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America in the Early 1900s

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The Woolworth Building

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In the early 1900s, America became captivated by whatever seemed modern and up to date, and the word "new" was everywhere. Amy Lowell and Ezra Pound were called New Poets. Eugene O'Neill symbolized the New Theater movement. Gender and racial progress were captured in terms like the New Woman and the New Negro. The magazine *The New Republic* began publishing, and the New School for Social Research opened, both in New York. In many ways, the city was the nation's capital of the new. New York was where you went if you wanted to see what the future looked like. One of the things you might notice first was Grand Central Terminal, a transportation hub built for the very modern electrically powered trains.

Like Grand Central Terminal, the soaring Woolworth Building was completed in 1913. It was the highest building in the world at that time. (The Eiffel Tower in Paris is taller, but is not considered a building because it is not enclosed.) Located on Broadway in Lower Manhattan, near City Hall, it was the vision of F. W. Woolworth, who paid the $13.5 million construction bill in cash. He had made his fortune by founding the nation's first chain of five-and-ten stores, so named because nothing cost more than a nickel or a dime. Woolworth wanted a dramatic statement of his company's

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success. He also wanted to rent out space to firms willing to pay top dollar for a prestigious address. The architect, Cass Gilbert, designed a building with a highly decorated exterior and many lavish interior rooms. Today's sleek metallic style of modern architecture was still in the future, but the Woolworth Building thrust New York's skyline into modern times, even as old New York, with its low brick buildings and rattling delivery wagons, remained alive at its feet.

Tenants began to move into the building even before it was completed, but the formal opening ceremony was held [on] April 24, 1913, just weeks after the closing of the Armory Show. Mr. Woolworth hosted a candle-lit dinner on the twenty-seventh floor, with Thomas Edison among the 900 invited guests. Edison had provided the electric lighting throughout the building at no cost, perhaps because he recognized the marketing value of illuminating the city's first skyscraper. By previous arrangement, at 7:30 that evening, President Woodrow Wilson flipped a switch in the White House to relay a signal that turned on every light in the Woolworth Building at once. Visible for miles, the building signaled the new New York: showy, optimistic, and aimed toward the future.

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Progressive Party Certificate

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Progressivism was so widespread in early twentieth-century America that it became the label for the age. But it did not mean the same thing to everyone. Some progressives were motivated by a moral concern for a fair or ethical society, and some by a passion for a particular issue. Some were conservative on cultural questions, others almost socialists when it came to economics. They didn't all fight the same battles, or agree on which battles should be fought. Many progressives, for example, did not support expanding rights for African Americans. What they shared was a belief that developments during the nineteenth century—immigration, industrialism, the growth of cities—created problems that could be solved by government action. They believed in new laws and regulations, even if it took decades to pass them. This is one way in which they were different from radicals, who had no patience for slow change.

Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1919) was president of the United States from 1901 to 1909. He ran again in 1912 on the Progressive Party ticket, nicknamed the Bull Moose Party after Roosevelt said he was as "fit as a bull moose." The party certificate was part of their campaign fundraising. The 1912 campaign for president was a four-way race. Roosevelt ran against the incumbent, fellow Republican William Howard Taft, Democrat Woodrow Wilson, and the Socialist candidate, Eugene V. Debs. All four ran as progressives, but defined it differently; as a case in point, neither the Democratic nor the Republican Party supported women's suffrage.

Despite Roosevelt's earlier reluctance, the Progressive Party favored women's right to vote. It also promoted an eight-hour work day for women and young persons, a six-day work week for all, immigrant rights, and conservation of natural resources. The platform summarized its ambitious reformist philosophy: Unhampered by tradition, uncorrupted by power, undismayed by the magnitude of the task, the new party offers itself as the instrument of the people to sweep away old abuses, to build a new and nobler commonwealth. In the end, however, Wilson won 42 percent of the popular vote, solidly defeating Roosevelt (27 percent), Taft (23 percent), and Debs (6 percent). The electoral vote was more lopsided, with Wilson taking 82 percent. The Progressive Party won a small number of congressional seats and survived until World War I, when some members rejoined the Republican Party and others became Democrats or independents.

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Theodore Roosevelt celebrated Woodrow Wilson's inauguration day by attending the Armory Show in New York. When he wrote about his visit, he did not mention politics, but his progressive philosophy, and his taste in art, were clear. He singled out Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase (Resource 2)*, but misidentified the title. "It is vitally necessary," he wrote, "to move forward and to shake off the dead hand, often the fossilized dead hand, of the reactionaries; and yet we have to face the fact that there is apt to be a lunatic fringe among the votaries of any forward movement. In this recent art exhibition the lunatic fringe was fully in evidence, especially in the rooms devoted to the Cubists and the Futurists, or Near-Impressionists. . . . Take the picture which for some reason is called 'A naked man going down stairs.' There is in my bath-room a really good Navajo rug which, on any proper interpretation of the Cubist theory, is a far more satisfactory and decorative picture."

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Suffrage Parade, New York City, 1913

This text has been provided courtesy of the New-York Historical Society.

The demand for the vote was part of the women's movement from the beginning. It was a central resolution of the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, when it seemed a far-off dream. The next decades saw one defeat after another, but the reformist spirit of the Progressive Era gave new energy to the cause. Women, and the men who supported them, were becoming more aggressive in their demands, and drawing on new progressive strategies for winning over the public. The large-scale parade was one of those strategies. Organizer Harriet Stanton Blatch, daughter of Seneca Falls firebrand Elizabeth Cady Stanton, said the purpose of the parade was to "carry the idea of political freedom of women into many obtuse minds." Mrs. Blatch gave this advice to participants: "March with head erect. Eyes to the front. Remember, you march for the mightiest reform the world has ever seen."

Four big suffrage parades took place in New York City between 1910 and 1913, under the direction of Mrs. Blatch. Another was held in the nation's capital on March 3, 1913, the day before Woodrow Wilson's inauguration. The Washington parade was organized by militant suffragist Alice Paul and her National Women's Party, who sought to use the inauguration to make the political argument for women's suffrage. As the 5,000 marchers paraded down Pennsylvania Avenue, spectators, nearly all men, grew unruly. They closed in on the marchers, blocking their way, heckling and shoving them. Police seemed to side with the crowd, and federal troops ultimately restored order. Most of

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the participants made it to the finish line, but one hundred marchers were taken to local hospitals.

This photo was taken two months later, on May 3, 1913, when New York City held its fourth annual parade, the biggest one to date. Ten thousand marchers, including 500 men, proceeded up Fifth Avenue. For this parade, the New York organizers had decided to focus less on convincing politicians, and more on winning over male voters. A special reviewing stand was set up in front of the New York Public Library, for men only, to encourage recruits. One of the men on the stand was the president of the Board of Aldermen, John Purroy Mitchel, who would enter the race for mayor in July, and win in November.

The message of the 1913 New York parade was that, according to organizers, "women were out in the world of work, facing life exactly as men face life, and that women needed, as men had found they needed, political power for their protection." *The New York Times* reported that the parade was orderly and that any rowdy spectators were well controlled by police.

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John Malanga, Newsie

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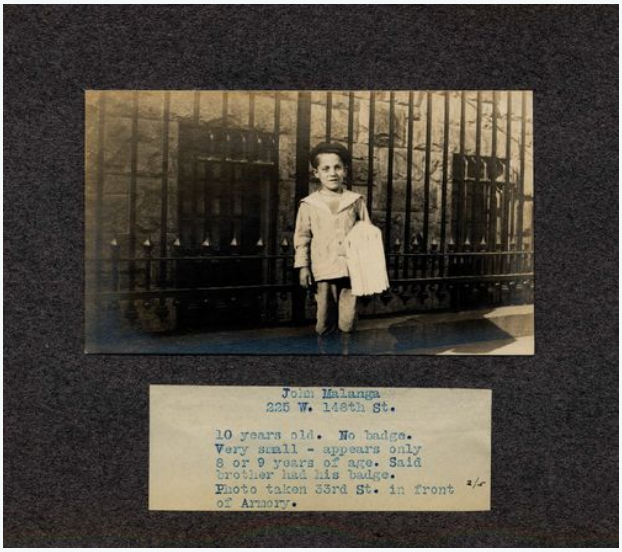

Lewis Wickes Hine (American, 1874-1940), John Malanga, ca. 1910.

Gelatin silver contact print. From Lewis Wickes Hine New York City Newsboys album, New-York Historical Society

Unless they were rich, American children had always worked—on their family's farms, or as apprentices or indentured servants. But with industrialism, immigration, and city poverty, the work of children changed in the late 1800s, and so did people's attitudes about youngsters at work. Ending child labor became one of the signature crusades of the Progressive Era.

The effort was spearheaded by the National Child Labor Committee, located in New York City. In 1908, to build public support, the committee hired photographer Lewis Wickes Hine to document the lives of working children. Now recognized as one of the founders of social documentary photography, Hine went to mills throughout the South, taking pictures of tiny barefoot children tending enormous looms. In New York City, he photographed immigrant families around the kitchen tables in their tenement apartments, shucking nuts or making artificial flowers to sell. Some of the children were still in high chairs.

Hine also photographed the children who sold newspapers on street corners in New York. Known as newsies, many were orphans and homeless. New York State tried to keep the youngest children

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out of this business. It required that newsies carry a badge at all times, and issued the badges only to boys over 10 and girls over 16. Hine's typed caption, printed with [a] photograph of newsboy John Malanga, shows how easily children could duck the law, and how far this young boy traveled from home to sell his papers. . . .

As the committee predicted, the public was outraged by Hine's photos. It was one thing for children to help their parents with the crops, but something else entirely when vulnerable youngsters worked long hours in dangerous conditions. Even the life of newsies, which had a certain romance and independence to it, no longer seemed right for the smallest children. But despite growing public agitation, child labor was not outlawed in the United States until the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act.

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Randolph Bourne, Radical Thinker

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Like other radical thinkers in the early 1900s, Randolph Bourne (1886–1918) was impatient with American culture, and with the past. He wanted a remade country, bold and new. His sympathies lay with people who were being left out or kept down: immigrants on the Lower East Side, the working class, women, young people. He attributed much of his philosophy to what he called his handicap. At the time of his birth, doctors often used a tong-like tool called a forceps to grasp a baby's head and pull the infant out of the birth canal. The process damaged some newborns, including Randolph Bourne, whose head and face were permanently disfigured. A bout of tuberculosis when he was 4 left him stunted and hunchbacked. All his life he was aware that people looked away in embarrassment or distaste when they came upon him, but he was more bothered by their assumption that he had nothing important to say. His writing on life as a person with handicaps anticipated what is today known as the disability rights movement.

Bourne grew up in Bloomfield, New Jersey, hating small-town life. As a young adult he worked at odd jobs before being admitted to Columbia University on scholarship, and he began publishing essays as a college student. He wrote about art, politics, education, and his own life. He believed that young people had the energy and brilliance the country needed, and his writing on youth captured the modern, future-focused spirit of the time.

Bourne was a key figure in the radical life that thrived in Greenwich Village in the 1910s. He was one of the few men regularly invited to the salon hosted by Alyse Gregory, a feminist and suffragist, and

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was a staunch defender of women's rights. He lived a busy, productive life, rich with intellectual conversation and community. But it was sometimes a lonely and painful one. Women enjoyed his friendship, but shied away from a romantic relationship with him. Even his professional life was sometimes affected by his appearance. Poet Amy Lowell said he wrote like a "cripple. Deformed body, deformed mind."

Bourne wrote on many topics, and was published in national magazines like *The Atlantic* and *The New Republic*. One of his major themes, which he explored in "Trans-National America," was that immigrants should have an active role in creating a new American identity. Another recurring Bourne topic was the unjustness of war. When World War I began in Europe in 1914, Bourne was bitterly opposed. He wrote against the war in *The Seven Arts*, one of several magazines that encouraged experimental thinking and writing, lashing out at American intellectuals who supported a U.S. role. The most important antiwar writer of his day, Bourne was also, ironically, a victim of one of the war's side effects, the easy spread of the deadly influenza virus as the troops returned home. Bourne died of the disease about a month after the Armistice went into effect. He was 32.

RANDOLPH BOURNE, RADICAL THINKER

On Handicaps: If the handicapped youth is brought into harsh and direct touch with the real world, life proves a much more complex thing to him than to the ordinary man. . . . He has practically to construct anew a world of his own, and explain a great many things to himself that the ordinary person never dreams of finding unintelligible at all. He will be filled with a profound sympathy for all who are despised and ignored in the world. When he has been through the neglect and struggles of the handicapped and ill-favored man himself, he will begin to understand the feelings of all the horde of the unpresentable and the unemployable, the incompetent and the ugly, the queer and crotchety people who make up so large a proportion of human folk.

[Randolph S. Bourne, "A Philosophy of Handicap," *Youth and Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1913), 349-350.]

On Youth: Old men cherish a fond delusion that there is something mystically valuable in mere quantity of experience. Now the fact is, of course, that it is the young people who have all the really valuable experience. It is they who have constantly to face new situations, to react constantly to new aspects of life, who are getting the whole beauty and terror and cruelty of the world in its fresh and undiluted purity. It is only the interpretation of this first collision with life that is worth anything. For the weakness of experience is that it so soon gets stereotyped; without new situations and crises it becomes so

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conventional as to be practically unconscious. Very few people get any really new experience after they are twenty-five, unless there is a real change of environment.

[Randolph S. Bourne, "Youth," *Youth and Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1913), 12-13.]

On Immigrants: As long as we thought of Americanism in terms of the "melting pot," our American cultural tradition lay in the past. It was something to which the new Americans were to be moulded. . . . America is coming to be, not a nationality but a trans-nationality, a weaving back and forth, with the other lands, of many threads of all sizes and colors. Any movement which attempts to thwart this weaving, or to dye the fabric any one color, or disentangle the threads of the strands, is false to this cosmopolitan vision. I do not mean that we shall necessarily glut ourselves with the raw product of humanity. It would be folly to absorb the nations faster than we could weave them. . . . [T]he attempt to weave a wholly novel international nation out of our chaotic America will liberate and harmonize the creative power of all these peoples.

[Randolph S. Bourne, "Trans-National America," *Atlantic Monthly*, 118 (July, 1916), 86-97.]

On War: Socialists, college professors, publicists, new-republicans, practitioners of literature, have vied with each other in confirming with their intellectual faith the collapse of neutrality and the riveting of the war-mind on a hundred million more of the world's people. . . . No one is left to point out the undemocratic nature of this war-liberalism. In a time of faith skepticism is the most intolerable of all insults. . . . We manufacture consolations here in America while there are probably not a dozen men fighting in Europe who did not long ago give up every reason for their being there except that nobody knew how to get them away.

[Randolph S. Bourne, "The War and the Intellectuals," *The Seven Arts* 2 (1917), 133-136.]

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Coney Island at Night

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In a ten-year stretch beginning in the 1890s, Coney Island evolved from a quiet beach resort to a glittering extravaganza by the sea—many acres of amusement rides, food stands, dance halls, boardwalks, fresh air, warm sand, and cooling ocean. People couldn't get enough of it, day or night. This photo shows the skyline of Luna Park, which opened in 1903 and became one of the most popular amusement parks on Coney Island.

In the beginning, Coney Island appealed especially to working-class New Yorkers, and it fit their wallets. Getting there was easy and inexpensive, and most of the amusement park rides were only a dime, with bargain prices often available. Working people went to Coney on their day off, which for most of them was Sunday. Otherwise, they put in ten-hour days, six days a week, and brought home about $600 a year. Coney was their break from routine. In the early 1900s, with the opening of the Luna Park and Dreamland, middle-class people began discovering the pleasures of Coney Island, too.

In their regular lives, these people lived with strict rules. Women were expected to be ladylike and modest. Their clothing was heavy, even in summer, the skirts and sleeves long, and the collars high. Many women still wore corsets. Most unmarried people lived at home with older relatives. Privacy was a luxury, and time alone with someone of the opposite sex was considered risky, almost

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shocking. The rules may have been looser in the poorest families, and men generally had more freedom than women. But everyone lived with restrictions on what was considered proper and acceptable.

Except at Coney Island. It was impossible to ride the giant curving slide of the Helter Skelter in a dignified way. Skirts flew. People squealed and threw their arms out. Rules were abandoned. Along the Boardwalk, a young couple could saunter along eating ice cream, alone in the crowd. Groups of teenagers could roam around the park without chaperones, just having fun. People of any age (and any body type) could change into bathing suits that look old-fashioned and heavy to us today, but those outfits allowed them to relax on the beach, go for a dip, [and] cavort with the freedom of children.

Coney Island succeeded because it provided a few hours of liberation, and because that sense of liberation, or a longing for it, was inching into people's lives already. Modern times were coming to New York, and Coney Island pushed them along.

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