The Cincinnati Red Stockings become the first salaried baseball team.

In 1873 Mark Twain and Charles Warner wrote a novel together entitled *The Gilded Age*. Historians later adopted the term and applied it to the era in American history that begins about 1870 and ends around 1900.

A Changing Culture

In 1872, at the age of 32, William Graham Sumner became a professor of political and social science at Yale College. Sumner’s classes were very popular. One of his students, William Lyon Phelps, illustrated Sumner’s tough, no-nonsense approach with this example of a class discussion:

**Student:** “Professor, don’t you believe in any government aid to industries?”

**Sumner:** “No! It’s root, hog, or die.”

**Student:** “Yes, but hasn’t the hog got a right to root?”

**Sumner:** “There are no rights. The world owes nobody a living.”

**Student:** “You believe then, Professor, in only one system, the contract-competitive system?”

**Sumner:** “That’s the only sound economic system. All others are fallacies.”

**Student:** “Well, suppose some professor of political economy came along and took your job away from you. Wouldn’t you be sore?”

**Sumner:** “Any other professor is welcome to try. If he gets my job, it is my fault. My business is to teach the subject so well that no one can take the job away from me.”

—adapted from *Social Darwinism in American Thought*

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### An American Story

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—adapted from *Social Darwinism in American Thought*
This era was in many ways a time of marvels. Amazing new inventions led to rapid industrial growth. Cities expanded to sizes never seen before. Masses of workers thronged the streets. Skyscrapers reached to the sky, and electric lights banished the darkness. Newly wealthy entrepreneurs built spectacular mansions.

By calling this era the Gilded Age, Twain and Warner were sounding an alarm. Something is gilded if it is covered with gold on the outside but made of cheaper material inside. A gilded age might appear to sparkle, but Twain, Warner, and other writers tried to point out that beneath the surface lay corruption, poverty, crime, and great disparities in wealth between the rich and the poor.

Whether the era was golden or merely gilded, it was certainly a time of great cultural activity. Industrialism and urbanization altered the way Americans looked at themselves and their society, and these changes gave rise to new values, new art, and new forms of entertainment.

**The Idea of Individualism**

One of the strongest beliefs of the era—and one that remains strong today—was the idea of individualism. Many Americans firmly believed that no matter how humble their origins, they could rise in society and go as far as their talents and commitment would take them. In 1885 the wealthy cotton manufacturer Edward Atkinson gave a speech to a group of workers at a textile factory in Rhode Island. He told them they had no reason to complain:

> “There is always plenty of room on the front seats in every profession, every trade, every art, every industry. . . . There are men in this audience who will fill some of those seats, but they won’t be boosted into them from behind.”

—quoted in *America’s History*

**Horatio Alger**

No one expressed the idea of individualism better than Horatio Alger. A minister from Massachusetts, Alger eventually left the clergy and moved to New York. There he wrote more than 100 “rags-to-riches” novels, in which a poor person goes to the big city and becomes successful. Many young people loved reading these tales. Inspired by Alger’s novels they concluded that no matter how many obstacles they faced, success was possible.

**Social Darwinism**

Another powerful idea of the era was Social Darwinism, which strongly reinforced the idea of individualism. English philosopher Herbert Spencer first proposed this idea. Historian John Fiske, political scientist William Graham Sumner, and the magazine *Popular Science Monthly* all popularized it in the United States.

**Herbert Spencer**

Philosopher Herbert Spencer applied Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution and natural selection to human society. In his 1859 book, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, Darwin argued that plant and animal life had evolved over the years by a process he called natural selection. In this process, those species that cannot adapt to the environment in which they live gradually die out, while those that do adapt thrive and live on.

Spencer took this biological theory, intended to explain developments over millions of years, and argued that human society also evolved through competition and natural selection. He argued that society progressed and became better because only the fittest people survived.

Spencer and others who shared his views became known as Social Darwinists, and their ideas were known as Social Darwinism. “Survival of the fittest” became the catchphrase of their philosophy. By 1902 over 350,000 copies of Spencer’s books had been sold in the United States.

**Reading Check**

What was the main idea behind individualism?
Social Darwinism also paralleled the economic doctrine of laissez-faire that opposed any government programs that interfered with business. Not surprisingly, industrial leaders like John D. Rockefeller heartily embraced the theory. Rockefeller maintained that survival of the fittest, as demonstrated by the growth of huge businesses like his own Standard Oil, was “merely the working out of the law of nature and the law of God.”

**Darwinism and the Church** Rockefeller may have appreciated Spencer’s interpretation of evolution, but Charles Darwin’s conclusions about the origin of new species frightened and outraged many devout Christians as well as some leading scientists. They rejected the theory of evolution because they believed it contradicted the Bible’s account of creation. Some American scholars and ministers, however, concluded that evolution may have been God’s way of creating the world. Henry Ward Beecher of Plymouth Church in Brooklyn called himself a “candid Christian evolutionist.” Beecher accepted Spencer’s ideas of Social Darwinism and championed the success of American business.

**Carnegie’s Gospel of Wealth** A wealthy and prominent business leader of the time, Andrew Carnegie believed wholeheartedly in Social Darwinism and laissez-faire. Speaking of the law of unregulated competition, he wrote:

> “It ensures the survival of the fittest in every department. We accept and welcome, therefore, as conditions to which we must accommodate ourselves, great inequality of environment, the concentration of business, . . . in the hands of a few, and the laws of competition . . . as being not only beneficial, but essential for the future progress of the race.”

—quoted in *Voices from America’s Past*

Believing that those who profited from society owed it something in return, Carnegie attempted to extend and soften the harsh philosophy of Social Darwinism with the *Gospel of Wealth*. This philosophy held that wealthy Americans bore the responsibility of engaging in philanthropy—using their great fortunes to further social progress. Carnegie himself, for example, donated millions of dollars as the “trustee and agent for his poorer brethren.” Other industrialists also contributed to social causes. (See page 1053 for more information on the *Gospel of Wealth*.)

**History Through Art**

*Baseball Players Practicing* Thomas Eakins painted this work in 1875. A member of the Realist school of art, Eakins tried to depict everyday events in detail. What elements of this painting reflect the Realist movement?

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![Baseball Players Practicing](image)

**Reading Check**

**Summarizing** What was the main idea of Social Darwinism?

**Realism**

Just as Darwin had looked at the natural world scientifically, a new movement in art and literature known as **realism** attempted to portray people realistically instead of idealizing them as romantic artists had done.

**Realism in Art** Realist painters rejected the idealistic depictions of the world of the earlier 1800s. One such painter, Thomas Eakins of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, considered no day-to-day
subject beneath his interest and careful observation. On his canvases, with their realistic detail and precise lighting, young men swam, surgeons operated, and scientists experimented. Eakins even dared to paint President Hayes working in shirtsleeves instead of in more traditional formal dress.

**Realism in Literature** Writers also attempted to capture the world as they saw it. In several novels, William Dean Howells presented realistic descriptions of American life. For example, his 1885 novel The Rise of Silas Lapham described the attempts of a self-made businessperson to enter Boston society. Also an influential literary critic, Howells was the first to claim Mark Twain to be an American genius and hailed him as “incomparable, the Lincoln of our literature.”

Twain, a Missouri native whose real name was Samuel Clemens, wrote his masterpiece, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, in 1884. In this novel, the title character and his friend Jim, an escaped slave, float down the Mississippi River on a raft. Through their innocent eyes, readers gain a piercing view of American society in the pre–Civil War era. Twain wrote in local dialect with a lively sense of humor. Nevertheless, Howells realized that Twain was more than a humorist. He had written a true American novel, in which the setting, subject matter, characters, and style were unmistakably American.

Howells also recognized talent in the work of a very different writer, Henry James, who lived most of his adult life in England. In novels such as Portrait of a Lady (1881), James realistically characterized the inner lives of the upper class. Isabel Archer, the lady of the title, reflects one of the prime values of her class—the concern to maintain social position by marrying well. Ultimately Isabel’s wealth interferes with her ability to pursue her own happiness.

Edith Wharton, who also concerned herself with the upper class she knew, modeled her realistic writing after those of James. She won a Pulitzer Prize for her novel The Age of Innocence, a stark portrait of upper-class New York society in the 1870s.

**Reading Check** Explaining What was the significance of Mark Twain’s Adventures of Huckleberry Finn?

**Popular Culture**

Popular culture changed considerably in the late 1800s. Industrialization improved the standard of living for many people, enabling them to spend money on entertainment and recreation. Increasingly, urban Americans, unlike rural people, divided their lives into separate units—that of work and that of home. Furthermore, people began looking for things to do outside the home and began “going out” to public entertainment.

**The Saloon** As Frank Lloyd Wright had noted when he arrived in Chicago, the city’s saloons far outnumbered its groceries and meat markets. Functioning like community centers, saloons played a major role in the life of male workers in the 1800s. They also served as political centers. Saloonkeepers often served as key figures in political machines.

Saloons offered free toilets, water for horses, and free newspapers for customers. They even offered the first “free lunch”: salty food that made patrons thirsty and eager to drink more. Saloons developed loyal customers. The first workers from the night shift would stream in at 5:00 A.M., and the last would stay until late at night.

**Amusement Parks and Sports** While saloons catered mostly to men, working-class families or single adults who sought excitement and escape could go to amusement parks such as New York’s Coney Island. Amusements there such as water slides and railroad rides cost only a nickel or dime.

Watching professionals box or play baseball also first became popular during the late 1800s. A game much like baseball, known as rounders and derived from the game of cricket, had enjoyed limited popularity in Great Britain in the early 1800s. Versions of the modern game of baseball began to appear in
the United States in the early 1800s. As the game grew in popularity, it became a source of profit. The first salaried team, the Cincinnati Red Stockings, was formed in 1869. Other cities soon fielded professional teams, and in 1903 the first modern World Series was played between the Boston Red Sox and the Pittsburgh Pirates.

The second most popular game, football, appealed first to the upper classes, in part because it began in private colleges and universities that the middle and working classes could not afford. By the late 1800s, the game had spread to public universities. As work became less physically strenuous, many people looked for leisure activities that involved physical exercise. Lawn tennis, golf, and croquet became popular. James Naismith, a Canadian working as an athletic director for a college in Springfield, Massachusetts, invented the game of basketball in 1891.

**Vaudeville and Ragtime** The many people living in the cities provided large and eager markets for other types of entertainment. Adapted from French theater, *vaudeville* took on an American flavor in the early 1880s with its hodgepodge of animal acts, acrobats, gymnasts, and dancers. The fast-moving acts, like the tempo of big-city life, went on in continuous shows all day and night. Like vaudeville, *ragtime* music echoed the hectic pace of city life. Its syncopated rhythms grew out of the music of riverside honky-tonk, saloon pianists, and banjo players, using the patterns of African American music. *Scott Joplin*, one of the most important African American ragtime composers, became known as the “King of Ragtime.” He published his signature piece, “The Maple Leaf Rag,” in 1899.

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**Checking for Understanding**

1. **Define:** philanthropy, realism, *vaudeville*, *ragtime*.

2. **Identify:** Gilded Age, Social Darwinism, *Gospel of Wealth*, Scott Joplin.

3. **Describe** how changes in art and literature reflected the issues and characteristics of the late nineteenth century.

4. **Culture and Traditions** What were the defining characteristics of the Gilded Age?

5. **Synthesizing** Do you think the idea of the *Gospel of Wealth* is still alive today? Why or why not?

6. **Organizing** Complete a graphic organizer similar to the one below by filling in new forms of entertainment that Americans turned to in the late 1800s.

7. **Examining Photographs** Analyze the photograph at the top of this page. How does the clothing the musicians are wearing compare with the clothing worn by musicians today?

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**Descriptive Writing** Imagine that you are a newspaper editor in the late 1800s. Write an editorial in which you support or oppose the philosophy of Social Darwinism. Include reasons to support your position.