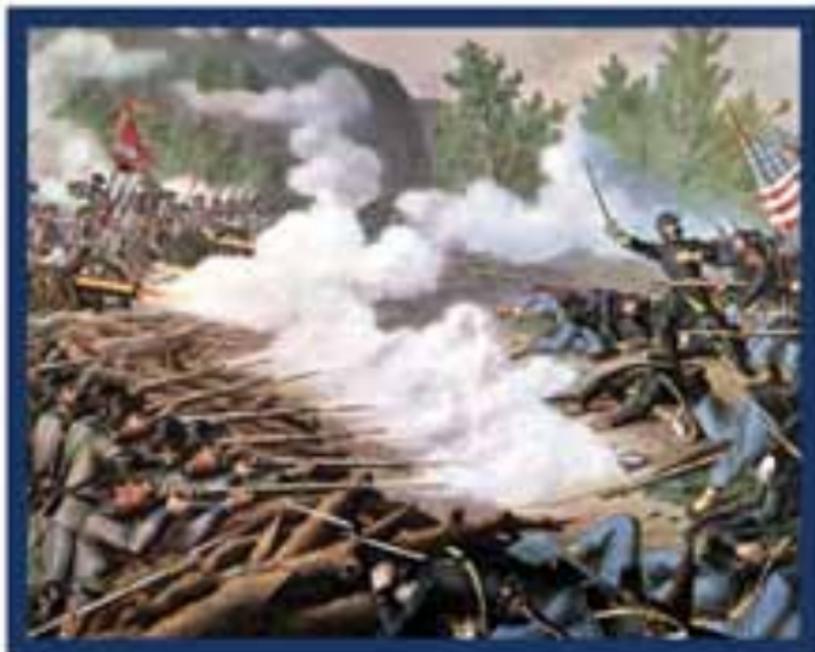


ALMANACS OF AMERICAN LIFE

CIVIL WAR AMERICA

1850 TO 1875



RICHARD F. SELCER

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GENERAL EDITOR

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Civil War America, 1850 to 1875

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Note on Photos

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Author's Note

The quarter-century from 1850 until 1875 is dominated by the Civil War and Reconstruction, but far more occurred during those years than the two events always heard about. The era demonstrates the truth of H. G. Wells's later assessment "The most interesting history of the [entire] 19th century was the growth of the United States." In truth, the beginnings of "modern times" in the United States can be traced to developments of this time. Such familiar aspects of modern life as government bureaucracy, consumer goods, mass culture, data profiling, and professionalism all first appeared in the mid-19th century. For instance, the 1850 Census was the first to break down American religious practices by denomination, and the 1870 Census was the first to take a close look at the state of American literacy. Record keeping became a government preoccupation, prompted partly by the demands of the Civil War but already under way before. The federal government, with the states lagging only slightly behind, diligently gathered information on disease and battlefield injuries among soldiers, railroad accidents, the insane, and the illiterate. The result of all this statistics gathering was the first three-dimensional picture of the American people that far transcended the economically driven decennial census reports. The fields of medicine and weather reporting particularly benefited from the wealth of statistics being gathered.

In a parallel development, government bureaucracy multiplied enormously during these years. Two new cabinet-level departments were created by Congress, Interior (1849) and Agriculture (1862). The Patent Office was given independent status, and the Pension Office was greatly expanded to handle the flood of veterans' claims

after the Civil War. The United States signed the international convention on weights and measures in 1875, and civil service reform got its start during Ulysses Grant's presidency. The nation's financial structure was also overhauled with the introduction of so-called subsidiary silver coinage into the money supply before the Civil War and the launching of the first income tax during the war.

This was a period that also saw the professionalization of American life. Physicians, engineers, and architects, among others, for the first time formed themselves into professional societies to set standards and protect their interests. Sportsmen, beginning with baseball players, divided themselves into "professional" and "amateur" ranks.

Ultimately, the Almanacs of American Life series, and *Civil War America* specifically, reflect the modern obsession of Americans with facts and figures. Spoiled by computer-based research and chronically short of time, people want their data in bite-sized bits. It would be nice if everyone could delve into the historical literature at leisure, but few have that luxury. It is the author's belief that no student of the history of 19th-century America can understand that century in all its complexities without consulting this volume. Narrative histories cannot tell the full story; nor does a concentration on the Civil War and Reconstruction to the exclusion of everything else do justice to the era. For the high school student or nonspecialist, *Civil War America* puts a wealth of facts culled from a wide range of primary and secondary sources at their fingertips. For the college student and the professional historian, this volume points the way toward deeper research with its table citations and comprehensive bibliography.

Preface

The most interesting history of the nineteenth century was the growth of the United States.

— H. G. Wells

1850 will complete the most eventful half century recorded in history. The coming year is pregnant with good for all Humanity, and so must be a happy one.

— Horace Greeley

It is ironic that the *English* historian, author, and futurist Herbert George Wells saw the United States as the most historically important of all nations in the 19th century. The eyes of the whole civilized world were focused on what was happening in the United States during those decades. But what those happenings signified was less clear to observers. In Horace Greeley's simple statement, the famed newspaper editor was wrong on two counts: Not only were the year 1851 and those following far from happy years for humanity, but the first half of the 19th century was as nothing compared to the second half in terms of grand events, tragedies, and triumphs. The half-century after 1850 was unprecedented, especially for Americans, in the rapid succession of history-making developments and in the scale and pace with which change piled on top of change. The quarter-century from 1850 to 1875 set the stage for what people now consider "modern America" on every front, which is to say society, politics, economics, religion, and technology.

There is a common misconception that "modern times" in American history began with the 20th century, or perhaps the so-called Industrial Revolution of the late 19th century, and certainly no earlier than the Civil War (1861–65). The reality is that the shadowy outlines of modern times could already be seen in the 1850s, although the idea that anything "modern" could have come out of the antebellum period seems almost ludicrous to present-day Americans. There is some justification for that way of thinking if one limits *modern* to travel via automobiles and airplanes, computer technology, total war, and global-scale economies. But if by *modern times* one means government bureaucracy, consumer goods, mass culture, data profiling, and the rise of the professions, then the foundations of the current way of life were laid down in the 1850s.

This was the time when statistics gathering became a routine activity of government and other institutions, and not just the usual vital statistics such as births, deaths, and marriages. Numerous areas of American life were quantified for the first time. Statistical profiles were compiled on the nation's religious preferences, racial makeup, inventiveness, economic output, and reading habits, to name just a few areas

that attracted the attention of the bean counters. Not surprisingly, the U.S. Census Bureau took the lead in gathering these statistics. The 1850 Census was the first to break down U.S. religious practices by denomination, and the 1870 Census was the first to take a close look at the state of U.S. literacy by separating the ability to read from the ability to write, and by separating juvenile illiteracy from adult illiteracy.

With the U.S. Census Bureau leading the way, data collecting became part of the fabric of American life. In 1850 the General Land Office in its annual report included careful calculations of the land area of all the states and territories composing the national domain. This was the first time that the government had undertaken such a massive job since 1800, and in the half-century since that last measurement, the Louisiana Purchase and Mexican Cession had been added. Only in 1850 did Americans know precisely how much territory they had purchased from France and taken from Mexico. And 1854 saw the publication of the first comprehensive statistical compendium in the nation's history, the *Statistical View of the United States*, compiled by the Southern apologist J. D. B. DeBow of New Orleans.

As the era advanced, this data-gathering trend not only continued but gathered speed during the Civil War. The 1860 Census was the first officially to count the number of periodicals published in the United States (4,051 publications of all types), Uncle Sam began to collect marriage and divorce statistics in 1867, and 1874 was the first year that data on the problem of the annual Mississippi River floods were gathered.

The South was slower to jump on the bandwagon because of the Civil War and Reconstruction. During those painful years, the important work of gathering vital statistics on the population lapsed. The money and the initiative to do routine record keeping simply were not there. As a result, some important demographic trends were missed, while others could only be guessed at.

The South notwithstanding, what was being produced year by year was nothing less than a statistical profile of the American people that went far beyond the decennial work of the Census Bureau. In the new scheme of things statistics gathering became a routine activity carried

out by countless private as well as public organizations. This quantification of American society produced record keeping on an unprecedented scale, whether it was counting church pews, team victories, railroad accidents, insane persons, or illiterates. Americans, it seemed, became obsessed with counting and classifying themselves. The quarter-century from 1850 to 1875 is the first era in U.S. history in which statistical record keeping becomes sophisticated enough actually to profile Americans in a variety of social, economic, political, and cultural areas.

The reasons behind all this number crunching are more difficult to gauge. Some of the motivation, such as the impetus for collecting information about economic production, undoubtedly derived from chauvinistic pride of accomplishment, allowing the nation to measure itself against European elders. The work was also driven by simple scientific curiosity as the methodology of scientists such as Louis Pasteur, Charles Darwin, and Gregor Mendel caught on among the general populace. The bureaucratic imperative also had to play a role in the heightened attention to record keeping: “Fish got to swim, birds got to fly,” as the song goes, and bureaucrats have got to generate paperwork. There was also a heightened awareness in the government of its responsibility to provide for the “general welfare” of the American people. This was represented in the growing sentiment against slavery as well as in the Census Bureau’s justification for counting all the newspapers and magazines published in the United States: They were seen as the “popular educators” of the day. Another motivation, however, was the post-Civil War influence of the rapidly growing insurance industry, which demanded documentation before it would pay off claims arising from accidents and natural disasters. Thus, railroad wrecks and rampaging floods, for instance, were carefully investigated and the results tabulated, although victims did not necessarily benefit. Posterity has been the greatest beneficiary, as those records that survived ultimately became the raw material for the practitioners of scientific history. As a result, the historian looking for a statistical profile of some group or activity who runs into a brick wall before about 1850—there are simply no comprehensive figures for much of American life before that date—finds that after the mid-century mark there is a relative wealth of data available for his or her purposes.

Two critical areas of American life whose modern understanding benefited greatly from all that attention to record keeping were medicine and weather reporting. The collection of medical statistics on a massive, detailed scale was a by-product of the Civil War as the Union army in particular tried to get a handle on the state of health of the hundreds of thousands of American boys who wore the blue. (Southerners were somewhat less efficient at measuring and recording medical statistics.) The result was the comprehensive and official *Medical and Surgical History of the War of the Rebellion*, published between 1870 and 1880. Its many statistical summaries, charts, tables, and color plates provide the best profile of public health in the United States in the 19th century, and of the state of the nation’s medical care at that time. This priceless storehouse of information is still used by doctors and historians as a basic research tool today.

Weather observing in the United States before 1870 was the province of the army, which relied on post surgeons around the country to record observations and forward them to Washington, D.C., with their regular medical reports. With the establishment of the Weather Bureau in 1870, the era of modern weather observation began, and almost all the comprehensive weather data used in long-term analysis of weather and climate patterns date from this time. It was agents of the Weather Bureau at key locations around the country who recorded observations on a regular basis and organized those data in a useful form who are the forerunners of all scientifically trained meteorologists today. The original motivations behind creation of the bureau were to understand natural phenomena, optimize the planting and harvesting of crops by the nation’s farmers, and protect lives and property from natural disasters by providing a certain measure of predictability.

All of this data profiling was welcomed by the mass of Americans in the 19th century, who saw it, not just as a way to get a handle on nature, but as necessary self-examination by the nation and as a way to distinguish themselves from their neighbors. This was more than a little ironic because today many Americans stoutly resist being pigeonholed by the Census Bureau or any other government agency, particularly on the basis of their race or religious preference, two areas that were more relevant to people of that time than were weather and public health. The government today has even been forced to respect these sentiments by cutting back on data gathering. Since 1976 Congress has barred the Census Bureau from questioning citizens about their religious affiliation.

What is important to remember is that this whole concern for data gathering and statistical profiling that is so much a part of modern society was born in the quarter-century after 1850, not just as a new area of government snooping but as a response to the needs and desires of the American people.

A parallel development in these same years is the bureaucratization of American life. It affected all areas but was most apparent in government, advancing in ways both large and small. In addition to the creation of the U.S. Weather Bureau in 1870, a variety of other government agencies were created around this time. These included two new, cabinet-level departments: the Department of the Interior (1849) and the Department of Agriculture (1862). They joined the long-standing Departments of War, State, Treasury, and Attorney-General in conducting the most important ongoing operations of the federal government. The Patent Office was given independent status in 1870, and the Pension Office underwent major expansion and reform in 1862 and again in 1873. The first small steps toward civil service reform occurred during these years, beginning in 1853, when Congress passed legislation requiring applicants for federal clerk jobs to take simple “pass examinations” to demonstrate their literacy. Seventeen years later, the first competitive *merit* examinations were administered to federal job seekers, during the much-maligned presidency of Ulysses Grant. Although these were administered on a limited basis, they set the stage for the first comprehensive civil service law, passed by Congress in 1883 (the Pendleton Act). Meanwhile, in 1875, bureaucracy was advancing on another front as the United States became a signatory to the convention that established the International Bureau of Weights and Measures. While serving beneficial purposes, all of these moves created additional layers of administration and added to the “creeping” bureaucratization of U.S. government.

The makeover of U.S. government was not confined to the executive branch. Being a congressman also began to take on more of the trappings of a “real” job. Until 1856, U.S. senators and representatives were paid a token per diem allowance only. That was officially changed to an annual salary during the Buchanan administration. Starting in 1857, congressmen drew \$3,000 a year in salary, though it was still harder for a poor man to represent his constituency or his country than for a rich man.

No surer sign exists of the growth of big government than the growth of Washington, D.C., itself. The population of the nation’s capital grew 75.4 percent between 1860 and 1870 (from 75,080 residents to 131,700 residents). And from 891.2 people per square mile in 1850, population density in the District soared to 2,270.7 per square mile in 1870, higher than in any place else in the United States, including New York City and Philadelphia. Without all those government office jobs, Washington, D.C., would still have been a malarial swamp on the Potomac River in those years.

While Uncle Sam’s extended family was growing, he was also making his power felt in Americans’ pocketbooks in unprecedented ways. First, the government entered the money printing business for the first time since the disastrous experiment with Continental notes of the Revolutionary War. During the first “four score and seven years” of the nation’s history, the United States had depended on what was vir-

tually a private banking system. The federal government left currency policy to state banks and private interests; that meant basically there was no currency policy or even a national currency worthy of the name. The initial step was taken in 1853, when the first subsidiary silver coinage was issued to serve as a practical retail currency. But it was not until 1863 that Congress legislated a full-blown revolution in the rickety American banking structure by assuming complete control of the currency, thus establishing the foundations of the modern U.S. financial system. It was another sweeping exercise of federal power unprecedented before this era.

Even more shocking was the introduction of the nation's first income tax during the Civil War. Strapped for funds to fight the war, Congress passed the tax in 1862 and proceeded to take a share of the average American's earnings for the first time in history. This prototype of the modern income tax continued even after the war, for another seven years, until it was grudgingly repealed in 1872. But the precedent that Uncle Sam could take his pound of flesh had been set.

Even American churches were swept up in the trend toward bureaucratization. Inspired by the new emphasis on scientific management and industrial efficiency all around them, spiritual leaders reexamined their traditional church practices. The primacy of the pulpit minister in church organization was felt to be antiquated, so power was shifted to boards of deacons or elders, who functioned much as corporate boards of directors do. These new church boards not only kept a tighter rein on the minister but put shepherding the flock on the same level as saving individual souls. At the same time, they also increased emphasis on hiring trained, professional clergy to run church operations. The ultimate aim of all this bureaucratization was to make the business of soul saving more efficient in the same way as industry and government were becoming more efficient at their jobs.

Amid all the changes, the big story of this era may have been the professionalization of American life. The nation's doctors, dentists, engineers, architects, and others for the first time formed themselves into professional organizations. They systematized their disciplines, started licensing procedures, and began to hold regular national conventions. They also closed ranks as exclusive fraternal associations that were not above politics or prejudice. This was particularly true in the practice of medicine, as the "regular" doctors worked hard to stamp out unconventional strains such as homeopathy and eclecticism. Other groups such as the American Institute of Architects (1857) were formed not so much to exclude certain brethren as to separate themselves from related fields and to honor their collective accomplishments.

Toward the end of this period, sports began to split into separate realms of amateur and professional players. The trend was most apparent in baseball, which formed the National Association of Base Ball Players in 1858 and then the National League in 1876. This development was soon followed by formation of the National Collegiate Athletic Association and Amateur Athletic Union.

The American scientific community was likewise caught up in the movement for a higher level of professionalization, beginning even before 1850 but accelerating greatly thereafter. Scientists and inventors aimed to separate themselves from amateur tinkerers, set their own research agenda, and conduct their investigations without moral or political restrictions. While gaining a higher measure of respect and prestige for the scientific disciplines, the professionalization movement in science also had the effect of withdrawing scientific knowledge from the public domain and making it the private preserve of the experts, the so-called men of science. Professionalization in science, as in sports, was popularly equated with superior technical knowledge and higher levels of accomplishment. It also tended to encourage snobbery and disdain for "nonprofessionals."

The ultimate effects of all this selectivity and cliquishness were to raise standards in numerous traditional occupations plus impose strin-

gent record keeping and data gathering, another unintended boon for historians.

Professionalization was not confined to the sciences and sports, or even to government service. Even in the humanities, professionalization was the new order. The 1870s saw the establishment of the profession of dramatist in the United States. Playwrights had always practiced their art for the enjoyment of their audiences and a measure of recognition, but at least on the western side of the Atlantic had never been able to make a good living by this art. Bronson Howard and a small handful of his contemporaries changed all that, starting in the 1870s.

This era also gave birth to the modern phenomenon of mass culture, whereby millions of people are persuaded to buy alike, act alike, and in the process perhaps even think alike, as opposed to practicing regional and local patterns of living. Today many people accept this as the normal order of things, but it was not always so in the United States. As odd as it seems for an era when the principal mode of transportation was still the horse, and when wild animals and Indians could still pose a threat to a person who wandered very far beyond the narrow boundaries of "civilization," mass culture was already becoming a fact of life in the middle of the 19th century. It was manifested in new forms of mass entertainment such as the traveling circus, minstrelsy, and even professional sports. Professional sports moved the focus from participating to viewing as the level of play and commercialization took sports out of the hands of ordinary folks and delivered it to the hands of paid, full-time "players." Thus, baseball, football, horse racing, and prizefighting, to name just a few, all became big business, attracting thousands of spectators to major events and leading to the multiplication of teams, leagues, and classifications across the board.

Another form of mass culture/entertainment was popular music, which changed from being an idle pursuit for the masses to becoming, as sports became, "big business." The major change in popular music was the emergence of the commercial publishing business. The historian Daniel Kingman has called this era the "beginning of the modern age in American Popular Music" as such artists as Stephen Foster and Fannie Crosby made a very profitable living off writing songs that were sung (and played) by the masses. The songwriters, as their music did, became household names sung and played by all classes. And where there was popular affection for anything in a capitalistic democracy, there was money to be made by businesses.

Modern mass culture that first took shape during these years also included the debut of the new penny newspapers in New York City; a flood of cheap, specialized magazines that hit the market; and the beginning of the best-seller lists that helped make novels such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) must reading for middle-class Americans. All of these phenomena cashed in on the remarkably high literacy of the American people as well as on their unquenchable curiosity about the world.

The emerging mass culture also owed a great deal to the urban explosion that occurred during this time. Fueled by immigration and natural increase, new towns sprang up all over the country while older towns were transformed into major cities. Immigrants and industrialization, trail drives and railroads were just the most visible impetus behind the waves of people who filled these towns and cities. This wave of urbanization gave rise to a distinctive urban culture that was more homogenized, more cosmopolitan, and more consumer oriented than previous generations of Americans had been. And it was a process that would only accelerate in the coming decades until it reached its full fruition with an "urban nation" in the 20th century.

At the beginning of this era the United States was already well on the road to being a consumer society by using up far more than it produced. In 1850 that meant that the country consumed \$44 million more in imported goods and services than it exported. This simple statistic foreshadowed the 20th century, when the United States would be known as the most profligate consumer nation in history.