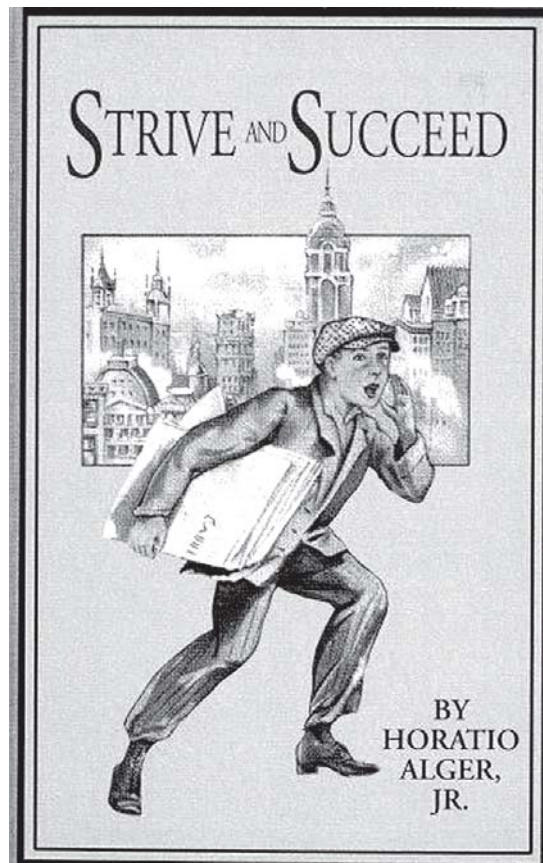


The American Dream and the Gospel of Wealth in Nineteenth-Century America

A Unit of Study for Grades 9–12

NINA GIFFORD
AND
TOM INGERSOLL



National Center for History in the Schools
University of California, Los Angeles

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TEACHER BACKGROUND

I. UNIT OVERVIEW

The American Dream is to achieve economic independence, especially to have a vocation and own a home in order to be happy. The “way to wealth” was outlined in its classic form by Benjamin Franklin and continues to inspire Americans. But the development of industrial society in the nineteenth century led to a competing idea: a “gospel of wealth” that exalted money-making and was used to justify the unprecedented economic power of the captains of industry. Allied with this gospel was the rags-to-riches saga, which featured rising meteorically to the top in contrast to Franklin’s lifelong prescription for industry and frugality. The tension between the limited goal for the average person and the chance of fabulous wealth possible only for a few helps explain why Americans became deeply divided about the great concentrations of wealth and the powers of big business in what Mark Twain called “the gilded age.”



Writer and humorist, Mark Twain, wrote the novel *The Gilded Age* ridiculing Washington D.C. and many of the leading figures of the day

The material in this unit is designed to introduce students to the origin and role of ideas in history, especially their role in the lives of ordinary people in the rapidly industrializing United States of the nineteenth century.

II. UNIT CONTEXT

These lessons concern Americans in the great age of industrialization, from 1850 to 1900. A good time to introduce the material is after covering immigration, the growth and problems of the working class, rise of the labor movement, and the appearance of big business. Having studied real-life cases where the rags to riches myth seems to have been borne out (such as Rockefeller and Carnegie), and others where it seems to have been a cruel joke (the thousands living in tenements), students will be prepared to examine industrial development and will have background for the study of populism and progressivism.

III. UNIT OBJECTIVES

- ◆ To identify common characteristics of the late nineteenth-century success ethic, using examples from biography and literature.
- ◆ To describe the social, economic, and political circumstances that nurtured the success ethic.
- ◆ To identify promoters of the gospel of wealth and explain why they promoted it.
- ◆ To examine the tension between an ethic of individual success and an ideology that justifies the power of the rich.

IV. CORRELATION TO NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR HISTORY

The American Dream and the Gospel of Wealth in Nineteenth-Century American Society provides teaching materials to support the *National Standards for History, Basic Edition* (National Center for History in the Schools, 1996), **Era 6**, “The Development of the Industrial United States (1870–1900). Lessons within this unit assist students in attaining **Standard 1A** and 2C by examining how industrialization made consumer goods more available, increased the standard of living for most Americans, redistributed wealth and explaining how artists and writers portrayed American life during that era.

This unit likewise integrates a number of **Historical Thinking Standards** including: draw upon visual and literacy sources (**Standard 2**, “Historical Comprehension”); examine the influence of ideas (**Standard 3**, “Historical Analysis and Interpretation”); and, support interpretations with historical evidence (**Standard 4**, “Historical Research”).

V. INTRODUCTION TO “THE AMERICAN DREAM AND THE GOSPEL OF WEALTH IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN SOCIETY”

Throughout America’s long preindustrial history, when agriculture was the source of livelihood for most people, the values expressed by Benjamin Franklin were prevalent. Yet Franklin’s way to wealth was as obvious as the road to the market for his readers: use your time wisely, conserve your income, impress creditors with regular habits, and avoid expensive vices. In this simpler age of agriculture and commercial capitalism, although there were rich individuals in America, there were no factories in the cities and no captains of industry with great power. Moreover, Americans like Thomas Jefferson, who knew about conditions in European cities, hoped Americans would not create cities and the dependent classes that inhabited them. They viewed industrial workers without their own land and tools of their trade as subject to their employers and unable to behave as independent citizens in a democracy.

The majority of Americans continued to work and live on farms throughout the nineteenth century, but by 1870 over one fourth lived in towns or cities, and by 1900 that

portion reached 40 percent. This increase was mainly the result of migration from rural America and immigration from rural Europe by people who took the jobs in the new factories. As industries became consolidated into larger and more complex forms, the decisions of a single man or the mysterious play of market forces could alter the condition of thousands of working families. Many of these people lived from day to day, owned no property, and had little or no recourse against the cheapening of their labor by industrialists except to organize. Bloody battles broke out between unions and the hired forces of employers who would deny workers any bargaining power.

The employers were guided by the philosophy of Social Darwinism the idea that progress results from a tooth-and-nail struggle for the survival of the fittest. This idea was not implied in Darwin's theory of evolution, but industrialists used it to rationalize practices of big business that many thought denied the rights of workers. Thus, businessmen also encouraged the myth that anyone could rise from rags to riches, which ignored people trapped in poverty. As an ideology, Social Darwinism also served to sanctify wealth as a sign of special fitness or even of salvation, as implied by some church ministers.

V. LESSON PLANS

Lesson One: Benjamin Franklin and the Virtues of Frugality

Lesson Two: Horatio Alger and the Virtues of Wealth

Lesson Three: The Gospel of Wealth