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NEW YORK CITY IN THE GILDED AGE

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Gilded Age New York - Part I.

Athens, Rome and Florence had their Golden Ages, but in referring to America and especially New York City in the late 19th century, with all of its burgeoning wealth and national dominance, Mark Twain slyly termed it the Gilded Age, to make the point that the golden, splendiferous surface only masked a vast underlying core of much more disturbing socio-political and economic realities.

The exponential growth in wealth of New York City's richest families in the "Gilded Age" was reflected in their aspirations to measure up to and even to outdo European high culture. As private wealth continued to move ever further uptown in NYC, we can trace that process in the built environment: the parks and squares, the mansions, the hotels, and the palatial public buildings that all were visual markers of the Gilded Age. It was the era of New York's most opulent private mansions, and of grandiose public buildings in the eclectic Beaux Arts style. We can see this world reflected as well in the work of artists such as architects Stanford White and Henry Hardenbergh, sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens, and painters William Merritt Chase and the New York Impressionists. It is a world both celebrated and critiqued in the fiction of Edith Wharton, and the complex ruminations of Henry James in *The American Scene*. And pointing beyond both the Gilded Age mansions on 5th Avenue and the slums of the Lower East Side, the new skyscrapers of lower Manhattan heralded the future of modernist New York.

Course Objectives:

Our objective this evening is to take a fresh look at the so-called Gilded Age, extending from the end of the Civil War era through the first decade of the 20th century. We'll explore how the roots of Gilded Age economics and politics lay in the investments and monopolies that grew in the post Civil War era, and in the political configurations of uptown Republican Reformers aligned with Lincoln's national agenda, and the downtown Democrat Tammany Hall that aligned with the interests of new immigrant urban populations. We survey the predominance of Beaux Arts architecture in the period, from the chateaux and palazzi of the super-rich, to the grand public monuments of Gilded Age civic culture. We look at how the genteel neighborhoods favored by old and new moneyed classes moved progressively northward, and discuss how the social mores of the wealthy were represented in the fictional worlds of Henry James and Edith Wharton. James' essays in *The American Scene* (1907) provide a more explicit insight into how a refined, Europeanized American intellectual viewed the new realities of early 20th century NYC: its fashionable hotels and restaurants, its new vertical architecture, and the rushing, blaring energy of its modernist street life.

Recommended Reading and Viewing for NY's Gilded Age:

Fiction:

Henry James, *Washington Square*, 1880. [set in mid-19th century NYC]
 Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 1920. [set in the 1870's]
 Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 1905. [set in the 1890's]
 Edith Wharton, *Old New York/ Four Novellas*, 1924.
 William Dean Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, 1890.
 Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward: 2000-1887*, 1888.

Film:

The Heiress, directed by William Wyler, 1949.
Washington Square, directed by Agnieszka Holland, 1997.
The Age of Innocence, directed by Martin Scorsese, 1993.
The House of Mirth, directed by Terrence Davies, 2000.

Memoir/ Observation/Exposition:

- Henry James, *The American Scene*, 1907. Esp. chaps. 2 & 3.
 Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams*, 1907 [privately printed]; 1918.
 Andrew Carnegie, "The Gospel of Wealth," 1889.
 Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, 1899.
 Ward McAllister, *Society As I Have Found It*, 1890.
 James McCabe, *Lights and Shadows of New York Life; or, The Sights and Sensations of the Great City*, 1872.
 Frederick Van Wyck, *Recollections of an Old New Yorker*, 1932.

Secondary Literature/ Scholarship:

- Esther Crain, *The Gilded Age in New York, 1870-1910*, 2016.
 M. H. Dunlop, *Gilded City: Scandal and Sensation in Turn-of-the-Century New York*, 2000.
 Eric Homberger, *Mrs. Astor's New York: Money and Social Power in a Gilded Age*, 2002.
 Justin Kaplan, *When the Astors Owned New York: Blue Bloods and Grand Hotels in a Gilded Age*, 2006.
 M. Christine Boyer, *Manhattan Manners: Architecture and Style, 1850-1900*, 1985.
 T.J. Stiles, *The First Tycoon/ The Epic Life of Cornelius Vanderbilt*, 2010.
 Robert Stern, Gregory Gilmartin, & John Massengale, *New York 1900: Metropolitan Architecture and Urbanism, 1890-1915*, 1983.
 Sean Dennis Cashman, *America in the Gilded Age/ From the Death of Lincoln to the Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*, 3rd edition, 1993.
 Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*, 1982.
 H. Wayne Morgan, editor, *The Gilded Age/ A Reappraisal*, 1963.
 Lankevich, George. *New York City: A Short History*. NYU Press, revised ed., 2002. Chap. 4 ("Building a Modern City") and Chap. 5 ("The Age of the Bosses").
 Hamill, Pete. *Downtown: My Manhattan*, 2004. Chap. 7 ("The Fifth Avenue").

Part II: How the Other Half Lived

Course Description:

Turn of the century NYC was renowned for the 5th Avenue mansions of "the 400" and for the grandiose Beaux Arts public buildings of New York's high culture. But there was another New York, vastly removed from these refined and rarified zones; it was the world of "How the Other Half Lives," a teeming world of immigrants and tenements concentrated in New York's Lower East Side, a world famously exposed by the crusading journalist/ reformer and Danish immigrant Jacob Riis, whose work laid much of the groundwork for the Progressive Era policies of social reform. It is also a world reflected in the literary work of socially conscientious writers such as Stephen Crane or the pioneering Yiddish writer Abraham Cahan.

Course Learning Objectives:

This afternoon we explore the Other New York: during the same years as the height of the Gilded Age, from 1890- 1910, another NYC existed, famously denominated by crusading reformer Jacob Riis as "How the Other Half Lives." It was a reality brought into being by the great waves of immigration passing through Ellis Island, dramatically changing the demographics of NYC at the turn of the century. We will take a fresh look at Riis' exposé photographs, and at his writings, and consider the long-range impact of his work, beginning with Lawrence Veiller's Tenement House Exhibition of 1899. But while reforms began to be instituted, and workers in various industries -- notably the garment industry -- began to unionize and to raise issues of occupational safety, the era still witness two of the worst disasters in NYC history: the burning and sinking of the General Slocum in the East River (1904) and the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire (1911), both a result of criminal negligence and the absence of appropriate safety regulations. Along with the documented history, we will also spend some time with the representation of the Lower East Side in literature and film, in works by Stephen crane and Abraham Cahan. We will also consider the often-neglected "invisible" middle class population of NYC during this same period so often defined by the polarity of the Gilded 400 and its polar opposite, the "Other Half."

Recommended Reading and Viewing:

- Lankevich, George. *New York City: A Short History*. New York University Press, revised ed., 2002. Chap. 6 ("America's First Metropolis").
- Thomas Bender, *Unfinished City: New York and the Metropolitan Idea*. New York University Press, 2002. Chap. 2, "Brooklyn Bridge."
- Eric Homberger, *New York City: A Cultural History*. Interlink Publishing 2008. Chap. 3, "The Immigrants' City."
- Pete Hamill, *Downtown: My Manhattan*. Little, Brown and Company, 2004. Chap. 8, "On the Rialto."
- Stephen Crane, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets [1893] and Selected Stories*, ed. Alfred Kazin. Signet Classics. New revised edition 2006.
- Abraham Cahan, *Yekl [1896] and the Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories of the New York Ghetto* Dover Publications, Inc., 1970.
- Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*. 1890.
- E. L. Doctorow, *Ragtime*, Random House, Inc., 2007.
- Film:
- Ric Burns' *New York*, part 3 (Jacob Riis episode) and part 4 (immigration, and the Triangle fire episodes).
- Joan Micklin Silver's *Hester Street* (1975), based on Cahan's *Yekl*.
- Coppola's *Godfather, Part II* (1974), the Little Italy flashback sequences.

NEWS RELEASE

1983



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THE BUILDING OF THE BROOKLYN BRIDGE:
AN AMERICAN ROMANCE

When the 5,989-foot Brooklyn Bridge opened to the public on May 24, 1883, it was the world's largest, costliest suspension bridge: an unprecedented engineering marvel, which was popularly acclaimed as the "Eighth Wonder of the World." Since that time, according to David McCullough, author of The Great Bridge, it has been the subject of more paintings, lithographs, etchings and photographs than any other American structure, and has figured prominently in the works of poets, playwrights and novelists.

Behind this magnificent structure, however, lies an intriguing American romance. It is the story of the daring, struggle and self-sacrifice of the people who conceived and built the Brooklyn Bridge: its designer, John A. Roebling; his son Washington, the chief engineer; Emily Roebling, Washington's remarkable wife, without whom the stricken engineer could not have completed what was to be his life's work. The building of the bridge is the story of the people of New York: officials with the vision to accept John Roebling's

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HONORABLE HOWARD GOLDEN
BOROUGH PRESIDENT OF BROOKLYN

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plan for a seemingly impossible achievement; other officials, like the infamous Boss Tweed, who sought to corrupt the project; the laborers, including thousands of newly arrived immigrants, who toiled for 14 long years, sometimes sacrificing their health or even their lives in the process.

Highlights of the history of the Brooklyn Bridge's construction:

- * John A. Roebling, a visionary German-born engineer, first proposed an East River suspension bridge in 1857. With his plan finally accepted and his design completed, he was to die of tetanus in 1867 after a freak accident on the waterfront.

- * His son Washington took over the building of the bridge at age 32. He completed his monumental task after 14 years, some 12 of which he spent as an invalid, directing construction from the window of his sickroom in Brooklyn Heights.

- * Washington Roebling was a victim of "caisson disease," so called because it attacked workers in the caissons, compartments filled with compressed air which allowed for excavation of the river bed and served as foundations for the bridge's twin gothic-arched towers. Known today as the "bends," the disease caused excruciating pain, paralysis and sometimes death. Many of the workers who toiled for \$2 a day in the dank atmosphere of the caissons were felled by the disease.

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- * Emily Roebling became her husband's chief aide during construction, interpreting his plans and relaying instructions to the site engineers.

- * Unforeseen setbacks, including political chicanery, faulty material, bad weather, equipment breakdowns and widespread public skepticism all plagued the builders of the bridge, delaying completion years beyond original projections.

- * After 14 years of construction, the bridge officially opened on May 24, 1883, at a cost of \$15 million and some 20 lives. Known as "People's Day," the opening date was declared a holiday on both sides of the river, and was marked by a parade led by President Chester A. Arthur, ceremonial orations and a stunning fireworks display set off from the bridge.

Today, nearly 100 years later, the Brooklyn Bridge still inspires awe and continues to present cause for celebration of the grandeur and human vision and will that it embodies.

#

T O
BROOKLYN BRIDGE

How many dawns, chill from his rippling rest
The seagull's wings shall dip and pivot him,
Shedding white rings of tumult, building high
Over the chained bay waters Liberty —

Then, with inviolate curve, forsake our eyes
As apparitional as sails that cross
Some page of figures to be filed away;
— Till elevators drop us from our day . . .

I think of cinemas, panoramic sleights
With multitudes bent toward some flashing scene
Never disclosed, but hastened to again,
Foretold to other eyes on the same screen;

And Thee, across the harbor, silver-paced
As though the sun took step of thee, yet left
Some motion ever-unspent in thy stride,—
Implicitly thy freedom staying thee!

Out of some subway scuttle, cell or loft
A bedlamite speeds to thy parapets,
Tilting there momentarily, shrill-shirt ballooning,
A jest falls from the speechless caravan.

Down Wall, from girder into street noon leaks,
A rip-tooth of the sky's acetylene;
All afternoon the cloud-flown derricks turn . . .
Thy cables breathe the North Atlantic still.

And obscure as that heaven of the Jews,
Thy guerdon . . . Accolade thou dost bestow
Of anonymity time cannot raise:
Vibrant reprieve and pardon thou dost show.

O harp and altar, of the fury fused,
(How could mere toil align thy choiring strings!)
Terrific threshold of the prophet's pledge,
Prayer of pariah, and the lover's cry,—

Again the traffic lights that skim thy swift
Unfractioned idiom, immaculate sigh of stars,
Beading thy path—condense eternity;
And we have seen night lifted in thine arms.

Under thy shadow by the piers I waited;
Only in darkness is thy shadow clear.
The City's fiery parcels all undone,
Already snow submerges an iron year . . .

O Sleepless as the river under thee,
Vaulting the sea, the prairie's dreaming sod,
Unto us lowliest sometime sweep, descend
And of the curvship lend a myth to God.



Statue of Liberty National Monument

Emma Lazarus' Famous Poem

A poem by Emma Lazarus is graven on a tablet within the pedestal on which the statue stands.

The New Colossus

*Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*