they are here." Even before the influx of Irish famine refugees, anti-Catholic sentiment flourished. In 1834, a group of Protestant workingmen, prompted by the rumor that the nuns in Boston's Ursuline convent school were forcing their primarily Protestant students to convert to Catholicism, burned the convent to the ground. State authorities failed to intervene on the sisters' behalf.

By the 1840s, such prejudices had spawned a national movement. An army of anti-immigrant writers, educators, ministers, and politicians overlooked the contributions of immigrant laborers and argued that most of the

"Can This Be the Sabbath?": Protestant Reform

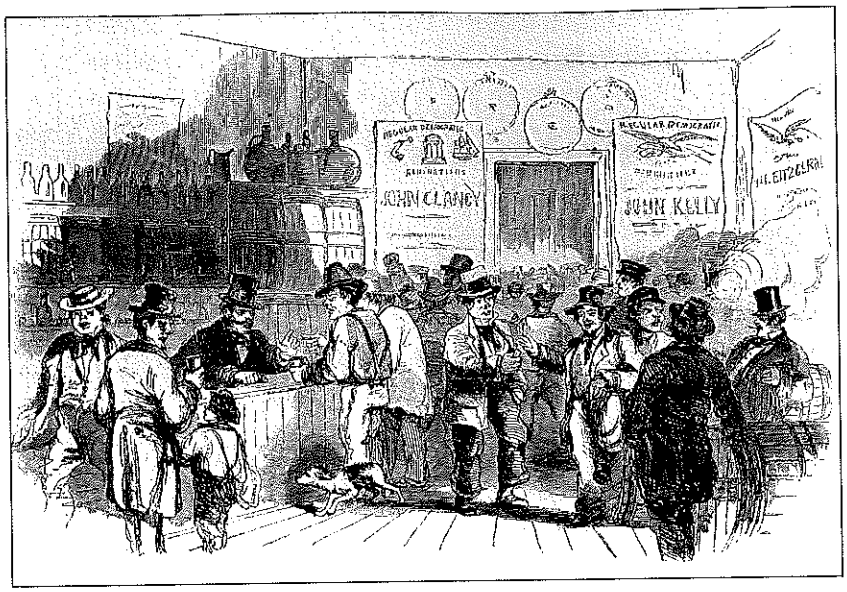
In the House of Industry's 1857 Monthly Record, *a shocked Protestant missionary, Louis M. Pease, describes the Sunday activity in the Five Points, a working-class immigrant neighborhood in New York City. Troubled by evidence of extreme poverty in the nation's industrializing cities, many Protestant reformers set up mission houses in poor, immigrant neighborhoods to minister to the needs of the largely Catholic residents. But a cultural abyss divided reformers from the people they wanted to help.*

"Can this be the Sabbath—God's holy day?" I involuntarily exclaimed, as I stood for a moment at the entrance of one of the avenues leading to the Five Points, and beheld the crowd of people pressing up and down Chatham street, while the heavily laden cars passed by, crowded with pleasure-seekers bound for the country, on their weekly holiday excursion. And then, as I walked slowly up Baxter street, to see the rum-shops, the junk-shops, the pawn-shops, the groceries, and the low Jewish clothing-stalls all open, the side-walks lined with apple-stands, and juvenile traffickers in papers and peanuts, while here and there were groups of night-thieves, vagabond boys, and loathsome, shameless girls prematurely ripened into infamous womanhood. Oh! who would suppose that this was the sabbath of the Metropolis of this great and Heaven-blessed country!

Five Points Monthly Record, May 1857.

nation's ills were the result of the newcomers' rejection of "American" work habits, culture, and religion. Immigrants' consumption of liquor and beer deeply offended these pious nativists, who linked temperance to morality. Even temperate and devout immigrants angered nativists if the immigrants were Catholic. In addition, nativists believed that the votes of immigrant men could be easily bought with promises of drink or employment.

Immigration bolstered the number of Roman Catholics in the United States in the 1840s and 1850s. Their ideals and beliefs contrasted sharply with those of evangelical Protestants. Where evangelicals pursued human perfection, Catholics adhered to an older and more lenient point of view: human beings were conceived in sin and were incapable of perfection on Earth. Although the church demanded moral conduct from Catholics, it granted that human frailty would inevitably, and repeatedly, lead them astray. The way back from sin could be found not in a single conversion, but in regular confession, repentance, and priestly absolution. Many Protestants also



The Voting-Place

Evangelical reformers objected to the undisciplined and sometimes violent atmosphere of working-class saloons. But, as indicated in this 1858 engraving of a bar in the Irish "Five Points" section of New York, reformers' concern involved more than the excesses of public drinking. The saloons were the organizing centers for the reformers' rivals, urban political machines like New York's Tammany Hall. *Harper's Weekly*, November 13, 1858 — American Social History Project.

mistakenly believed that the Catholic Church required a kind of loyalty from its congregants that undermined democratic political practices.

In 1850, scattered clusters of secret anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic societies banded together into a national organization, and a year later, they formed a new political party. Officially named the American Party, its followers were popularly labeled "Know-Nothings" because when questioned by outsiders, members often responded, "I know nothing." The Know-Nothings sought to disfranchise immigrant voters through literacy tests and to unite northern and southern whites against the "alien menace." They believed that a Catholic conspiracy was threatening America's republican institutions. One important goal, which they shared with some antislavery advocates, was keeping the West open for free settlement, although in this case, they explicitly meant native-born white settlement.

In some cases, nativists clashed violently with immigrants. In May 1844, shots emanating from an Irish firehouse scattered participants in a nativist rally in Philadelphia. Three nativists were killed in the opening skirmish, and ten more along with one Irishman were slain as the hostilities dragged on. The following night, a full-scale riot erupted as nativist residents went on the attack, burning and looting Irish establishments and homes and attacking churches and other community institutions. A decade later, in Brooklyn, immigrants and Know-Nothings clashed during the fall elections. Know-Nothings challenged the citizenship papers of Irish voters, inspiring an Irish mob to beat to death an election official. The mob also drove off the nine deputies who were sent to protect the polls. Some women threw stones

Defenders of the True Faith

The popular political cartoonist David Claypool Johnston, who converted to Catholicism, condemned the nativist rioters who burned down the Ursuline Convent in Charlestown, Massachusetts, on August 11, 1834. *Scraps* (1835) — Boston Athenaeum.

and flatirons, and a Mrs. Murphy urged the crowd to "kill them bloody Know-Nothings."

Competition for jobs provided another volatile arena for native-born and foreign-born groups. Many native-born workers found more desirable positions in these years, but many others were displaced by lower-paid immigrants. Some stayed in their old jobs, resenting their new foreign-born coworkers. Employers frequently encouraged nativist attitudes, partly out of genuine conviction, partly to deflect workers' anger away from themselves, and partly to undermine their employees' capacity to organize across ethnic lines. During the 1840s and 1850s, bloody brawls repeatedly broke out as groups of workers of different origins pitted themselves against one another.

The most brutal battles occurred between newly arrived immigrants and native-born blacks. Irish immigrants had been forced to the bottom of the occupational hierarchy by native-born whites, and there they vied for jobs with African Americans. Some employers, who preferred what they perceived as "docile Negroes" to "rowdy Irish," encouraged such conflict. An ad in the *New York Herald* in the 1840s read, "Wanted, A Cook, Washer, and Ironer; who perfectly understands her business; any color or country except

Nativist and Immigrant Arguments in the 1840s

Nativist—anti-immigrant—appeals to American-born workers and merchants were common throughout the 1840s and 1850s. This election circular, printed in the New York Daily Plebeian *on April 20, 1844, conveys a sense of how fear of immigrants was manipulated by politicians in search of votes and by businessmen looking to further divide the urban working class. Immigrants responded to such nativist attacks in various ways. In this 1847 letter to the New York* Champion of American Labor, *one foreign-born worker warned of the effects of nativism on mutual support between American- and foreign-born workers in the United States.*

"Look at the Hordes of Dutch and Irish Thieves and Vagabonds": A Nativist Election Appeal

Look at the hordes of Dutch and Irish thieves and vagabonds, roaming about our streets, picking up rags and bones, pilfering sugar and coffee along our wharves and slips, and whatever our native citizens happen to leave in their way. Look at the English and Scotch pick-pockets and burglars, crowding our places of amusement, steam-boat landings, and hotels. Look at the Italian and French mountebanks, roaming the streets of every city in the Union with their dancing monkeys and hand-organs, all as an excuse for the purpose of robbing us of our property the first favorable opportunity. Look at the wandering Jews, crowding our business streets with their shops as receptacles for stolen goods, encouraging thievery and dishonesty among our citizens. Look at the Irish and Dutch grocers and rum-sellers monopolizing the business which properly belongs to our own native and true-born citizens.

New York Daily Plebeian, April 20, 1844.

"We Are Strong and Getting Stronger": Immigrants Challenge Nativist Beliefs

You intend to shut out the foreigners or naturalized citizens of this country from any benefit that will arise from your plans to get better wages. . . . You use the word American very often and nothing at all is said about naturalized citizens, but if you think to succeed without the aid of foreigners you will find yourself mistaken; for we are strong and are getting stronger every day, and though we feel the effects of competition from these men who are sent here from the poorhouses of Europe, yet if you don't include us to get better wages by shutting off such men, why, you needn't expect our help.

Champion of American Labor, April 17, 1847.

Irish." In response to such prejudice, Irish immigrants often laid claim to the "wages of whiteness," ridiculing, demeaning, and attacking the African Americans with whom they competed. In 1842, Irish coal miners in Pennsylvania attacked blacks who competed for their jobs; in 1853, armed African Americans replaced striking Irishmen on the Erie Railroad; and in 1855, Irish and black dockworkers battled along the New York City water-

The Day We Celebrate
Harper's Weekly cartoonist Thomas Nast portrayed a riot on St. Patrick's Day as a violent urban "sport." Nast's portrayal of the Irish, baring their teeth along with other weaponry, was typical of nineteenth-century cartoonists, who tended to give each immigrant working-class group the physical traits that were supposedly characteristic of its "race" and place in a social hierarchy. *Harper's Weekly*, April 6, 1867 — American Social History Project.

front. Over and over again, those on the bottom rungs of the economic ladder struggled to keep one step above the nearest competition.

Although nativists embraced conservative values, many viewed themselves as part of broader reform movements of the era. Most advocated temperance, condemned prostitution, and supported colonization. Some even advocated the end of slavery, joining with those abolitionists who believed that African Americans were inferior to whites, just as immigrants were inferior to native-born Americans.

Radical Reform

Evangelical Protestantism was a driving force among both conservative nativists and progressive advocates of reform. Even some radicals emerged among evangelicals, but they usually joined with activists who embraced other religious traditions or who rejected religion altogether as a basis for social change. Radicals were drawn to many of the same reform campaigns as their moderate counterparts, but they approached these issues in a distinctive spirit. Whereas moderate reformers hoped that public schools would help to tame the lower classes and create more conscientious and disciplined wives and workers, radicals wanted the schools to help working people learn and defend their rights as citizens and producers. The same point of view influenced radicals to advocate for land reform and to form separate groups such as the Washingtonian Temperance Society, through which reformed drunkards worked to uplift themselves and convert other

"Industry Without Drudgery": Planning for Brook Farm

In 1840, Unitarian minister George Ripley wrote to the Transcendentalist author Ralph Waldo Emerson in an (unsuccessful) effort to convince him to join, or at least invest in, Ripley's planned utopian community. Brook Farm began operations in 1841 in West Roxbury, Massachusetts; its members lived and dined communally and divided their time between farm work and artistic and scholarly pursuits. Although other utopian communities, such as Oneida in upstate New York and Amana in Iowa, achieved self-sufficiency, Brook Farm ultimately failed. The community never recovered from a devastating fire in 1846, and it closed its doors in 1847.

My Dear Sir,—

. . . Our objects, as you know, are to insure a more natural union between intellectual and manual labor than now exists; to combine the thinker and the worker, as far as possible, in the same individual; to guarantee the highest mental freedom, by providing all with labor, adapted to their tastes and talents, and securing to them the fruits of their industry; to do away the necessity of menial services, by opening the benefits of education and the profits of labor to all; and thus to prepare a society of liberal, intelligent, and cultivated persons, whose relations with each other would permit a more simple and wholesome life, than can be led amidst the pressure of our competitive institutions.

To accomplish these objects, we propose to take a small tract of land, which, under skillful husbandry, uniting the garden and the farm, will be adequate to the subsistence of the families; and to connect with this a school or college, in which the most complete instruction shall be given, from the first rudiments to the highest culture. Our farm would be a place for improving the race of men that lived on it; . . . we should have industry without drudgery, and true equality without its vulgarity. . . .

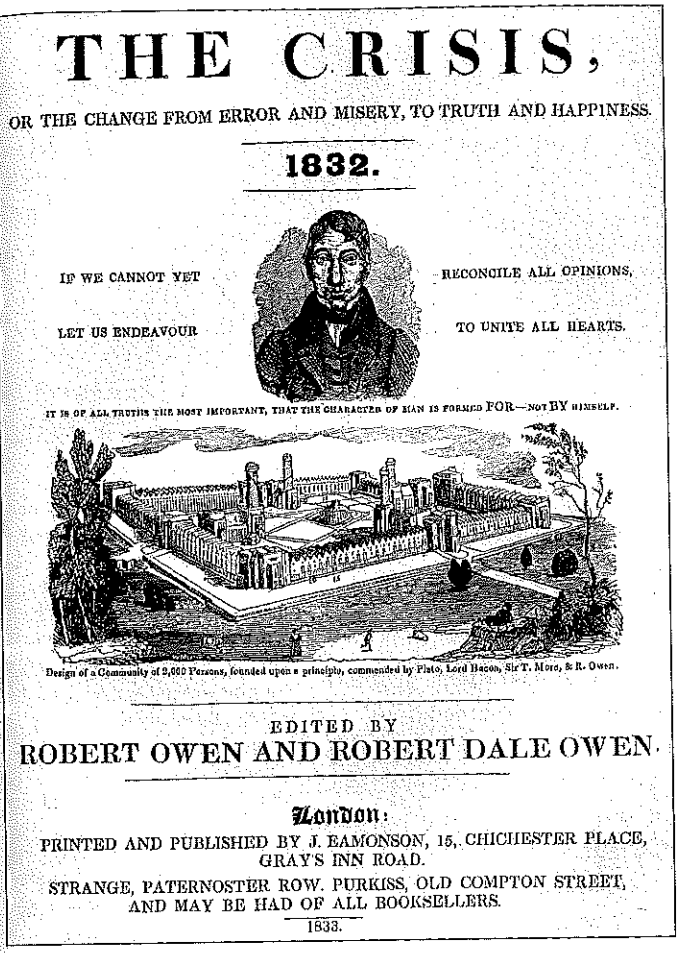
George Ripley

P. S. . . . let me suggest the inquiry, whether our Association should not be composed of various classes of men? . . . I think we should be content to join with others . . . whose gifts and abilities would make their services important. For instance, I should like to have a good washerwoman in my parish admitted into the plot. She is certainly not a Minerva or a Venus; but we might educate her two children to wisdom and varied accomplishments, who otherwise will be doomed to drudge through life. The same is true of some farmers and mechanics, whom we should like with us.

George Ripley to Ralph Waldo Emerson, November 9, 1840, in O. B. Frothingham, *George Ripley* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1882), 307–312.

workingmen to their cause. The result was a tug-of-war between radical and moderate reformers, with one side stressing popular participation and democratic rights and the other emphasizing social order.

Faced with more urban disorder than their counterparts from the 1820s and 1830s, some radical reformers established utopian communities in the hopes of creating new models for social harmony. Others focused on mak-



THE CRISIS,

OR THE CHANGE FROM ERROR AND MISERY, TO TRUTH AND HAPPINESS.

1832.

IF WE CANNOT YET RECONCILE ALL OPINIONS,

LET US ENDEAVOUR TO UNITE ALL HEARTS.

IT IS OF ALL TRUTHS THE MOST IMPORTANT, THAT THE CHARACTER OF MAN IS FORMED FOR—NOT BY HIMSELF.

Design of a Community of 2,000 Persons, founded upon a principle, commended by Plato, Lord Bacon, Sir T. More, & R. Owen.

EDITED BY
ROBERT OWEN AND ROBERT DALE OWEN.

London:
PRINTED AND PUBLISHED BY J. EAMONSON, 15, CHICHESTER PLACE, GRAY'S INN ROAD.
STRANGE, PATERNOSTER ROW. PURKISS, OLD COMPTON STREET, AND MAY BE HAD OF ALL BOOKSELLERS.
1833.

"The Change from Error and Misery, to Truth and Happiness"

Robert Owen and the design of his New Harmony utopian community in Indiana appeared on the title page of *The Crisis*, written by Owen and his son in 1833. Robert Owen and Robert Dale Owen, *The Crisis, or the Change from Error and Misery, to Truth and Happiness* (1833) — Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

ing land available to all. Women came together in an attempt to advance their own rights as well as those of enslaved African Americans. The abolition of slavery became the primary goal of a number of northern reformers. These efforts brought together women and men, blacks and whites, working-class and middle-class activists, and native-born and immigrant Americans. Most believed, as labor journalist William Young proclaimed in 1845, that God intended that humanity "should be bound together by nature's golden chain . . . into one harmonious whole—no slaves—no servants—no masters—no oppressed and no oppressors—but in the language of Christ—'For one is your master, and all ye are brethren.'"

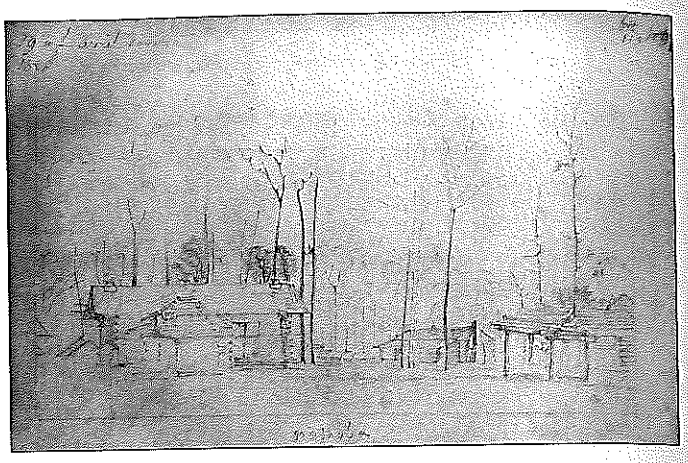
Communal Experiments and Cooperative Enterprises One of the most radical movements of the nineteenth century involved establishing entirely new communities based on collective ownership of property and infused with the spirit of cooperation instead of competition. European immigrants had first erected such utopian societies in North America in the eighteenth century. The largest of these was created by a religious movement called the Shakers. By the 1830s, several Shaker communities in New York and Massachusetts housed more than 6,000 members.

Other founders of utopian communities drew their ideas from more secular sources. In the 1820s, the Irish-born industrialist Robert Owen applied ideas that he had developed about social reform in Scotland to communities in the United States. In Owen's New Harmony, Indiana, community, there would be "no personal inequality, or gradation of rank and station; all will be equal in their condition."

In the late 1830s and 1840s, utopian communities multiplied. Some, such as Brook Farm in Massachusetts, founded in 1841, expressed Christian disenchantment with commercializing and industrializing America. More, however, followed the lead of Robert Owen, Charles Fourier, and other European socialists and sought economic equality among their residents.

Whether religious or secular, most of the communities that were founded in this period were closely tied to other social movements, especially peace, abolition, and woman's rights movements.

The most famous, and controversial, of these nineteenth-century utopian societies was founded at Oneida, New York, by John Humphrey Noyes in 1848. Following the same economic plan as New Harmony and Brook Farm, women and men at Oneida shared labor and were paid equal wages for equal work. But Noyes also advocated sexual reform. Oneida residents practiced something called "complex marriage," in which women and men could divorce and remarry, children were raised communally, and reproduction was planned. The system of sex and marriage, which was intended to free women from the burdens of male domination and frequent childbearing, was highly regulated. The community had to approve marital unions, for example, and men were required to control their sexual urges. Women, however, gained little authority over their work or their sexual relations and lost authority over their children. Still, Oneida thrived for four decades despite the popular outrage provoked by the community's sexual practices.



Nashoba, April 19, 1828
Influenced by Robert Owen and New Harmony, Frances Wright established an interracial utopian community, Nashoba, near Memphis, Tennessee. Its white and black residents (including slaves purchased by Wright) worked and lived together. Believing that racism could be defeated only by the "amalgamation of the races," Wright permitted interracial sexual relationships in the Nashoba community. Even abolitionists condemned the experiment. This is a sketch by Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, a French artist-naturalist who spent ten years at New Harmony. Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, April 19, 1828, pencil drawing — No. 43122, Musée d'Histoire Naturelle du Havre.

The greatest obstacle to the dozens of utopian communities that emerged in the 1830s and 1840s was economic failure, not public outrage. Most began with only limited financial resources, which made it difficult to match the enticements offered by the competitive world outside. Moreover, even modest economic setbacks could spell disaster for communities that were already operating close to the margin. Critics cited failed communities as proof that the whole experiment was futile. Yet many utopian residents felt differently. Mary Paul, a former Lowell textile worker who lived in a utopian community in Red Bank, New Jersey, in 1853–1854, wrote her father about the benefits of her new life. In just one year, Paul reported, I have "already seen enough to convince me that [this] is the true life. And although all the attempts that have ever yet been made towards it [a society built on Fourier's principles] have been failures . . . my faith in the principle is as strong as ever, stronger if possible."

Movements for Land Reform Land reform offered another means of improving the plight of working-class Americans. The promise of abundant land had lured millions across the Atlantic. It still beckoned in the 1840s and 1850s. The federal government owned huge tracts of unimproved soil in the West, but most was given in subsidy to private railroad companies or sold in

"The Money-power Must Be Superseded by the Man-power": Workers' Cooperatives

In 1845, the Boston Mechanics' and Laborers' Association founded a cooperative society. A committee of that association drafted the statement excerpted here to explain the purpose and methods of cooperation.

. . . Here, as [in Europe], the soil, motive power, and machinery are monopolized by the idle few; all the sources of wealth, all the instrumentalities of life, and even the right and privilege of industry are taken away from the people. Monopoly has laid its ruthless hands upon labor itself, and forced the sale of the muscles and skill of the toiling many, and under the specious name 'wages' is robbing them of the fruits of their industry. . . .

The remedy lies in a radical change of principle and policy. Our isolated position and interests, and our antisocial habits, must be abandoned. The Money-power must be superseded by the Man-power. Universal Monopoly must give place to Societary ownership, occupancy, and use. . . . The direction and profits of industry must be kept in the hands of the producers. Laborers must own their own shops and factories, work their own stock, sell their own merchandise, and enjoy the fruits of their own toil. Our Lowells must be owned by the artisans who build them, and [by] the operatives who run the machinery and do all the work. And the dividend, instead of being given to the idle parasites of a distant city, should be shared among those who perform the labor. Our Lynns must give the fortunes made by the [shoe] dealer and employer, to those who use the awl and use the material.

The Awl, January 18, 1845.

large tracts on the open market. Big land companies, banks, and wealthy individual speculators bought up enormous quantities of public land. By 1860, speculators owned over twenty million acres in Illinois and Iowa alone—nearly a quarter of the land in those states. They then jacked up prices and resold the land in smaller plots to homesteaders. Those who could not afford land on these terms became laborers or tenants of large landowners. Those who did buy their own farms frequently went into debt to do so. Later, unable to meet their payments, many lost both their homesteads and their life savings.

Reformers protested these government land policies, demanding that public lands be distributed to the needy, which would slow the growth of wage labor and tenancy. The most energetic land reformer in the 1830s and 1840s was George Henry Evans, a Welsh-born printer and a leader of the Workingmen's Party. Evans insisted, "If any man has a right . . . to live, he has a right to land enough for his subsistence. Deprive anyone of these rights, and you place him at the mercy of those who possess them." Public

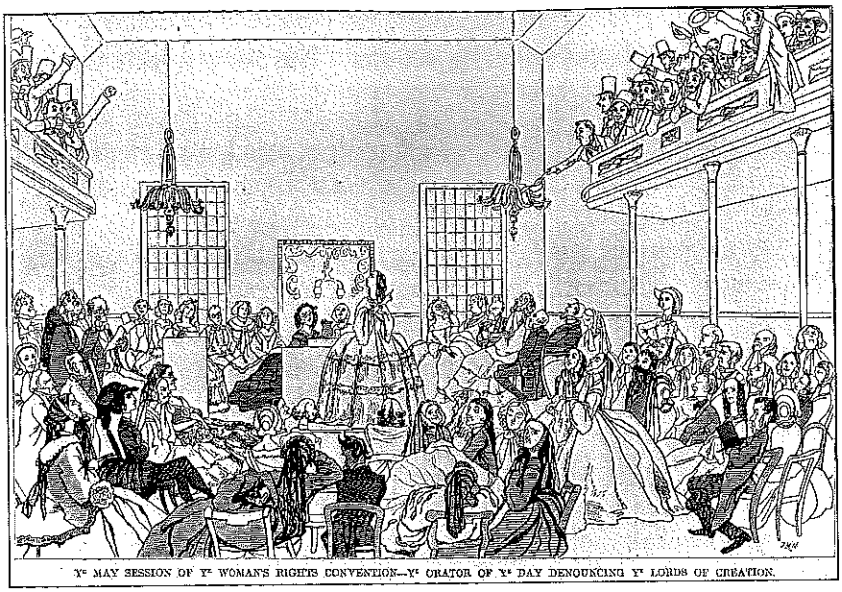
land must be made available free of charge to those who would actually settle and till it.

The National Trades Union, which was organized as a labor union in 1834, also linked "the interests and independence of the laboring class" to the land question. Its members believed that if "public lands were left open to actual settlers," surplus workers would be "drained off" from the cities into agriculture, relieving unemployment and job competition. The Massachusetts labor newspaper *Voice of Industry,* warmly endorsed demands for "free soil," as did Lynn's shoe workers. As one shoemaker demanded, "Where shall we go but on to the land? Deprive us of this and you reduce us to the condition of the serfs of Europe." Many German immigrants agreed, hoping that wider access to land would lessen job competition and thus undermine nativism.

Women Reformers Seek Rights for Themselves Women were active in many of the reform and radical movements of the 1830s and 1840s. In this period, most women lacked the right to keep their wages, retain custody over their children, or protect their bodies from assault. Free black and immigrant women were especially limited in their occupational options, yet many had to support their families and face harassment and assaults by white employers. Although few of these women joined the formal women's rights movement in this period, many recognized the need for wider opportunities and collective action.

In 1825, New York seamstresses had organized the first all-women's strike in the United States. By 1831, striking tailoress Sarah Monroe claimed, "It needs no small courage from us . . . to come before the public in the defence of our own rights, but . . . if it is unfashionable for the *men* to bear oppression in silence, why is it not also become unfashionable with the women?" Lowell mill girls organized themselves for better wages and working conditions throughout the 1830s and 1840s (see chapter 7). In 1845, members of the Ladies Industrial Association in New York City who sought similar goals declared, "The boon we ask is founded upon RIGHT alone." For these women, the most important issues involved rights to good jobs and fair wages.

Middle-class women did not expect to work for wages, and they generally viewed their lives as superior to those of the poor and working class. Few recognized or supported these women's claims for rights of their own. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, one of the founders of the women's rights movement in the United States, did claim that the condition of Irish women in her hometown of Seneca Falls, New York, helped to inspire her interest in the cause. Yet she viewed her Irish neighbors as passive victims of male domination, expressing both concern and condescension for their plight:



"The Amazonian Convention"
The proceedings of a women's rights meeting were disrupted by hecklers in an 1859 cartoon published in *Harper's Weekly*.
J. M'Nevin, *Harper's Weekly*, June 11, 1859 — American Social History Project.

> Alas! Alas! who can measure the mountains of sorrow and suffering endured in unwelcome motherhood in the abodes of ignorance, poverty, and vice, where terror-stricken women and children are the victims of strong men frenzied with passion and intoxicating drink?

Most woman's rights advocates in the 1840s and 1850s were prompted to analyze the position of women in society because of their involvement in other social causes, most notably the abolition of slavery. As abolitionist Angelina Grimké noted, "The investigation of the rights of the slave has led me to a better understanding of my own." It was members of the Society of Friends, known as Quakers, who provided the core of the movement for women's rights in the mid-nineteenth century. Led by Lucretia Mott of Philadelphia, Mary Ann McClintock of Waterloo, New York, and Amy Post of Rochester, these women claimed a decade of experience as advocates of abolition, Indian rights, land reform, and other causes. The campaign for equality of the sexes was important as part of this larger effort to achieve racial and economic justice.

Four Quaker activists joined Elizabeth Cady Stanton in organizing the first women's rights convention in the United States, held in July 1848 at Seneca Falls, New York. Attended by some 200 to 300 people, the convention celebrated the achievements of women past and present but noted the many burdens placed on them on account of their sex. One hundred participants signed a manifesto modeled on the Declaration of Independence, declaring "all men and women are created equal." Demands for greater social and

"Repeated Injuries and Usurpations": The Seneca Falls Convention

The resolutions passed at the first women's rights convention, at Seneca Falls in 1848, parts of which are presented here, demanded that women be given their full political and civil rights as citizens of the United States.

The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of a absolute tyranny over her. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world:

He has never permitted her to exercise her inalienable right to the elective franchise.

He has compelled her to submit to laws, in the formation of which she had no voice.

He has made her, if married, in the eye of the law, civilly dead.

He has taken from her all right in property, even to the wages she earns.

. . . In the covenant of marriage, she is compelled to promise obedience to her husband, he becoming, to all intents and purposes, her master—the law giving him power to deprive her of her liberty, and to administer chastisement.

He has monopolized nearly all the profitable employments, and from those she is permitted to follow, she receives but a scanty remuneration. He closes against her all the avenues to wealth and distinction which he considers most honorable to himself. As a teacher of theology, medicine, or law, she is not known.

He has created a false public sentiment by giving to the world a different code of morals for men and women, by which moral delinquencies which exclude women from society, are not only tolerated, but deemed of little account in man.

He has endeavored, in every way that he could, to destroy her confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect, and to make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life.

Philip S. Foner, ed., *We the Other People* (1976).

economic rights for American women had been voiced before this. But only now did an organized movement arise, led by women and dedicated to winning for women a wider sphere and equal rights. For a few leaders, including Stanton, the most crucial demand to ensure women's first-class citizenship was the right to vote. Supported by Frederick Douglass, who was deeply concerned with votes for free blacks, the suffrage resolution passed, though not unanimously, as the other resolutions did.

For most women's rights advocates, however, an enlarged sphere of action for women in the home, the church, education, and work was as

"Am I Not a Woman and a Sister?"
This 1837 engraving was a variation on the standard American abolitionist symbol of the supplicant male slave. The symbol, accompanied by the motto "Am I not a man and a brother?," was adopted from the seal of the British Society for the Abolition of Slavery, created by the English abolitionist and potter Josiah Wedgwood in 1787.
George Bourne, *Slavery Illustrated in Its Effects upon Women* (1837) — Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

important as political rights. For many women, equal education was considered the most important right. Individuals such as Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman in the United States to receive an M.D. degree, from Geneva Medical College in central New York in 1849, showed what women could do if given the chance. Many women with far fewer opportunities than Blackwell, including immigrant, African American, and working-class women, recognized the value of greater access to education, decent wages, and legal rights. A few woman's rights advocates recognized these connections and joined their working-class sisters in forming Working Women's Protective Unions. Most also remained ardent abolitionists.

Abolitionists Fight Slavery and Each Other For many reform-minded women and men, the eradication of slavery was the most important movement of the day. Led by advocates of immediate emancipation such as William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, and Abby Kelley, radical abolitionists argued that other forms of bondage—wage slavery and prostitution, for instance—paled in comparison with the millions who were held in servitude by southern planters. Seeking to create a movement that reflected democratic and egalitarian ideals, radical abolitionists demanded that antislavery groups, including the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS), be open to women as well as to men and to African Americans as well as to whites.

The commitment of radical abolitionists to principles of both racial and sexual equality ensured that some who agreed with the abolition of slavery would disagree over the means to achieve emancipation. By the late 1830s and 1840s, the result was factionalism and infighting among abolitionists. But such disagreements also multiplied the number and range of antislavery movements, forcing more and more of those who lived in the free-labor North to confront their complicity with slavery in the South.

In 1837, tensions among antislavery advocates mounted in response to a controversial lecture tour by Sarah and Angelina Grimké. Southern-born daughters of a slaveholder, the Grimkés rejected the values of their family and region, moved to Philadelphia, and joined the Society of Friends. On speaking tours, they noted, among other issues, the links between the plight of slaves and their own plight as women, and they were condemned by the Congregational ministers of New England. Although the Grimkés were supported by the AASS, some in the organization were not eager to embrace their pioneering call for women's rights, fearing that it would undermine the power of the antislavery message.

In 1840, all of these issues came to a head at the AASS's annual meeting. After a bitter fight over Abby Kelley's election to the executive committee, more moderate abolitionists walked out. One politically oriented group

formed the Liberty Party, hoping to achieve through the electoral system what seemed impossible by using merely the power of moral persuasion. Another evangelically oriented faction, led by Lewis Tappan, founded the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, which urged participants to work within Protestant churches.

Those who remained in the AASS formed an even more tightly knit and radical group than before. Quaker women and free blacks played prominent roles in the organization, which attacked churches and the government as props of southern slavery. Among this contingent, many opposed war and capital punishment, refused to buy slave-produced products, embraced health reforms such as high-fiber diets and water cures, rejected traditional forms of religious worship, participated in utopian experiments, and campaigned for women's rights, Indian rights, and land reform. Most free black and some white radical abolitionists also provided assistance to fugitive slaves, fought segregation in northern schools and jobs, and advocated black voting rights.

Throughout the 1840s and early 1850s, the battle to abolish slavery moved along several tracks at once. Political abolitionists followed an important new path by seeking to end slavery through Congressional intervention. This politically oriented segment of the antislavery movement entered electoral contests just as the influx of immigrants was beginning to change the face of American politics. Together, these two new forces would redraw the political system in the United States.

The Abolition of Slavery and Party Politics Most Garrisonian abolitionists viewed electoral politics as corrupt and the U.S. Constitution as a proslavery document. But beginning with the founding of the Liberty Party in 1840, a growing number argued that the political system and the national government were simply too powerful to ignore. Although working within the existing electoral system, they offered a radical alternative to the political status quo by forming third parties dedicated to ending slavery.

They were inspired in part by the reluctance of either the Whigs or the Democrats to address the problem of slavery. The Whigs, building on Henry Clay's American System, sought to expand the federal government, encouraging industrial and commercial development and promoting temperance and education that would ensure a sober and intelligent working class. They appealed especially to substantial merchants and manufacturers in the North, wealthy planters in the South (who sought to strengthen their ties with northern commercial interests), and successful farmers in the West who needed government-funded roads, canals, and railroads. The Democrats were convinced that they could defeat the Whigs by appealing to the rapidly increasing wage-earning and immigrant populations. They favored the use of state power to expand economic opportunities, but they opposed

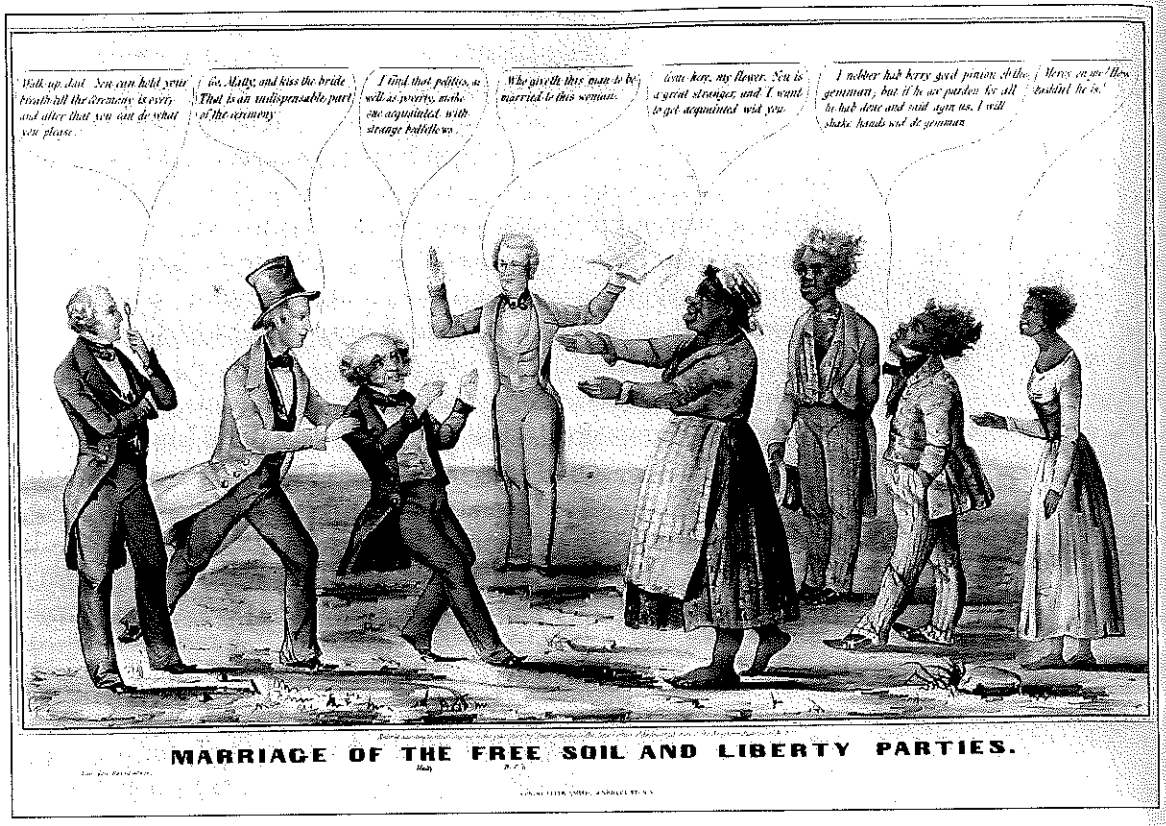
great wealth and industrial and commercial monopolies in favor of western expansion, which they believed would help small farmers and workers.

Whereas evangelical Protestants generally favored Whig policies, the Democrats were far more successful in attracting Irish and German immigrants, including Catholics, to their banner. In 1840, the Whigs won the White House, but when the newly elected president William Henry Harrison died in office after just one month, they were left with ex-Democrat John Tyler in his place. Although Tyler had brought the party much-needed southern votes, he was not a successful advocate of the Whig platform. By 1844, Tyler and other conservative southern Whigs were ready to rejoin the Democratic Party.

By 1844, the Democrats had built powerful political machines in several cities with large immigrant populations. They nominated James K. Polk for president, and he ran on a strongly expansionist platform. Seeking to secure Texas and the disputed Oregon Territory for the United States, Polk won a significant victory, although he outpolled the Whig candidate Henry Clay by fewer than forty thousand popular votes. The Liberty Party, funded in large part by wealthy abolitionist Gerritt Smith, ran James G. Birney. Birney had once been a wealthy Alabama planter, but on a trip North in the 1830s, he denounced slavery. He was declared a traitor by his home state, and his property, including slaves, was seized. Birney never returned to Alabama but instead became an abolitionist lecturer in the North. He and the Liberty Party had a single goal: the abolition of slavery through legislation. This single-issue approach proved too narrow, however, to attract a significant number of voters. Still, Birney received sixty-two thousand votes, including many from disaffected antislavery Whigs who might otherwise have voted for Clay.

Over the following four years, Polk succeeded in implementing his expansionist program, but in doing so, he alienated a substantial number of northern Democrats. It was in this context that a new political party was formed in 1848. The Free-Soil Party drew heavily on former Liberty Party supporters, including free black abolitionists, and the new party attracted disaffected antislavery Whigs and northern Democrats as well. In 1848, Free-Soilers nominated former Democrat Martin Van Buren as president and former Whig Charles Francis Adams, the son of John Quincy Adams, as his running mate. This party was less radical in its goals than the Liberty Party and thus could appeal to many more voters.

The Free-Soil Party focused less on the moral and political rights of blacks and instead sought to defeat the "Slave Power" conspiracy. Free-Soilers claimed that the "Slave Power" endangered the rights of free speech and free press as well as free labor. The critical issue, they argued, was the exclusion of slavery from newly opened western territories. By 1848, then, the goals of political abolitionism had shifted dramatically away from



Marriage of the Free Soil and Liberty Parties

This 1848 lithograph cartoon commented on the formation of the Free-Soil Party in 1848. Free-Soil presidential candidate Martin Van Buren, whose political career included alliances with slaveholding interests, was shown entering a "marriage of convenience" with the forces of the antislavery Liberty Party. The racial stereotypes were typical of the visual representation of African Americans in the antebellum period. National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

ending slavery in the South and toward promoting the settlement of free men, particularly free white men, in the West.

The Free-Soil campaign angered many people. Radical abolitionists such as Garrison denounced the party platform, and many saw the nomination of Van Buren, who had earlier allied with slaveholders, as a travesty. Yet slave owners, too, were infuriated by the emergence of Free-Soilers, who threatened to undermine the two major political parties and the federal union. Northern business and political leaders likewise feared that this third party might dangerously polarize the nation.

Considered too moderate by Garrisonians and too radical by traditional Whigs and Democrats, the Free-Soil platform nonetheless attracted widespread support. Van Buren received almost three hundred thousand votes in the 1848 election. This represented nearly one in every seven ballots cast in the free states, nearly five times as many as Liberty Party candidate James G. Birney had received four years earlier. Especially successful among small farmers, the Free-Soil Party also found support among some industrial workers, including shoemakers in Lynn, Massachusetts.

Despite the critiques of Garrisonians, the Free-Soil Party gained the support of many ardent abolitionists, including women and African Amer-

icans. In the Midwest, antislavery women formed dozens of societies to support the Free-Soil campaign. Perhaps even more significantly, black abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass, Samuel R. Ward, Henry Highland Garnet, Charles Remond, and Henry Bibb embraced the Free-Soil platform, despite the antiblack sentiments of some party leaders. "It is nothing against the actors in this new movement," wrote Douglass later, "that they did not see the end from the beginning—that they did not at first take the high ground that further on in the conflict their successors felt themselves called upon to take." Douglass and other black abolitionists viewed the party as an opening wedge in the larger fight against slavery and believed that future events would force Free-Soilers to reexamine their prejudices.

The Free-Soil Party was not strong enough in 1848 to transform the existing two-party system. Whigs and Democrats both avoided the most divisive issues, particularly slavery. The Whigs won the 1848 election, but they did so by running a presidential candidate, General Zachary Taylor, who had gained his national stature by serving as a leader in Polk's efforts to conquer new western territories. The Democrats ran Lewis Cass, a northerner who embraced the South's position on slavery. Taylor's lackluster reputation among abolitionists and Cass's failure to gain a victory made it likely that in the next election, the Free-Soil Party could pick up even more votes from disaffected members of the two major parties.

Conclusion: The Free-Labor North Faces an Uncertain Future

At midcentury, economic and technological change, massive immigration, urban growth, and the rise of religious and reform movements had transformed the United States in myriad ways. Conflicts over class, race, and gender relations disrupted the traditional social hierarchies, and reformers offered diverse solutions to the young nation's problems. Evangelical churches, nativist organizations, utopian communities, and advocates of land reform, woman's rights, and abolition all debated how to create a nation that combined opportunity with order.

The political scene, too, was in flux. The Whigs were in decline, and the Democrats disagreed about how to grow without antagonizing their northern or southern constituency. The Free-Soilers were a growing but as yet small force on the national scene, while another small segment, nativists, looked backward to a nation of Anglo-American farmers and small-town Protestants. In the 1840s, it seemed that none of these parties was powerful enough to shape the agenda of the United States in its image.

The assistance that abolitionists needed to strengthen their hand would come from an unlikely source: southerners. At the same time that northerners were struggling to adjust to an expanded commercial, capitalist, and industrial society, southerners were confronting economic and political

challenges of their own. The contradictions posed by slave labor in a supposedly democratic society led more and more northerners—white as well as black—to see in the South a threat to all that they held dear. But only when those contradictions began to create conflicts between wealthy slaveholders and poorer southern whites did the institution of slavery become precarious enough to be abolished.

The Years in Review

1837

- The Panic of 1837 lasts five years and devastates the nation.
- Boston establishes a regular police force in response to riots, strikes, and increased crime; New York City does the same seven years later.

1840

- The American Anti-Slavery Society's annual convention is split over the issue of women's rights; some moderate abolitionists leave the group to found the politically oriented Liberty Party and the religiously focused American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society.
- Whig William Henry Harrison is elected president over Democrat Martin Van Buren, but Harrison dies one month after taking office and is replaced by ex-Democrat John Tyler.

1841

- Unitarian minister George Ripley founds Brook Farm, a cooperative community, in Massachusetts.

1844

- A bloody riot in Philadelphia reflects growing tensions between nativists and Catholic immigrants.
- Democrat James K. Polk defeats Whig Henry Clay on a strongly expansionist platform; the Liberty Party runs slaveowner-turned-abolitionist James G. Birney as its candidate.

1845

- A potato fungus sets off the Irish famine, ultimately resulting in the deaths of an estimated one million Irish and the emigration to the United States or Canada of another one to two million.
- New York women employed in the needle trades form the Female Industry Association (also known as the Ladies Industrial Association) to fight wage cuts; the organization quickly disappears after an unsuccessful strike.

1846

- The invention of the sewing machine reduces the amount of labor it takes to make garments, but employers reap the benefits by dropping the rates they pay.

1847

- Escaped slave Frederick Douglass establishes himself as an abolitionist editor in Rochester, New York.

1848

- An unsuccessful German revolution leads many Germans to emigrate to the United States.
- Gold is discovered in California and lures people westward.
- The first American women's rights convention is held in Seneca Falls, New York; resolutions declare that all people are equal and that women should have the right to vote.
- Mexican War hero General Zachary Taylor, a Whig, defeats Democratic candidate General Lewis Cass for the presidency.
- The Free-Soil Party is formed, drawing supporters from the former Liberty Party and other antislavery voters; its candidate, former president Martin Van Buren, aids in Taylor's victory by capturing Democratic votes.
- The Associated Press is established to take advantage of the telegraph's ability to transmit news across the country.
- Spiritualism, a religion based on the ability to communicate with the spirits of the dead, gains a popular following, especially among advocates of abolition, women's rights, and utopian communities.

1849

- Thousands of angry New Yorkers riot outside of Astor Place Opera House to protest a performance by English actor William Macready; the riot reflects class conflict over the burgeoning urban culture.
- Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman doctor in the United States, graduates at the head of her class at Geneva Medical College in New York, where she was shunned by male students.

1850

- Anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic societies come together as the American Party, usually called the Know-Nothings.
- Swedish singer Jenny Lind tours the United States, playing to packed halls—part of the emergent popular culture.
- President Zachary Taylor dies (apparently from an illness brought on by cherries and ice milk he consumed at the laying of the cornerstone for the Washington Monument); Millard Fillmore becomes president.

1852

- Democrat Franklin Pierce is elected president in an election that marks the death of the Whig Party.

1853

- German immigrant Heinrich Steinwig founds Steinway and Sons piano-manufacturing company, anglicizing his family name in deference to American tastes.

1855

- Irish and black dockworkers battle on the New York City waterfront—one of many conflicts between Irish and African Americans over jobs.

1857

- Failure of the Ohio Life Insurance and Trust Company sparks an economic panic and slump.

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