Chapter

The Ferment of Reform and Culture, 1790–1860

# Focus Questions

. How did Deism, the Second Great Awakening, continued denominational fragmentation, and Mormons shape American religious life?

. What educational developments occurred in the first half of the nineteenth century?

. Who led the various reform movements in the early half of the nineteenth century?

. How did Americans contribute to the advance of science during this time?

. Who were America’s foremost artistic and literary figures in the first half of the nineteenth century?

6. What were the significant changes in American art and literature in the first half of the nineteenth century?

# Chapter Themes

**Theme:** The spectacular religious revivals of the Second Great Awakening reversed a trend toward secular rationalism in American culture and helped to fuel a spirit of social reform. In the process, religion was increasingly feminized, while women, in turn, took the lead in movements of reform, including those designed to improve their own condition.

**Theme:** The attempt to improve Americans’ faith, morals, and character affected nearly all areas of American life and culture, including education, the family, literature, and the arts—culminating in the great crusade against slavery.

**Theme:** Intellectual and cultural development in America was less prolific than in Europe, but they did earn some international recognition and became more distinctly American, especially after the War of 1812.

chapter summary

In early nineteenth century America, movements of moral and religious reform accompanied the democratization of politics and the creation of a national market economy. After a period of growing rationalism in religion, a new wave of revivals, beginning about 1800, swept out of the West and effected great change not only in religious life, but also in other areas of society. Existing religious groups were further fragmented, and new groups like the Mormons emerged. Women were especially prominent in these developments, becoming a major presence in the churches and discovering, in reform movements, an outlet for energies that were often stifled in masculinized political and economic life.

Among the first areas to benefit from the reform impulse was education. The public elementary school movement gained strength, while a few women made their way into still-tradition-bound colleges. Women were also prominent in movements for improved treatment of the mentally ill, peace, temperance, and other causes. By the 1840s, some women also began to agitate for their own rights, including suffrage. The movement for women’s rights, closely linked to the antislavery crusade, gained adherents even while it met strong obstacles and vehement opposition.

While many reformers worked to improve society as a whole, others created utopian experiments to model their religious and social ideals. Some of these groups promoted radical sexual and economic doctrines, while others appealed to high-minded intellectuals and artists.

American culture was still quite weak in theoretical sciences and the fine arts, but a vigorous national literature blossomed after the War of 1812 with the works of Washington Irving and James Fennimore Cooper. In New England, the literary renaissance encouraged truly “American” literature and was closely linked to the philosophy of transcendentalism promoted by Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Margaret Fuller, the editor of the *Dial*. Many of the great American writers, such as Walt Whitman, reflected the national spirit of utopian optimism, but a few dissenters, such as Hawthorne and Melville, explored the darker side of life and of their own society.

Imitative portraiture and historical painting gave way to emerging romanticism of the Hudson River School that glorified nature and began to examine human interaction with the environment.

# developing the chapter: suggested lecture or discussion topics

* Explain the revivals of the Second Great Awakening and their broad cultural implications. Emphasize how the spirit of social reform grew out of individual conversion and how religious change was linked to the wider democratic movements in American society.

references: Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (1989); Robert Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (1994).

* Examine the nature of the nineteenth-century family and its relation to society, stressing particularly how the cult of domesticity and women’s separate sphere gave women a specially defined role in society. Examine how some female reformers began to advocate their own rights as well as the betterment of others.

reference: Carl Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (1980).

* Examine the early women’s movement as one of the most important reforms and explain the obstacles it faced. Show the relationship between women’s growing activism and the broader reforms of the antebellum era.

reference: Lori Ginzburg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence* (1990).

* Explore the perfectionist and utopian quality of early American culture, as revealed in both the utopian communal experiments and philosophical movements like transcendentalism. Point out the involvement of many writers in reform movements and experiments such as Brook Farm.

reference: Anne C. Rose, *Transcendentalism as a Social Movement, 1830–1850* (1981).

# for further interest: additional class topics

* Use popular contemporary texts such as *McGuffey’s Readers* or *Godey’s Lady’s Book* to illuminate early American character and values. Discuss how the messages that were especially aimed at children or women reveal prevalent social attitudes, as well as the nature and purposes of nineteenth-century education.
* Examine the story of the Mormons. In what way is it an American story (individualism, fighting religious persecution, and pioneering)? In what ways is it an un-American story (others’ intolerance, communalism, and polygamy)?
* Analyze one or more of the utopian communities, such as the Shaker communes, New Harmony, Oneida, or Brook Farm. Consider how the success or failure of such efforts should be judged.
* Listen to the music of Stephen Foster. Compare it with contemporary European music by Beethoven, Brahms, Verdi, and Wagner. Why the difference?
* Review American works of literature of this time (Thoreau, Alcott, Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville). Find contemporary European authors and works of literature (Dickens, Hugo, and Dumas). Are the American works distinct and unique when compared with the European ones?

# character sketches

## Charles G. Finney (1792–1875)

Finney was the most influential revivalist of the Second Great Awakening and a president of Oberlin College, a center of abolitionism and reform.

Although he was a successful attorney before turning to preaching, Finney never attended college or law school. Despite his dislike of conventional churches, he underwent a total conversion to religion after reading the Bible on his own. He then abandoned his law practice entirely, saying that he had a “retainer from the Lord to plead His cause.”

Finney was ordained by the Presbyterians but was often at odds with them and conducted revivals completely on his own. Besides the anxious bench, some of his other new methods included praying by name for the conversion of sinners in the community, holding extended nightly meetings for a week or more, and encouraging women to pray and speak publicly. He also used theatrical gestures, movement, and emotional rhetoric to rouse his listeners.

**Quote:** “A revival is not a miracle, or dependent on a miracle in any sense. It is a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means.” (*Lectures on Revivalism,* 1835)

reference: William G. McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (1959).

## Joseph Smith (1805–1844)

Smith was the founder and original prophet of the Mormon Church.

The poor New York frontier family in which he grew up frequently moved during his childhood. He experienced his first vision of the angel Moroni in 1820, followed by subsequent encounters that led to the discovery of the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon recounts the coming of Old Testament people to America and the battles of the good Nephites with the evil Lamanites (American Indians).

The Mormon Church was organized very hierarchically, with Smith as “Seer, Translator, Prophet, Apostle of Jesus Christ, and Elder of the Church.” He gave numerous new revelations before his martyrdom in Carthage, Illinois. The most famous was that allowing polygamy; Smith himself had twenty-seven wives at the time of his death. He had also announced his plan to run for president of the United States in 1844.

A magnetic personality, Smith was down-to-earth, clever, physically vigorous, and virile.

**Quote:** “We believe in the literal gathering of Israel and in the restoration of the Ten Tribes; that Zion will be built upon this continent; that Christ will reign personally upon the earth; and that the earth will be renewed and receive its paradisiacal glory.” (Statement of Faith, 1843)

reference: Richard Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (1984).

## Catharine Beecher (1800–1878)

Beecher was a prominent women’s educator and writer and a member of the famous Evangelical family.

Catharine, the oldest of four Beecher daughters, was very close to her father, and when her mother died, sixteen-year-old Catharine took over much of the responsibility for managing the household and the younger children.

Her plans to marry an unchurched man in 1822 came to naught when he died four months after their engagement, and she took the death as a divine judgment on her. The following year, she opened the first of her female seminaries.

Beecher insisted that the young ladies in her schools take up physical exercise and attacked the confining clothing and social norms that restricted women. But she opposed higher education for women and attacked women’s involvement in abolitionism and other social reforms. Her popular *Treatise on Domestic Economy,* written with her sister Harriet Beecher Stowe, contained practical tips on child-rearing, cooking, family health, and other matters that would enable women to run their homes effectively.

**Quote:** “Any activity that throws woman into the attitude of a combatant, either for herself or others, lies outside her appropriate sphere.” (*An Essay on Slavery and Abolitionism,* 1837)

reference: Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (1973).

## Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902)

Stanton, the cofounder (with Lucretia Mott) of the Seneca Falls Convention, was the most influential nineteenth-century American feminist.

Her father was a lawyer, and she took great interest in his work. When he said to her, “Oh, my daughter, I wish you were a boy,” she set out to show him that girls were as good as boys.

She wrote the “Declaration of Sentiments” for the Seneca Falls Convention and pushed through the demand for woman suffrage. For a few years, she wore Amelia Bloomer–style pants outfits in protest against women’s confining clothing.

After 1851, she worked in close collaboration with Susan B. Anthony. Anthony was the traveler and organizer who focused almost exclusively on suffrage, while Stanton was the writer and theorist who advocated a broader feminism and many other radical causes. She was lively, humorous, well read, and a very popular speaker.

**Quote:** “I should feel exceedingly diffident to appear before you at this time, having never before spoken in public, were I not nerved by a sense of sacred right and duty [and]…did I not believe that woman herself must do this work; for woman alone can understand the height, the depth, the length and the breadth of her degradation.” (Speech to the Seneca Falls Convention, 1848)

reference: Alma Lutz, *Created Equal: A Biography of Elizabeth Cady Stanton* (1973).

## Mary Lyon (1797–1849)

Lyon was a pioneering women’s educator and the founder of Mt. Holyoke Seminary (later Mt. Holyoke College).

One of her male schoolteachers told her that the general belief in women’s mental inferiority was wrong and the girls could absorb as much advanced learning as they had an opportunity to obtain. She opened her first girls’ school in 1824 but spent much time pursuing knowledge on her own by attending lectures at all-male Amherst College.

She raised the first thousand dollars for Mt. Holyoke on her own and took no salary until the venture was under way. The original name for the school was to be Pangynaskean (Greek for “whole-woman-making”), but this was dropped after press ridicule. Mt. Holyoke was unique among female seminaries because the young ladies were taught the same academic subjects as men and because the students managed their own cooking, housekeeping, and laundry.

A very religious woman, Lyon often encouraged campus revivals. She was hardworking, friendly, and very popular with students and faculty. So indifferent was she to dress that her students bought her stylish hats to replace the unfashionable ones she usually wore.

**Quote:** “During the past year my heart has so yearned over the female youth…that it has sometimes seemed as if there was a fire shut up in my bones.” (1834)

reference: Anne Rose, *Voices of the Marketplace: American Thought and Culture* (1995).

## Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862)

Thoreau was the writer and friend of Emerson whose works on nature and civil disobedience have had a continuing influence on American culture.

He was born in Concord, Massachusetts. The death of his older brother, John, at a young age deeply affected Henry and contributed to the lonely and tragic side of his character.

After resigning from schoolteaching after a few weeks because he refused to discipline the children, he later organized a progressive school, where classes were held outdoors and children were encouraged to develop their own interests.

Emerson agreed to allow Thoreau to build his cabin on Emerson’s property at Walden Pond if Thoreau would clear the land and put in a garden. Thoreau moved there on the Fourth of July, 1845, and stayed two years and two months. During that time he wrote his two masterpieces, *Walden* and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers.*

**Quote:** On his deathbed, Thoreau was asked if he had made his peace with God. He replied, “I did not know that we had ever quarreled.”

reference: Robert D. Richardson, *Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (1986).

## Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882)

Emerson was the most famous American writer and philosopher of the early nineteenth century, whose transcendentalist theories shaped the golden age of New England literature.

He came from a long line of New England clergymen but eventually abandoned both the pulpit and conventional religion. His speech to the Harvard Divinity School in 1838, which questioned the value of historical Christianity, aroused ministerial opposition and prevented his returning to Harvard until 1865.

Emerson was popular in the local community of Concord, where he was once elected Hogreeve (the town official in charge of rounding up stray pigs). After his “American Scholar” lecture, he was in great demand as a speaker and traveled thousands of miles to deliver his addresses—which he repeated many times. His booming platform voice belied his generally quiet and mild-mannered demeanor.

**Quote:** “Books are for the scholar’s idle times. When he can read God directly, the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men’s transcripts of their readings.” (“American Scholar” address, 1837)

references: Joel Porte, *Representative Man: Emerson in His Time* (1979); Robert D. Richardson, *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (1995).

# questions for class discussion

. What particular qualities did Evangelical religion give to the early American culture? Why did so many of its energies move toward the reform of society? Were there elements of American religion that resisted the reform impulse? (See boxed quote on page 311.)

. How important is a free public education to a republic? If it is important, why then was early education so poor? If it is not important, why did it begin? Do you agree that public education was “an insurance premium that the wealthy paid for stability and democracy,” as the authors assert? Is it important to a republic to have compulsory public education? (See boxed quote on page 315.)

3. Were the cult of domesticity and the rise of the child-centered family signs of an improvement or a restriction on women’s status and condition? Was the new family a progressive reflection of American democratic ideals or a restriction on them? (See boxed quotes on page 315 and 320.)

. Why did America produce so many reform and utopian movements? What did they contribute to American culture? (See boxed quotes on page 331.)

. What made women such prominent leaders in the religious and reform movements? How did the women’s rights movement compare with the other movements of the period? What obstacles did women reformers face? Why did women often have more difficulty working on their own behalf than they did advocating other causes? (See boxed quote on page 316. See also Examining the Evidence section on page 321.)

**CONTENDING VOICES: NEWSPAPER EDITORIALS DISAGREE OVER SENECA FALLS CONVENTION**

**Questions for Class Discussion**

1. How did the author of the editioral “Women out of their Latitude” respond to the Senceca Falls Convention?

2. What arguments did the author of the second editioral make in response to the first editoral?

# makers of america: The Oneida Community

## Questions for Class Discussion

. What were the fundamental human and social problems that Noyes’s radical ideas attempted to address? Why was he able to put them into practice in antebellum America?

. Was the Oneida experiment doomed to failure from the start? Or should its nearly thirty years of existence be considered a rather remarkable success, especially in its challenge to traditional Victorian patterns of marriage gender relations, considering the very short life span of most utopian communes?

## Suggested Student Exercises

* Locate Putney, Vermont, and Oneida, New York, on maps. Compare the pattern of Noyes’s communal migrations with those of other utopian groups that challenged conventional patterns of monogamous marriage––especially Joseph Smith’s Mormons and Mother Ann Lee’s Shakers. Consider why such groups frequently migrated toward the frontier.
* Examine some of Noyes’s own statements and writings. Consider whether his sexual and communal experimentation was really a movement toward freedom or whether it really represented a kind of cultlike control by the founder himself that was resented by the younger generation reared in the commune.

# varying viewpoints

## Expanding the View

* David Donald, *Lincoln Reconsidered* (1956).

A view of reformers as motivated by cultural anxiety:

“In these plebeian days they could not be successful in politics; family tradition and education prohibited idleness; and agitation allowed the only chance for personal and social self-fulfillment.… What they did question, and what they did rue, was the transfer of leadership to the wrong groups in society, and their appeal for reform was a strident call for their own class to re-exert its former social dominance.… Leadership of humanitarian reform may have been influenced by revivalism or by British precedent, but its true origin lay in the drastic dislocation of Northern society.”

* Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Women’s Sphere*” *in New England, 1780–1835* (1977).

A view of social reform as a reflection of women’s social ties:

“Women who joined maternal associations thus asserted their formative power over their children’s lives, took up evangelical goals, and complemented the private job of child rearing by approaching their occupation cooperatively with their peers. Women joined moral reform societies to accomplish different immediate aims, but with similar reasoning.… Like maternal associations, moral reform societies focused women’s energies on the family arena in order to solve social problems.”

# Questions for Class Discussion

. How do the proponents of these two viewpoints each explain the relationship between the reformers’ backgrounds and their reform activities?

. How might these different views of reformers’ motives affect our judgments about the value of social reform?

. How might each of these historians interpret the temperance movement or the career of Dorothea Dix?