

Rise of Industrial America

Work in the Late 19th Century

The late 19th-century United States is probably best known for the vast expansion of its industrial plant and output. At the heart of these huge increases was the mass production of goods by machines. This process was first introduced and perfected by British textile manufacturers.



In the century since such mechanization had begun, machines had replaced highly skilled craftspeople in one industry after another. By the 1870s, machines were knitting stockings and stitching shirts and dresses, cutting and stitching leather for shoes, and producing nails by the millions. By reducing labor costs, such machines not only reduced manufacturing costs but lowered prices manufacturers charged consumers. In short, machine production created a growing abundance of products at cheaper prices.

Mechanization also had less desirable effects. For one, machines changed the way people worked. Skilled craftspeople of earlier days had the satisfaction of seeing a product through from beginning to end. When they saw a knife, or barrel, or shirt or dress, they had a sense of accomplishment. Machines, on the other hand, tended to subdivide production down into many small repetitive tasks with workers often doing only a single task. The pace of work usually became faster and faster; work was often performed in factories built to house the machines. Finally, factory managers began to enforce an industrial discipline, forcing workers to work set--often very long--hours.

One result of mechanization and factory production was the growing attractiveness of labor organization. To be sure, craft guilds had been around a long time. Now, however, there were increasing reasons for workers to join labor unions. Such labor unions were not notably successful in organizing large numbers of workers in the late 19th century. Still, unions were able to organize a variety of strikes and other work stoppages that served to publicize their grievances about working conditions and wages. Even so, labor unions did not gain even close to equal footing with businesses and industries until the economic chaos of the 1930s.

To find other documents in American Memory relating to this topic, you might use the terms work or workers, factories, or specific occupations such as miner, machinist, factory worker, or machine operator.