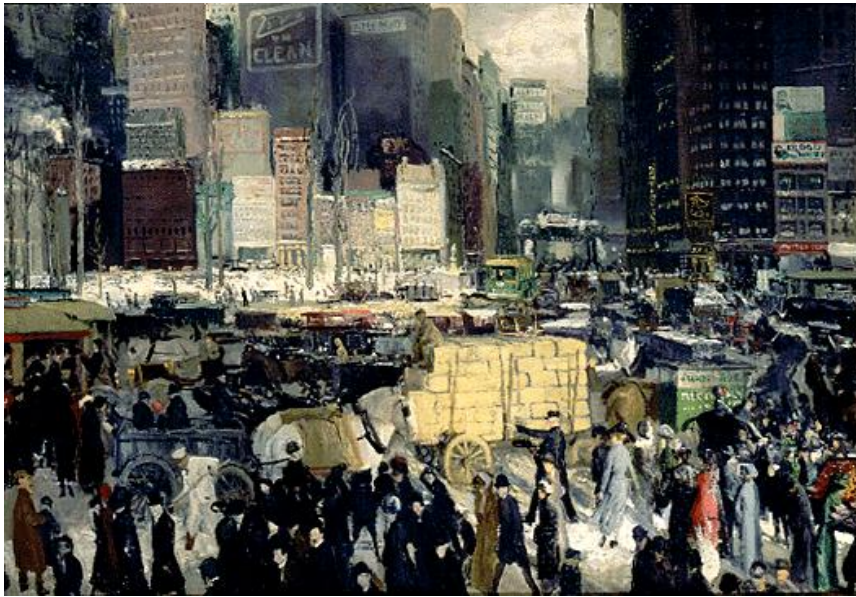


# “Something to Marvel At”: Urban Life in America, 1865 - 1920

## An Online Professional Development Seminar

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George Bellows, *New York*, oil on canvas, 1911

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Eastern Region Program,  
coordinated by Waynesburg University.

**AMERICA** *in* **CLASS**<sup>®</sup>

*from the* National Humanities Center

## GOALS

- To deepen understanding of the urban experience in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America
- To provide fresh primary resources for use with students
- To introduce material from online collections of the Library of Congress and National Humanities Center
- To offer discussion strategies that promote close textual analysis

## UNDERSTANDING

Between 1865 and 1920, the new scale and capability of technologies in the workplace, in transportation, and in everyday living transformed cities, producing both excitement and suffering, and ultimately calling forth new ideas about planning and government.

## FROM THE FORUM

### Challenges, Issues, Questions

- The major challenges I face when teaching about urban life is the inability of the students to understand the struggles of urban dwellers.
- Urban issues: poverty, sanitation, the plight of poor children, race, living conditions, class, gender.
- I would love to see some images of cities before, during, and after this period to get the kids to compare them.
- This period is difficult for students to understand because there was so much going on: urbanization, industrialization, reform, immigration, labor strife, the rise of the corporation. Are there themes that can bring order to these various topics?

## FROM THE FORUM

### Challenges, Issues, Questions

- How did this period create a better life in America for people of many races and classes?
- How did immigration affect the development of cities, including infrastructure, during this period?
- How did class manifest itself in cities?
- Did urban "gang" violence in the U.S. begin during this period?
- How did American cities differ from European cities?
- How dirty were American cities?
- Did upper- and lower-class folk mix and mingle?



## Henry Binford

Professor of History, Northwestern University

National Humanities Center Fellow, 1990-91

*The First Suburbs: Residential Communities  
on the Boston Periphery, 1815-1860*  
(1988)

## Urban Development After the Civil War

### What was NOT new in 1865:

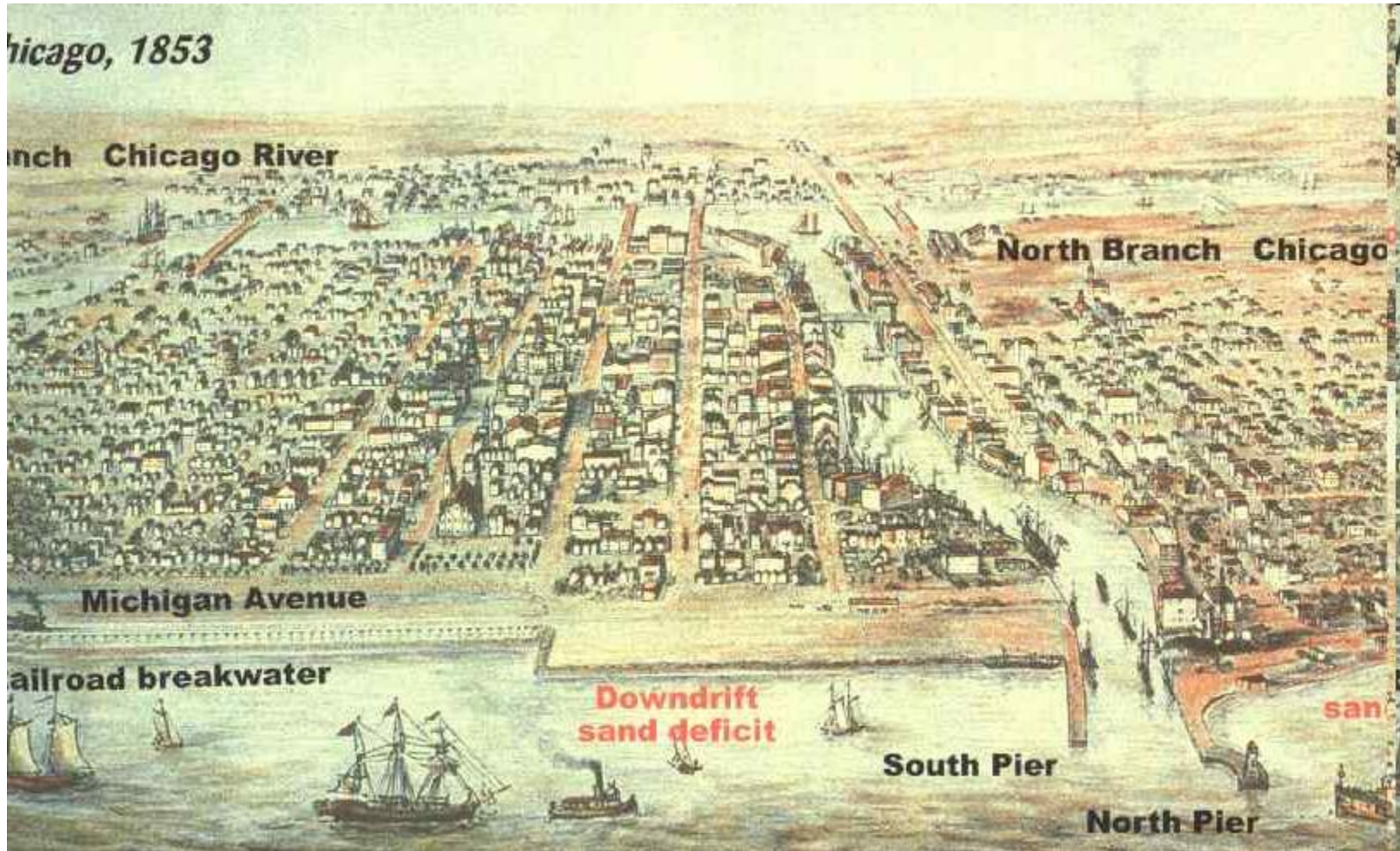
- Crowds
- Factory work
- Poverty, dirt, crime and gangs
- Idea of urban excitement (“bright lights”) versus rural dullness and dark nights
- Cities as places of progress, opportunity, liberty and danger

## What WAS new after 1865:

- Huge and sudden changes in the population size of cities and in the extent of their physical sprawl.
- Big changes in the nature of work, putting thousands into jobs in dangerous and insecure factories and expanding clerical and managerial jobs as well.
- Radically increased diversity in the biggest cities, in terms of nationality, race, and religion.
- The introduction of new municipal and state regulatory powers regarding housing, planning, and sanitation.
- The introduction of new forms of public entertainment, including amusement parks and movie houses, that helped to break down gender and class divisions.



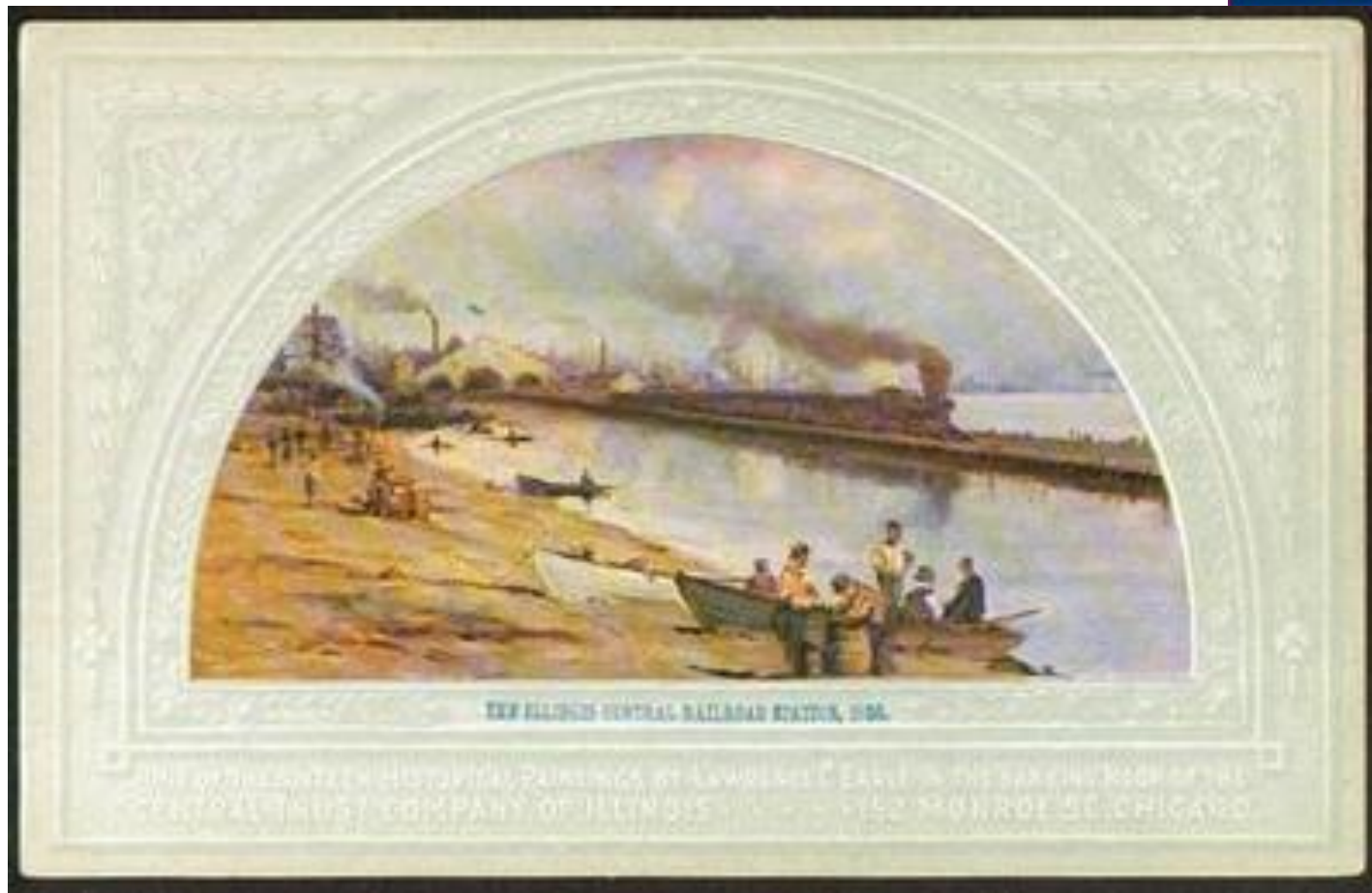
# Urban Life in America, 1865-1920



Chicago, 1853

## Discussion Question

How would you describe Chicago in the 1850s?



Chicago  
1869

## Discussion Question

What does this image tell us about Chicago in 1869?



Lower Manhattan, circa. 1885

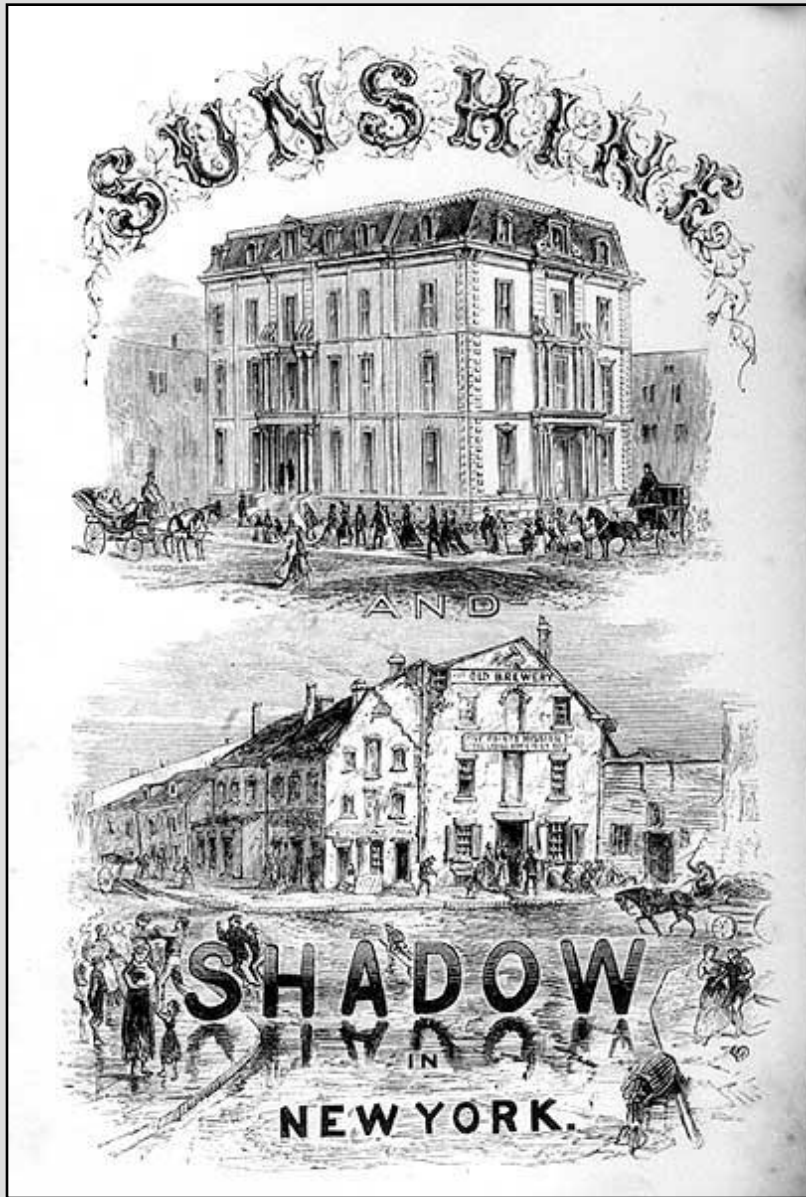
## Discussion Question

How would you describe lower Manhattan in the 1880s?

# Urban Life in America, 1865-1920

<u>Ranked by 1925 size:</u>	<u>1850</u>	<u>1900</u>	<u>1925</u>
New York City	682	4242	7774
London	2320	6480	7742
Tokyo	567	1497	5300
Paris	1314	3330	4800
Berlin	446	2424	4013
Chicago	30	1699	3564
Buenos Aires	76	806	2410
Osaka	300	931	2219
Philadelphia	340	1294	2085
Vienna	426	1662	1862
Boston	202	1075	1773
Moscow	373	1120	1764

# Urban Life in America, 1865-1920



Fifth Avenue

## Discussion Question

What does this image suggest about the way cities were perceived as they began to grow after the Civil War?

Five Points

Title page, *Sunshine and Shadow*, 1868

## Horatio Alger, *Ragged Dick, or, Street Life in New York*, 1868 (Ch. 2)

When Dick had got through with his last customer the City Hall clock indicated eight o'clock. He had been up an hour, and hard at work, and naturally began to think of breakfast. He went up to the head of Spruce Street, and turned into Nassau. Two blocks further, and he reached Ann Street. On this street was a small, cheap restaurant, where for five cents Dick could get a cup of coffee, and for ten cents more, a plate of beefsteak with a plate of bread thrown in. These Dick ordered, and sat down at a table.

It was a small apartment with a few plain tables.

### Discussion Questions

How is Dick characterized in this passage?

How is New York characterized?

## Horatio Alger, *Ragged Dick, or, Street Life in New York*, 1868 (Ch. 2)

Dick had scarcely been served when he espied a boy about his own size standing at the door, looking wistfully into the restaurant. This was Johnny Nolan, a boy of fourteen, who was engaged in the same profession as Ragged Dick. His wardrobe was in very much the same condition as Dick's.

“Had your breakfast, Johnny?” inquired Dick, cutting off a piece of steak.

“No.”

“Come in, then. Here's room for you.”

“I ain't got no money,” said Johnny, looking a little enviously at his more fortunate friend.

...

“Come in. I'll stand treat this morning.”

Johnny Nolan was nowise slow to accept this invitation, and was soon seated beside Dick.

“What'll you have, Johnny?”

“Same as you.”

“Cup o' coffee and beefsteak,” ordered Dick.

These were promptly brought, and Johnny attacked them vigorously.

### Discussion Question

What does this passage tell us about Dick, about what it takes to survive in the city ?



## Monongahela Valley

### Discussion Questions

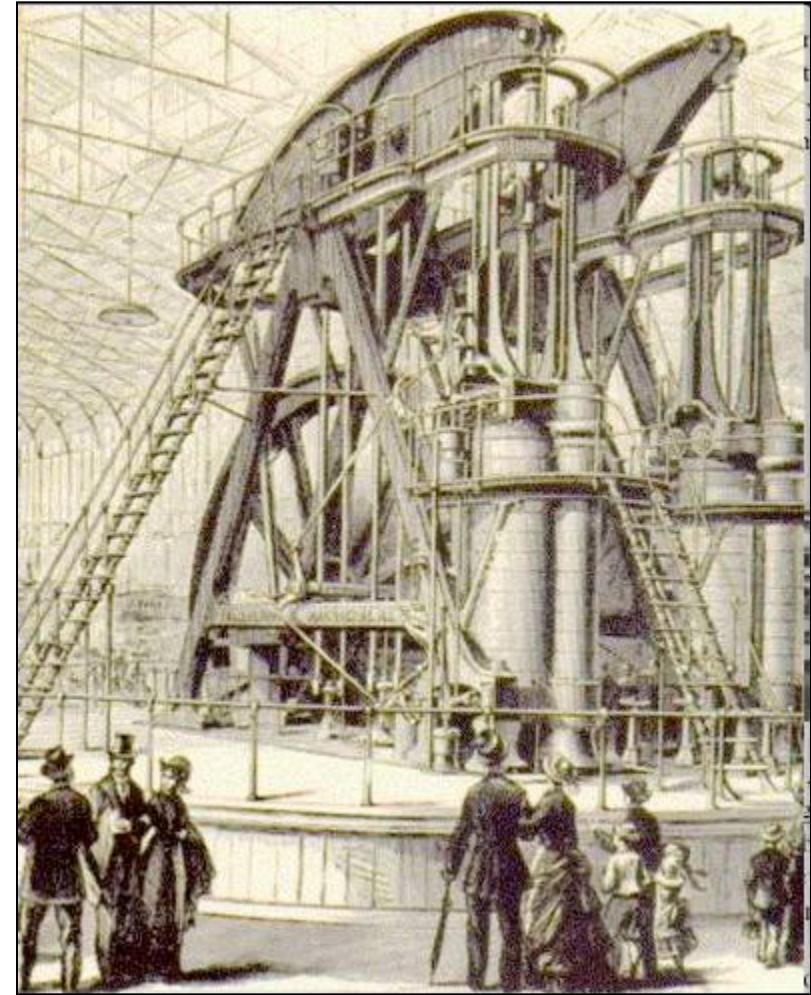
How do these images represent the Second Industrial Revolution?  
How do they compare to the earlier urban landscapes we viewed?





New York City, 1905

# Urban Life in America, 1865-1920

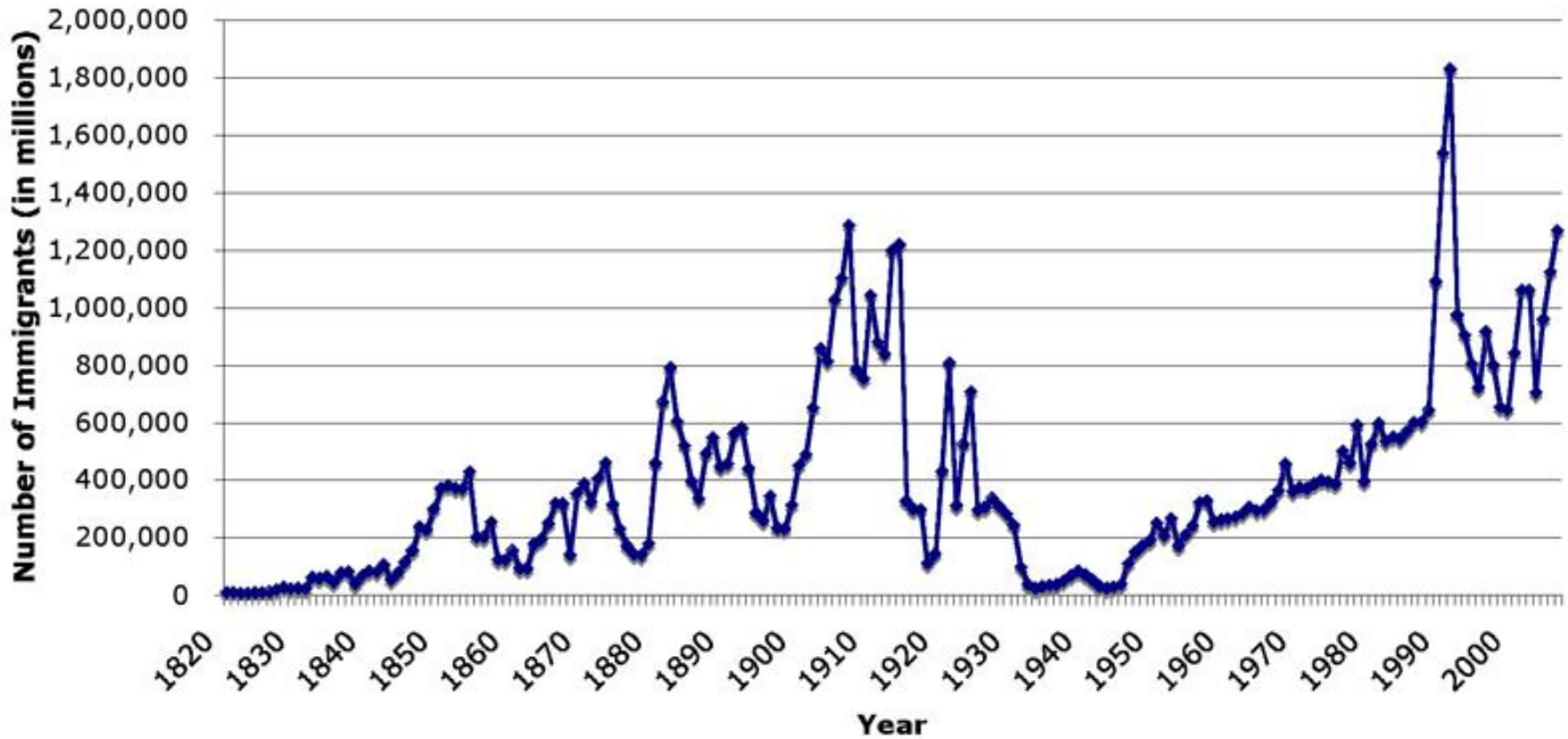


**The Corliss Steam Engine, 1876**  
1,400 horsepower, 40 feet tall, 200+ tons

**Discussion Question:** What does the Corliss Engine suggest about the period's attitude toward technology?

# Immigration to the United States, 1820-2006

Immigration to the US, 1820-2006



## Discussion Questions

How might a newcomer react to the tram way?

What implications does the tram way hold for urban growth?



Cincinnati cars on tramway

“My father and a neighbor, Old Uncle Bill Brandon, had to go up to the Big Town, which was Chicago, on some sort of business...and I suppose I'd been extra diligent at doing chores, weeding potatoes, killing worms on the tomato plants, or something...and Father rewarded me by taking me along.

“You can imagine what a time I had seeing things I'd never seen before, in fact had only dreamed about or heard about. Curiosity wasn't the name for it. Speechless incredulity came nearer describing my emotions.

“But when I saw my first trolley car slipping along Cottage Grove Avenue in Chicago...slipping along without horses or engine or apparent motive power...well it was just too darned much for me. I didn't know what to think.

“Uncle Bill could understand horses, hogs and cattle, steam engines, army mules and row boats, and such thing but that trolley car, with the little spinning wheel at the end of the pole, spinning along against the electric wire above it; was too much for him.

## Discussion Question

What strikes Reese as new upon his first visit to the Big Town?

# Urban Life in America, 1865-1920



Dayton, Ohio, 1905



Chicago, 1905

## Discussion Question

How do these images illustrate the ways technology changed the city?

## Discussion Questions

What does this image suggest about the visual culture of the city?

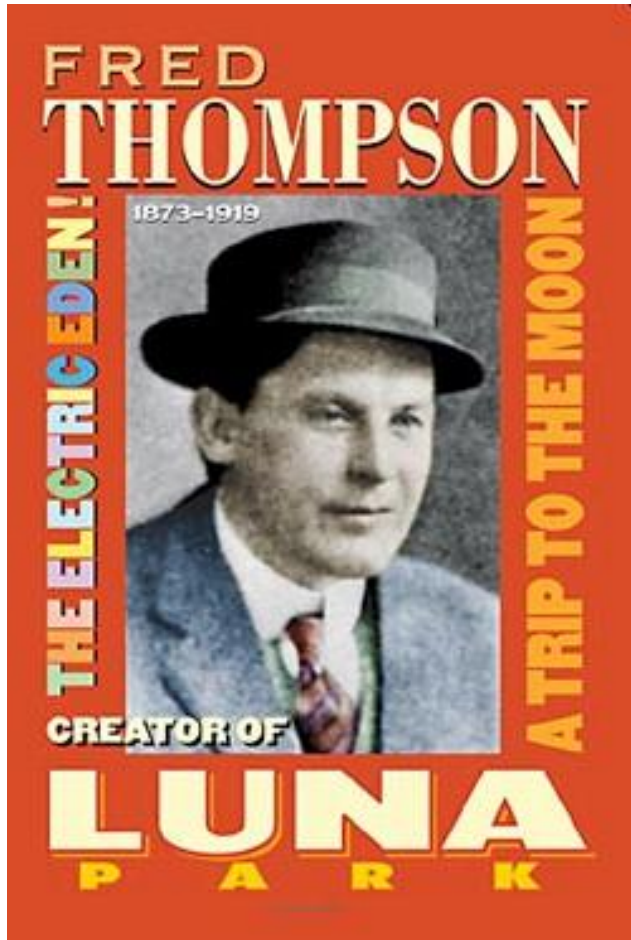
About commerce?

About indicators of class?

How does this image suggest the impact of the city on the individual?



*Window Shopping*, Everett Shinn, oil on canvas, 1903



The difference between the theatre and the big amusement park is the difference between the Sunday-school and the Sunday-school picnic. The people are the same; the spirit and the environment are wholly different. It is harder to make the picnic successful than successfully to conduct a session of the school; and it is harder to make a success of a big amusement park than of a theatre. There isn't any irreverence in this comparison with the Sunday-school, for if the amusement park doesn't attract people who are interested in the Sunday-school, it isn't going to succeed.





Coney Island beach, circa. 1905



Coney Island, Luna Park, 1905

## Discussion Question

Why would Thompson want to compare Luna Park to a Sunday school?

George Washington Plunkitt  
1842-1924

New York State Senator

Represented the Fifteenth  
District in New York City

Tammany Hall politician

Riordon, William L., *Plunkitt of  
Tammany Hall: A Series of Very  
Plain Talks on Very Practical  
Politics*, 1905



“EVERYBODY is talkin’ these days about Tammany men growin’ rich on graft, but nobody thinks of drawin’ the distinction between honest graft and dishonest graft. There’s all the difference in the world between the two. Yes, many of our men have grown rich in politics. I have myself. I’ve made a big fortune out of the game, and I’m gettin’ richer every day, but I’ve not gone in for dishonest graft — blackmailin’ gamblers[,] saloon-keepers, disorderly people, etc. — and neither has any of the men who have made big fortunes in politics.

“There’s an honest graft, and I’m an example of how it works. I might sum up the whole thing by sayin’: ‘I seen my opportunities and I took ’em.’

“Just let me explain by examples. My party’s in power in the city, and it’s goin’ to undertake a lot of public improvements. Well, I’m tipped off, say, that they’re going to lay out a new park at a certain place.

“I see my opportunity and I take it. I go to that place and I buy up all the land I can in the neighborhood. Then the board of this or that makes its plan public, and there is a rush to get my land, which nobody cared particular for before.

“Ain’t it perfectly honest to charge a good price and make a profit on my investment and foresight? Of course, it is. Well, that’s honest graft.”



George Caleb Bingham, *The County Election*, oil on canvas, 1851-52, available in America in Class Lesson, *The Expansion of Democracy During the Jacksonian Era*, from the National Humanities Center



John Sloan, *Election Night*, oil on canvas, 1907, available in *The Gilded and the Gritty* from the National Humanities Center

## Discussion Question

What do these images suggest about the differences between rural and urban politics?

Ginsy's was the hangout for the unemployed, the number runners and for the gambling men who used to come around after work to pick up a game.... For a long time the Tauckamuck Democratic Club was able to give this neighborhood some patronage mostly through its connection with Eddie Flynn, Bronx Political Boss, who had an 'in' with the Post Office. Then the talk about jobs was optimistic. All you had to do was to get one of the Block Captains to introduce you to somebody who would introduce you or get you an interview with a certain notorious politician in the Bronx, whose name I don't care to mention. Each introduction cost you five dollars a handshake. All negotiations were carried on in or around Ginsy's corner candy store, where the block captains, or peanut politicians as they were called, hung around to keep in touch with the people and get up a game of cards now and then. Two of the number runners had their posts in Ginsy's and many times if they thought the cop on the beat had orders to pick them up or if they spied the precinct detectives headed their way, you could see them duck into the phone booth and gulp down the paper slips. Ginsy's also kept a pin ball machine which drew the nickels and attention of everybody at one time or another. Small betting was carried on at the side. Ginsy's was the gossip exchange. You could find out the color of your neighbor's underwear in Ginsy's.

## Discussion Questions

What role does the candy store play in the neighborhood?

Was there anything comparable in rural or small town America?

How many different kinds of business are conducted out of the store?

## Discussion Question

Compare the attitude toward the city expressed in this image with that expressed in *Ragged Dick*.



“Bandit’s Roost,” *How the Other Half Lives*, Jacob Riis, 1890



World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893



View from the Ferris Wheel

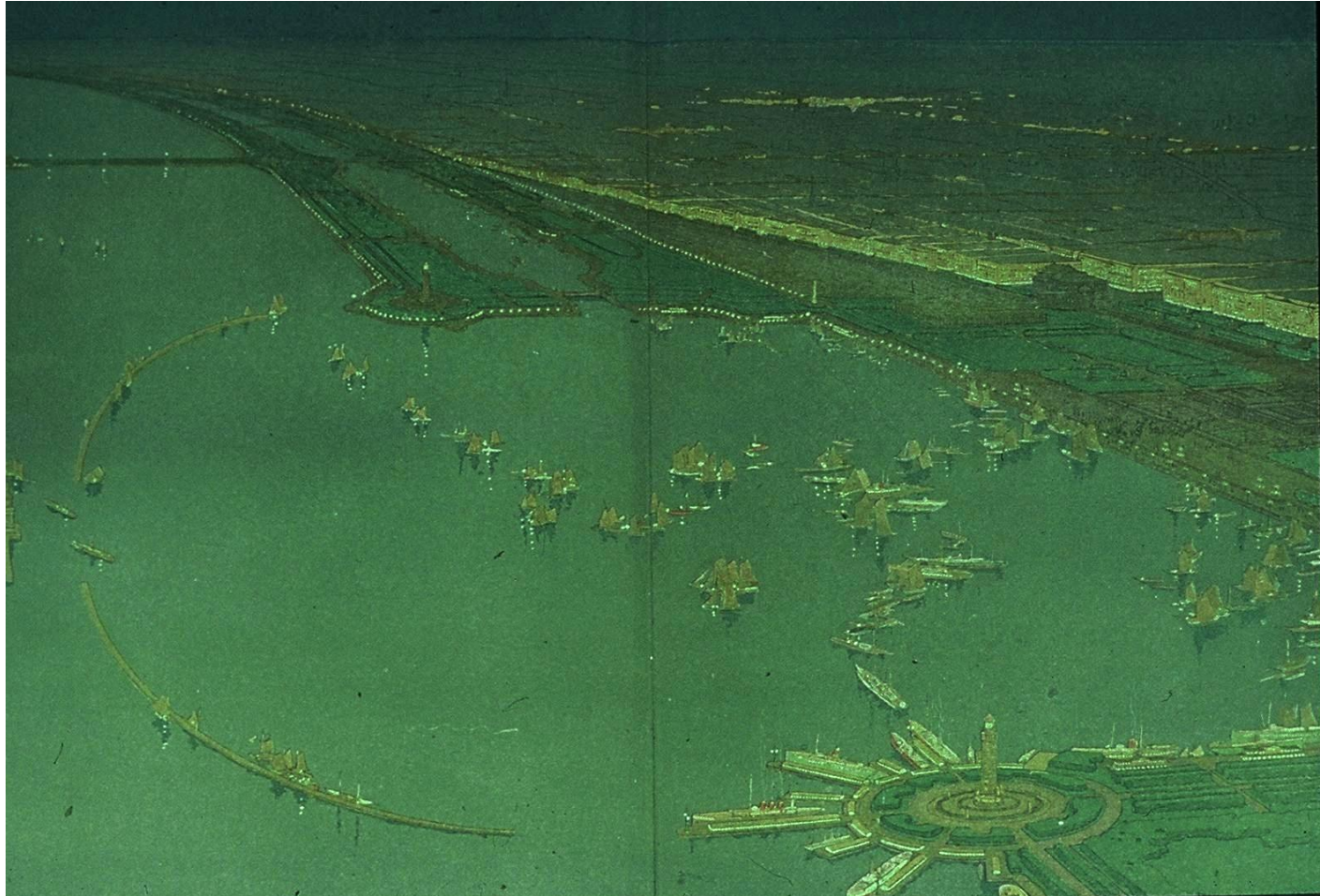
## Discussion Question

Compare the urban experience suggested by these images with that suggested by the Riis image in the previous slide.

## Discussion Question

Why did the artist make this a nighttime scene?

(Hint: Compare it with the postcard image of the World's Fair in the previous slide.)



Daniel Burnham, Plan of Chicago, 1909



“It is one of the great advances of modern science to have discovered that just simple ordinary outdoor air is a most valuable health resource; that a balcony on a city street is a thousand times better than a room in a house closed for fear of drafts, curtained for fear of fading the furniture, and lighted by a lamp. . . .

“... [T]he State might be visualized as immersed in a great sea. Here and there a city is sending up great clouds of dust, smoke, and foreign gases which may be likened to city sewage rising from points at the bottom of the clear sea. Between these great sources of pollution run connecting roads, boulevards, railways, each sending out all along its sinuous course dense currents of waste and contaminated air. Along these lines of pollution appear houses and factories, often emitting foul air themselves and completely surrounded by dense clouds of air sewage, only appearing to the view as sudden gusts blow the mass away. This sort of visualization will lead to the conclusion that even outside air is bad in the vicinity of cities.”

### Discussion Questions

In what ways does Richards’s view of the city culminate all the developments we have been discussing?

In what ways is it a 21<sup>st</sup> century vision?

Final slide.

Thank You