

COPYRIGHT / USAGE

Material on this site may be quoted or reproduced for **personal and educational purposes** without prior permission, provided appropriate credit is given. Any commercial use of this material is prohibited without prior permission from The Special Collections Department - Langsdale Library, University of Baltimore. Commercial requests for use of the transcript or related documentation must be submitted in writing to the address below.

When crediting the use of portions from this site or materials within that are copyrighted by us please use the citation: *Used with permission of the University of Baltimore.*

If you have any requests or questions regarding the use of the transcript or supporting documents, please contact us:

Langsdale Library
Special Collections Department
1420 Maryland Avenue
Baltimore, MD 21201-5779
<http://archives.ubalt.edu>

The Social Condition of the American People during the first Quarter of the Present Century.

At the beginning of this century, the United States contained a population of about 5,300,000.

Of this number, one fifth were negro slaves.

It was scattered over parts of this country, as far as the Mississippi River; but two thirds of it was to be found within fifty miles of the Sea Coast.

New York was a wilderness to within a few miles of the city of that name.

The Ohio territory contained 45,000;

Kentucky 220,000; and Tennessee 104,000.

These were constantly increasing in population, and importance, on account of immigration from the coast states.

In spite of embargoes and high-sea robberies, foreign commerce was rapidly increasing, greatly owing to the

war of Napoleon. At this time the exports and imports amounted to about \$75,000,000 each. These were greatly enlarged when France opened her West Indies for trade, with the United States; but on account of difficulties of transportation, it was long before commerce could be carried on to a great extent.

The government was greatly hampered by party feeling. When Hamilton organized the Bank of the United States, great was the outcry against it. For years the New York Legislature refused to charter one, and it was only by a trick of Aaron Burr, who got banking privileges for a company, that was to supply the city with fresh water, that one was obtained.

There was little dealing in stocks, because there were no great capitalists.

The National Debt was \$50,000,000, for the

ness of which sum, the government paid eight per cent interest. The only American coin in general circulation, was the large copper cent. In the large towns Federal money was used to some extent, but in the country, sums were reckoned in L. s. d. It was an amusing sight to see people paying bills, both systems being used at the same time.

Of course emigration to America was yet in its bud, still there was a steady stream flowing in from the Old World. Then, as now, they were mostly Germans. Some sailed a good sum before starting, but were sure to be robbed by sea-captains and agents; and when they reached this country they were penniless. However, by serving as labourers, they soon became able to buy a farm. Then, having built their log cabins, they went to work,

and, in most cases, in time became wealthy. Another class went into voluntary servitude, for, from three to eight years, for the cost of their passage. On their arrival, they would be sold for what they would bring. When freed, their masters were bound to furnish them with two complete suits of clothes, (one new) a grubbing hoe, a weeding hoe, and a new axe.

In spite of the thrift of these Germans they were very superstitious, and believed that the Moon affected agriculture; so that until the right Moon came, they would plant nothing. When the harvest had been gathered, it was dragged along the muddy roads to the city. The roads had improved little since the French and Indian War. Turnpikes were greatly opposed by the people.

The legislature of Rhode Island, refused to allow the people of Providence to spend more for a turnpike, across the state, than for an ordinary road, on the ground, that free men should never have to pay for the use of the public-highways, and if they did, they would become what the English were, slaves.

As a result of this feeling, good roads, were for a long time, a thing unknown in that state, as well as in Georgia, which pursued the same bigoted policy. Those of the Carolinas, and Virginia were little better.

In Pennsylvania, an effort had been made to build a good road from Lancaster, to Philadelphia, but it had at first failed, on account of ignorance in the art of road-making. The enterprise was afterwards taken up by an Englishman,

who had seen a Macadamized road, and, at last, in spite of the opposition of the farmers near the city, it was brought to a successful completion. This soon became the best and most used pike, in the country.

Most of the traveling was done in stage-coaches. These were little more than large boxes, mounted on springs. Their average speed was about four miles an hour, but on the roads where there was competition, they went much faster, on account of the driver's desire, to keep ahead of the coach of the opposition.

The usual charge was six cents per mile including fourteen pounds of baggage; but if it weighed more, the traveler was compelled to pay for it at the same rate as himself. The inns on the roads were in some places, very bad.

Some rooms had ten or twelve beds, in them, and if a man asked for clean sheets, he had to pay dearly for them. One took the first bed that he found empty, and if all were occupied, lay down beside any one whom he chose, without, as much as asking leave to do so.

In New England, they were much better. The sheets were clean, and the landlords honest. The selectmen of the town, the judge with his court, and shermen, farmers, and pleasure parties stopped there. The mail took twenty days to go from Maine to Georgia. The usual rate of postage, for less than one hundred miles, was eight cents; for more, twelve cents and a half. There was no regular furnished lines on the sea-coast, and river communication was very

irregular on account of the unsteady
and contrary winds. The Ohio River
could be used only for going downstream
hence the Kentucky people were in the
habit, of building large rafts, which they
floated down the Ohio River, to the
Mississippi, and thence to New Orleans.
This however was at the risk of their lives
on account of the hostile Indians, and
the home journey was made on horseback
through a country of unfriendly Indians.

A successful steamboat had already
been built by Fitch, a man of great
ingenuity, and had run for a summer on
the Delaware; but the people did not
patronize it, and so it failed.

Watt's steam-engines had for
ten years, been in successful operation, and
yet it was not until over a quarter of
a century after this, that they came

into use in this country. Owing to this lack of intercourse, the states grew apart according to their natural groupings.

In New England, cloth, shirts, hats, and the like, were manufactured, and exported to the southern states.

Agricultural implements were also made, but were no better than those used in Europe, a thousand years ago.

In some places, the iron-works were important, yet the great mineral wealth of the country, was as yet undiscovered. Even if it had been, it would have been of little importance, owing to the cost of transportation.

Steam, not having come into use, most articles were made by hand.

Most of the houses even in New England were but log-cabins. They were not as comfortable as those of England, during

the Middle Ages, yet were kept neat, and clean. Across the Alleghanies, the settlers lived in cabins, some of which were built in a single day. When a new one came, the neighbour, built his house for him, making the occasion a sort of holiday. There was but one door, and a window, and the cracks were filled with chips, and then smeared with mud. The furniture consisted of tables, chairs, benches, and a bedstead, all of which, were made with a saw, an auger, and an axe.

The city houses of the better class, were two stories high; in most cases, the office or store, and the rooms in which the family lived, being on the first floor, while on the second, was a large parlor, or drawing room, extending the whole length of the building. In this room, balls and parties were generally given.

Every man was compelled to do service at fires. In New York, each grown man, was required to keep four buckets, with which at the sounding of the alarm, he was expected to go to the fire.

In Philadelphia a hose was used, but it took the united efforts of twelve men, to pump the water into it.

The first Insurance Company, had been started in 1752, the premium being returned after seven years, without interest.

The laboring classes had plenty to eat. Pork, was eaten three times a day, indeed it was the favorite food of the poor. Indian corn was also much liked, and coffee, and chocolate were drunk once or twice a day. Salt meat and salt fish were occasionally obtained.

The price of pork was twelve cents a pound, that of salt, four cents, of dry fish,

twenty cents, and of sugar, about forty cents.

The Americans drank a great deal, according to the standard of our times.

Intoxication was common, and some, even of the best families, died drunkards.

The first temperance society was started in 1810, and it is said, was organized by reason of the occasional intoxication of ministers at conferences. Brandy was the favorite drink, of the city beau.

In New England, Puritanism still had a hold upon the people.

The Sabbath began at sunset on Saturday, when all work was stopped. After supper the Bible was read, after which the whole family retired. On the next morning, all the family (except the babies) went to church. After service, those who lived near by, went home, but those from a distance ate dinner in their pens.

This was well enough in summer, but in winter, there was great opposition, to sitting in the cold churches, which caused the death of many. The tithing man was still in existence. His duty was to see that the Sabbath was properly observed, and to stop all who traveled on that day, and ask of them, their name and business.

This was a great annoyance, and he was barely tolerated.

The western settlers, in summer, wore a small hat, a hunting shirt, a gandy-fringed belt, deer skin or lincey pants, and moccasins. To this, in winter, was added a coat, and a white blanket-coat. In the cities, there was much foppishness. If the dude, was a Republican, he imitated the French style; if a Federalist, the English. The French custom was to wear pants so tight, that it took hours

to get them on, and as they reached to the
arm-pits, the nearer was afraid to sit
down, for fear he might be visited with a
dire calamity.

Dancing and theatre-going
were the principal amusements in the large
cities. The theatre was much patronized
by the wealthy class, but the poorer ones
could not attend on account of the high
prices asked for tickets.

There were often fights in the
galleries, where the young bloods congregated.
The plays were very long, and a great
deal of politics was worked in between
the acts. In summer, the companies strolled
through the country, but met with poor
returns, in most cases.

Hunting, sailing, riding, chess and cards, were
very popular, as were also the examinations
at the higher schools, and colleges.

The chief sports of boys and young men were foot-ball, cricket, quoits, and ice-skating. Horse racing was in its infancy.

There were but few horses in the country, fit for such work, and so they had to be imported.

New York, had a very popular race course. Virginia, imported some of the best horses in Europe, and for a long time, its track, stood at the head of American popular amusements. In the country, scratch races were often gotten up at the tavern.

The only form of prize-fighting known in America, was the rough and tumble fight. This differed from the ordinary English prize-fight, in that, there were no rules, every thing being fair. This was the most brutal amusement of the people.

Showmen, acrobats, and the like, wandered

about the country, giving exhibitions at the
taverns, or wherever they could find a
sufficient audience.

Franklin founded the
first public library in 1732, and it was
still in existence in 1800. All of the
libraries in the country, put together,
scarcely contained thirty thousand volumes.

The Americans had little or no
knowledge of the classics, or philosophy.
The Museums did much towards
educating the children and people.

Two great streams of settlers
were continually flowing from the seaboard
states, westward.

The first of these, found its way in central
New York, which was at this time, for the
most part, a wilderness; and the second,
to the valley of the Ohio.

The former was mostly supplied.

by the people of New England. Indeed, so great was the immigration in some parts, that some districts were almost entirely depopulated. The rich soil of New York presented such a striking contrast to that of New England, which never very fertile, had become exhausted by continual use, that great numbers could not resist the temptation to immigrate.

First came the pioneer, a restless person, who, as soon as he had cleared his place, and gotten it into good condition, would sell out and seek an abode farther west. Behind him, came the thrifty settlers, who went to work earnestly, and in time came to own splendid farms. As a natural result of this, Troy sprang up into an enterprising town. The farmers took their grain there, and sold it to the merchants, who loaded on ships, by means of elevators,

and sent them down the river, to New York.

It was in a large measure, this, that made New York the Metropolis of the New World.

For the advancement of this trade, the Erie Canal had been projected, but it was long before it was finished.

The settlers in the Ohio valley, had a much more dangerous time of it. Wayne's treaty with the Indians, opened a large tract of land for colonization, and thither many people went. This soon made Ohio a state, and Indiana, a territory; but the great objection to this part, was the lack of a convenient market, which has already been mentioned. The valleys, especially in Kentucky and Tennessee were so fertile, that all that was necessary, was to plant the seed, and wait until the grain ripened. The hogs which have previously been said, to be the principal source of animal food,

were turned into the woods, and there left to graze until night. From this it will be seen that the American of these regions, had little to do, and it has been complained that they were great idlers, doing nothing but loaf around the tavern all day.

But naturally he was no idler, for no one ever came to America, to have an easy time of it. The English settlers were subject to fevers, and other diseases of the climate, and had a very hard time of it. But the Germans, who took to it naturally, were, as before stated, very prosperous. But whatever the condition of the country at this time, one thing was wanting and that was, some easy mode of communication.

Robert C. Cole.