

Background Information for Teachers and Students:

The transformation of America between the years of 1815-1848 took two kinds of decisions. Of individuals looking for a better future and public policy where leaders had to make conscious decisions about the direction of the country. The changes took place within a continental and global context.

America in 1815 was similar to a third world country today. Most people lived on isolated farms. Difficult transportation routes and modes along with limited ways to communicate kept most Americans lives primitive. Most Americans grew their own food and made their own clothing. Difficulty of communication and transportation made their life isolated. Only those that lived along waterways could move about. Information from the outside world was limited and seen as a luxury. The invention of the telegraph by Samuel Morse in 1844 transformed the ability to communicate by long distances in a shorter time than previous means of communication (horse or mail). Americans believed the telegraph would promote democracy, peace, and justice all over the world. By 1848, the United States had become transcontinental with improvements in transportation. The railroad, Erie Canal and steamboat provided Americans the opportunity to integrate into a global economy. At this time America was extending its territory westward and promoting Manifest Destiny. The ability to communicate long distances and improvements in transportation revolutionized American life. Improvements in transportation and innovations in printing techniques allowed the dissemination of books and newspapers. The post office delivered news on politics making nationwide mass politics possible. Most Americans of this time period expected changes in their country. Some looked at geographic expansion across the Continent; others wanted enrichment of their lives which could be accomplished through industrialization, increased educational opportunities and better treatment of racial groups and women. Religion played an important role for Americans during this time period. Revivals were common occurrences in rural America. During the early 19th century almost everybody believed in intelligent design. Most Americans believed in progress and felt a divine providence would guide their progress.

Many Americans were looking for a way to get ahead and build a better life. This was accomplished by getting ahead in material terms. Technology introduced industrialization and a mass of migration of Americans from rural to urban areas. American life sped up and a promise through a better life with material advances. The ability to have power, the advances in communication and transportation changed the way of life in America. The power revolution included the first steam engine, and then the electric revolution. Communications improved with the invention of the telegraph and then the telephone. Transportation began with the steamboat and then the railroad. The use of power provided Americans the opportunity to compete on a world market with goods made by machine rather than by hand. The railroad opened the ability to travel transcontinental in seven days rather than six months. The telegraph was important to the Civil War. Wartime correspondences depended on the telegraph for both sides. The railroad also played a major role in the Civil War, providing fresh troops, artillery, and food for those on the front lines.

Americans believed democracy promoted the belief of diversity while in fact it imposed a conformity shaped by Protestant public opinion. They made a pretense of tolerance, but had minimal tolerance in matters of public behavior. Both religion and liberty were entwined to “unite” Americans. During the period of Jacksonian Democracy Americans became divided, poor against rich, white against black, Protestant against Catholic, native against immigrant. The Whig party was against the Democratic Party, the abolitionist against proslavery believers and the North was against both the South and the West. One source of anxiety came from not knowing the purpose or direction of the nation; another was that one faction might become more powerful than the other. Most Americans believed God’s plan for America’s destiny depended on the preservation of the constitution and the union. This made the idea of secession unforgivable and sinful. By 1860 many Northerners became part of the Republican Party promoting industry, tariffs, and free soil in the west. Southerners were devoted to states rights, free trade, and slavery.

Most of the 10 million enslaved Africans brought to the New World came to America before 1807. In 1790 slaves comprised about one fifth of Americans. Most slaves were concentrated in slave states and due to the Missouri Compromise slavery was eliminated north of the Ohio and Missouri Compromise line. White superiority was virtually universal among whites and justified slavery. Many whites saw the evils of slavery but shrugged them off as a “necessary evil”. Legally, slaves could not marry, own property, or testify in courts against whites. By law slaves were defined as property, and economically, seen as valuable property. Frederick Douglas wrote three autobiographies and challenged the beliefs on the causes and consequences of slavery, freedom, and moral accountability in the Civil War era.

Resources for Information:

<http://www.fpri.org/footnotes/>

Vol 13, No 12: [Throes of Democracy: The American Civil War Era, 1829 – 1877](#), Walter McDougall, 5/2008

Vol 13, No 5: [What Hath God Wrought](#), Daniel Walker Howe, 8/2008
<http://www.dinah.com>.

<http://www.catawbaschools.net/default.aspx>