

Andrew Jackson vs. Henry Clay: Democracy and Development in Antebellum America

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Social Change and the Market Revolution

The political careers of Andrew Jackson and Henry Clay² unfolded within a period of critical social and cultural change that swept the United States in the generation following the American Revolution. By comparison to the world of Jackson and Clay, the world that colonial Americans had lived in seemed, in retrospect, to be stable and circumscribed. Colonial settlements had not extended far beyond the Atlantic seaboard, partly because bad roads and primitive technology limited their ability to expand and partly because both hostile Indians and British imperial policy discouraged migration beyond the Appalachian Mountains. Many white Americans lived on small farms that were gradually getting smaller as a growing population pressed against a fixed supply of land. In the South, a few plantation owners held large tracts of land along the banks of navigable rivers and streams and profited from the labor of growing numbers of African slaves. Inland communities like that one that Andrew Jackson grew up in were populated by yeoman farmers³ and their families, who owned small plots and tilled them with their own hands.

In North and South alike, commerce grew out of the export of products from the fields and forests near navigable waters. Towns grew up where merchants collected local products like flour, rice, tobacco, tar, lumber, hides, salted meat, and codfish and shipped them abroad in exchange for consumer goods from Europe. Throughout the backcountry, however, the high costs of overland transportation put limits on the spread of commerce. In these isolated districts, settlers might take a small surplus to a distant market once a year or so but otherwise produced what they needed at home or bartered with their neighbors. This economy grew steadily in the colonial period but not so rapidly that social stability was overturned.

In many colonial communities, a few families had managed to control the best lands or other economic resources in the early days of settlement and had managed to stay on top of local society for several generations. Whether they were southern slaveholders or simply the most prosperous farmers and merchants in the northern colonies, well-established colonists formed a gentry or upper class that dominated local society. These families frequently intermarried with one another and used their wealth and educational advantages to build a reputation for culture, refinement, and public service. Their ranks included the most distinguished lawyers, doctors, and ministers in the colonies, as well as the most prominent merchants and landowners, and they

¹ Unless otherwise noted, your history teacher wrote the footnotes.

² Jackson, the seventh president, and Clay, a long-time Representative and Senator whose own presidential ambitions were frustrated—in 1832 by Jackson—were the founders of the modern Democratic Party and the Whig Party, respectively. They had different ideas about politics, power, and the economy.

³ Yeoman farmer: a farmer who owns his own, usually small, farm.

provided services for their neighbors in return for deference, respect, and political office. In most colonies, leadership by prominent local gentlemen like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Hancock, or John Adams had been essential to the success of the American Revolution.

Like all societies, colonial America experienced its own dynamics of evolution and change, even within its seemingly stable and elitist framework. Change began to accelerate in the 1790s, however, and accelerated further after 1815. Cultural and political developments from the American Revolution had a significant impact, but the most powerful transformations began in the US economy. The success of the industrial revolution in Great Britain had inspired American imitators, and restrictive imperial economic policies⁴ no longer stood in their way. Ambitious entrepreneurs launched successful experiments in factory production, especially of cotton cloth. Canals reached into the interior and invited farmers to produce more crops for sale to urban and foreign markets. The invention of the steam boat and later the railroad created even more opportunities for cheaper transportation and gave a powerful boost to the culture of cotton and use of slave labor. Businessmen eagerly promoted the spread of banks and paper money to finance the new developments, and reformers created public schools and other educational institutions⁵ to enable citizens to take full advantage of them. Historians have come to call this period of increased commercial activity the “Market Revolution.”⁶

In fact, the Market Revolution was a specific instance of what economists call “economic development,” referring to changes in society that bring more sophisticated technology, faster transportation and communication, more efficient business institutions, and a better-educated workforce to the processes of economic production. Properly speaking, economic development not only results in growth, or a higher level of raw economic output, but also in the production of more sophisticated goods and services than before.

The prospect of economic development held momentous consequences for newly independent Americans. Abundant new chances for wealth and opportunity offered the possibility of higher standards of living for consumers and producers alike. For some Americans, the stable and deferential villages of the eighteenth century had been stifling traps. Limited economic opportunities kept a few families in security at the top, but a significant number of young people found it harder and harder to improve themselves or even to replicate the social and economic status of their parents. For these frustrated citizens, the coming of the Market Revolution and the opening of western lands could offer the chance to cross the mountains for a fresh start, to move to town and learn a remunerative⁷ trade, or to cultivate a new crop and ship a profitable surplus to a previously unattainable market. In turn, these new opportunities could upset the frozen social and political hierarchies of the colonial era, giving newly prosperous citizens a chance to claim their own share of social recognition, to win public

⁴ Such as Navigation Acts or the Townshend Acts, which had limited colonial commerce before the Revolution.

⁵ Yea!

⁶ It would be more accurate to say that some historians call this the “Market Revolution.” Others—for example, Daniel Walker Howe, the author of *What Hath God Wrought*—think that phrase implies a greater change than in fact took place, and prefer the terms “Transport” or “Communications” Revolution—or even no over-arching term at all.

⁷ A good word for you to look up...

office perhaps, and to claim the equality with established families that the American Revolution had supposedly promised to everyone.

More ominously, however, the Market Revolution also presented dangers for Americans, threatening economic bust as well as boom and fostering the growth of large enterprises that seemed to threaten far more harm to some citizens than they promised in rewards. In many ways, the conflict between Andrew Jackson and Henry Clay reflected this tension between the perceived costs and benefits of economic development.

The specific opportunities offered by the Market Revolution varied considerably from region to region and between the different levels of society. Western New York, for example, had not been settled by white Americans for more than about a generation before it felt the impact of the Erie Canal, the largest and most significant transportation project of the era. Begun by the state government in 1817, the canal connected the Great Lakes to the Hudson River at Albany in 1823 and thereby funneled all the products of the upper Midwest down to New York harbor. Even before completion, farmers along the path of the canal were expanding their production of wheat, which millers in towns like Rochester and Utica would grind into flour and ship to eastern customers. Toll revenues on the canal grew so large that the project became self-financing, with income from the eastern portions paying for construction of the unfinished segments to the west. The expansion of western trade turned New York City into the urban powerhouse of the nation and enabled it to replace Philadelphia as America's largest city.⁸ A subsidiary string of smaller towns grew up along the canal itself, each one creating new opportunities for lawyers, ministers, storekeepers, schoolmasters, bookkeepers, newspaper editors, clerks, construction workers, and roustabouts.⁹

The Erie Canal unquestionably brought prosperity to adjacent communities. It also brought together people who might otherwise have preferred to remain apart, such as churchgoing townspeople with strong roots in the culture of Puritan New England, and rowdier, hard-drinking canal workers who didn't much care for the strait-laced moral conventions of their employers. It likewise brought the circulation of new books, newspapers, and magazines to affluent families along the way and inspired them to replicate the idealized portraits of genteel respectability they found there. It loosened apprentices and journeymen from the immediate supervision of their masters, but it did not erase the masters' nagging conviction they were responsible for the conduct of their workers.

Intangibly, the Canal's manifest success fostered a belief among propertied families along its banks that all things were possible, that the world could be improved, that wicked people could become good, and that good people could become perfect.¹⁰ Beginning in the late 1820s and climaxing in a massive revival in Rochester in 1831, the middle and upper classes of western New York became seized with religious fervor in a startling series of evangelical meetings led by the handsome professional revivalist Charles Grandison Finney. The middle- and upper-class Protestant women of places like Rochester took the lead in transforming their children, their husbands, and their churches, and their husbands continued their work by pressing for the

⁸ New York also replaced Philadelphia as the financial capital of the country. A canal built in the 1820s and that has fallen into disuse today is the reason why Wall Street is the center of modern American finance and banking.

⁹ Roustabout: an unskilled laborer

¹⁰ This notion of reform, improvement, and "perfectibility" will soon be the subject of a lesson or two in class.

reformation of the unruly employees who made the mill wheels turn. The workers who joined churches and abandoned their licentious behavior found favor with their employers and moved up the economic ladder. Those who refused these changes usually kept on moving, and soon western New York had become famous as a center for moral reform and perfectionist theology. Admirers of the moral as well as the economic effects of the Market Revolution found the “burnt-over district” of western New York a model for the transformation of the whole nation. Later in the 1830s, when it came time for citizens to sort themselves out into political parties, the voters of western New York turned overwhelmingly to Henry Clay and the Whigs.

Matters turned out differently in the little coastal town of Lynn, Massachusetts. The inhabitants of Lynn had long been in the habit of making shoes for sale in Boston and other nearby markets, particularly during winter evenings when farming was impossible. After 1814, when local merchants acquired enough capital to form their own bank,¹¹ and when transportation networks broadened to take in a wider circle of customers, the organization of shoemaking changed significantly. Local capitalists would buy up large quantities of hides or other raw materials and pay a skilled worker to cut them up into shoe parts. They distributed the pieces to local men, women, and children, each of whom would specialize in stitching together a different component. The completed shoes could then be shipped in barrels by steamboat, canal boat, and wagon train to customers all over America and sold for much lower prices than the cost of a custom-made shoe prepared by a skilled local artisan. By 1837, Lynn manufacturers “sold one pair of shoes for every 2.5 white females (the great bulk of the customers were white) in the United States.”¹² In the process, Lynn had become an important industrial center. Its manufacturers became quite wealthy; work was created for Boston merchants, bankers, ship owners, and their employees; full-time shoe workers became important customers for the food crops of local farmers; and consumers all over the country gained the opportunity to become decently shod at lower prices.

At the same time, almost no one in Lynn knew how to make a whole shoe anymore. Control of the business had shifted from the individual artisan in his shop to the merchant capitalist who owned the leather and paid the wages. A community of independent artisans in command of their own families and workshops had become a society of bosses and lifelong wage earners. Many of the new workers were women and children who no doubt enjoyed the opportunity to earn their own wages and thus gain a little autonomy from husbands and fathers. These workers had relatively low skills, however, and their piecework¹³ wages were also low. If they objected or went on strike, they could easily be replaced. Both in Lynn and out in the hinterland, moreover, the change could leave skilled adult male shoemakers stranded. A few could adapt to the luxury market for customers who could still afford to pay hand-made prices, but many were left with ruined businesses, irrelevant skills, diminished self-respect, and perhaps most galling of all, enfeebled authority over their wives and children. For them, the Market Revolution brought a loss of independence, a decline in status, and a potential receptivity to political movements that

¹¹ In this context, “capital” means “money.”

¹² Alan Dawley, *Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), 26. [Note in source.]

¹³ Piecework: pay by production. Thus, Lynn workers were paid by the shoe, not by the hour.

could promise them a restoration of both, at least on the symbolic level. In the heyday of Whig and Democratic rivalry, Lynn voters thus gave their support to the followers of Andrew Jackson.

Far away from Massachusetts and New York, farmers in the southeastern states faced very different conditions from the shoemakers of Lynn and the millers of Rochester. Soil and climate gave southerners an advantage in the production of crops that would not grow in Europe or the North, and colonists had learned long before that products like tobacco and rice could grow there very profitably with the labor of slaves. The success of English textile mills had produced a tremendous demand for new sources of fiber, and a hardy, upland variety of the cotton plant grew well in a broad crescent of territory that stretched from the North Carolina-Virginia border southwestward to the Mississippi River and beyond. Unfortunately for growers, no one knew how to separate upland cotton's lint from its seeds. In 1793, when a Connecticut tutor named Eli Whitney devised an engine or gin to perform this job quickly and cheaply, the path was opened for a southern version of the Market Revolution.

In the decade following 1790, southern production of cotton increased from 3,000 bales annually to 73,000. Farmers raced to fling the seeds into ground and reap the bounty of high prices and ample harvests. Georgians stepped up their demands for Indian land sales, and back-country farmers cherished sudden aspirations to planter status. All they needed were slaves to perform the backbreaking labor of plowing, planting, weeding, and picking the crop, but plenty of workers were available in the old and crowded plantations of the Chesapeake Bay region. Under the new U.S. Constitution, moreover, Congress had no power to interfere with the international slave trade until 1807, and eager slavers kept the sea-lanes of the notorious Middle Passage busy with their infamous traffic.

Whitney's invention therefore touched off a feverish search for cotton lands and cotton hands. Native Americans were compelled to supply the former, and Africans and African Americans, the latter. One of the primary incentives for General Andrew Jackson's later Indian conquests was the Cotton Kingdom's appetite for new territories. The cotton boom likewise wrenched apart thousands of black families as slave traders put together shipments of prime field hands for purchasers in the southwest. Even white families mourned to see their loved ones depart for the fever-ridden cotton frontier. As one North Carolinian begged in an 1839 letter to his brother in Alabama, "This letter is to say to you leave Mobile and come home. Once more I say come home, your home is here if you have a home in this world. But sir for me to write and fear that I am writing to a dead man and that man my brother." Farm wives wept especially bitter but helpless tears at their husbands' decisions to move their families to the wilderness.

The cotton frontier continued to grow as the English and American textile industry expanded, but wild swings of the business cycle imposed a boom-and-bust rhythm on the plantation South that was as unfamiliar as it was frightening to the first generation of participants. One particularly dramatic collapse came in 1819, when a spectacular rise in the price of cotton and cotton lands was followed by a disastrous collapse. William Harris, a small planter of Madison County, Alabama, left a vivid record of what the Panic of 1819 meant to him in a series of letters to his brother. Harris had moved from Virginia to Madison County in 1819 and had borrowed the enormous sum of \$26,000 to purchase a plantation. Almost immediately, cotton prices slumped, the harvest failed, and Harris was lucky to sell his land for less than half of what he paid. The experience devastated his self-esteem. "The embarrassment of mind I have suffered

from some time...,” he wrote his brother, “causes reflection which almost unmans me, those *feelings* I hope you never may experience.... If I had never left Virginia, I might perhaps been better off... and it grieves me to think that I have, perhaps, to go still farther.” Harris was not mistaken. Still in debt after the loss of his land, he managed to start again on a rented farm, but he never found a permanent place in Madison County. In 1825, he moved again to seek elusive success in Tennessee. Citizens who remained in Madison County developed the unshakable conviction that a sinister coalition of merchants, bankers, speculators, and political insiders they called “the royal party” had conspired to bring on the panic or at least to exploit it to aggrandize themselves at the expense of innocent and hardworking pioneers.¹⁴ For the remainder of the antebellum period, they expressed their convictions in solid support for the Jacksonian Democratic Party.

Like William Harris and his brother, ordinary Americans of the early nineteenth century became painfully aware that the Market Revolution held special dangers as well as opportunities. A farmer’s experiment in market agriculture might fail, leading to the loss of his land and treasured independence. Mass production might destroy the jobs of skilled artisans. In either case, the loss of a farm or workshop could lead to a perceived loss of equality and a social descent into the ranks of permanent wage laborers. The New England farmers’ daughters who stitched shoes in Lynn or eagerly took positions in the region’s new textile mills may have welcomed the freedom that a regular pay envelope brought them. Men who were brought up to think of independence, property ownership, and manliness as part of an inseparable package, however, were less likely to be satisfied by the new arrangements. A more powerful business cycle, moreover, would create depressions and recessions that could bring bankruptcy and ruin to thousands of families through no fault of their own, while the rise of powerful corporations could overwhelm the political strength of ordinary voters. Voting Americans therefore experienced the changes of the Market Revolution with a mixture of pleasure and anxiety, and they passed along their ambivalence to their politically elected representatives.

¹⁴ This paragraph contains more than a few reminders of our own economic plight. Writing in 2011, one can identify the problems caused by a real estate bubble and the willingness to blame bankers and speculators for our current problems. Of course, just because you have a conspiracy theory doesn’t mean it is necessarily wrong....