

Industrialization and technology during the gilded age



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Technology transformed the United States during the Gilded Age in many ways. First, it allowed for businesses to find new ways to do old tasks and do them more efficiently. It also developed communication and transportation, making it easier for businesses to reach their consumers. By creating new jobs and getting more workers into the American work force, technology helped add to the already expanding American economy. Business leaders known as “robber barons” and “captains of industry” were harnessing this newly emerging technology and using it in their businesses. The Gilded Age was a time where there was great changes and developments in technology. Therefore, powerful industrialists of the late 1800s were known both as captains of industries and robber barons, the American labor force changed, emerging inventions and technology helped big businesses, and developments in communication and transportation affected big businesses.

Many powerful industrialists of the late 1800s would be considered both captains of industries and robber barons. The Gilded Age was a time where there was “moving, building, expanding, reforming, and dreaming” (Boorstin 436). Various businessmen were emerging in the United States. Among the few that rose to the top, even fewer used the power and money they had to help the United States and its citizens. The businessmen who used their power and money to benefit the United States in a positive way were known as captains of industry. Those businessmen who used their power and money for their own selfish desires were known as robber barons. (Pollick 1). An example of an industrialist during the Gilded Age would be Andrew Carnegie. Carnegie originated from a poor family in Scotland. At the age of 13, Carnegie arrived in the United States with his family. Working as a child

laborer in a cotton factory, Carnegie self-educated himself by reading books. Carnegie soon used his knowledge and talent to form Carnegie Steel Company. Now a steel industrialist, Carnegie was one of the richest men in the United States. Because of the ways books helped Andrew Carnegie, he used his profit to help give books and bring education to others. Carnegie donated “ much of his fortune to founding libraries all over the United States” (Boorstin 418). Carnegie’s Steel Company was a success and it was collecting profits. Soon, another industrialist named J. Pierpont Morgan wanted to buy Carnegie’s Steel Company. Everything was going fine with the company so Carnegie made an outrageous offer of half a billion dollars for the company. Carnegie thought it was too good to be true, so he accepted and received all of the money. (Boorstin 418) Because of the way Carnegie gave away his profit to help the well being and education of others, Carnegie would be considered a captain of industry. On the other hand, Carnegie would also be considered a robber baron because of the way he used the position of his company in the economy to sell his company so he could receive a large amount of money. Many of the industrialists in the Gilded Age were also like Carnegie. They helped others in some ways but also benefitted themselves in others. Therefore, many powerful industrialists of the Gilded Age would be considered both captains of industries and robber barons.

The American labor force changed during the period of industrialization due to the large amount of people immigrating to the United States. Historically, the Gilded Age was known as a time of mass immigration to the United States. Many of these immigrants came from Europe and other parts of the world escaping the “ overcrowding, lack of opportunity, and [...] religious

persecution” found in their homeland (Reef 8). Immigrants also came to the United States looking for opportunity and a way to support their families back home. As these immigrants came to the United States, innovations in technology at the time opened many jobs in factories. Workers were needed to operate the new machinery available at the time and to fill the jobs where skilled labor was needed. Some immigrants came to the United States as contract laborers with the companies that hired them. The companies agreed to pay for their trip to the United States if they would work for the company and have a downgraded salary for a certain amount of time. These laborers worked for big businesses in factories. Because the immigrant laborers were willing to work for lower wages, companies would prefer to hire them. Cheap labor was in demand as American workers feared because “[immigrants] would be willing to work for less money and thus depress wages for everyone” (Reef 8). This led to a vast majority of workers in the work force being immigrants that recently came to the United States. Furthermore, children were also being put to work. As aforementioned, big businesses had a demand for cheap labor. Many immigrant children joined their parents as they worked in factories. Since the end of slavery, mill and factory owners in the south were looking to replace the slaves that used to be working on their farms and in their factories. Since the majority of the immigrants went to cities in the north, the demand for cheap labor was filled with children working for low wages. Businesses figured that if they put children to work, they would not rebel as much as adults would (Reef 8-9). Thus, the American labor force changed through the addition of immigrants and children as laborers.

Big businesses benefitted from new inventions and technologies of the late 1800s because they helped them improve efficiency and produce more products. To start, many new technologies were emerging during the Gilded Age. Each industry in the United States used specific machinery and tools to make their products. For example, millers used mill stones to break hard wheat in the spring. Improvements in technology such as rollers helped increase the efficiency of mills. Rollers were tools that were used in substitute of mill stones that did the same job faster and better. Air purifiers with air blowers made in France that separated unwanted particles from the wheat once it was broken. These rollers along with air purifiers helped Cadwallader Colden Washburn, a flour miller at the time, create a new mill with maximum efficiency that “ produce[d] flour rapidly and cheaply” (“ Flour Milling in the Gilded Age” 1). Many businesses such as the Pillsbury Brothers used these new technologies and dominated their respective industries. Along with technology specific to their industries, big businesses also benefitted from technology that was generally made to improve life such as light bulbs and electricity in general. Light bulbs had an advantage over kerosene lamps in that they provided more light. This allowed businesses to keep their workers longer because there was now more light early in the morning and late at night so that the workers could efficiently work. The creation of the light bulb led to more inventions such as motors and power grids which helped illuminate cities and streets after sundown (“ Second Industrial Revolution” 2-3). Hence, developments in technology made it possible for big businesses to make production more efficient and give workers longer hours.

Lastly, developments in communication and transportation affected American businesses. First, many new inventions were created during this time. The telegraph, for example, was widely used in industry. The Western Union Telegraph company created many offices which could be used to send and receive telegraphs. “ The telegraph was of importance to business in general, especially after the invention of the stock ticker in 1866, and of great value to newspapers” (“ Communications Technology, 1870-1900” 2-3). Railroads were created that made moving across America much faster than it had used to be. Faster than any other form of mail, railroad mail cars were efficient and speedy as the mail was sorted while the train was in motion and delivered at the stops. Railroads helped businesses because they also created a way for businesses to mail products to their consumers. The money order system was put into place which also helped businesses. Messages and goods could have been sent in days when before it had taken months to do so. This allowed for businesses to spread their products and reach faraway consumers. Railroads, along with other forms of technological communication, affected businesses for the better. (“ Communications Technology, 1870-1900” 2-3) In conclusion, the change in business because of emerging technology not only affected business but altered it so that there were more opportunities for the business to succeed.

The Gilded Age is known for its advancements and developments in technology. From the robber barons to the light bulb, the Gilded Age was a time of good and bad in the United States. Coined by Mark Twain, the term “ gilded” shows what the United States really was. All of these developments in technology along with the successful big businesses made it seem like this

time was excellent, but in essence workers were being treated poorly and immigrants were living in slums. Because of the benefit of businesses, the era seemed well when looked at altogether. Therefore, technology had a great impact on business at this time. Conclusively, technology transformed the United States in many ways during the Gilded Age.