

The Twin Revolutions --Part One--

Introduction

The War of 1812 lasted three years because historians are terrible at naming things. It was a Revolutionary rematch between the United States and Great Britain. Some people at the time called the war the Second American Revolution.

On January 8th, 1815, after years of fighting, British forces attempted to capture New Orleans and gain access to the Mississippi River. But they suffered a crushing defeat by American forces led by General Andrew Jackson. The British lost 2000 men. The Americans lost 70. The victory made Andrew Jackson a war hero and it reaffirmed American independence.¹

But on that January day, there was something that neither side knew—the war was already over. American diplomats in Europe had agreed to the Treaty of Ghent two weeks prior, formally establishing peace. Washington, DC didn't learn about the battle or the treaty in Europe until mid-February 1815. News, even important news, traveled slowly.²

In fact, everything at the time moved slowly. At the start of the century, merchants from Tennessee and Kentucky would float down the Mississippi River with whatever goods they were selling. They'd reach New Orleans, sell their goods, break down their boats, sell the material for lumber, and then they would *walk* home. It cost nine dollars to move one ton of goods 30 miles overland. For the same price, you could ship goods 3000 miles across the Atlantic.³ America was a poorly connected nation.

But during the decades after the war of 1812, Americans built a network of roads, railroads, and canals which knit the Nation together and fostered twin revolutions in transportation and communication.

Far from just improving travel time or keeping people up to date on the latest political scandals, the twin revolutions sent ripples through every aspect of life in America. It was not a simple chain reaction. It was a web of interconnected movements. The ability to transport goods more easily changed the economy. The new economy altered family life and gender roles. Preachers traveled the newly built roads stoking a massive religious revival. And in the midst of a rapidly changing, and seemingly unstable world, some Americans sought comfort in new religious communities and weird sexual communes. The early 1800s were a wild time.

Let's dig in.

¹ Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 12-15.

² Gordon S. Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 695-96.

³ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 40, 214.

--Intro Music--

[Welcome to American History Remix, the podcast about the overlooked and underexplored parts of American history. We're glad you're here!]

A Growing Nation

At the turn of the 19th century, the Nation was growing. Its population was growing, geographically it was growing, and people were on the move. The population of the United States in 1790 was 3.9 million. In 1815, it was 8.5 million. By 1840, it was 17 million. There was immigration to the US during this period, but the growth was mostly due to a high birthrate.⁴

For the Revolutionary generation, the frontier had been western New York, western Pennsylvania, or Tennessee. But in the early 1800s, thousands of men and women were moving farther west, drawn by the prospect of owning their own farms, and pushed from the east by soil exhaustion and increasing competition for land.⁵

Between 1800 and 1810, the population of Ohio grew from 45,000 to 231,000. In the same decade, Indiana grew from 6000 white inhabitants to 25,000.⁶ As the white population grew, the territories turned into states. In 1791, Kentucky entered the Union. Tennessee in 1796. Ohio in 1803.⁷

Transportation

But, as we've mentioned, amidst all this growth, the United States was still a largely disconnected society. Travel between the states was slow. Roads were only minimally maintained. They weren't good for much more than transporting goods a few miles from farms to local markets.

Recognizing the need for easier transportation, federal and state governments began investing in roads. This was the beginning of the transportation revolution.

In 1811, Congress commissioned the first National Road, also called the Cumberland Road. By 1818, it stretched from the Potomac, over the Appalachian Mountains, to the Ohio River. Less than twenty years later, the road reached Illinois.⁸

States likewise began transportation projects. In 1812, Massachusetts granted charters to build 105 toll roads, what they called turnpikes. That same year, New York State granted 57 similar

⁴ Joyce Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2000), 63-66; Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 52, 75; United States Census Bureau, "POP Culture:1840," History, last updated December 8, 2021,

https://www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/fast_facts/1840_fast_facts.html.

⁵ Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution*, 67-68; Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 43.

⁶ Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 58.

⁷ Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 701.

⁸ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 86, 212-13.

charters.⁹ These roads were chartered by state legislators who worked with private businesses to construct them.

On these new roads, travelers and farmers peddling their goods could cover an average of 6 to 8 miles an hour, which was an improvement, but they still weren't great for transporting goods long distances.¹⁰

Canals—manmade waterways—were much more effective for that.

The primary example is the Erie Canal, which crossed New York State from Albany to Buffalo. Prior to the canal, if you wanted to ship something from the Great Lakes region to New York City, you either had to carry it over a mountain, ship it down Canada's St. Lawrence River, or the Mississippi...and then sail around the Atlantic coast.

A canal would be very useful, but it was an ambitious project. In 1817, when construction began, the longest canal in the United States was 26 miles. The Erie Canal would be 363. Thomas Jefferson said the project was "madness." The political opponents of New York's governor, Dewitt Clinton, called the canal "Clinton's big ditch."¹¹

But when the project was completed in 1825, it was a gigantic success. Goods from the Great Lakes could be shipped along the canal from Buffalo to Albany and from there down the Hudson River to New York City.¹² The big ditch cut the cost of shipping from Lake Erie to New York City from \$100 a ton to \$9.¹³

The Erie Canal also helped grow the cities in upstate New York. We've already mentioned Albany and Buffalo, but also cities like Rochester, Syracuse, and Utica. Thanks to the canal, New York State was on the forefront of many of the subjects we'll be looking at.¹⁴

Other states saw the value of the canal and soon began imitating the "big ditch." Ohio created a canal system linking Cleveland and Cincinnati, connecting Lake Erie with the Ohio River. Hoping to challenge the supremacy of the Erie Canal, Pennsylvania constructed the Mainline Canal that stretched 395 miles from Pittsburgh to Philadelphia.¹⁵

By 1840, there were 3500 miles of canals in the United States.¹⁶

⁹ Boydston, *Home and Work*, 57.

¹⁰ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 212-13; Steven Hahn, *A Nation Without Borders: The United States and Its World in an Age of Civil Wars, 1830-1910*, vol. 3 of *Penguin History of the United States*, ed. Eric Foner (New York: Penguin Random House, 2016), 89.

¹¹ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 117-20.

¹² Boydston, *Home and Work*, 57-58.

¹³ Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 43.

¹⁴ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 217.

¹⁵ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 220.

¹⁶ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 89.

Another innovation at the time was the steamboat. Steamboats were actually first introduced to the United States in 1787, but they were slow to catch on. By the early 1800s, however, steamboats began moving up and down the Hudson River—again—in New York.

The steamboat offered immediate advantages to merchants. They could carry passengers and several tons of goods upstream, even in shallow waters or on rivers with strong currents.

These ships were pretty dangerous though. The boilers were prone to explode. Between 1825 and 1830, there were forty-two separate steamboat explosions which killed 273 people. In 1838, a single massive explosion in South Carolina killed 140 people. The tragedy led Congress to enact the first federal safety regulations the following year.

Regardless of the dangers, the technology was valuable, and it improved over time. In 1817, it took 25 days for a steamboat to travel upriver from New Orleans to Louisville, Kentucky. Nine years later, the journey took eight days.¹⁷

Finally, railroads capped off the transportation revolution. The first railroads in the United States were built in the 1820s. They weren't yet traveled by locomotives or made to carry people. No, the first railroads were used for things like moving granite a few miles from a mine to a shipyard, and the carts were pulled by horses.¹⁸

But the city of Baltimore planned a more ambitious railroad.

Like other cities along the Atlantic seaboard, the population of Baltimore was growing, but its economy lagged behind that of New York City where wealth was flowing in and out of the Erie Canal. Baltimore was connected to the Ohio River Valley via the National Road, but, as we've seen, moving goods along primitive roads was slow and costly.

Therefore, to challenge the economic supremacy of New York City, in 1827 Baltimore chartered the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. The vision was for the railroad to, as the name suggests, connect Baltimore with the Ohio River Valley. The railroad would cross the Allegheny Mountains pulled by horse.

The line opened in 1830 and, at first, traveled a whopping 13 miles. Over the following decades, they expanded the line farther and farther. But that's not really what's important.

The Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, or the B&O Railroad, was the Nation's first common carrier. That means it carried goods and *people* who could buy tickets for departures scheduled ahead of time. Opening the railroads to the public ushered in a new era in national travel. We take this for granted today, but someone had to invent travel schedules.

¹⁷ All Steamboat info from Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 214-15.

¹⁸ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 562.

But there's more. A few years earlier, in 1825, England introduced the first steam-powered locomotive. When the B&O line opened in 1830, it quickly copied England's technology and created the first steam engine line in the United States. No more horses.¹⁹

Other cities soon imitated the railroad. By 1840, there were 3200 miles of railroad in the Nation, twice the amount in all of Europe.²⁰ In 1806, the journey from Lexington, Kentucky to Washington DC took three weeks. The same trip in 1846 took four days by train.²¹

Driven by a desire to unite the Nation and make a profit, both private and government investors transformed the way Americans moved about their country. In just one generation, the country went from being a group of poorly connected states to an interconnected nation in which people and goods could travel easily.

Communication

Coinciding with the revolution in transportation was the twin revolution in communication.

In 1825, a new printing press was imported to the United States that was capable of printing 2000 pages in an hour. The press was steam-powered, just like all those boats that exploded. I'm unaware of any printing presses blowing up, but if you are, please drop us a message, we'd love to hear about it. Anyway, this meant that printers could produce more reading materials.²²

Much of the reading material was religious, Bibles, hymnals, and books about theology. But it was by no means limited to this subject. In cities like Philadelphia, New York, and Boston, there was a growing book publishing industry, which allowed authors in the US to make a living for the first time. Magazines sprung up, covering special interests. Newspapers were already distributed widely, but the low cost of publishing caused the industry to explode. Again, figuratively, unless you have information we don't. For example, in New York City, in 1832, there were accumulatively over 18,000 newspapers circulating daily. Just four years later, there were over 60,000 papers printed in the city every day.²³

Political newspapers were among the primary publications, and they helped drive the growth of popular democracy. They printed congressional speeches and letters from congressmen to their constituents. And frontier papers kept people informed about the goings on in Washington.²⁴

The network of roads, canals, and railroads helped publications reach a wider audience. Also enabling the circulation of reading material was the growing postal service. The number of post offices in the US more than doubled from 3000 in 1815 to 8000 in 1830. Delivering mail was the

¹⁹ "Baltimore and Ohio Railroad," Gale Encyclopedia of U.S. Economic History, accessed April 7, 2022, <https://go-gale-com.ezproxy.multnomah.edu/ps/i.do?p=UHIC&u=s1136538&id=GALE|CX3611000080&v=2.1&it=r>.

²⁰ Hahn, *A Nation Without Borders*, 112; Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 563.

²¹ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 564.

²² Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 227.

²³ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 228-29.

²⁴ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 228.

largest peacetime function of the federal government. And publications, not personal letters, were the most widely distributed material in the postal system.²⁵

The transportation revolution meant that people and goods could move more easily. The communication revolution meant that information and ideas could spread throughout the country.

By the 1840s, the twin revolutions knit the Nation together, and, in the process, they transformed nearly every aspect of American life.

Market Revolution

The revolutions in transportation and communication impacted everything. But first and foremost, they changed the economy. Historians call this change the Market Revolution. There were lots of revolutions at the time.

At the opening of the 19th century, most families in the Republic practiced subsistence farming, meaning they'd grow food for themselves. It was a mixed agriculture; a family might grow wheat and vegetables and raise draft animals and hens. If they produced a surplus, that would be sold or traded at a local market.²⁶ Families likewise produced many goods and tools at home. What they could not produce themselves they would acquire from a market or by trading with their neighbors.²⁷ But these were local, relatively isolated markets that often bartered instead of using cash. Coastal cities were more engaged with Atlantic trade during the 1700s, but most of the Nation did not have easy access to the Atlantic.

The culture placed a strong value on self-sufficiency, independence, and not being reliant on others. That included not being reliant on someone else for their wages. But this system of economic and material independence was replaced by what we call a market economy—capitalism.

It was America's textile industry—cloth making—that led the way in the Market Revolution, so we'll use them as an example. The transformation began during the War of 1812, when a company called the Boston Associates acquired the technology for large water-powered looms which used a waterwheel to harness a river's current to power machinery which could then weave thread into cloth. Boston Associates actually stole the technology from England, but that's another story.

Anyway, in 1814, they opened a factory in Waltham, Massachusetts, and the venture was a financial success. It was the first factory in the Nation that could facilitate all the steps of cloth production, from raw material to finished product, in *one* location. Water-powered machinery was simply more effective than women weaving in their homes. The technology allowed them to

²⁵ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 225-27.

²⁶ Hahn, *A Nation Without Borders*, 85; Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 34-35; Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution*, 62-63.

²⁷ Boydston, *Home and Work*, 2, 21; Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 34.

produce more cloth faster.²⁸ And the growing transportation network allowed the company to sell their product throughout the Nation.

Boston Associates built several more water-powered mills along the rivers of New England. And, in 1821, they built a factory town called Lowell, Massachusetts. The town was literally built to produce textiles. At its height, it had over 1000 employees, including over 300 young women who lived and worked in Lowell, weaving on the large looms.²⁹

By 1836, eight different companies built similar mills near Pawtucket Falls, Massachusetts. The textile industry was at the forefront of the new economy. Other industries, such as paper production and shoemaking, proceeded along the same lines over the following decades. They opened factories with large numbers of employees who used water, or sometimes steam powered machines, to mass produce products that could be transported and sold throughout the country.³⁰

It was not immediate, but as the Market Revolution progressed, men and women were drawn into the workforce, away from the family farm. Visitors from Europe noted how Americans were always on the move. They moved from town to town, they changed their careers, or, if they stayed in agriculture, they settled new farms on the frontier. Americans, they observed, were restless, mobile, competitive, and driven to make their way and earn money.³¹

In the new market economy, there were simply more kinds of work available than there had been before. It wasn't just factory work either. The improvements in transportation and communication required a more complex economy. Steamboats needed captains, trains needed conductors, someone had to all those dig canals. It needed bankers to finance building projects, insurance to protect the investors, office clerks to do whatever boring jobs clerks do. Transportation also allowed for goods and food to be moved more broadly, contributing to urban growth. So, rather than isolated communities, the Nation developed an interconnected and mixed economy.

Family

Now let's continue the story, because the impact of the twin revolutions did not stop with the economy. The new economy intimately affected Americans by altering family life and gender roles.

Labor on a family farm had traditionally been divided by gender, but everyone contributed to the family's survival: the husband, wife, and children.

²⁸ Sellers, *The Market Revolution*, 27-28; Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 132-35.

²⁹ Boydston, *Home and Work*, 58; Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 133.

³⁰ Boydston, *Home and Work*, 58; Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution*, 76-77.

³¹ Alan Taylor, *American Republics: A Continental History of the United States, 1783-1850* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2021), 211-12.

Men worked in the fields or tended pack animals. Women tended gardens, produced homemade goods to use and to barter with, and stored food preserves so the family wouldn't starve during winter. If the women didn't work, the family died.³²

In fact, the English word "husband" used to mean "farmer" in the pre-modern era. But it is nearly impossible for a single man to run a farm. He needed help—a wife, a family. Thus, overtime, the word "husband" came to mean "a married man." That's how important a woman's work was.³³

Both parents were, likewise, responsible for raising the children. After infancy, when a child was no longer dependent on the mother for sustenance, parenting was mainly divided by gender. Sons would work with their fathers in the fields, daughters would sew, cook, and tend gardens with their mothers.³⁴

But the market economy disrupted the older way of life.

As manufacturing plants spread across the Nation (but especially in the Northeast, where the process began), wage labor slowly began to replace the barter system. The economy drew men out of the home and off the family farm to work for employers for set hours in return for wages.

For those men who participated, the process changed how they understood work, their homes, and themselves. They came to view wage labor as the whole of the economy, and earning wages became integral to their conception of masculinity. Men in the market economy insisted employers pay them "family wages." That is, enough to support a whole family.³⁵ Thus, here was born the idea of a male breadwinner.

You see, there was a growing distinction in the minds of the American public between home and work.

The outside world was competitive – men competed for employment, companies competed for revenue, cities competed for trade. It's not that men had never felt the effects of competition before. England, Spain, and France had all competed for control of North America, after all. What is war if not violent competition? But in a capitalist economy, Americans felt competition more *personally* than they had before. Rather than growing their own food, making their own goods, and trading with their neighbors, they competed with their neighbors for jobs and wages.

In that environment, Americans came to view the home as a haven from the outside world, and women were the keepers of the household.³⁶

³² Boydston, *Home and Work*, 11-12, 17.

³³ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 34.

³⁴ Boydston, *Home and Work*, 42-43.

³⁵ Boydston, *Home and Work*, 50, 99.

³⁶ Boydston, *Home and Work*, 42-43.

Contemporary writers used the language of “separate spheres” of influence to distinguish the proper place for men and women. In this context, public life was a man’s realm while private life was a woman’s appropriate sphere.

A woman’s proper place, so conceived, was at home, by the fireside. She was expected to be domestic, cheerful, compassionate, tending to the need of her husband and children, using her womanly virtue and purity to counteract the effects of the outside world.³⁷

And, because of the communication revolution, women’s literature flooded the market. One author wrote, “the domestic fireside is the great guardian of society against the excesses of human passion.”³⁸

There were books like *The Young Ladies’ Oasis*, *The Frugal Housewife*, *The Lady’s New Book of Cookery*; magazines such as *The Lady’s Token* and *The Ladies’ Companion*; essays like “Rules for Conjugal and Domestic Happiness,” “The Wife: Source of Comfort and Spring of Joy,” and (my favorite title) “Woman, a Being to Come Home To.”³⁹

In these books and magazines and essays, authors instructed women to occupy themselves “only with domestic affairs.” They should be submissive and kind, to have “no arms but gentleness.” Others offered specific instructions on how women could efficiently run their households and tend to the practical needs of their husbands.⁴⁰

Just as wage labor changed the way men conceived of their manhood, the market economy altered how women understood their work. Prior, in their diaries they simply called their labor “work.” Afterwards, they began calling it “housework.” Labor, which they once recognized as helping the family survive, now needed a qualifier. “Real work” meant laboring outside of the home and contributing to the national economy.⁴¹

The division between public and private spheres also helps explain why, even though the voting rights at this time were expanding to nearly universal suffrage for white men, they did not expand to include women. Because a woman, in this worldview, did not need to vote. She could use her womanly virtue to influence her husband and her sons. She could simply care for her family, instill the men with morality, and *they* would vote.⁴²

One author at the time wrote this explicitly: of women, she said, “let her not look away from her own little family circle for the means of producing moral and social reforms but *begin at home*.”⁴³

³⁷ Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 162.

³⁸ Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood,” 162.

³⁹ Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood,” 153, 161, 163-169. For real though, there is a book or magazine named on nearly every page.

⁴⁰ Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood,” 161.

⁴¹ Boydston, *Home and Work*, 51-99, 155.

⁴² Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood,” 162-63; Linda K. Kerber, “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History,” *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 1 (1988): 10-11. Boydston, *Home and Work*, 43, 56; Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution*, 26-29, 150-51.

⁴³ Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood,” 163, italics added for emphasis.

There were, of course, exceptions to the new gender roles. Especially among the urban lower class, women often worked outside of the home as domestic servants, midwives, or washerwomen. Or if her husband was a shopkeeper or artisan, a wife would often assist him in his business. And, as we've noted, some women even worked in the manufactories, creating textiles and other goods like their male counterparts.⁴⁴

But the male breadwinner became the *ideal*. And the upper classes judged and looked down upon the lower classes that couldn't live up to it.

In prior generations, the idea of a male breadwinner and separate spheres would have made no sense. Work had been divided by gender, but men and women lived and worked on the family property together.

But in the market economy, in the minds of most Americans, home and work became distinct categories. A woman was supposed to remain at home. That was her appropriate sphere of influence. A man worked outside the home to provide for his family. The public realm was his territory.

Religion

While the economy and family were changing, religious revivals rocked the Nation. For a little background: in the 1740s, there was a religious revival in the colonies called The First Great Awakening. Following the revival came the Revolutionary era, which was a time of general disinterest in religion. Religious language, ideas, and values were still around, but overall church membership declined significantly. Then came the Second Great Awakening, an even more powerful revival than the first, where evangelical Christianity spread across the Nation like wildfire.

We can see its roots in the 1790s, when churches in the Nation began to grow again, but it didn't reach its height until the 1830s and '40s after the twin revolutions had connected the Nation. There were many preachers leading the revivals, but we're going to focus on two specific men, Charles Finney and Lyman Beecher.⁴⁵

Finney was a lawyer turned traveling preacher. He began his career preaching in the cities along the Erie Canal. As his career grew, he traveled widely. He would set up camp in a city and preach every night, sometimes for up to a week.

Breaking with tradition, his preaching style was informal, easy to follow, and emotional. Unlike the Puritans, who taught that personal salvation rested solely upon the will of God, he taught that men and women could choose to follow God. In so doing, he tapped into the democratic impulses of the American people. In an environment where men and women could choose where they live, where they work, where they travel, and democratically choose for themselves who

⁴⁴ Boydston, *Home and Work*, 37.

⁴⁵ Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 276-77; Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 176-78.

should govern them, Finney’s message that they could choose God made a lot of sense.⁴⁶ There is a reason his preaching was popular. If you’ve listened to our episode on Puritanism, you’ll know what a departure this was.

Lyman Beecher was a pastor in New York, Connecticut, and Massachusetts before becoming the president of Lane Theological Seminary. Under Beecher’s leadership, many of his fellow ministers began riding from town to town to lead local revivals. He also produced religious tracts and established a Christian magazine, utilizing the new printing technology.⁴⁷ He wasn’t alone either. For example, in the year 1830, preachers and missionary societies published 6 million religious tracts, and the country had 600 religious newspapers.⁴⁸

The leaders of the Second Great Awakening used the new means of transportation and communication to spread the Gospel.

But the Great Awakening was not a unified movement. Those involved were interdenominational. The Methodists and the Baptists were the fastest growing denominations, but Finney and Beecher were both Presbyterians. Though, Finney was actually more popular outside his denomination than within it. The specific differences between the denominations aren’t important to the story we are telling now. The point is—the revival was diverse.⁴⁹

There was, however, a shared belief at the time that evangelicalism had a social responsibility. There was considerable overlap between the Second Great Awakening and the newly emerging temperance movement, women’s rights movement, and anti-slavery movement. These reform movements and the revivals were by no means synonymous. But these movements drew men and women from across denominations, whose religious beliefs compelled them to reform and improve the world.⁵⁰

Charles Finney allowed women to participate and preach at his revivals. When he became president at Oberlin College in Ohio, the school became the first institution of higher education in the world to allow both men and women to attend. Lyman Beecher preached against slavery. In fact, his daughter was Harriett Beecher Stowe, who wrote the famous anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.⁵¹

Because of the Second Great Awakening, between 1820 and 1840, Americans established 40,000 new churches. This was due in part to the growth in population and the expansion into new states and territories, but church growth actually surpassed population growth. Some estimates suggest the number of ministers grew at three times the rate of the population. In 1776, only 17% of

⁴⁶ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 170-72; Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 460; Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 196-201.

⁴⁷ Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 422; Sellers, *The Market Revolution*, 210.

⁴⁸ Alan Taylor, *American Republics*, 222.

⁴⁹ Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 436-37, 441-44; Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution*, 200-201.

⁵⁰ Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 427-28.

⁵¹ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 166-68, 172-75.

Americans were active members in a church. By 1850, that number doubled to 34%. This era was the height of evangelical influence on American culture.⁵²

African Americans were an essential part of the Second Great Awakening. In fact, this was the era when the African American community, both free and enslaved, embraced Christianity in large numbers. Philadelphia had a large free black population. In that city, the community established the first black Methodist, Presbyterian, and northern Baptist congregations. And in 1816, the African Methodist Episcopal Church of Philadelphia became the first independent church, controlled solely by its African American congregation, whereas prior churches had remained part of national denominations. This church was also an important center in the abolitionist movement.⁵³

Evangelical religion, however, was not the only faith in the Nation. In fact, there were several new religious and communal societies popular among Americans at the time.

First came the Shakers. The movement originated in England in the mid-1700s, but the group immigrated to the colonies on the eve of the American Revolution under the leadership of Mother Ann Lee.⁵⁴

The Shakers reached their height of popularity from the mid-1830s to the mid-1850s. They had over 6000 communities, despite some pretty unique beliefs.⁵⁵ Radical for the time, Lee and her followers believed that women as well as men could be religious leaders. Their emotional, dramatic, and physical worship services bewildered outside observers. They literally “shook” for God, which is why others called them “Shakers.” They also lived communally, rather than as separate families. And most radical of all, they taught that sex was the root of all evil and was the original sin in the Garden of Eden.⁵⁶ All members, therefore, married and unmarried, were expected to live in celibacy.

Why were they so popular? Some historians argue that communal and celibate life had a general appeal in antebellum society, because people were reacting to the new labor and sexual expectations. The Market Revolution had disrupted traditional family life. By doing so, it had opened the door to new conceptions of gender, work, family, and sex.⁵⁷

Let’s look at another example – Mormonism. Joseph Smith was the prophet and first president of the Mormon Church, which he founded in 1830. Smith grew up in western New York, a region so prone to religious revivals it was called the “burned over district” because of how many times it caught fire for the Holy Spirit. The region was also on the forefront of the Market Revolution, thanks to the Erie Canal. Smith and his early followers directly felt the changes in religious, social, economic, and familial life. In 1843, he formally introduced to his church the practice of

⁵² Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 270; Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 166.

⁵³ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 182-85.

⁵⁴ Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 24.

⁵⁵ Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 23.

⁵⁶ Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 26, 35-41.

⁵⁷ Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 12-15, 47.

polygamy – where a man takes multiple wives. Unlike Mother Ann Lee, Smith still believed that women should be subservient to their husbands, and he did not allow them a place in church government.⁵⁸

Let's add a third example: John Humphry Noyes, like Joseph Smith, was from upstate New York. Noyes became a Christian during the Second Great Awakening and briefly studied at the Andover and Yale Theological Seminaries in the early 1830s. However, he came to doubt Christian orthodoxy and proposed some innovative beliefs regarding property, sex, and marriage.

He drew followers to himself and established the Oneida Community in New York in 1848. Members of the community held all property in common. No one owned anything as an individual. They did the same with their spouses. Every man was husband to every woman. Every woman wife to every man. They called this practice “complex marriage,” and Noyes even used terms like “free love.”⁵⁹ It sounds like the 1960s, right? But we're talking about the 1840s.

Not all of the new communities were religious. Some simply favored communal living and the redistribution of wealth without religious affiliation.

Robert Owen was an English manufacturer. He came to the US and founded New Harmony, Indiana in 1825. The members of Owen's community, called Owenites, worked together and held all property in common. Owen envisioned the community as a utopian society that would be a model to the world, a cure to the cut-throat individualism and competitiveness of the market economy. It didn't work out. New Harmony lasted only two years, but they inspired 18 similar utopian communities.

Separate from the Owenites were the Brisbane communities, founded by Albert Brisbane in the 1840s. Drawing ideas from French social theory, the Brisbane communities were carefully planned. Everyone would work, but each member's labor was matched to their specific skills. Each member would be an equal owner of the community and would get a share of its profits. Even the architecture, which had large common spaces, was designed to facilitate communal life, rather than individualism. At their height, there were 28 Brisbane communities in the United States.⁶⁰

So, what do we make of these new religions and alternative communities? Collectively, they display the various ways men and women reacted to a rapidly changing and seemingly unstable world. Social and geographic mobility disrupted communities. So, Americans began to experiment with new ways to organize society. Communal life was an antidote to the individualistic market economy. The disruption to family life caused some to reconsider what gender and sex and marriage could look like.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 76-77, 123, 131; Sellers, *The Market Revolution*, 224-25.

⁵⁹ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 302-303; Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 7, 107-10.

⁶⁰ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 292-96.

⁶¹ Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 231-32; Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 218; Taylor, *American Republics*, 211-12.

But we need to be careful here because it's a mistake to think that people only turn to religion when their life is in crisis or if the world is changing around them. That is too simple. After all, evangelicalism was one of the driving forces in social change. Ministers championed the progress and growth of the Nation. Evangelical fervor energized the reform movements. And, as we've talked about in a prior episode, the synthesis of evangelicalism, republicanism, and common sense empowered the common man and fostered democracy in the young nation.⁶²

So, through the twin revolutions, religion and American society influenced each other.

Conclusion

So, there you go. The revolutions in transportation and communication affected the economy, family life, gender roles, and religion. They were a far-reaching and powerful force. I had a teacher who once told me that history is largely the story of unintended consequences. I think there's truth to that. When they built the Erie Canal, they didn't know they would destabilize family life. But that's what happened.

For those who experienced it, the rapidly changing society was thrilling and unsettling, offering new opportunities and disrupting long-standing social norms. But there was no escaping it.

And you know what's crazy? We're not even done yet! There's a second part to this episode. We'll look at the twin revolutions in transportation and communication and consider how they affected slavery, education, popular culture, politics, and Native Americans.

Because, truly, nothing in American society was untouched by this process.

Thanks for listening.

[American History Remix is written and produced by Will Schneider and Lyndsay Smith. Special thanks to our friend Chelsea Gibson for reviewing an early draft of this episode. We truly appreciate her many insightful contributions, questions, and corrections. Of course, any inaccuracies remain our responsibility, but we appreciate Chelsea's generous input! For the latest updates, be sure to follow us on Instagram and Twitter. Check out our website for episode transcripts, recommended reading, and resources for teachers. That's AmericanHistoryRemix.com.]

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⁶² Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 303; Noll, *America's God*, 191-94.

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