

Handout Week One “Before the Storm: America from 1815 to 1850”

Mick Chantler, Instructor

The transformation that our country underwent during this time span—just about two generations—is nothing less than astonishing. In 1815 America was still a third rate power with an economy that would resemble that of a developing nation today. We had just come out of a nearly disastrous war that threatened to break up our still young and not yet fully formed republic. Native Americans still roamed the eastern half of the United States, and wild animals prowled just beyond the city limits. Our transportation and communications infrastructure was still remarkably primitive—it would take six weeks for the news of the signing of the Peace Treaty which ended the War of 1812 to reach Washington; consequently the famous Battle of New Orleans was fought weeks *after* diplomats had formally ended the conflict.

In just thirty five years America had nearly doubled in size as a result of the Mexican War. Railroads and telegraph wires crisscrossed the continent, and gold was discovered in California, making the United States a truly continental empire. Our population tripled between 1815 and 1850, our national economy was booming, and immigration soared. (In 1820 only 8,200 immigrants entered the United States; by the 1840s a hundred and fifty thousand foreigners were coming into the country each year. The Cotton Kingdom spread from the Atlantic coast to Texas, with the corollary that the national curse of slavery became more firmly ensconced than ever. Native Americans were ruthlessly driven from their ancestral lands east of the Mississippi, vast forests were cut down to prepare the way for the advancing westward movement, and hundreds of species of animals were hunted to extinction. It wasn't pretty, but the process turned the country into a white man's paradise.

America's religious landscape changed as dramatically as the physical environment. The Second Great Awakening swept through the land, and charismatic preachers converted millions to an emotional brand of evangelical Christianity. (This was a shocking development to many—Thomas Jefferson famously predicted that by mid-century all Americans would be rational,

intellectual Unitarians. Really?) Towns and cities sprang up where there had been swamps and endless woodlands, and every little hamlet built its church—sometimes two or three. It was an optimistic time in America—it appeared that we really were the Chosen People.

Politics too underwent a sea change. Prior to 1815, most Americans put their trust in the country's elites—refined and well educated gentlemen with who came from a quasi-aristocratic background. But with the rise of “The Democracy” that would all change. Cultured and sophisticated solons gave way to lusty, brawling politicians who answered only to the common man. Modern political parties arose to channel the passions of “The People” and clear away any vestiges of privilege. Andrew Jackson was the epitome of this new breed of leader, a brutal knife-fighting duelist who, as John Quincy Adams said, could barely write his own name. No matter—he was the man of the hour as we entered our boisterous national adolescence.

But not everyone was supportive of these massive changes. Some Humanitarians objected to the annihilation of the Indians, nature lovers were aghast at the degradation of the environment, and of course by the 1830s there was a robust antislavery movement in America. Many reformers recoiled at the abuses of our rising industrial economy, and called for an early, pre-Marxian brand of socialism. Millions were appalled at the coarsening of our political system, which tended to reward populist demagogues at the expense of thoughtful statesmen like Washington, Jefferson, and Madison. But on the whole, most Americans were pleased with the developments of the era, and saw our national growth and prosperity as signs of God's approval of our successful experiment in republican government.