38. From the Countryside to the City

The Age of Industry brought tremendous change to America. Perhaps the single greatest impact of industrialization on the growing nation was urbanization. Thomas Jefferson had once idealized America as a land of small, independent farmers who became educated enough to participate in a republic. That notion was forever a part of history.

As large farms and improved technology displaced the small farmer, a new demand grew for labor in the American economy. Factories spread rapidly across the nation, but they did not spread evenly. Most were concentrated in urban areas, particularly in the Northeast, around the Great Lakes, and on the West Coast. And so the American workforce began to migrate from the countryside to the city.

The speed with which American cities expanded was shocking. About 1/6 of the American population lived in urban areas in 1860. Urban was defined as population centers consisting of at least 8000 people, only a modest-sized town by modern standards. By 1900 that ratio grew to a third. In just 40 years the urban population increased four times, while the rural population doubled. In 1900, an American was twenty times more likely to move from the farm to the city than vice-versa. The 1920 census declared that for the first time, a majority of Americans lived in the city.

The Best and Worst of American Life
These new cities represented both the best and the worst of American life. Never before in American history had such a large number of Americans lived so close to each other. The ease with which these people could share ideas was never greater. Although these cities produced many products, they were also a huge market. Now, in one small area, citizens could enjoy better and cheaper products. Technology created possibilities as the skyscraper changed the skyline, and electric cars and trolleys decreased commuting time. The light bulb and the telephone transformed every home and business.

There was also a darker side. Beneath the magnificent skylines lay slums of abject poverty. Immigrant neighborhoods struggled to realize the American dream. Overcrowding, disease, and crime plagued many urban communities. Pollution and sewage plagued the new metropolitan centers. Corruption in local leadership often blocked needed improvements.

American values were changing as a result. Urban dwellers sought new faiths to cope with new realities. Relations between men and women, and between adults and children also changed. As the 20th century approached, American ways of life were not necessarily better or worse than before. But they surely were different.
They spread like wildfire. For a new factory to beat the competition, it had to be built quickly. Laborers needed fast, cheap housing located close to work. Roads would be hastily built to connect the factory with the market. There was no grand design, and consequently, the new American city spread unpredictably. Urban sprawl had begun. But the growing beast brought benefits that raised the standard of living to new heights.

Going Up

As surely as the city spread outward across the land, it also spread upward toward the sky. Because urban property was in great demand, industrialists needed to maximize small holdings. If additional land was too expensive, why not increase space by building upward? The critical invention leading to this development was of course the fast elevator, developed by Elisha Otis in 1861.

Steel provided a plentiful, durable substance that could sustain tremendous weight. Chicago architect Louis Sullivan was the foremost designer of the modern skyscraper. His designing motto was "form follows function." In other words, the purpose of a structure was to be highlighted over its elegance. Beginning with the Wainwright Building of St. Louis in 1892, Sullivan's steel-framed colossus became the standard for the American skyscraper for the next twenty years. Chicago was the perfect site for this new development, because much of the city had been destroyed by a great fire in 1871.

Seeing, Talking, Shopping, and Moving
Few inventions allowed humans to challenge nature more than the light bulb. No longer dependent on the rising and setting of the sun, city dwellers, with their ample supply of electricity, could now enjoy a nightlife that candles simply could not provide. Developed by Thomas Edison in 1879, urban areas consumed them at a staggering rate.

Alexander Graham Bell added a new dimension to communications with his telephone in 1876. The implications for the business world were staggering, as the volume of trade skyrocketed with faster communications. In addition to the telephone, many urban denizens enjoyed electric fans, electric sewing machines, and electric irons by 1900.

The farm could not compete. Most of these new conveniences were confined to the cities because of the difficulties of sending electric power to isolated areas. Indoor plumbing and improved sewage networks added a new dimension of comfort to city life. Department stores such as Woolworth's, John Wanamker's, and Marshall Field's provided a large variety of new merchandise of better quality and cheaper than ever before.

People could reach their destinations faster and faster because of new methods of mass transit. Cable cars were operational in cities such as San Francisco and Chicago by the mid-1880s. Boston completed the nation's first underground subway system in 1897. Middle-class Americans could now afford to live farther from a city's core. Bridges such as the Brooklyn Bridge and improved regional transit lines fueled this trend.

The modern American city was truly born in the Gilded Age. The bright lights, tall buildings, material goods, and fast pace of urban life emerged as America moved into the 20th century. However, the marvelous horizon of urban opportunity was not accessible to all. Beneath the glamour and glitz lay social problems previously unseen in the United States.
Immigration was nothing new to America. Except for Native Americans, all United States citizens can claim some immigrant experience, whether during prosperity or despair, brought by force or by choice. However, immigration to the United States reached its peak from 1880-1920. The so-called "old immigration" brought thousands of Irish and German people to the New World.

This time, although those groups would continue to come, even greater ethnic diversity would grace America's populace. Many would come from Southern and Eastern Europe, and some would come from as far away as Asia. New complexions, new languages, and new religions confronted the already diverse American mosaic.

The New Immigrants

Most immigrant groups that had formerly come to America by choice seemed distinct, but in fact had many similarities. Most had come from Northern and Western Europe. Most had some experience with representative democracy. With the exception of the Irish, most were Protestant. Many were literate, and some possessed a fair degree of wealth.

The new groups arriving by the boatload in the Gilded Age were characterized by few of these traits. Their nationalities included Greek, Italian, Polish, Slovak, Serb, Russian, Croat, and others. Until cut off by federal decree, Japanese and Chinese settlers relocated to the American West Coast. None of these groups were predominantly Protestant.
The vast majority were Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox. However, due to increased persecution of Jews in Eastern Europe, many Jewish immigrants sought freedom from torment. Very few newcomers spoke any English, and large numbers were illiterate in their native tongues. None of these groups hailed from democratic regimes. The American form of government was as foreign as its culture.

The new American cities became the destination of many of the most destitute. Once the trend was established, letters from America from friends and family beckoned new immigrants to ethnic enclaves such as Chinatown, Greektown, or Little Italy. This led to an urban ethnic patchwork, with little integration. The dumbbell tenement and all of its woes became the reality for most newcomers until enough could be saved for an upward move.

Despite the horrors of tenement housing and factory work, many agreed that the wages they could earn and the food they could eat surpassed their former realities. Still, as many as 25% of the European immigrants of this time never intended to become American citizens. These so-called "birds of passage" simply earned enough income to send to their families and returned to their former lives.

Resistance to Immigration

Not all Americans welcomed the new immigrants with open arms. While factory owners greeted the rush of cheap labor with zeal, laborers often treated their new competition with hostility. Many religious leaders were awestruck at the increase of non-Protestant believers. Racial purists feared the genetic outcome of the eventual pooling of these new bloods.

Gradually, these "nativists" lobbied successfully to restrict the flow of immigration. In 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, barring this ethnic group in its entirety. Twenty-five years later, Japanese immigration was restricted by executive agreement. These two Asian groups were the only ethnicities to be completely excluded from America.

Criminals, contract workers, the mentally ill, anarchists, and alcoholics were among groups to be gradually barred from entry by Congress. In 1917, Congress required the passing of a literacy test to gain admission. Finally, in 1924, the door was shut to millions by placing an absolute cap on new immigrants based on ethnicity. That cap was based on the United States population of 1890 and was therefore designed to favor the previous immigrant groups.
But millions had already come. During the age when the Statue of Liberty beckoned the world's "huddled masses yearning to breathe free," American diversity mushroomed. Each brought pieces of an old culture and made contributions to a new one. Although many former Europeans swore to their deaths to maintain their old ways of life, their children did not agree. Most enjoyed a higher standard of living than their parents, learned English easily, and sought American lifestyles. At least to that extent, America was a melting pot.
38d. Corruption Runs Wild

Becoming mayor of a big city in the Gilded Age was like walking into a cyclone. Demands swirled around city leaders. Better sewers, cleaner water, new bridges, more efficient transit, improved schools, and suitable aid to the sick and needy were some of the more common demands coming from a wide range of interest groups.

To cope with the city's problems, government officials had a limited resources and personnel. Democracy did not flourish in this environment. To bring order out of the chaos of the nation's cities, many political bosses emerged who did not shrink from corrupt deals if they could increase their power bases. The people and institutions the bosses controlled were called the political machine.

The Political Machine

Personal politics can at once seem simple and complex. To maintain power, a boss had to keep his constituents happy. Most political bosses appealed to the newest, most desperate part of the growing populace — the immigrants. Occasionally bosses would provide relief kitchens to receive votes. Individuals who were leaders in local neighborhoods were sometimes rewarded city jobs in return for the loyalty of their constituents.

Bosses knew they also had to placate big business, and did so by rewarding them with lucrative contracts for construction of factories or public works. These industries would then pump large sums into keeping the political machine in office. It seemed simple: "You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours." However, bringing diverse interests together in a city as large as New York, Philadelphia, or Chicago required hours of legwork and great political skill.
All the activities mentioned so far seem at least semi-legitimate. The problem was that many political machines broke their own laws to suit their purposes. As contracts were awarded to legal business entities, they were likewise awarded to illegal gambling and prostitution rings. Often profits from these unlawful enterprises lined the pockets of city officials. Public tax money and bribes from the business sector increased the bank accounts of these corrupt leaders.

Voter fraud was widespread. Political bosses arranged to have voter lists expanded to include many phony names. In one district a four-year-old child was registered to vote. In another, a dog's name appeared on the polling lists. Members of the machine would "vote early and often," traveling from polling place to polling place to place illegal votes. One district in New York one time reported more votes than it had residents.

Boss Tweed

The most notorious political boss of the age was William "Boss" Tweed of New York's Tammany Hall. For twelve years, Tweed ruled New York. He gave generously to the poor and authorized the handouts of Christmas turkeys and winter coal to prospective supporters. In the process he fleeced the public out of millions of taxpayer money, which went into the coffers of Tweed and his associates.

Attention was brought to Tweed's corruption by political cartoonist Thomas Nast. Nast's pictures were worth more than words as many illiterate and semi-literate New Yorkers were exposed to Tweed's graft. A zealous attorney named Samuel Tilden convicted Tweed and his rule came to an end in 1876. Mysteriously, Tweed escaped from prison and traveled to Spain, where he was spotted by someone who recognized his face from Nast's cartoons. He died in prison in 1878.