Native-born Americans and immigrants were drawn to cities by the jobs available in America’s growing industries. The new, modern cities had skyscrapers, public transportation systems, and neighborhoods divided by social class. In many cities, political machines controlled city government.

**Americans Migrate to the Cities**

**MAIN Idea** Rural Americans and immigrants moved to the cities where skyscrapers and mass transit were developed to deal with congestion.

**HISTORY AND YOU** Have you ever ridden the bus, subway, or railway system? How do you think your ride to school or the store would be different without mass transportation? Read on to learn why cities developed mass transportation systems.

After the Civil War, the urban population of the United States grew from around 10 million in 1870 to more than 30 million in 1900. New York City, which had more than 800,000 inhabitants in 1860, grew to almost 3.5 million by 1900. During the same period, Chicago swelled from 109,000 residents to more than 1.6 million. The United States had only 131 cities with populations of 2,500 or more residents in 1840; by 1900, there were more than 1,700 such urban areas.

Most of the immigrants who poured into the United States in the late 1800s lacked both the money to buy farms and the education to obtain higher-paying jobs. Thus, they settled in the nation’s growing cities, where they toiled long hours for little pay in the rapidly expanding factories of the United States. Despite the harshness of their new lives, most immigrants found that the move had improved their standard of living.

Rural Americans also began moving to the cities at this time. Farmers moved to cities because urban areas offered more and better-paying jobs than did rural areas. Cities had much to offer, too—bright lights, running water, and modern plumbing, plus attractions such as museums, libraries, and theaters.

The physical appearance of cities also changed dramatically. As city populations grew, demand raised the price of land, creating the **incentive** to build upward rather than outward. Soon, tall, steel frame buildings called **skyscrapers** began to appear. Chicago’s ten-story Home Insurance Building, built in 1885, was the first skyscraper, but other buildings quickly dwarfed it. New York City, with its business district on the narrow island of Manhattan, boasted more skyscrapers than any other city in the world. With limited space, New Yorkers had to build up, not out.
The Technology of Urbanization

Before the mid-1800s, few buildings exceeded four or five stories. To make wooden and stone buildings taller required enormously thick walls in the lower levels. This changed when steel companies began mass-producing cheap steel girders and steel cable.

Steel Cable

Steel also changed the way bridges were built. Engineers could now suspend bridges from steel towers using thick steel cables. Using this technique, engineer John Roebling designed New York’s Brooklyn Bridge—the world’s largest suspension bridge at the time. It was completed in 1883.

Elevators

Elisha Otis invented the safety elevator in 1852. By the late 1880s, the first electric elevators had been installed, making tall buildings practical.

No one contributed more to the design of skyscrapers than Chicago’s Louis Sullivan. “What people are within, the buildings express without,” explained Sullivan, whose lofty structures featured simple lines and spacious windows using new, durable plate glass.

To move people around cities quickly, various kinds of mass transit developed. At first, almost all cities relied on the horsecar, a railroad car pulled by horses. In 1890 horsecars moved about 70 percent of urban traffic in the United States.

More than 20 cities, beginning with San Francisco in 1873, installed cable cars, which were pulled along tracks by underground cables. Then, in 1887, engineer Frank J. Sprague developed the electric trolley car. The country’s first electric trolley line opened the following year in Richmond, Virginia.

In the largest cities, congestion became so bad that engineers began looking for ways to move mass transit off the streets. Chicago responded by building an elevated railroad, while Boston, followed by New York, built the first subway systems.

Analyzing VISUALS

1. Theorizing What other technologies were necessary in order to build modern skyscrapers?
2. Predicting What long-term effects do you think the new building technologies had on cities?
Separation by Class

**MAIN Idea** In the cities, society was separated by classes, with the upper, middle, and working classes living in different neighborhoods.

**HISTORY AND YOU** Do you know the history of certain neighborhoods in your city or town? Can you see where the classes were divided? Read on to learn how each class lived in the cities.

In the growing cities, the wealthy people and the working class lived in different parts of town. So, too, did members of the middle class. The boundaries between neighborhoods were quite definite and can still be seen in many American cities today.

High Society

During the last half of the 1800s, the wealthiest families established fashionable districts in the heart of a city. Americans with enough money could choose to construct homes in the style of a feudal castle, an English manor house, a French château, a Tuscan villa, or a Persian pavilion. In Chicago, merchant and real estate developer Potter Palmer chose a castle. In New York, Cornelius Vanderbilt’s grandson commissioned a $3 million French château with a two-story dining room, a gymnasium, and a marble bathroom.

As their homes grew larger, wealthy women managed an increasing number of servants, such as cooks, maids, butlers, coachmen, nannies, and chauffeurs, and spent a great deal of money on social activities. In an age in which many New Yorkers lived on $500 a year, socialite hostess Cornelia Sherman Martin spent $360,000 on a dance.

Middle-Class Gentility

American industrialization also helped expand the middle class. The nation’s rising middle class included doctors, lawyers, engineers, managers, social workers, architects, and teachers. Many people in the middle class moved away from the central city so as to escape the crime and pollution and be able to afford larger homes. Some took advantage of the new commuter rail lines to move to “street-car suburbs.”

**Urban Society**

Urban industrial society in the late 1800s was divided into social classes. The upper class and middle class lived well, but conditions for the working class and poor were often abysmal.

**The Upper Class**

\[\text{The upper class could afford elaborate mansions and many servants. Men typically owned or managed large businesses. Women almost never worked. Clothing was elaborate and expensive. Events, such as afternoon tea in their garden (above), required formal dress and shows they had substantial leisure time.}\]

**The Middle Class**

\[\text{Middle class families could generally afford their own homes and better quality clothing. Women rarely worked—and if they did it was usually because they wanted a career, not out of necessity. Many families had at least one servant (shown above in back holding the baby) and enough money left over to buy luxuries, such as the new gramophone shown above.}\]
In the late nineteenth century, most middle class families had at least one live-in servant. This gave the woman of the house more time to pursue activities outside the home. “Women’s clubs” became popular. At first, these clubs focused on social and educational activities. Over time, however, “club women” became very active in charitable and reform activities. In Chicago, for example, the Women’s Club helped establish juvenile courts and exposed the terrible conditions at the Cook County Insane Asylum.

**The Working Class**

Few families in the urban working class could hope to own a home. Most spent their lives in crowded **tenements**, or apartment buildings. The first tenement in the United States was built in 1839. In New York, three out of four residents squeezed into tenements, dark and crowded multi-family apartments. To supplement the average industrial worker’s annual income of $445, many families rented precious space to a boarder. Zalmen Yoffeh, a journalist, lived in a New York tenement as a child. He recalled:

> “With ... one dollar a day [our mother] fed and clothed an ever-growing family. She took in boarders. Sometimes this helped; at other times it added to the burden of living. Boarders were often out of work and penniless; how could one turn a hungry man out? She made all our clothes. She walked blocks to reach a place where meat was a penny cheaper, where bread was a half cent less. She collected boxes and old wood to burn in the stove.”
>
> —quoted in *How We Lived*

**The Family Economy**

Within the working class, some people were better off than others. White native-born men earned higher wages than African American men, immigrants, and women.

One economist estimated that 64 percent of working class families relied on more than one wage earner in 1900. In some cases, the whole family worked, including the children. The dangerous working conditions faced by child workers, and the fact that they were not in school, alarmed many reformers.
A growing number of women took jobs outside the home. Native-born white women typically had more years of education than other women. Thus, many used their literacy to work as teachers or do clerical work.

The largest source of employment for women, however, remained domestic service. Immigrant women often worked as domestic servants in the North; African American women usually worked as domestic servants in the South. Such work involved long hours, low wages, and social isolation.

When people were physically unable to work, they had to rely on family members or charity. When a worker was maimed or killed on the job, there was usually no compensation. Most older Americans lived with family members. Nearly 70 percent of those 65 or older lived with their grown children. A growing number, however, lived independently or in homes for the aged.

**Reading Check** Explaining Who was in the “middle class” in the late 1800s? Where did they live?

**Urban Problems**

**MAIN Idea** Major problems plagued the cities; political machines provided help for some residents but were frequently corrupt.

**HISTORY AND YOU** What kinds of programs are used in your area to deal with urban problems? Read about political machines and how they ran city government.

City living posed the risks of crime, violence, fire, disease, and pollution. The rapid growth of cities only made these problems worse and complicated the ability of urban governments to respond to these problems.

**Crime and Pollution**

Crime was a growing problem in American cities. Minor criminals, such as pickpockets, swindlers, and thieves, thrived in crowded urban living conditions. Major crimes multiplied as well. From 1880 to 1900, the murder rate jumped sharply from 25 per million people to more than 100 per million people.

**Primary Source**

New York “Boss” George W. Plunkitt explains the benefits of the political machines:

“The poor are the most grateful people in the world, and, let me tell you, they have more friends in their neighborhoods than the rich have in theirs.

If there’s a family in my district in want I know it before the charitable societies do, and me and my men are first on the ground.... The consequence is that the poor look up to George W. Plunkitt ... and don’t forget him on election day.

Another thing, I can always get a job for a deservin’ man.... I know every big employer in the district and in the whole city, for that matter, and they ain’t in the habit of sayin’ no to me when I ask them for a job.”

—quoted in William L. Riordan, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall*

**Document-Based Questions**

1. **Analyzing Primary Sources** How does Plunkitt say he learns of people in need in his district?

2. **Determining Cause and Effect** What is the result of Plunkitt’s care for the needy in his district?
Alcohol contributed to violent crime, both inside and outside the home. Danish immigrant Jacob Riis, who documented slum life in his 1890 book *How the Other Half Lives*, accused saloons of “breeding poverty,” corrupting politics, bringing suffering to the wives and children of drunkards, and fostering “the corruption of the child” by selling beer to minors.

Disease and pollution posed even bigger threats. Improper sewage disposal contaminated city drinking water and triggered epidemics of typhoid fever and cholera. Though flush toilets and sewer systems existed in the 1870s, pollution remained a severe problem as horse manure was left in the streets, smoke belched from chimneys, and soot and ash accumulated from coal and wood fires.

**Machine Politics**

The political machine, an informal political group designed to gain and keep power, came about partly because cities had grown much faster than their governments. New city dwellers needed jobs, housing, food, heat, and police protection. In exchange for votes, political machines and the party bosses who ran them eagerly provided these necessities.

**Graft and Fraud** The party bosses who ran the political machines also controlled the city’s finances. Many machine politicians grew rich as the result of fraud or graft—getting money through dishonest or questionable means. George Plunkitt, one of New York City’s most powerful party bosses, defended what he called “honest graft.” For example, a politician might find out in advance where a new park was to be built and buy the land near the site. The politician would then sell the land to the city for a profit. As Plunkitt stated, “I see my opportunity, and I take it.”

Outright fraud occurred when party bosses accepted bribes from contractors who were supposed to compete fairly to win contracts to build streets, sewers, and buildings. Corrupt bosses also sold permits to their friends to operate public utilities, such as railroads, waterworks, and power systems.

**Tammany Hall** Tammany Hall, the New York City Democratic political machine, was the most infamous such organization. William “Boss” Tweed was its leader during the 1860s and 1870s. Tweed’s corruptness led to a prison sentence in 1874.

City machines often controlled all the city services, including the police department. In St. Louis, the “boss” never feared arrest when he called out to his supporters at the police-supervised voting booth, “Are there any more repeaters out here that want to vote again?”

Opponents of political machines, such as political cartoonist Thomas Nast, blasted bosses for their corruption. Defenders, though, argued that machines provided necessary services and helped to assimilate the masses of new city dwellers.

**Reading Check** Evaluating Why did political machines help city dwellers in the late 1800s?

**Vocabulary**


**Main Ideas**

2. Identifying What technologies made the building of skyscrapers possible?

3. Comparing How did the living conditions of the upper, middle, and the working classes in the late 1800s compare?

4. Organizing Complete the graphic organizer below by listing the effects of many Americans moving from rural to urban areas in the late 1800s.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Migration</th>
<th>Effects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Critical Thinking**

5. Big Ideas How did political machines respond to the needs of the people?

6. Synthesizing Why were pollution and sewage a problem in American cities in the late 1800s?

7. Analyzing Visuals Look at the photos on pages 224–225. How did industrialization affect the class structure in the United States?

**Writing About History**

8. Persuasive Writing Take on the role of an urban planner in a major city in the late 1800s. Write a letter to members of the city government listing specific reasons for the importance of setting aside city land for parks and recreational areas.

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