Chapter 13: Meeting the Challenges of the New Age,
1820s–1850s

Chapter Review

1. AMERICAN COMMUNITIES Women Reformers of Seneca Falls Respond to the Market Revolution

The Seneca Falls Convention on July 19 and 20, 1848, was a gathering of approximately 300 women who met to discuss important issues of their time. The meeting focused on the Declaration of Sentiments, a petition for women’s rights based on the Declaration of Independence. The struggle for women’s rights was only one of many reform movements that emerged from the United States in the wake of the market revolution. Many reformers belonged to liberal religious groups with wide social perspectives. Among the many causes they supported were the temperance movement and the anti-slavery movement. Americans gathered together in reform organizations to try to solve the problems posed by the market revolution.

1. IMMIGRATION AND THE NATION’S CITIES

The market revolution’s most noticeable impact was in the major cities, where a majority of new immigrants to America lived.

a. The Growth of Cities

The market revolution increased the size of American cities, particularly the seaport cities. In addition to increasing the size of existing cities, the market revolution brought about “instant” cities, like Utica and Chicago, which were located at critical points on the new transportation network.

b. Patterns of Immigration

Increasing numbers of immigrants to the United States also contributed to rapid urban growth. Most of the immigrants to the United States from the 1820s to the 1860s were from Ireland and Germany. New industries needed workers and many of the changes in industry and transportation that accompanied the market revolution would not have been possible without the use of immigrant labor.

c. Irish Immigration

The Irish Potato Famine of 1845–46 brought the first major wave of Irish immigrants to American cities. The new immigrants, who were relatively poor, remained in the cities. Living in crowded and unsanitary conditions and desperate for work, they created ethnic enclaves in the cities where they lived that provided familiar, if foreign to outsiders, pastimes and religious services.

d. German Immigration

German immigrants were typically small farmers or artisans. They were not as poor as the Irish and were able to afford to settle inland and begin farming. German agricultural communities fostered cultural continuity by forming predominantly German towns. Another important group of immigrants were the Chinese. By the 1860s, nearly 90 percent of the laborers building the Central Pacific Railroad were Chinese immigrants.

e. Ethnic Neighborhoods

Almost all new immigrants preferred to live in ethnic neighborhoods where they had family ties, familiar ways, and community support. Germans who settled in urban areas built ethnic enclaves, much like the Irish and Chinese. The Germans formed church societies, benefit societies, and fire companies in these new communities. Ethnic clustering allowed immigrants to a new country to preserve their cultural traditions.

1. URBAN PROBLEMS

New American political and social forms began to emerge from the rapid growth and economic competition of the new urban environment.

a. New Living Patterns in the Cities

Immigration caused urban growth and a sharpening of class differences within major urban centers. It became clear that the benefits of the market revolution were not distributed equally. Cities in the early nineteenth century lacked clean municipal water supplies, sewers, and garbage collection. As a result, every American city suffered epidemics of sanitation-related diseases like yellow fever and cholera. This lack of municipal services encouraged residential segregation. As the middle class left the cities, the urban poor clustered in bad neighborhoods known as slums. Increasing residential segregation came to embody larger issues of class and citizenship.

b. Ethnicity and Whiteness in Urban Popular Culture

Immigrants to American cities contributed to the new urban popular culture. Irish immigrants faced not only discrimination but also cultural denigration. Their response was to insist on their “whiteness” through an urban popular culture characterized by violence and mockery. Popular urban working class amusements included theater shows, a venue prone to violence, and black face minstrel shows. From 1820–1860, a combination of economic depression, overcrowding, and a vast influx of immigrant labor resulted in working class amusements becoming rougher and rowdier.

c. The Labor Movement and Urban Politics

By the 1830s the status of artisans had greatly deteriorated in the nation’s cities. Worker protest against changing conditions first took shape in the form of party politics. The Workingmen’s Party was founded in Philadelphia in 1827. They campaigned for a ten-hour work day and the preservation of the artisan shop system. In 1833 representatives from nine different craft groups formed the General Trades Union of New York. One year later, representatives from several local GTUs organized the National Trades Union. The pressures of the Panic of 1837 caused the union’s collapse but the emergence of such unions was a visible sign of class-based community interest among workers. Urban politics were dominated by strong political organizations. In New York City, Irish and German participation in party politics virtually destroyed the Whig Party that had controlled New York prior to the immigrants’ arrival.

d. Civic Order

As overcrowded urban centers gave rise to crime and violence, it became apparent that Americans were fascinated by such violence. Increasing working class “rowdyism” frightened middle-class and wealthy city residents. In colonial times, members of a city could be counted on to keep the peace and deal with civil disturbances. However, the size of modern cities like New York made such practices impossible. In 1845, New York City created a permanent police force to keep order amongst the poor.

e. Urban Life of Free African Americans

By 1860 there were nearly 500,000 free African Americans in the United States. More than half of these people lived in the North, most often in large cities. Free African Americans living in Northern cities faced residential segregation, job discrimination, segregated public schools, and severely limited civil rights. To protect themselves from the larger community, African Americans, like the German and Irish, created their own communities. The focus of the African American community was the church. Employment opportunities for black men continued to deteriorate from 1820 to 1850 and many blacks found themselves the targets of urban violence.

1. SOCIAL REFORM MOVEMENTS

New middle-class attitudes embraced a passion for reform focused on solving the problems of the nation’s cities. Thus, middle-class people dealt with the social changes in their communities by joining organizations devoted to reform.

a. Religion, Reform, and Social Control

Evangelical religion was a central aspect of social reform. Members of evangelical groups hoped to convert others in the process of creating a perfect moral community on earth. Originally, reform movements sprang from the realization that traditional small-scale local relief efforts were no longer working. Reformers believed in the basic goodness of human nature and saw the overcrowded, unsanitary living conditions of the city as a major culprit of demoralization. Although well-intentioned, reformers held a dogmatic belief that they knew what was right and they were determined to see the reforms and improvements they suggested enacted. The reform movement was not all good. Reformers wanted to reform unfit members of society whether they wanted to be reformed or not. Additionally, the reform movement promoted a dangerous hostility toward Catholic immigrants and the temperance movement targeted immigrants in particular because of theirfree drinking habits.

b. Education and Women Teachers

Women became deeply involved in reform efforts through their churches. One way that they participated in the reform movement was through educational reforms. Educational reformers believed that children were born innocent and that they needed proper nurturing and encouragement to succeed in life. In the 1830s compulsory education laws were enacted throughout the North. As more children went to school, more teachers were hired to teach them. Teachers were commonly young, single women. Teaching offered women their first real career opportunity.

c. Temperance

The largest reform organization of the period was the American Society for the Promotion of Temperance. The group, which was predominantly evangelical, saw excessive drinking as a national problem. They argued that men hurt their families by drinking not only because of physical violence but also because they spent the family’s income on liquor. The new middle-class, with its focus on respectability and morality, found excessive drinking unacceptable. Temperance thus became both a social and a political movement.

d. Moral Reform, Asylums, and Prisons

Reformers attacked other “social evils” as well, including prostitution, asylums, and the prison system. To solve the problem of prostitution, reformers tried to offer prostitutes work as domestic servants, a low-paying and unappealing career. Where reformers realized that prostitution was an economic rather than moral issue, they quickly organized charities and work for poor women. The Asylum movement, led by Dorothea Dix, led to the establishment of a state asylum for the insane in Massachusetts and similar institutions in other states. Model penitentiaries were built in Auburn and Ossining, New York. These prisons were supposed to reform their inmates through strict order and discipline. They were not always as successful as reformers had hoped.

e. Utopianism and Mormonism

Rapid social change often results in apocalyptical religious movements. The depression resulting in the Panic of 1837 and the market revolution proved a fertile environment for such religious movements. The Millerites believed that the Second Coming of Christ would occur on October 22, 1843. Although that did not happen, they revised their beliefs and formed what is today known as the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. The Shakers, founded by “Mother” Ann Lee in 1774, were an offshoot of the Quakers and the oldest utopian religious movement. The Shakers called for a radical social philosophy that included the abolition of the traditional family. While many of these groups were formed and successfully organized, few cooperative communities succeeded. In 1830, Joseph Smith founded the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, which was based on the book of Mormon, which Smith claimed had been given to him by an angel. Mormonism was distinctive in the extraordinary unity of its members and is a rare example of communal settlement proving successful.

1. ANTISLAVERY AND ABOLITIONISM

The anti-slavery sentiments that would play such a large role in America’s future in the 1840s and 1850s also had their start in religious reform movements.

a. The American Colonization Society

The American Colonization Society, formed in 1817, formulated the first national plan to “solve” the slavery question. Their idea was to gradually emancipate and relocate slaves in Africa.

b. African Americans’ Fight Against Slavery

Most free African Americans rejected the plans of the American Colonization Society. They insisted on an immediate end to slavery and on the equal treatment of whites and blacks in America.

c. Abolitionists

A third group interested in ending slavery was known as the abolitionists. This group, led by William Lloyd Garrison, condemned slavery as sinful and demanded its immediate abolition. The moral horrors of slavery successfully involved many Northerners in the efforts of the abolitionist movement. The initial impact of the abolition movement in the South was to stifle dissent and make the lives of slaves even harder.

d. Abolitionism and Politics

Although abolitionism began as a social movement, it soon became a nationalpolitical issue. Southerners, with the help of President Jackson, passed a gag rule in Congress prohibiting the discussion of antislavery petitions. Many Northerners viewed the gag rule as illegal censorship and the rule was repealed in 1844. Although abolitionists had succeeded in bringing the issue of slavery to the national stage, they failed to achieve the moral unity as a movement that they had hoped to achieve. In 1840 the abolitionist movement formally split.

1. THE WOMEN’S RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Touched by the reform movements and the religious revival of the time, middle-class women with the luxury of time enthusiastically joined these reform movements.

a. The Grimké Sisters

Sarah and Angelina Grimké, although members of the southern slave-holding elite, rejected slavery and became Quakers. They became the first female public speakers in America and spoke on many occasions to groups about the evils of the Southern slave system. Like many women in the anti-slavery movement, the Grimkés were criticized for their failure to assume the more traditional roles of women.

b. Women’s Rights

The first women’s rights convention in American history was the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848. The convention, which called for universal woman suffrage, was an outgrowth of nearly 20 years of women’s participation in various social reform movements. Although the convention was held in 1848, it would be another seventy-two years before women would be guaranteed the right to vote.