



New Haven and the Nation 1865-1900 A Social History Labor, Immigration, Reform

Curriculum Unit 79.03.07
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History is the record of human events, the sum total of the entire human experience. But it is much more than a catalogue of the achievements and failures of people and nations.

The study of history demands an objective analysis of the historical record. Historical records are not always objective and in many instances they can be one-sided. When doing research on the labor movement, immigrant life, and reforms in New Haven during the late nineteenth century, I encountered difficulty in uncovering evidence of the existence of the poor, slums, tenements, and problems of the laboring class.

Most books written about New Haven, by the people of the time, saw the city as the best of all possible worlds. It was a place of middle and upper class living, of balls, parties, walks in the city's beautiful parks, of shopping in the fine downtown stores. But New Haven was a typical city of the period; there was another side to life a side which many people chose to ignore or only haphazardly mention in passing.

This unit is an attempt to show the other side of late nineteenth century New Haven. The purpose of this unit is to help the student understand the interrelationship of economic and social factors, and to help him or her understand how these factors shaped the lives of the American people. This will be done by an analysis of some of the attitudes, values and beliefs of the people. It will also show how these attitudes, values and beliefs were put into practice, either as the rejection of the poor or the establishment of reform movements, which were intended to remove existing inequalities.

Rapid and momentous were the changes in America after the Civil War. This change could not have taken place without forcing a profound readjustment in American society. The reconstruction of the American economy affected the whole nation. The North was transformed into one complex industrial area. As industries moved into high gear, the output of the factories increased and the newly expanded rail system spread their goods to every part of the United States. The telegraph and telephone established direct contact between businessmen throughout the nation. High pressure salesmen assured ongoing expansion by educating the public to the new "necessities" of life.

With this type of stimulation, every branch of industry expanded rapidly. The new American industries created 12 million new jobs between 1865 and the early 1900s. Along with this development in the North came a greater concentration of wealth and population. The biggest impact came in those areas where industry was already in existence. A prime example is the city of New Haven, which by the middle of the 19th century was

one of the most important manufacturing centers in the United States.

New Haven was a typical city of the period. *MAP 1** It was a “walking city,” so called because most people walked to work, shops and recreation. The business district grew up near the homes of wealthy merchants. Near the shipyards and factories were the homes of the workers. The town poor lived near the outskirts of the city or in the alleyways and cellars of the central city. With industrial expansion, the need for more space grew rapidly. The larger cities met the need for space by improving the means of transportation which allowed the population to spread out

As industrial America changed over to large scale methods of production, the gulf between workers and owners widened. Wages, hours and working conditions were fixed by the company. Earnings were greatly affected by an increase in the number of underpaid women and children in the factories and mills. In New Haven in the 1860s over 40% of the workers were women and children. To this figure was added the ever increasing number of immigrants willing to work for next to nothing.

Along with the rise of large scale industry came the increase in the power of labor organizations. The objectives of many of these organizations were basically the same: the establishment of the 8-hour day; fair wages; industrial arbitration; the abolition of child labor; weekly payments; and factory inspections. Workmen in the large cities were glad to receive \$2.00 a day. Their 10-hour day went from 7:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., with an hour at noon for lunch. In some businesses the hours were shorter, and in others a good deal longer.

READING 1 Women in industry were concentrated at the lowest level of work and pay, usually receiving about 1/2 to 1/3 the wages of men doing the same job. A woman’s salary averaged about \$4.00 per week.

*Maps, readings, charts and pictures mentioned in this unit refer to a teacher’s packet, *New Haven and the Nation* , which is available from the Teachers Institute office.

Although unions fought for many of the same objectives, there were differences in their methods. Samuel Gompers, leader of the American Federation of Labor, opposed the philosophy of the Knights of Labor. The Knights hoped to organize all workers in the United States by organizing all workers in an industry into a single industrial union.

By being united they could demand political action to bring about the changes they sought. Samuel Gompers was president of Local 144 of the Cigar makers Union when he fought for the establishment of trade or craft unions.(1877). He wanted unions to be comprised of men sharing a special skill. Gompers believed that unions should use the strike weapon, as well as boycotts, to make employers increase wages, shorten hours and develop safer working conditions. But Gompers did not believe that unions should have political goals or try to change the economic system.

Workers in post-war Connecticut, like the rest of the nation, became interested in national labor organizations. Between 1850 and 1877 about fifty local unions were active in the state, but they usually did not last long and were ineffective. Lack of unity among the workers in their aims and methods; the opposition and power of the employer; public opposition to unions; strikes; and loss of membership due to a series of depressions weakened organized labor in its early years.

The workers of New Haven participated in the development of organized labor and labor law reform. The five hundred members of the local coach makers union, under the leadership of Talbot H. Harrison, petitioned the legislature to establish an 8-hour day for their industry. In January 1877, the *Register* noted that “the workingmen of this city are preparing to present to the legislature a request for the enactment of a law

preventing children under fourteen years of age from obtaining employment in the State.”

One organization served as a channel to combine the working class on a nationwide basis. This was the Knights of Labor, founded in 1869. The Knights, like many other such groups, existed in secret for many years, for fear of reprisals by employers. The Knights of Labor came to Connecticut in the winter of 1878. The national leader, Terrance V. Powderly, established locals in Hartford, Middletown and New Haven.

Organized workers throughout labor history have resorted to the strike as a principal weapon. The expansion of membership in labor organizations drew in many socialists and radicals; nationwide, unions became embroiled in an increasing number of strikes, boycotts and other disturbances.

The Panic in 1873, like every other panic in United States history, was accompanied by problems in the labor field. The growth of unemployment, the drop in wages, and the hopelessness of the workers led to a period of violent revolts. Labor unrest in New England reflected this trend. One strike after another occurred; many were put down, some with great violence. A strike of the textile workers in New England attracted wide attention in 1875. The owners of the mills brought in French-Canadians to take the place of the striking workers. The situation in Connecticut can be illustrated by the strike at the Ponemak Cotton Mills in Taftville, the largest mill of its kind in the state.

Labor unrest and strikes occurred frequently during this period in New Haven, sometimes over local problems, as in the case of the bricklayers employed in the construction of an addition to the Candee Rubber Company in 1878. The workers launched a strike for an increase in wages. Occasionally unrest would be the result of sympathy for workmen elsewhere. For example, in 1877, in sympathy for railway workers whose wages had been reduced by the Baltimore and Pittsburgh Railroad, city laborers held a mass demonstration resulting in a near riot on the Green. The city police force was called upon to quiet the demonstrators.

In the 1880s and 1890s there was an upsurge of strikes in Connecticut. The state listed twenty-five strikes in 1881 and one hundred and forty-four in 1886. In the spring of that year, the carriage industry in New Haven was idled for months by a strike as workers held firm to their demands for more pay and shorter working hours. Italian immigrants in New Haven were often used by factory owners as strike breakers. They were at the bottom of the economic ladder and had no bargaining position with employers. With both labor and capital mobilized for defense and aggression, the stage was set for a trial of strength.

In spite of setbacks, blacklists and legal prosecution, the labor movement had one important effect—it fostered a new spirit of unity among the workers. *READING II* By 1881 trade unions in New Haven had developed considerable strength. In that year the Council of Trade and Labor Unions was formed, later changing its name to the Trade Council of New Haven. The following unions joined together to form the Council: Bakers and Confectioners; Brewery Workmen; Bricklayers and Plasterers; Building Laborers; Stereotypers; Typographers; Stonemasons; Carpenters and Joiners; Cigar makers; Iron Moulders, Journeyman Plumbers; Gas-fitters, Steam-fitters and Pressmen. On March 9, 1887, the Connecticut Federation of Labor was organized in Hartford by workers from New Haven, Meriden, Danbury, Waterbury and Hartford. By 1900 the state membership reached 14,000.

One consequence of the depression that followed the periods of panic in the 1870s and 1890s was mass unemployment. There emerged throughout the country what was called the “tramp evil.” In some eastern sections of the Berkshires in Massachusetts, the “tramps” formed organized bands. Young men wandering in search of employment associated with professional criminals and beggars, living in the woods, stealing, drinking and fighting. From many towns and cities came reports of thefts, fires, rapes and murders committed

by vagrants. In some New England towns after the Panic of '73, people on the outskirts were forced to abandon their homes out of fear of these "tramps."

New Haven had its share of the problem in 1874; 215 arrests were made related to the "tramp evil." The problem continued throughout the 1880s. This was due in great part to the custom of furnishing, at all police stations in the city, free lodging to all applicants. This custom encouraged "tramps" to come into the New Haven area. In the late 1880s the city fathers changed the law, bringing an end to this problem.

In answer to the heavy demands of industry on the labor market and the opportunities offered by American life, the number of immigrants rose rapidly after the Civil War. For the first time, American manufacturers sent agents to Europe to stimulate immigration. The steamship companies offered low steerage rates, enabling agents of American firms to prepay the passage of laborers who would agree to work for the company for wages that seemed fantastically high to Europeans, but which were very low by American standards. The demand for labor can be considered one of the main factors responsible for the great influx of immigrants into Connecticut. With the exception of Rhode Island and Massachusetts, Connecticut, in 1900, had a larger proportion of foreigners in its population than any state in the union. *CHARTS I-III*

The new immigrants fell into established patterns of employment. Most had to put off their dreams of owning a farm. Their first thoughts had to be of earning a livelihood. They found jobs in construction camps, mines, and in the factories of mill towns and great Eastern manufacturing centers. READING III American cities in the nineteenth century developed simultaneously as centers of industry and as areas with high concentrations of immigrants. It is here that they developed communities that attempted to reinforce and sustain the culture of the homeland.

The majority of the European immigrants during the nineteenth century were not skilled or experienced in industrial work. Those workers who came with some skills tended to abandon their old world trades largely because they found little demand for their skills. Conditions were the same for nonskilled immigrant families—the husband could not earn enough to support his family; the wife and children also had to work to make ends meet. An abundance of labor was readily available at the lowest possible wages. Yet none of the immigrant entry ports offered any kind of public assistance to either immigrants seeking jobs or employers looking for workers.

Unless the immigrant had sufficient money, a specific destination, or a relative or friend to lean on, he faced considerable problems. The new immigrants did not fit quickly into the American way of life. Because of their difficulties with the language and ignorance of the social system they were often taken advantage of. A New Haven resident in July 1873 requested that an investigation be made into the living conditions of the Italian boys on Oak Street. *The Register* of July 18, 1873 reported:

These boys wander from street to street earning money from the charitable for their lazy taskmasters by playing upon dilapidated musical instruments, by blacking boots, or by any pursuit that will bring a daily specified sum of money to the idle and vicious men who have bought them for a term of years.

PICTURES I-III

Loneliness, bitterness and confusion frequently overtook the new immigrants. This was especially true of those who came from rural areas of the old country to highly urbanized cities in America.

Both the urban working class and the newly arrived immigrants suffered from a lack of adequate housing. Poverty compelled them to live where rents were cheap. They were forced to live in overcrowded, run down tenements and wooden cottages without sufficient air, light or sanitation facilities. *READING IV* These living conditions fostered the spread of disease, fire and crime. In many cities groups of reformers worked to improve the housing situation. The reformers' main concern was bad housing because they believed that poor living conditions breed poor citizens. *PICTURES IV-V*

The rise in the Italian population of Connecticut was phenomenal. From only 61 in 1860 their number increased to 19,105 at the close of the century. The United States Census does not report any Italians in Connecticut at all until 1880; the reason being that they hid their identity for fear of persecution. The steady employment given to a number of Italians by the Candee Rubber Company and the Sargent factory in New Haven encouraged the workers to send for their families. In a few years a complete Italian community was formed in New Haven. This type of community was not only characteristic of Italians, but of all immigrant groups.

In New Haven the Italian community was located in the Wooster Square area. Originally it was a wealthy Irish neighborhood. In the late 1860s industry moved into the area and the Irish moved out to the edge of the city. They often commuted to work in the downtown area by the newly installed streetcars. As the wealthy moved out, they left the area to the factories and tenements. The once beautiful mansions were turned into apartment houses, overcrowded and neglected. It was into this area that the Italian immigrant moved in search of work. Workers preferred to walk to their place of employment to save the expense and time required for commuting.

The immigrants chose places where they could associate with people like themselves in language, habits and religion. The newest arrival knew the addresses before he stepped off the boat. *READING V* They worshipped in churches and synagogues like those in the homeland, they formed fraternal and benevolent societies to assist their own. The Sons of Italy, B'rith Abraham, the Order of Vasa (Swedish), the Sons of Norway, the Knights of Columbus (Irish), the Wreath of the Eagle (Slovak), and the Sons of Herman (German) were some of the mutual aid societies with lodges in New Haven.

Since colonial times, people from other lands had been welcome in America. But by the 1880s a less than cordial attitude was developing. Anti-foreignism or "nativism" once again flared up. Because of the tension the new wave of immigrants created, the legislature in Connecticut passed an amendment to the state constitution regarding voting privileges. This 1898 amendment provided that "every person shall be able to read in the English language any part of the Constitution or any section of the statutes of the state before being admitted as an elector." New Haven voted its approval. The Democratic platform of 1892 echoed the feelings of many New Haven residents: "We heartily approve all legitimate efforts to prevent the United States from being used as the dumping ground for the known criminals and professional paupers of Europe."

The increase in immigration caused great problems in the field of education. In Connecticut, the school system was encountering problems with immigrant children because of their inability to read and speak English. Most of these children were in the larger cities and towns of the state. In many schools a large percent of the children were foreign born or of foreign born parents.

To meet the needs of these children New Haven established the ungraded or unclassified school. The purpose of this type of school was to accommodate the children who could not speak English and who therefore had difficulty in the regular classroom. New Haven had three such ungraded schools in 1881: the Whiting School, the Hamilton School and the Skinner School, with a total of 150 pupils. Truant officers finding a child

wandering on the streets, dirty and in rags, would bring the child to the ungraded school. Two other schoolrooms were also established, one in the Fair Street School and the other in the Dixwell Avenue School, for those who were habitually truant or incorrigible in the regular classroom,

By 1896 the New Haven School System had taken a hostile attitude toward the immigrant. In the *Annual Report of the Board of Education* they referred to New Haven's "increasing and promiscuous population—a population containing a large foreign element," mainly Italian and Russian. Innumerable problems had been created for the school system, the Board reported, "by the influx into the city of people who were ignorant of our institutions, laws and language, people who had not been accustomed to send their children to school in the country from whence they came and who seemed to care but little for their education, especially in the English language." The Board took a strong stand on Anglo conformity and had little apparent sensitivity to the immigrant's cultural background. The New Haven School System did attempt to meet the needs of the younger immigrants. Kindergartens were opened for what they called "the large class of neglected children now growing up in this city, whose parents are obliged to leave them alone in squalid homes or let them run in the streets."

The immigrants did have certain attitudes about the formal American educational institutions. They did perceive correctly that the schools were hostile to the family. Many did not see any value in the education provided by the American high school. In school the immigrant children were advised to train for manual, working class occupations. Many educators judged that they lacked the mental ability necessary for other professions.

The cities of the nineteenth century were very crowded. *MAP //* The poor lived in crowded tenements, wooden shacks or cellars, The streets were filthy; there were few sewers or indoor toilets; and the citizens often drank water that was polluted. Pressure groups were formed to force city leaders into doing something to improve conditions. Streets were paved and sidewalks were installed. Improved street lights and larger police forces helped to reduce crime. Many cities, under pressure from the federal government, adopted codes to regulate the sale of food and drugs. Women were prominent in the drive to improve the quality of life. Women's clubs were in the forefront of campaigns for clean streets and air, and were active in working with children and working women. By the end of the nineteenth century, most cities had housing codes requiring landlords to install fire escapes, plumbing and adequate lighting in their buildings.

The slums had become a firmly-rooted American institution. So few were the sanitary precautions throughout them that death ran almost unchecked. Typhoid, smallpox, scarlet fever and cholera were the leading causes of death. New Haven was the first city in the state to possess a Department of Health. Organized as an independent branch of the city government, it came into existence in 1872. The most important progress in public health was made by local groups such as this, not by the State Board of Health.

As a community, New Haven was especially liable to contagious diseases. New Haven was a center for travel and thus in daily communication with areas where, for example, smallpox was prevalent. In 1882 reports from Baltimore indicated that there were several thousand citizens down with smallpox. The disease was also prevalent in New York City and Patterson, New Jersey. The only known protection from it was general vaccination, yet there was widespread indifference to this easy, safe method of protection. New Haven's remarkable exemption from smallpox in 1882 can, in part, be attributed to the care taken by the Board of Health in promptly isolating every case that occurred and in vaccinating all who had been exposed.

For many years before the Civil War, most states and local governments maintained almshouses, orphanages, homes for inebriants, insane asylums and institutions for the deaf and dumb. Most cities possessed, in

addition, a number of private benevolent societies. With the development of industrial society, the need for such agencies grew constantly greater. Official provisions for the poor in urban and rural areas were crude, unsystematic, and poorly administered. When a family fell into hopeless pauperism, its members were packed off to the poorhouse. We have all too clear a picture of the degradation and suffering which these institutions represented. *READING VI* During the last half of the nineteenth century, the institutions already established made rapid progress, especially in the area of specialized care for children.

Connecticut followed the national trend in the reform movement. One of the most important acts established the State Board of Charities (1873). The Board was authorized to inspect almshouses, homes for neglected or dependent children, asylums, hospitals, and all institutions for the care and support of criminals. The Board not only supervised all public and private relief institutions, but suggested means of improvement.

The homeless and penniless who lived in or came to New Haven could be assured of shelter and food, either through public relief or private charities. Private charities in New Haven were divided into three categories: (1) institutions, (2) societies providing for home care of the poor and (3) churches.

The United Workers Society, established in 1877, carried out its work in five areas. These included (1) almshouse visits, (2) an employment bureau, which gave work to poor women, (3) the boys club (operating during the winter months in the basement of the old State House), which offered a place of recreation and reading to many newsboys and bootblacks who would otherwise roam the streets, (4) a committee for the relief of the sick poor, and (5) a sewing school for girls (open from September until July).

The Mothers Aid Society was established in 1883 to supply work for poor women. The society established the Leila Day Nursery to take care of their children during the day. *READING VII* The New Haven Dispensary was opened in 1872 as a private society for the care of the sick poor. It was located on York Street, next to the Yale Medical School. Here the needy could be treated free of charge. The Organized Charities Association on Church Street was an organization where, for a reasonable amount of work in the woodyard or laundry, the poor and needy could secure lodging and meals. The Grand Army of the Republic cared for old soldiers and the Ladies Seamen's Friend Society was organized to help sailors.

Churches showed a great interest in urban social problems. The Young Men's and Young Women's Christian Associations provided social and physical activities for city youth. The Salvation Army sought to help the poor of the city. The Army brought religion to the tenements and distributed food and clothing to the needy. The orphans were provided for by three church run asylums. The New Haven Orphan Asylum was organized in 1883 under Protestant management. The asylum took up the entire city block from Elm Street to Edgewood Avenue and from Platt Street to Beers Street. This is the block where the Troup School is located today. The St. Francis Orphan Asylum, organized in 1865, was under the management of the Catholic Church. Located along Highland Street between Prospect Street and Whitney Avenue, its name has been changed to Highland Heights. The third asylum was operated by the Jews. It was located in York Square and called the Hebrew Ladies Orphan Society. In 1882 there were 369 children receiving aid, "300 whose fathers were common drunkards; 19 whose mothers were profligate; 50 who had shiftless and idle fathers and mothers," according to a report of the Mothers Aid Society for that year. Many churches had organizations to care for the sick and poor of the parish; the First Church and Trinity Church had homes for aged and indigent women; the St. Vincent de Paul Society had branches in all Catholic Churches to help the sick and poor; three Jewish benevolent societies took charge of their sick and poor.

In the late 1800s public relief in New Haven was given in four different ways: (1) direct money aid; (2) support of insane asylums; (3) support of the almshouse; and (4) "pauper labor." given to persons who could not

obtain full wages for their services. The almshouse was built in 1861 on the town farm. It was located far out in the northwestern part of the city on Marlin Street, now the corner of Edgewood Avenue and Brownell Street. *PICTURES VI-VII* By 1897, the City Department of Charities and Corrections was created. There “the honest poor may find a home, the unfortunate a temporary asylum, the truant a place of wholesome correction and the illiterate a school for usefulness.”

The cities became places of contrast. Many rich Americans lived in cities, but so did the poor. In some areas one could find the mansions of the rich at a short distance from the slums of the urban poor. These were the parts of the city where few traveled unless they lived there or had business dealings in the area. Many Americans lived their entire lives without ever seeing a slum. To them this other side of life was remote and unreal. The social activities of the wealthy were chronicled in the newspapers and read by all. The slum dwellers had no “social” life that was newsworthy except in the form of the annual Police Reports. *PICTURES VIII-X*

SAMPLE LESSONS

LESSON I PRIMARY SOURCE READINGS

Obviously, what happened in history was very real and important to people who lived at the time. If we can see issues through the eyes of those who were there, the past becomes real and easier to relate to the present.

A set of 30 primary source readings— *New Haven and the Nation* —may be borrowed from the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute. The books contain firsthand accounts and pictures, along with questions for discussion. The readings, charts, maps, and pictures indicated in this unit are found in the book.

LESSON II PUBLIC AND PRIVATE ORGANIZATIONS

Today in large cities there are places where the poor and needy can go for help. Below is a list of organizations that existed in New Haven in the late 1800s. As a class or individual project, compile a list of organizations today where residents of New Haven can get help.

Young Men’s Christian Association

Young Women’s Christian Association

Hebrew Ladies Orphan Society

New Haven County Home

Saint Francis Orphan Asylum

City Missionary Association

Young Men’s Christian Association Boys Club

Knights of Columbus

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Salvation Army

State Hospital

Mothers' Aid Society

Ladies Seamen's Friend Society

New Haven Dispensary

Hospital of Saint Raphael

Grace Hospital

B'rith Abraham

Leila Day Nursery

The Almshouse

QUESTIONS

1. In what ways are these organizations the same? Different?
2. Are any of the organizations of the 1890s still in existence today? If so, which ones?
3. What kinds of services were especially important in the 1890s?
4. In what ways did urban reformers and social workers try to help city dwellers?
5. Are social services and reforms needed today? Explain.

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