

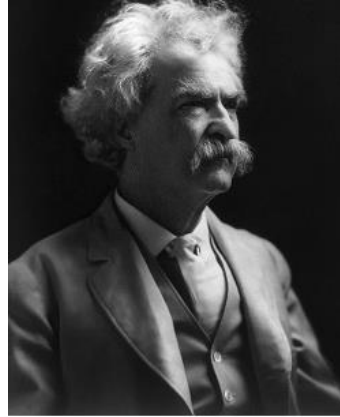
Reading: Mark Twain and the Gilded Age

Introduction

Most of us probably know Mark Twain best as the author of the Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn stories. But did you know that it was Mark Twain who coined the term 'Gilded Age'? This term has subsequently gained recognition among historians and is now commonly used to refer to a specific historical era.

So when was the Gilded Age? The Gilded Age refers to the period of time in American history between the end of the Civil War and the turn of the 20th century. In other words, from around the 1870s - 1900. Sometimes you will see the Gilded Age extended all the way to 1914, the year World War I broke out, but more commonly it is usually considered as coming to a close with the beginning of the 20th century.

In 1873, Mark Twain wrote a satire titled *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today* in which he addressed issues of greed, corruption, and scandal. His use of the term 'Gilded Age' describes an age characterized by corruption and decay, but covered up by a thin layer of gold. To Mark Twain, economic inequality and political corruption were symptoms of decaying society, despite the fact that industrial and technological advances appeared golden.



Mark Twain coined the term Gilded Age.

Key Industrial Developments of the Gilded Age

Let's look at some of the key historical developments of the Gilded Age. Many of them have to do with industrialization and modernization. After the Civil War, the United States experienced what can only be described as a 'Second Industrial Revolution.' Central to this second wave of industrialization was railroad construction. The railroad boomed after the Civil War, and it began expanding into the American West.

In 1869, the First Transcontinental Railroad was completed. This railroad, built by the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroad companies, linked the East Coast to the West Coast. It was a railroad line stretching across the continental U.S. The First Transcontinental Railroad opened up the West to settlement, leading to the popping up of towns and cities.



This image captures the completion of the First Transcontinental Railroad.

Advances in science and technology led to improved living conditions for many Americans. Between the 1880s and World War I, America experienced 'electrification' as electric light replaced oil lamps. The man responsible for this was none other than Thomas Edison, who developed the first successful incandescent light bulb in 1879. His company, the Edison Electric Light Company, pioneered the commercial application of electric light.

Big Business in the Gilded Age

The Gilded Age was a period in which big business thrived. Perhaps no big businesses typified the Gilded Age more than Standard Oil and Carnegie Steel. John D. Rockefeller made a fortune in the oil industry through his Standard Oil Company. In his day, Rockefeller was the richest man in the world. Another wealthy industrialist was Andrew Carnegie, who founded the Carnegie Steel Company (which would later

Introduction

Key Industrial Developments of the Gilded Age:

Big Business in the Gilded Age (room on P2)

become U.S. Steel). Carnegie was renowned as a philanthropist, giving away roughly 90% of his fortune to various charitable organizations.

However, the rise of big business caused many in the government to be concerned. The concern was that big businesses were making it difficult for the 'little man' (in other words, smaller businesses) to survive. As a result, the government engaged in a policy of regulation. The Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890 prohibited specific anti-competitive practices and gave the government more authority to investigate and even break up large companies. In 1911, Standard Oil Company was found to violate the Sherman Antitrust Act and was ordered to break up.

Society in the Gilded Age

Let's quickly examine society during the Gilded Age. The Gilded Age was characterized by Victorian architecture and style. Gender roles were traditional and clearly defined, although the early seeds of feminism were being sown during this period. Immigration increased during the Gilded Age, with many immigrants coming from Europe.

In urban areas, it was not uncommon to see entire sections of city made up of Irish, Italian, or Jewish immigrants. Because many immigrants tended to be poor, they often lived in small apartments under horrible conditions. Poverty, crime, poor living conditions, and corruption in urban areas prompted various reform movements, and ultimately led to the Progressive Era, which took place between the 1890s and 1920s.



A Standard Oil Refinery built by John D. Rockefeller.

Society in the Gilded Age

Lesson Summary

Let's review. The Gilded Age refers to the period of time in American history between the end of the and the turn of the 20th century. In other words, from around the 1870s -1900. The term was coined by Mark Twain and was used to describe an age characterized by but covered over with '.....' The railroad expanded dramatically during the Gilded Age. In 1869, the First Transcontinental was completed, linking the American with the American West. Thomas was the man responsible for the 'electrification' of America when, in 1879, he developed the first successful incandescent electric.....

Big business during the Gilded Age, even as government stepped in to it. John D. Rockefeller made a fortune in the oil industry through his Company. In his day, Rockefeller was the man in the world. Another wealthy industrialist was Andrew....., who founded the Carnegie Steel Company. European flourished during the Gilded Age, however, many immigrants lived under horrible conditions in areas, which helped lead tomovements.

WordBank for Summary

Railroad	immigration	Standard Oil	corruption	East
gold	Civil War	regulate	light bulb	Urban
Edison	reform	Carnegie	richest	thrived