

Historical Background

The Civil War Era (1850–1914)

Between the Civil War and World War I, America changed dramatically. The period began with cotton plantations and the Pony Express, and it ended with cars, airplanes, telephones, and movies. The Civil War scarred everyone—soldier, civilian, slave—and the shift from agriculture to industry accelerated. No American's life would ever be the same.

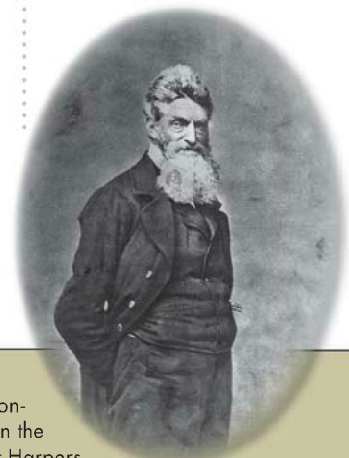
Prelude to War

The North and the South had developed differently. Commerce ruled the North and King Cotton ruled the South. The Industrial Revolution, advances in transportation, and a tide of immigration turned northern cities into centers of bustling activity. By contrast, cotton plantations and the system of slavery defined the South. Issues such as what to do about fugitive slaves and whether new states should be slave or free dominated politics. Rage and resentment grew. War was waiting.

Brother Against Brother

When Abraham Lincoln, dedicated to halting the spread of slavery, was elected president in 1860, South Carolina and five other states left the Union and established the Confederate States of America. Fighting began at Fort Sumter, in Charleston Harbor. Many on both sides anticipated a short war. No one could know what lay ahead: the carnage of Antietam, where more than 26,000 men fell in a single day; the deprivation of the siege of Vicksburg, where people survived only by eating dogs and rats; the destruction of Georgia, when Union troops marched to the coast. The devastating civil war lasted four long years.

By the time Confederate general Robert E. Lee surrendered to Union general Ulysses S. Grant in the spring of 1865, over 600,000 American soldiers had lost their lives. The South lay in ruins, its cities, farms, and plantations destroyed. The future looked grim. Just after the surrender, Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, and the exhausted, war-torn nation faced the huge task of reconstruction without him.



TIMELINE

1850

1850: China Taiping rebellion begins against the authority of the Qing government.



◀ **1856: France** Gustave Flaubert publishes *Madame Bovary*, a classic novel of realism.

1857: Dred Scott decision by the U.S. Supreme Court rules that people of African descent cannot become U.S. citizens.

▶ **1859:** John Brown, an abolitionist, leads a raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia; he is hanged for treason.

1859: England Charles Darwin introduces theory of evolution in *The Origin of the Species*.

Americans Go West

After the Civil War, physical expansion and industrialization transformed the American landscape, economy, and society. The Homestead Act of 1862 promised 160 acres to anyone who would live on the land for a certain period and improve it. This shifted the westward movement into high gear. Half a million farmers, including tens of thousands of emancipated African Americans, staked their claims on the Great Plains. Miners went west, with dreams of gold sparkling in their eyes. In 1869, workers drove the last spike in the transcontinental railroad.

The Frontier Disappears

By 1890, the frontier had ceased to exist. Settlers, railroads, mines, ranches, and the slaughter of the buffalo had transformed the West. In place of open range were ploughed fields, grazing lands, and miles of fences. Gone, too, were the Indian nations; by 1890, almost all Native Americans in the West had been forced from their lands.

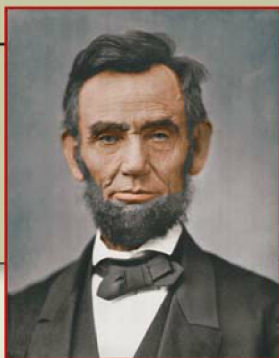
The "Electric" Society

When electricity entered the scene in the 1880s, the second Industrial Revolution began. Americans began to enjoy electric lights, telephones, automobiles, motion pictures, and skyscrapers, along with noise, traffic, and air pollution. Urban populations exploded; millions of immigrants provided cheap labor. Low wages, child labor, and disease were the norm for the working class, while a handful of industrial giants lived like kings. Mark Twain perfectly summarized the contradictions of this era when he called it "The Gilded Age."

Key Historical Theme: Painful Growth and Electric Change

- The Civil War left the nation physically, economically, and emotionally devastated as reconstruction began.
- Riding the railroad, Americans moved West and annihilated the frontier.
- The Age of Electricity transformed everyday life. Cities, with all their pleasures and problems, expanded rapidly.

1860: Abraham Lincoln is elected United States president. ▼



▲ **1861:** Civil War begins in April with firing on Fort Sumter.

1862: Emily Dickinson's poem "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" is published in the Massachusetts newspaper *The Republican*.

▼ **1862: France** Louis Pasteur proposes modern germ theory of disease.



1865

1863: Lincoln issues the Emancipation Proclamation.