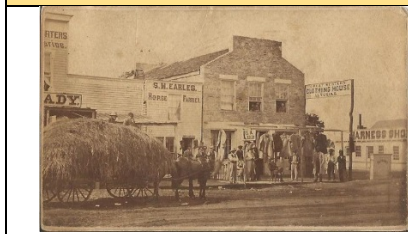


Chapter 121. We The People In 1840: Overview



Dates:
1840

Sections:
• A Changing American Landscape

Time: 1820-1840

A Changing American Landscape



Main St. in Small Town America

The American landscape has changed dramatically in the twenty years between 1820 and 1840.

The population has almost doubled and stands at 17 million. The average age is youthful, at twenty-two years old, and life expectancy is just under forty years for white citizens.

Fears of a foreign invasion disappear with General Andrew Jackson's victory over the British at New Orleans in 1815, and the financial depression which lingers for almost a decade is firmly over by 1825. With that, the time has come for a surge in domestic development.

Many of the new economic opportunities are fostered by Henry Clay, the long-term Kentucky Senator who promotes what he calls the “American System,” aimed at strengthening the nation’s infrastructure – and earning him another run at the presidency.

Clay’s “system” calls for increased tariffs on foreign imports aimed at protecting U.S. manufacturers, a national bank to help fuel capitalism, and federal spending, especially behind roads, canals and bridges to facilitate transportation of goods and settlers. Despite opposition from Presidents Jackson and Van Buren, at least some of Clay’s wishes are realized.

The result is an America suddenly on the move in every direction.

Primitive cart paths give way to upgraded macadam and plank roads and turnpikes, linking farms to small towns and on to growing urban centers. Steamboats convert a hazardous two month overland journey from Philadelphia to St. Louis into a two week sight-seeing adventure. The locomotive Tom Thumb appears on the scene in 1830 and sparks the nation’s love affair with trains and tracks. “Commodore” Cornelius Vanderbilt parlays his interests in steamboats, trains and real estate into a fortune that rivals the tycoon, John Jacob Astor.

By 1840, the great western migration is well under way.

In addition to the new modes of transportation, it is supported by Jackson’s harsh Indian Removal Act of 1830 driving the eastern tribes across the Mississippi, and generous congressional Land Acts enabling new settlers to buy the vacated sites for \$1.25 an acre. Fully one in every four Americans reside in the eleven states west of the Appalachian mountains barrier in 1840.

Back east a sharp divide is materializing between the five states below the Mason-Dixon line and the nine states up north.

The southern states remain rural and pre-industrial in character, according to Jefferson’s blueprint. They are dominated by small farmers, 70% of whom work their land without slaves, raising subsistence crops and livestock, along with cotton, tobacco or rice, dependent on their local soil and climate. The 30% who do own slaves tend to be wealthier, although only 10,000 families (less than one percent) across the entire South have the 50 or more slaves required to operate plantations comparable to Monticello.

Meanwhile in the original northeastern states, Clay’s American System initiatives are having a profound effect on the economy and on lifestyles. Cities like New York, Philadelphia and Boston begin to resemble their counterparts in Europe. Workshops and factories, “protected” by tariffs, turn out finished goods to be sold in Main Street storefronts and by itinerant countryside peddlers. Along with this commerce comes a host of new city jobs, often more lucrative than agriculture. Although eight in every ten northeasterners still live on farms in 1840, 37% now make their living from this diversified economy.

As more northern jobs rely on brainpower rather than physicality, the value of a formal education grows in importance. Pioneering research in teaching methods, undertaken by Horace Mann, Emma Willard, Catharine Beecher and Mary Lyon, begins to reshape K-12 schooling in Massachusetts and New York. Their work also opens up teaching as a second “suitable career path for women,” to go along with nursing, and provokes more early debates about female roles and rights in society.

The growing intellectual class, concentrated around New England's premier universities, is also intent on building America's worldwide reputation in philosophy, science, literature and culture in general.

Leading voices here include Ralph Waldo Emerson, Frederick Hedge, Margaret Fuller and Henry David Thoreau, who together comprise the Transcendentalist movement.

Meanwhile the revivalist fervor surrounding the "Second Awakening" provokes a reexamination not only of personal salvation, but also of the nation's overall moral values -- which some see eroding in response to the rise of secularism and "grasping materialism."

These concerns lead to a string of "experimental communities" aimed at elevating American society to the Utopian level envisioned by Saint Thomas More in the 16th century. Robert Owen's New Harmony and George Ripley's Brook Farm are both modeled after the French socialist, Charles Fourier. Other attempts include the Oneida Institute and John Humphrey Noyes's Oneida Perfectionists, Fannie Wright's project at Nabosha, and the Amana colony in Iowa.

We the people of 1840 have escaped the threat of foreign conquest and are on the way to creating a new American landscape capable of surpassing any nation in Europe. Apparently nothing can stand in the way, or can it?