

# [Introduction to the gilded age](https://assignbuster.com/introduction-to-the-gilded-age/)

The Gilded age refers to the brief time in American History after the Civil War Restoration period. The Gilded Age derived its name from the many great fortunes that were created during this period. During this time, the United States experienced a population and economic boom that led to the creation of an incredibly wealthy upper class. The era lasted for only a few years from 1877 – 1893, before the market crash of 1893 that caused a severe depression to the entire country.

## Main Body

Through this era, there was a huge growth of different industries and a wave of immigrants marked this period in history (Morgan, 54). Because of the success of the Western expansion, the gold rush in California and resources in Western North America, the demand for railroads led the way for much of the Gilded Age. The production of iron and steel rose dramatically because of improved technologies in factories and western resources like lumber, gold and silver increased the demand for improved transportation. There were mining operations that led to incredible profits and the owners of companies dealing with these were suddenly swimming in lots of money, thus an elite culture that evolved around expensive taste and possessions sprung up. The huge fortunes they got from industrial activities, brought these socialists a status. Infrastructure improved as witnessed in the different sections for example, the railroad development boomed as trains moved goods from the West, which was rich in resources to the East. Steel and oil were in great demand. Due to the boom of many industries, the country witnessed a flow of immigrants who came into the country in search of better job and greener pastures. Due to the rapid changes in cities, modern architectural and transportation features were enhanced.

However, the Gilded Age also portrayed a negative side. There was a widespread population surge in the United States and it has even been reported that about one hundred and forty thousand Chinese immigrants entered the country. Most of these Chinese immigrants worked on the Western railroads. Irish immigrants also escaped the Potato famine in their homeland for greener pastures in the U. S. However, these immigrants were often discriminated by the Americans and even subjected to low paying bad jobs and neglected living conditions. The surge in population in America led to severe shortages in housing that led many to live in poorly constructed structures that had a high risk of fire and other disasters. According to (Morgan, 78), immigrants were forced to dwell in the poorest parts of the cities that were characterized by crime gangs.

The irony of this era is that it is metaphorical in that there was a thin covering of gold over a dirty and awful situation. The Government was experiencing ills such as corruption that was widespread during this era. It was after the assassination of President Lincoln, that the concept of morals in government changed and it went spiraling down. Wealthy people used their affluence to defraud institutions for example William Tweed used his political power to swindle the state of New York millions of dollars to enrich himself and his associates. These became a usual occurrence, there were so many scandals that rocked different parts of the country and they shocked the world at large.

Conversely, the Gilded Age was not an appropriate label for the American society from 1875- 1900 as it was a complicated era, brought back into balance only because of a sudden and extreme economic depression. This depression barred Americans from creating a true refined class and falling into the modes that had convinced America to surrender from Britain. However, the era established an unfortunate American cultural reality that wealth was power and that it meant to enrich only the ones who possessed it rather than the community at large. Presently, in the lives of celebrities, and people who profit from trust funds, we can still see some of the doctrine of the gilded era currently in the society.

As I have discussed above, many heavy industries came up such as coal mining and railroads. The railroad network enhanced new areas to commercial farming and this led to the creation of a national marketplace that inspired a significant rise in mining and the production of steel because of the many industries that were been built at the time. Thus, railroads became the weave that held the growing nation together and this created opportunities for entrepreneurs in other fields. The industries relied on raw materials that were mostly made from natural resources for economic and corporate expansion during this age. After the rail system was completed, there was military presence to deal with armed conflicts. The security enhanced the immense export of resources. According to Morgan (p 130), the insatiable desire for the resources of the great trunk railroads led to the creation of the country’s financial market in Wall Street. At some point in this age, due to the good economy a few corporations dominated in steel, sugar, oil and the manufacturing of agriculture machinery. Industries increased their machinery as a cheaper way to create more products. According to Morgan (p 143), Fredrick Winslow Taylor came to the conclusion that worker efficiency in steel could be enhanced through the utilization of machines. Because of this, there was increased speed of the machines used in factories and there was productivity of factories but the need for skilled labor was lowered. However, some industries still needed laborers who worked while been supervised by skilled engineers and foremen. Still, people wanted to be skilled in different areas and this resulted to the emergence of engineering colleges that fed the huge demand for expertise. Railroads invented intricate practical systems to set up unambiguous career tracks. Morgan H states that these tracks were made-up for skilled blue collar jobs that started in railroads and stretched into finance, trade and manufacturing. It was because of this rapid growth of business that a new middle class started to emerge. Despite the many faces the Gilded Age portrayed of success, there were many Americans who were still struggling to earn a living. Some workers became unhappy with their working conditions and this led to the creation of trade unions as a way of taking their own responsibility for improvement.

Due to the growth of American cities and the push of modern civilization, there was a new sector services that came about and these were known as public utilities. These utilities comprised of telecommunications, street railways and electricity plus gas suppliers. As portrayed above, the gilded age was characterized by economic expansion that led to the emergence of a new nation and this made the US take the lead among other countries in areas of industry and trade (Morgan, 67). Inventive entrepreneurs had the opportunity to invest because the nation had transformed from an agricultural economy into an industrialized one. For example, Cornelius Vanderbilt had sold most of his ships and ventured into railroads and he profited greatly from this.

However, Twain and Warner (p, 121) point out that there was so much looting that took place in this era and this was characterized by the many robber barons that even started controlling major areas of interest such as the railways. As discussed above, many public officials that served in the Government even defrauded major cities for example the State of New York was defrauded by William Tweed.

Wealthy entrepreneurs like John Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie were viewed as been indifferent to the sufferings that the poor population endured. Some of the rich were philanthropic but others justified cruelty with a philosophy called social Darwinism. This philosophy stated that if evolution favors the strongest, they argued, why should the strong lend out a helping hand to the weak for them to survive? However, to combat this, the social gospel arose where many Christians believed that through reform efforts dealing with child labor and slums plus unsafe working conditions, they could still build the Kingdom of God on Earth (Morgan, 98)

## Conclusion

The Gilded Era was a time when the United States experienced great economic growth and social change. This age witnessed the growth of many industries, urbanization, construction of the railroads, rise in technology and the rise of many big businesses. However, some factors divided the Americans. These factors were such as the emergence of the elite class who often looked down upon the other Americans. Another factor was the extreme poverty in some parts of the country where the underpaid workers lived. The rich resided in their wealthy estates and they often used the poor to do their dirty work for them. This often subjected the poor to humiliation and some of them turned to crime as I have discussed above. The people were divided in many areas such as religion where the rich believed the Darwin’s philosophy. However, some of them were generous and they gave back to the society. The poor believed in the social gospel where they believed that through reform efforts dealing with child labor, slums and pathetic houses plus unsafe working conditions, they could still build the Kingdom of God on Earth. Nevertheless, the Gilded Age also made positive contributions to present day America as it was a force to be reckoned with.

## Work Cited

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Twain, Mark and Warner, Charles. The Gilded Age. New York City: Oxford University Press 2007 pp 1-134

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