

Historical Background

The American Renaissance (1800–1870)

The European Renaissance—the magnificent rebirth of classical art and learning—took place in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries. The American version—not a “rebirth” as much as a first flowering—took place in the first half of the nineteenth century. During these years, the nation came of age and entered its literary and cultural maturity.

Two turn-of-the-century events symbolized America’s growing up. In 1800 the nation’s capital was moved from Philadelphia to Washington, D.C., establishing a unique political center for a unique republic. In the same year, Americans founded the first cultural institution in the capital, the Library of Congress, a storehouse of law, scholarship, and creativity.

Steam, Steel, and Spirit

Underpinning the American cultural renaissance was sheer physical and technological growth. In 1803, Thomas Jefferson doubled the nation’s size by signing the Louisiana Purchase. With the expansion of size came an expansion of spirit, an upsurge of national pride and self-awareness. Improved transportation helped bind the old and the new states together. Canals, turnpikes, and especially railroads—“the iron horse”—multiplied. Steamboats and sailing packets sped people and goods to their destinations. Everyone and everything was on the move. After California was added to the nation, the Gold Rush of 1849 drew hundreds of thousands of hopeful people to the western edge of the continent.

Major advances in technology spurred social and cultural change. Factories sprang up all over the Northeast, creating new industries, new kinds of jobs, and plenty of economic profit. The steel plow and the reaper encouraged more aggressive frontier settlement by making farming practical on the vast, sod-covered grasslands. The telegraph made almost instant communication possible across America’s great distances.

TIMELINE

1803: Louisiana Purchase extends the nation’s territory to the Rocky Mountains.

1800

“The object of our mission is to explore the Missouri River”
—Thomas Jefferson



▲ 1804: Lewis and Clark begin expedition exploring and mapping vast regions of the west.

The Slow March of Democracy

The 1828 election of Andrew Jackson, “the People’s President,” ushered in the era of the common man, as property requirements for voting began to be eliminated. Only white males, however, benefited from these democratic advances. Little political attention was paid to women, and most African Americans remained enslaved. The tragic policy of “Indian removal” forced the westward migration of Native Americans as their tribal lands were confiscated. On the 1838 “Trail of Tears,” for example, thousands of Cherokee perished on the trek from Georgia to Oklahoma.

On the World Stage

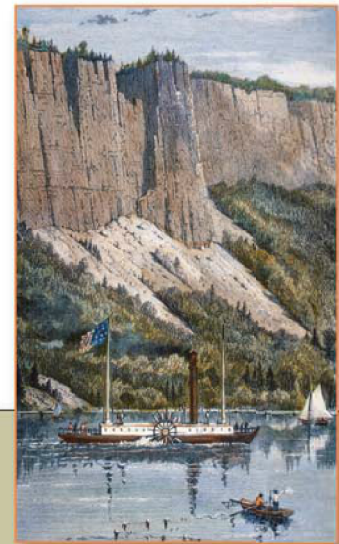
The first decades of the 1800s were hopeful ones. The War of 1812 convinced Europeans that the United States was on the world stage to stay. The Monroe Doctrine of 1823 warned Europe not to intervene in the new Latin American nations. In the 1830s, the U.S. became embroiled in a conflict over the secession of Texas from Mexico. When Texas was admitted to the Union in 1845, the resulting war with Mexico ended in a United States victory, adding more territory to the nation, including California.

Winds of Change

At mid-century the United States faced trouble as well as promise. The new prosperity unleashed fierce competition, leading to factories scarred by child labor and unsafe working conditions. Women’s rights gained some ground, but the deepest social divide remained slavery. Advocates of states’ rights argued that the federal government could not bend states to its will. Abolitionists, on the other hand, insisted that slavery was morally wrong. In 1861, the gathering storm finally burst into civil war.

Key Historical Theme: Coming of Age

- Physical expansion and technological progress lay the foundation for an American cultural flowering.
- Democracy advanced, although women, Native Americans, and African Americans did not fully share in it.
- The conflict over slavery eventually led to civil war.



1807: Robert Fulton’s steamboat makes first trip from New York City to Albany. ►



◄ **1804:** France Napoleon Bonaparte declares himself emperor.

1810