

## **Oakland TAHG Lesson Study 2008-2009**

### **Possible 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Topics**

#### **Paying for the Civil War**

It is well known that the North was able to win the Civil War because of its superior economic resources. An important aspect of that economic superiority was the Union's ability to finance its wartime expenses by issuing millions of dollars of bonds, many of which were bought in small quantities by ordinary northerners. In this sense, the North's success was a legacy of two antebellum developments: (1) the increased prosperity of its citizens, and (2) the relatively even distribution of that prosperity among millions of middling farmers, craftsmen and businesspeople.

Reaching all those people, however, was a challenge. In stepped Jay Cooke, the famous merchant-financier. Using aggressive marketing techniques such as newspaper advertisements and traveling salesmen, Cooke was able to dispose of government bond issues several times during the course of the war, thus sustaining the Union war effort. The newspapers and railroads that made Cooke's selling effort possible were themselves the foundation of the prosperity which allowed citizens to buy. Examining this process could allow students to learn a number of things. First, just how expensive the war was. Second, how those massive expenses were met. Finally, the role of new commercial transportation and communications networks that linked the North together in facilitating the aggregation of small amounts of individual savings into a modern war effort.

#### **Lowell: Freedom and Coercion in America's Earliest Factories**

In the 1820s and 1830s, New England textile manufacturers built the country's first factories. These water-powered operations consisted of large, multi-story buildings with hundreds of machines attended to by hundreds of wage-earning workers. In 1826 several mill owners incorporated the town of Lowell, which was supposed to function as a model both of productive efficiency and enlightened treatment of workers. The owners staffed their factories with young, unmarried farm girls from surrounding rural areas, housing them in company boardinghouses. In order to win the consent of parents, the boardinghouses enforced a strict moral code that included, for example, mandatory church attendance. The girls worked long and difficult hours at the relentless pace of the machinery.

The combination of mill owner paternalism and demanding—some might say exploitative—working conditions suggest the beginnings of an industrial nightmare. But

the story is more complicated. For many of these girls, the chance to move off isolated farms and earn their own money provided new and exciting opportunities. Mill owner paternalism, it turns out, was often not as bad as the paternalism of actual parents. By the same token, paid industrial labor had its advantages over unpaid country tedium, including the ability to indulge one's tastes in the latest fashions. However, in ensuing years competitive pressures in the textile industry led employers to worsen conditions in a variety of ways. In response, the women textile workers organized and struck. Thus the Lowell story provides a compelling case with which to examine the ways in which economic development could be both liberating and oppressive. A great source is the *Lowell Offering*, a monthly newsletter put together by the workers themselves.

### **Slavery: Wealth and the Fruits of Labor**

Slavery was such a pervasive presence in the South before the Civil War that there are any number of ways to approach it. Here I suggest two possibilities. First, one could look at the overall role that slavery, as a very particular system of production, played in the southern economy. Slaves generated a tremendous amount of wealth for the South. The question was who should control and enjoy that wealth. For white planters, the answer was clear, and they clung tenaciously to their "peculiar institution." A good document illustrating their views is the Mississippi Secession Ordinance of 1861. Modeled on the Declaration of Independence, this document clearly sets forth the white South's fear that northern antislavery sentiment threatened the very foundation of their wealth and leisure. "Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery—the greatest material interest of the world. . . . [A] blow at slavery is a blow at commerce and civilization." This could be contrasted with various other documents in which former slaves articulated what they saw to be their interests.

Another approach might focus on the act of buying and selling slaves at auction. Doing so gets at the heart of what it really means to treat a human being as chattel property. On the one hand, slaveholders' pretensions to paternalistic interest in their slaves' welfare is exposed as they coldly calculate dollar values. On the other hand, the fact that slaves were subjected to instant separation from friends and family is driven painfully home. The slave auctions also provide numerous possibilities for investigating the intricacies of slave-master relations. Though deprived of the greater part of their freedom, slaves demonstrated remarkable ingenuity in trying to manipulate the terms of sale to their benefit. Many of these practices are detailed in Walter Johnson's *Soul by Soul*.

## **Farm Life, the Environment, and Change**

One of the stories that historians have only recently begun to pay significant attention to is the environmental impact of American farming in the nineteenth and earlier centuries. From the early 1800s, for example, northeastern farmers faced the difficulty of sustaining accustomed agricultural yields on soil increasingly depleted by exploitative farming techniques. The problem slowly migrated west, appearing in places like Ohio, then Indiana, then Illinois, and so on. Under frontier conditions, farmers sought to clear land quickly and generate an immediate return. Sustainable farming practices, however, were labor intensive and required more capital, especially for commercial fertilizers.

In the two decades before the Civil War northeastern farmers also faced the competition of cheaper grain pouring in from newly cleared western lands. As a result, many northeastern farmers changed their farming practices, learning to conserve their resources better and shifting to truck farming, dairying, sheep-raising and other products that did not directly compete with the West. These changes were far-reaching, affecting not only business practices and the forms of physical labor, but even family and gender relations. For example, many farmers in upstate New York began to specialize in cheese production. As the work became concentrated in a few central locations for greater efficiency, what had previously been thought of as household female labor, became defined as commercial male labor.

The 1840s and 1850s witnessed the proliferation of an agricultural press devoted to such issues, which could provide compelling sources. Also interesting were the agricultural fairs of the same period, which brought farmers together to compete over the quality and quantity of their produce, to peruse the latest agricultural technology (iron plows and cultivators, horse-powered threshers, etc.) and to learn improved farming methods.

## **The Transportation Revolution**

The antebellum period, roughly from the end of the War of 1812 until the outbreak of the Civil War, was characterized by an explosion in the construction of transportation infrastructure. The earliest, and in many ways the most successful, such project was the Erie Canal, completed in 1825. By linking the Hudson River with the Great Lakes, the canal opened up huge areas to commercial farming and other business, not just in upstate New York but throughout the upper Midwest. In part as a result, New York City emerged as the country's premier commercial center, handling the trade of a vast hinterland.

The Erie Canal, however, was just the beginning. Soon other states embarked on ambitious canal projects, and within only a few years railroads began to appear. By the end of the 1830s, the United States had almost twice the number of track miles as all of Europe combined. In the 1850s a second railroad boom greatly expanded the country's rail network. At a more local level, Americans were gripped by turnpike mania. Plank roads, they hoped, would connect smaller outlying communities to the major canal and railroad lines. Although often less successful than anticipated, the many turnpike projects of the period testify to Americans' hunger for better transportation.

The piecemeal construction of the nation's transportation network had far-reaching and ultimately incalculable ramifications. It generated endless political fights at every level of government over who should finance such projects and where they should be located. It formed the foundation of a rapidly expanding economy. It fundamentally altered the lives of millions of Americans who came increasingly to depend for their livelihood on distant, impersonal markets. It provided the means by which the nation communicated, carrying the mail, newspapers and, after 1844, telegraphic messages (the lines for which were typically constructed alongside railroads). It was, in other words, a true revolution.