The Industrial Revolution in the United States

The Industrial Revolution took place over more than a century, as production of goods moved from home businesses, where products were generally crafted by hand, to machine-aided production in factories. This revolution, which involved major changes in transportation, manufacturing, and communications, transformed the daily lives of Americans as much as—and arguably more than—any single event in U.S. history.

An early landmark moment in the Industrial Revolution came near the end of the eighteenth century, when Samuel Slater brought new manufacturing technologies from Britain to the United States and founded the first U.S. cotton mill in Beverly, Massachusetts. Slater’s mill, like many of the mills and factories that sprang up in the next few decades, was powered by water, which confined industrial development to the northeast at first. The concentration of industry in the Northeast also facilitated the development of transportation systems such as railroads and canals, which encouraged commerce and trade.

Following the Civil War, industrialization in the United States increased at a breakneck pace. This period, encompassing most of the second half of the nineteenth century, has been called the Second Industrial Revolution or the American Industrial Revolution.

Over the first half of the century, the country expanded greatly, and the new territory was rich in natural resources. Completing the first transcontinental railroad in 1869 was a major milestone, making it easier to transport people, raw materials, and products. The United States also had vast human resources: between 1860 and 1900, fourteen million immigrants came to the country, providing workers for an array of industries.

For millions of working Americans, the industrial revolution changed the very nature of their daily work. Previously, they might have worked for themselves at home, in a small shop, or outdoors, crafting raw materials into products, or growing a crop from seed to table. When they took factory jobs, they were working for a large company. The repetitive work often involved only one small step in the manufacturing process, so the worker did not see or appreciate what was being made; the work was often dangerous and performed in unsanitary conditions. Some women entered the work force, as did many children. Child labor became a major issue. Dangerous working conditions, long hours, and concern over wages and child labor contributed to the growth of labor unions.

The new jobs for the working class were in the cities. Thus, the Industrial Revolution of the United States began the transition from a rural to an urban society. Young people raised on farms saw greater opportunities in the cities and moved there, as did millions of immigrants from Europe. Providing housing for all the new residents of cities was a problem, and many workers found themselves living in urban slums; open sewers ran alongside the streets, and the water supply was often tainted, causing disease.