

# **City of Immigrants** Full Historical Background

## **America at the Turn of the Twentieth Century**

In the aftermath of a major economic depression in the 1890s, the United States embarked on an era of remarkable economic growth and prosperity that brought rapid change throughout society. With the continent settled, population growing, and imperial expansion in the Caribbean and Philippines underway, the US became a major global power. By 1910, the nation's industrial base was the largest in the world as the mass production of consumer goods transformed production. Large farms and mechanized agriculture displaced small farmers and a new demand grew for labor in factories in cities across the country.

This economic growth drew millions of new immigrants to US cities as the nation shifted from a largely rural population (80% in 1860) to a majority urban population by 1920. Cities themselves were transformed by new technologies that ushered in skyscraper buildings, electric streetcars and trolleys, the light bulb, telephones, and new forms of mass entertainment, such as amusement parks and motion pictures. A new middle class of white-collar workers carried out the clerical and administrative work increasingly required by industries large and small.

Industrialists such as Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller accumulated vast fortunes from the economic activity of the late 19th Century. Mark Twain coined the term "The Gilded Age" to refer to this period in which excessive wealth by some masked large social problems. By the turn of the century, many Americans—wageworkers, members of the middle class, elite humanitarians—believed that corporate power was out of control and that the industrial order needed fundamental reform.

The years between 1890 and 1920 became known as the Progressive Era. Progressivism was not a single movement, nor simply a matter of presidential politics, but rather a network of overlapping and sometimes competing organizations and coalitions that campaigned to reform American society between 1890 and 1914. Several themes and forces defined progressivism of the era—its focus on ending corruption, improving efficiency, and promoting technical expertise; its strong support among the middle classes; its disdain for traditional political parties; its optimistic faith in the power of the state; its international character; and its limited success.

Millions of Americans from all walks of life marched under the progressive banner—from working people battling for better pay and control over their lives to urban reformers striving to improve living and working conditions in the slums. Some reformers were actually what we might now consider conservative in their goals—they wanted to "Americanize" millions of new immigrants, to close working-class saloons, to make city government more businesslike, or to make American society more "orderly." Progressive politicians set goals of breaking up large corporations that stifled competition ("trust busting"), regulating corporate activity, and conserving the natural environment. Some parts of the movement addressed issues specific to a certain gender, race, or social group, such as women campaigning for the right to vote and African Americans protesting disfranchisement and lynching.

## **Immigrants in New York City**

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At the turn of the twentieth century, unprecedented numbers of immigrants flowed into the United States, bringing their languages, religions, and culture into US cities. Millions arrived from Italy and Eastern Europe with distinct reasons for leaving and goals for their future. While their experiences in their homelands were widely different, these “new” immigrants found themselves living and working in close proximity in New York City, where soon the foreign-born made up more than half of the population.

In Eastern Europe, Christian majorities pushed Jews to the fringes of society and antisemitic laws restricted land ownership and work options. Most Jewish men were artisans or peddlers in market towns or “shtetls.” Some were religious scholars whose studying was considered of utmost value. Others believed in socialism and took up political resistance to the Russian tsar. Like many women during this period, Jewish women managed the household. Jewish mothers and daughters also worked as small merchants, taking part in the market life of bustling, but ghettoized, communities.

Economic turmoil in Eastern Europe, coupled with brutal repression and “pogroms” (state-sanctioned massacres) prompted a mass exodus of Jews to America. Sons or daughters often emigrated first, finding jobs and paying the passage for other family members.

Immigrants from southern Italy were often peasants who were uprooted from their land by an agricultural depression and sought economic relief in the US. Elites in Italy’s industrial north scorned the less educated and darker-skinned peasants of the underdeveloped south who comprised the majority of Italian immigrants. At first, eight out of ten Italian immigrants were men who came to the US without their families. Many planned to earn enough to maintain their homes and families in Italy, and more than half of these immigrants returned to Italy. Italian families had worked together on the land for centuries. Most families were highly patriarchal and formal education was minimal, as all children had to help in the fields. Women also did sewing, spinning, and cooking.

The pace and size of US cities were different than anything Italian and Jewish immigrants had ever experienced. Whether they came from villages or small cities, little in their past prepared them for the crowded streets, blaring traffic, towering skyscrapers, and roaring subways of New York. There was a huge gap between the lifestyles of the rich and the poor. Electricity, natural gas, telephones, central heating, and indoor plumbing were common among the urban upper classes by the turn of the century. At the other end of the scale, poor tenement-dwellers fueled their kitchen stoves with scavenged scraps of coal and wood, lit kerosene lamps, and drew water from hydrants located in courtyards near foul-smelling privies. A new tenement building might include a hallway toilet shared by residents, and possibly even hot water, but most immigrant housing had neither heating nor lighting systems.

New York’s chief immigrant neighborhood, the Lower East Side, was dark, dirty and crowded, with one of the highest population densities in the world. Survival depended on mutual support. The streets teemed with peddlers selling goods and ethnic foods. Down every street were immigrant clubs, theaters, and cafes. Lower East Siders shopped, gossiped, debated politics,

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and sought entertainment. Neighborhood ties and kinship networks helped immigrants preserve old cultures while adapting to new realities. But not all immigrants shared the same self-interests, nor the same vision of American life. Socialist organizers, small businessmen, and Democratic Party politicians competed for the allegiance of new immigrants. Jewish and Italian gangsters exploited immigrants' ignorance and vulnerability.

Meanwhile, Progressive reformers established settlement houses to aid new immigrants and instill "American middle class" values. Some social workers, such as Lillian Wald, founder of the Henry Street Settlement House, and Mary Simkhovitch of Greenwich House, were sympathetic to the immigrants' problems and helped publicize their plight. Others were critical of immigrant cultures and sought to cleanse newcomers of what they saw as backward customs.

### **Urban Mass Culture, Leisure, and the Working Class**

Immigrant life was not all drudgery and hard times. America's turn-of-the-century cities were the birthplace of a new commercial culture, filled with new amusements. Immigrants were drawn to the freedom and romance promised by new fashions, moving picture shows, and dance halls. Despite their economic differences, millions of New Yorkers read some of the same newspapers, saw the same movies, laughed at the same comic strips, mixed in public spaces like Coney Island, and wore mass-produced fashions that blurred class distinctions. The new commercial culture also brought with it class-based cultural conflicts. Middle-class arbiters of morality tried to regulate "disorderly" amusements and direct working-class audiences into what they considered to be more uplifting forms of recreation.

By the 1910s, greater New York had more than five hundred dance halls. "The town is dance mad," complained one reformer. Dance halls ranged from the respectable to the tawdry. Young working women were the mainstays of the dance halls, even though they were expected to contribute most of the little they earned to their families. They stretched their pennies by "dating" young men, who paid for an evening's food, drink, and entertainment in return for female companionship and the possibility of sexual experimentation. These young working women were the pioneers of a new mixed-sex realm of leisure; previously, women's entertainment had been restricted largely to family outings or activities meant for women only. Dance halls and amusement parks offered young people a place to meet and enjoy each other's company unsupervised. Seeking excitement and independence, young immigrant women and men established the norms of modern romantic companionship.

Dancing could also be found at commercial amusement parks, which developed during the late 1890s. By 1919, at least 1,500 parks nationally took their place alongside vaudeville shows, movies, and professional sports events, offering diversion to people who were not wealthy. By 1910, every major city had at least one park that could be reached by trolley. These parks featured picnic groves, dance halls, skating rinks, pony and boat rides, penny arcades, carousels, ferris wheels, roller coasters, and other rides in addition to nightly entertainment like fireworks, band concerts, or musical shows. Elaborately decorated and highly mechanized,

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amusement parks like the Chutes in San Francisco, Pittsburgh's Kennywood Park, Boston's Revere Beach, and Denver's Manhattan Beach offered release from the dullness of the workaday world. "It is just like what I see when I dream of heaven," one young woman exclaimed on her first visit to Brooklyn's Coney Island. The Tunnel of Love had distinctly sexual overtones: "Will she throw her arms around your neck and yell?" advertisements asked. Coney Island hotels, beaches, and boardwalks catered to a range of pocketbooks; one 1899 guidebook claimed the area was "divided equally amongst the rich and the poor." Luna Park, Coney Island's fantasy land of minarets, turrets, and 250,000 electric lights, had a relatively high admission price and was aimed at the respectable middle class. Steeplechase Park, with its fun houses, circuslike sideshows, and rougher rides, attracted working-class youths.

An outing to an amusement park was an occasional treat, but plenty of everyday entertainment was also available, and at popular prices. The theater was a lively part of immigrant neighborhoods, from participatory, hiss-at-the-villain melodrama to Shakespeare. By the 1890s, vaudeville was competing with other forms of live entertainment by offering "something for everybody": beautiful women for the men, romantic singers for the women, slapstick comedians for the boys, animal acts for young children. Vaudeville ran almost nonstop—six days a week, from around noon to near midnight—at prices that most could afford.

Moving picture technology evolved quickly, from the hand-wound Kinetoscopes of 1893 to the large-screen projection cinema that was perfected a mere three years later. By 1905 entrepreneurs were setting up small storefront theaters featuring continuous shows composed entirely of one-reel silent films. These "nickelodeons," so named because the price of admission was a nickel, were an instant success. By 1907 there were more than two thousand nickelodeons in the United States. Three years later, about twenty-six million Americans were attending weekly shows at ten thousand nickelodeons.

### **New York City's Garment Industry**

Immigrants were the backbone of the industrial workforce. Though poorly paid, their jobs supported their families and communities and opened the way for the growth of the new commercial culture. The nature of immigrants' work lives depended, in part, on where they lived. Many American cities were known for particular industries. For example, Pittsburgh was a steel town, Chicago's economy centered on meatpacking, and the garment (or clothing industry) dominated New York's economy. In the garment industry, unlike steel or meatpacking, there was not a giant company towering over all rivals, controlling pay scales and working conditions. Instead, the garment trade was characterized by a few large firms and hundreds of small shops, most located in lower Manhattan, competing for a share of the clothing market.

Concentrated in New York City, the ready-made clothing industry was relatively new. For most of the nineteenth century, women had made their own and their children's clothing at home, with or without the help of hired seamstresses, and men with money had used tailors.

The way the garments were produced underwent a major organizational shift with the introduction of the sweatshop system. Sweatshops employed a handful of workers, almost all of

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whom were immigrant Jewish or Italian women. The workers were supervised by contractors of their own nationality, mostly men, who received materials on credit from manufacturers, bought sewing machines on the installment plan, and rented lofts or tenement apartments for factories. In 1902, about 25,000 to 30,000 women did piecework in New York City. Thousands of small, marginal firms competed with a few large manufacturers. Shops were hot in summer, cold in winter; workers were charged for needles, thread, and electricity. Workers were paid by the piece rather than by the hour, and at low piecework rates, they pushed themselves hard and worked long days to make a living. Competing with other small shops and meeting seasonal deadlines, these contractors operated with little capital. Their profits depended on speeding up production, ignoring safety, stretching already long working hours, and paying low wages. Many workers participated in short, spontaneous strikes, but lasting labor organizations were rare.

Most garment workers were young immigrant women. By 1910 the workforce was 70 percent women. Over 56 percent were Jewish and 34 percent were Italian. About 50 percent of the women were under the age of 20. Men dominated higher paying positions like cutting and pressing, while women toiled at lower paying jobs of assembling and finishing work. African American women were a small percentage of garment workers, and most worked at home, barred from factory work by racism.

### **Uprising of 20,000**

In the fall of 1909, the industry exploded. Wage cuts and other grievances sparked a wave of small walkouts by workers who produced shirtwaists, the blouses urban working-class and middle-class women wore. The workers were mostly young women whose earnings not only helped to support their families but also gave them a small measure of independence. In November 1909, they turned out for a huge meeting in the Great Hall of New York City's Cooper Union. The most dramatic and inspiring speaker that night was Clara Lemlich, a young Ukrainian-born activist who called for a general strike against all the companies in the industry. Within two days, between twenty thousand and thirty thousand workers had walked off their jobs. A month later, the strike, which became known as The Uprising of the Twenty Thousand, spread to Philadelphia.

When the strike began, the garment workers' union—the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU)—was tiny and weak. Many labor leaders thought that organizing a union among women was futile. But the strike proved this notion false. The female strikers' courage as they confronted police arrests and beatings by hired thugs won the public's heart. Employers hired prostitutes to taunt picketers, knowing that working women feared falling into the brutalized life of the streets. Police and judges also preyed on the young women's fears through sexual harassment and severe prison sentences.

Male members of the ILGWU, Socialist party activists, and community organizations that helped strikers' hungry families all supported the striking women. The strikers' other key ally was the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL). Founded in 1903, the WTUL was a coalition of women—some from the working class, some college-educated reformers like Lillian Wald and Jane Addams, and some extremely wealthy women—devoted to bringing women into trade

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unions as a means of empowerment. League members believed that working women were more oppressed as workers than as women, but that women of all classes shared important connections because they were women. The elite WTUL members provided funds for strikers, spoke to the press, and arranged for volunteer lawyers, but they also did their share of picket duty and even went to jail. Not everyone trusted the wealthy WTUL members or their financial support. Trade unionist Leonora O'Reilly complained that strikers were reluctant to voice their own opinions because they felt bound to agree with the society women who donated money. Still, despite disputes between women of different classes, the women shared a commitment to making the WTUL a genuine arena for working-class feminism.

The industry-wide strikes of garment workers during 1909 and 1910 brought tens of thousands of women into the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU), which had been established a decade earlier. Most of these new members were Jewish, but some were from other ethnic groups. Both in Philadelphia and New York, some African-American women joined the union and the strike. The conflict dragged on until February 1910, when the ILGWU reached an arbitrated settlement with manufacturers. The strikers and the union held together enough of a coalition to win important gains from 300 companies. At Triangle Shirtwaist, one of the biggest shops, women won a 52-hour week and a 12-15 percent wage increase. But Triangle and other large companies rejected workers' safety demands and refused to recognize the union as the workers' representative. Later strikes (and the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist fire) led to union recognition and the passage of state and city laws forcing industry-wide reform. Within months of the February victory, thousands of garment workers in Chicago and cloakmakers in New York began their own strikes. By the eve of World War I, unions had made deep inroads into the clothing, fur, and millinery industries. Nearly four hundred thousand clothing workers became union members between 1909 and 1913.

### **The Triangle Fire and Its Legacy**

On the warm spring afternoon of March 25, 1911, a small fire broke out in a bin of rags at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, a crowded garment factory on New York City's Lower East Side. The factory's fire escapes were faulty and the exits were locked or blocked by foremen fearful that workers would sneak out to rest or leave with stolen needles and thread. As the fire spread, the workers were trapped. In less than an hour, 146 people—most of them young Italian and Jewish women who had recently arrived in America—perished from smoke inhalation or from injuries sustained in a desperate ten-story leap to escape the flames. Many more workers were injured.

The Triangle fire horrified Americans and focused public attention on the human costs of industrialization. In the aftermath of the tragedy, middle-class reformers, socialists, and working people, including survivors of the fire, united to pressure lawmakers for factory regulation. New York State established a Factory Commission, whose members included American Federation of Labor (AFL) president Samuel Gompers and Consumers' League of New York representative Frances Perkins. Crucial to the commission's success were two politicians allied with the Democratic political machine known as Tammany Hall, Robert Wagner and Alfred E. Smith, who served as its chairman and vice chairman. Over the course of four years, hundreds of workers

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testified to the commission about unsafe working conditions. To improve wages and protect the health and safety of New York workers, the commission sponsored fifty-six laws, many of which were passed by Democrats eager not only to wrap themselves in the banner of reform but also to undercut the growing influence of socialists among working-class constituents.