CHAPTER 14

Forging the National Economy, 1790–1860

# Focus Questions

. How fast was the population of America increasing and what were the sources of this population growth?

. What were important developments in American manufacturing?

. How did the developing factory system affect women and children?

. What technological advances improved agricultural production?

. What transportation innovations developed and how did they change sectional relationships?

# Chapter Themes

**Theme:** The importance of the West grew in the early nineteenth century. Cheap land attracted immigrants and natives alike, and after some technological innovations, the West became an agricultural giant. The increased output also spurred transportation developments to tie this developing region to the rest of the United States.

**Theme:** In the era of Jacksonian democracy, the American population grew rapidly and changed in character. More people lived in the raw West and in the expanding cities, and immigrant groups, like the Irish and Germans, added their labor power to America’s economy, sometimes arousing hostility from native-born Americans in the process.

**Theme:** In the early nineteenth century, the American economy developed the beginnings of industrialization. The greatest advances occurred in transportation, as canals and railroads bound the Union together into a continental economy with strong regional specialization.

chapter summary

The youthful American republic expanded dramatically on the frontier in the early nineteenth century. Frontier life was often crude and hard on the pioneers, especially women.

Westward-moving pioneers often ruthlessly exploited the environment, exhausting the soil and exterminating wildlife. Yet the wild beauty of the West was also valued as a symbol of American national identity, and eventually, environmentalists would create a national park system to preserve pieces of the wilderness.

Other changes altered the character of American society and its workforce. Old cities expanded, and new cities sprang up in the wilderness. Irish and German immigrants poured into the country in the 1840s and 1850s, and the Irish, in particular, aroused nativist hostility because of their Roman Catholic faith.

Inventions and business innovations, such as free incorporation laws, spurred economic growth. Women and children were the most exploited early factory laborers. Male workers made some gains in wages and hours but generally failed in unionization attempts.

The most far-reaching economic advances before the Civil War occurred in agriculture and transportation. The early railroads, despite many obstacles, gradually spread their tentacles across the country. Foreign trade remained only a small part of the American economy, but changing technology gradually created growing economic links to Europe. By the early 1860s, the telegraph, railroad, and steamship had gone far toward replacing older means of travel and communication such as the canals, clipper ships, stagecoach, and pony express.

The new means of transportation and distribution laid the foundations for a continental market economy. The new national economy created a pattern of sectional specialization and altered the traditional economic functions of the family. There was growing concern over the class differences spawned by industrialization, especially in the cities. But the general growth of opportunities and the increased standard of living made America a magnetic land of opportunity to many people at home and abroad.

# developing the chapter: suggested lecture or discussion topics

* Focus on the Irish and German immigrants and the nativist reaction to them. Show why nativists thought that immigrant poverty and Catholicism posed a threat to American democracy. Consider the important role that the Catholic Church played in the lives of Irish and German Catholic immigrants, despite the opposition of nativists.

REFERENCES: Kerby Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (1985); Jay P. Dolan, *The Immigrant Church* (1975).

* Examine the effects of early industrial development on labor and society. Show how the change from a subsistence to a market economy affected workers, farmers, and especially women.

REFERENCES: Herbert Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America* (1976); Mary Blevitt, *Men, Women, and Work* (1988).

* Consider the various stages of the market and transportation revolutions. Focus on the particular significance of the steamboat and the canal and their gradual replacement by the railroad.

REFERENCE: Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815–1846* (1992).

* Analyze the relation between the growing national economy and the regional economic specialization of the Northeast, South, and Midwest. Point out the paradoxical way in which economic development both united and divided the sections.

REFERENCE: W. Elliot Brownlee, *Dynamics of Ascent* (1974).

# for further interest: additional class topics

* Discuss the roots of Irish immigration to America. Consider the changing historical image of Irish-Americans and their culture from the nineteenth century to the present and the relationship between popular stereotypes (Irish police, St. Patrick’s Day) and the actual experience of Irish-Americans.
* Discuss one or more of the early inventions and their relation to economic growth, for example, the cotton gin, the sewing machine (see Examining the Evidence section on page 294), the mechanical reaper, and the telegraph. Consider how much technological progress depends on the proper social and economic conditions.
* Compare the early-nineteenth-century American economy with those of developing Third World countries today. Discuss the absolutely crucial role that developing a basic infrastructure—particularly transportation and communication facilities—plays in the early stages of industrial development.
* Focus on the lives of early factory workers, perhaps using the female textile workers of Lowell, Massachusetts, as a case study. (See boxed quotes on page 292 and 296.)

# character sketches

## Eli Whitney (1765–1825)

Whitney was the American inventor whose two major innovations—the cotton gin and the system of interchangeable parts—revolutionized the American economy.

He did not care for school, preferring to spend his time making and fixing things in his father’s shop. Whitney once took his father’s watch completely apart and reassembled it without his father discovering the deed. For a time, he supported himself by manufacturing nails and hatpins.

He earned money to attend Yale by fixing things around the college. One campus carpenter allegedly said, “There was a good mechanic spoiled when you went to college.”

He built the first cotton gin in ten days and a larger model in a year. The original machine was stolen and imitations were produced; it took Whitney many years of legal battles to gain the sole patent for the device.

**Quote:** “There were a number of very respectable Gentlemen at Mrs. Greene’s who all agreed that if a machine could be invented which would clean the cotton with expedition, it would be a great thing both to the country and to the inventor.… I concluded to relinquish my school and turn my attention to perfecting the Machine. I made one before I came away which required the labor of one man to turn it and with which one man will clean ten times as much cotton as he can in any other way before known.…” (Letter to his father, 1793)

REFERENCE: Constance M. Green, *Eli Whitney and the Birth of American Technology* (1956).

## Robert Fulton (1765–1815)

Fulton is best known in America for his development of the steamboat, but he was also a successful artist and an inventor of the submarine and the torpedo.

As a boy, Fulton became a skilled gunsmith, and in school, he made his own pencils. He liked to fish but hated to row boats, so at fourteen, he devised a paddle wheel to move the boat by foot.

A talented artist, he studied in London under Benjamin West and was earning a successful living by painting before he turned to mechanics and engineering.

He first worked in Britain on iron aqueducts and bridges, and then went to France, where he built a diving boat, the *Nautilus,* which could stay underwater for four hours. But Napoleon lost interest in the device when it proved unable to sink British shipping.

His first steamboat sank on the Seine, but a second model, built in 1803, was successful. This became the prototype for the *Clermont*.

**Quote:** “When [the *Clermont*] came so near that the noise of the machine and paddles were heard…some prostrated themselves and besought Providence to protect them from the approach of the horrible monster which was marching on the wave and lighting its path by spitting fire.” (Newspaper account of the *Clermont*’s first voyage, 1807)

REFERENCE: Kirkpatrick Sale, *Fire of His Genius: Robert Fulton and the American Dream* (2001).

## Samuel F. B. Morse (1791–1872)

Morse, the inventor of the telegraph, was also a superb American painter and was, for a time, a leader of nativist agitation.

He studied painting in England, with some of his work winning prizes in the Royal Academy competitions. He returned to Boston in 1815 but discovered that he could earn a living only by painting portraits. After Congress rejected his plan to paint the Capitol rotunda, he reluctantly abandoned art and turned to inventing.

From his time in Europe, he had developed a strong dislike of Catholicism, and in the 1830s, he was a leader of American anti-Catholic agitation.

He developed the first ideas for the telegraph from hearing lectures on electricity. But it took several years of experimentation to perfect the sending and receiving devices and to develop his Morse code for communicating messages by short and long signals. He was in continual poverty and was nearly at the point of abandoning the project when Congress finally authorized funds for the successful Baltimore-to-Washington line.

**Quote:** “If the presence of electricity can be made visible in any part of an electric circuit closed by an electromagnet, I see no reason why intelligence may not be transmitted instantaneously by electricity.” (1832)

REFERENCE: Carleton Mabee, *American Leonardo: A Life of Samuel F.B. Morse* (1943).

# questions for class discussion

. How does the image of the frontier compare with the reality of pioneer life as described in the chapter? (See boxed quote on page 281.)

. Review the push factors that forced Europeans (specifically the Irish and Germans) from their home countries. What were the pull factors that attracted them to the United States? Why was the United States more appealing than other locations for European immigrants? (See boxed quotes on page 283.)

. Why was transportation—particularly the canals and the railroads—so important in the early stages of industrialization? (See boxed quote on page 304.) Would industrialization have occurred more quickly if the federal government had been unimpeded in offering financial assistance to transportation projects?

. Which technological innovation was most important for early-nineteenth-century economic development? (See boxed quote by Abraham Lincoln on page 292.)

. Compare the life of factory workers to that of slaves in the South. Is “wage slave” an appropriate description for factory workers? (See boxed quote on page 293.)

. What effects did the movement from a subsistence to a market economy have on American society, including farmers, laborers, and women? What were the advantages and disadvantages of the change?

. To what degree was American industrialization made possible by foreign contributions, such as immigration and stolen mill plans?

# makers of america: The irish

## Questions for Class Discussion

. In what ways were the Irish similar to other immigrants from the British Isles, such as the English (Chapter 3) and the Scots-Irish (Chapter 5) and in what ways were they different?

. How did the Irish particularly shape the history of American politics, urban life, and religion? What factors contributed to their success in America and what made it difficult for them to get ahead?

## Suggested Student Exercises

* Use your local yellow pages to find the names of Irish businesses or professions.
* Examine some well-known Irish-Americans (for example, John F. Kennedy, Mayor Richard Daley, Eugene O’ Neill, Al Smith). Consider why more Irish-Americans have achieved prominence in the twentieth century than in the nineteenth.

# makers of america: the germans

## Questions for Class Discussion

. Compare the historical experience of German immigrants, both before and after immigration, with that of the Irish. How did the patterns of German settlement compare with those of the Irish?

. What elements of American culture have been influenced by the German presence? Is that presence more visible in certain regions of the country than in others?

## Suggested Student Exercises

* Use maps of Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, or of cities like Cincinnati or Milwaukee, to identify German place names.
* Consider the rather harsh persecution of German-Americans during World War I as a contrast to their generally benign experience in America.

**CONTENDING VOICES: KNOW-NOTHING PARTY PLATFORM VS. ORESTES BROWNSON**

**Questions for Class Discussion**

1. What political reform/restriction did the Know-Nothing Party advocate?
2. Contrast the Know-Nothings with the analysis of immigrants offered by Orestes Brownson?