CHAPTER 22

THE PROGRESSIVE ERA

SUMMARY
In late 1902, writers for McClure's Magazine introduced a new type of journalism, investigating and exposing the problems caused by rapid industrialization and urbanization. These journalists, dubbed “muckrakers” by Theodore Roosevelt, contributed to a broad reform movement called “progressivism.” From the mid-1890s through World War I, progressives challenged the status quo and sought changes in the nation’s society, politics, economy, culture, and environment.

The Changing Face of Industrialism
In spite of persistent problems of poverty, disease, and racism, a new century and generally improved economic conditions brought a sense of optimism to Americans. The emergence of mammoth business enterprises from 1895 to 1915 led to inevitable changes in managerial attitudes, business organization, and worker roles.

The Innovative Model T
In 1913, Henry Ford established a moving assembly line to mass produce his standard automobile, the Model T. By dramatically reducing the time and costs of production, Ford managed to lower prices and expand sales and profits. The passage of the Federal Roads Act in 1916 established a national highway system.

The Burgeoning Trusts
Standard Oil began a national trend among American big businesses toward oligopoly by swallowing up smaller competitors. By 1909, nearly one-third of the nation's manufactured goods were produced by only one percent of the industrial companies. Massive business mergers and reorganizations touched off a national debate over what the national government could and/or should do about the trusts. Many progressives as well as business leaders generally favored moderate reforms that would promote economic progress while protecting private property.

Managing the Machines
Assembly line production caused management to focus on speed and product rather than on the worker. Following Frederick Winslow Taylor’s principles of “scientific management,” managers tried to extract maximum efficiency from their workers. Factories ran round the clock; jobs became increasingly monotonous and dangerous; and workers lost control of the work pace as well as the “folkways” of the workplace. A 1911 fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company in New York City killed 146 people and focused national attention on unsafe working conditions.
Society's Masses
The mass production of goods in America allowed for greater consumption and required a larger work force. Women, African Americans, Mexican Americans, and immigrants played significant roles in the nation’s economic expansion and sought to improve their individual as well as group conditions. For many of these people life was incredibly hard, characterized by long hours, low wages, and inadequate housing.

Better Times on the Farm
As many Americans continued to migrate to the cities, those who remained on the nation’s farms experienced some prosperity, benefiting from greater production and expanding urban markets. Improved roads and mail services diminished rural isolation and brought farmers into the larger society. Progressive reforms, including efforts to eliminate “farm-bred” diseases and irrigation projects, also contributed to a “better life” on the farm. At the same time, however, land prices rose with improved crop prices, causing rates of farm tenancy to increase, especially in the South.

Women and Children at Work
In 1900, one-fifth of all adult women worked, but most earned only meager wages in industrial or service-oriented jobs. Women of color had even fewer job opportunities or protections, and most found themselves restricted to domestic service. The increase in the number of White women working did not go unnoticed, provoking the criticism that working women threatened the home. Continuing use of child labor also aroused public indignation, and led women reformers to lobby for federal protection of maternal and infant health.

The Niagara Movement and the NAACP
Progressive reforms seemed barely to touch the lives of African Americans. Most continued to live in rural areas, many in the Jim Crow South, laboring in the cotton fields or in unskilled jobs. Few belonged to unions, obtained adequate education, or earned pay equal to that of White workers in the same jobs. African-American leader W. E. B. Du Bois rejected the gradualist approach urged by Booker T. Washington and began the Niagara Movement for racial justice and equality, resulting in the creation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1910. Despite limited gains, African Americans continued to experience violence, segregation, and discrimination.

“I Hear the Whistle”: Immigrants in the Labor Force
The “new” immigration of southern and eastern Europeans continued in the early twentieth century. Not all immigrants were permanent. Among some groups, up to fifty percent returned to their homelands. For those who stayed, employers used “Americanization” programs to fashion dutiful habits among foreign workers. Such programs were often resisted by labor unions. After 1910, large numbers of Mexicans fled to the United States, transforming society in the Southwest. Though fewer Chinese immigrants arrived, many Japanese came settling along the Pacific Coast. The increasing numbers of immigrants intensified nativist sentiments.
Conflict in the Workplace
Long hours, low pay, and the impersonal and unsafe conditions of factory jobs led to an increase of worker strikes, absenteeism, and union membership. Mindful of workers’ problems and fearful of potential violence, progressives urged labor reforms.

Organizing Labor
The most successful union, the American Federation of Labor (AFL), restricted membership to skilled male workers and limited its agenda to issues of wages and working conditions. The Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL) led the effort to organize women workers and promote their interests. The militant International Workers of the World (IWW) welcomed anyone regardless of gender or race, urging labor solidarity and calling for social revolution.

Working with Workers
Some business leaders used violence and police action to keep workers in line. Others, influenced by the emergence of a school of industrial psychology, learned to consider workers’ job satisfaction, safety, and pay as a means to promote productivity and improve public relations.

Amoskeag
A large New England textile company, Amoskeag suffered no worker strikes from 1885 to 1919. The key to their industrial harmony seemed to be the company’s paternal interest in employee welfare, exhibited by its provision of recreational, educational, and health services for its workers.

A New Urban Culture
The first two decades of the twentieth century saw a general improvement in the quality of life for many Americans. Jobs were plentiful, the professions increased, the middle class grew, and new entertainments and inventions emerged.

Production and Consumption
Consumer advertising increased tremendously between 1900 and 1920, informing the new consumer generation about new products and improvements on old ones. Although most Americans’ income increased, so did prices, eating up most workers’ available spending money. And despite the growth of the middle class, the rich above all, grew richer.

Living and Dying in an Urban Nation
Due to medical advances and improved living conditions, average life expectancies for Americans increased dramatically. Infant mortality remained high, however. Cities grew by leaps and bounds, and by 1920 fewer than one-half of all Americans lived in rural areas. Rising urban affluence led to outlying suburbs, and major cities used zoning as a technique to shape growth and, often, extend racial and ethnic segregation.
Popular Pastimes
Changing work rules and increasing mechanization from 1890 to 1920 gradually allowed American workers greater leisure time for play and enjoyment of the arts. Mass entertainment consisted of sporting events, vaudeville, and later, movies, while phonograph records brought the new types of music—ragtime, blues, and jazz—into people’s homes. Even popular fiction became mass produced. As audiences grew, entertainment became big business.

Experimentation in the Arts
In the fine arts, Americans sought new forms and styles of expression, reflecting the period’s pervading call for change and progress. The nation’s urban centers, especially New York City and Chicago, attracted painters, writers, poets, dancers, and musicians interested in artistic experimentation. These artists joined with a generation of people in the fields of politics, journalism, science, education, and a host of others in hopes of progressive change.

Conclusion: A Ferment of Discovery and Reform
The first two decades of the twentieth century were a time of sweeping change that affected American society, culture, politics, and the economy. Progressive reform reshaped the landscape of the country, restructured taxes, regulated business, changed the political system, and altered the lives of Americans, especially the working and middle classes, in an attempt to make a difference and fulfill the promise of the nation.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES
After mastering this chapter, you should be able to:

1. Relate the purposes and results of “muckraking” to the broader movement of progressivism.
2. Discuss the factors that contributed to a progressive movement of reform from 1890 to 1920.
3. Explain the changes in American industrialism during the early twentieth century regarding management and organization.
4. Discuss the contributions made and benefits derived by women, African Americans, Mexican Americans, and immigrants to the nation's economic expansion during the Progressive Era.
5. Explain the origins and purposes of the Niagara Movement and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).
6. Examine the causes for and results of conflict in the industrial workplace.
7. Analyze the successes and failures of union activities during this era.

8. Discuss the new methods employed by industrialists to increase productivity, job safety, and worker satisfaction.

9. Explain how the effects of mass production and mass entertainment altered the lifestyles and tastes of Americans.

10. Describe the various types of experimentation in the fine arts in America during this era.

GLOSSARY

To build your social science vocabulary, familiarize yourself with the following terms:

1. **muckrakers** those who search out and expose publicly real or apparent misconduct of prominent figures. “Readers were enthralled, and articles and books by other muckrakers . . . spread swiftly.”

2. **burgeoning** expanding; flourishing. “Americans took pride in teeming cities, burgeoning corporations, and other marks of the mass society.”

3. **oligopoly** control of an industry or service by a few powerful companies. “The result was not monopoly, but oligopoly—control of a commodity or service by a small number of large, powerful companies.”

4. **finance capitalists** investors or business people who subsidize capitalist endeavors. “finance capitalists like J. P. Morgan tended to replace the industrial capitalists of an earlier era.”

5. **hallmark** a conspicuous indication of the character or quality of something. “Their efforts . . . became another important hallmark of the Progressive Era.”

6. **tenancy** the occupancy of lands by paying rent to the owner. “Tenancy grew from one-quarter of all farms in 1880 to more than one-third in 1910.”

7. **grandfather clause** a discriminatory clause aimed at African Americans in the constitutions of several southern states prior to 1915, exempting from voting restrictions descendants of persons who were registered voters before 1867. “In Guinn v. United States (1915), the Supreme Court overturned a 'grandfather clause' . . . in Oklahoma.”

8. **stereotypes** common or standard impressions usually representing an oversimplified opinion, feeling, or judgment. “Immigration patterns often departed from traditional stereotypes.”
9. **barrios** ethnic grouping in a certain part of a town or city by Latin Americans. “Like other immigrant groups, they also formed enclaves in the cities, barrios, . . .”

10. **productivity** a measure of the efficiency of production, usually expressed in terms of output per man-hours. “labor productivity dropped ten percent between 1915 and 1918. . .”

11. **arbitration** process by which the parties to a dispute submit their differences to the judgment of an impartial third party. “the important Hart, Schaffner agreement, which created an arbitration committee . . .”

12. **bureaucratic** characterized by a narrow, rigid, formal routine. “As businesses grew in size, they also grew more bureaucratic . . .”

13. **utopian** characterized by impossibly ideal or perfect conditions. “At first scornful of the ‘utopian’ plan, business leaders across the country soon copied it . . .”

14. **zoning** to set aside areas of a city by legal restriction for purposes of business, residential, or entertainment needs. “Zoning ordered city development . . .”

15. **avant-garde** characterized by the creation or application of new or experimental ideas, especially in the arts. “Defiantly avant-garde, they shook off convention and experimented with new forms.”

**IDENTIFICATION**

Briefly identify the meaning and significance of the following terms:

1. “muckrakers”

2. Progressivism

3. Henry Ford

4. Triangle Shirtwaist Company Fire
5. National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)

6. Ashcan School

7. “birds of passage”

8. Women's Trade Union League (WTUL)

9. Amoskeag

10. International Workers of the World (IWW)
MATCHING

A. Match the following with the appropriate description:

_____ 1. Ida Tarbell  a. social worker that headed the Children’s Bureau within the Bureau of Labor

_____ 2. Margaret Sanger  b. muckraking author of the “History of the Standard Oil Company”

_____ 3. Grace Abbott  c. fiery young radical who joined the International Workers of the World (IWW) as a teenager

_____ 4. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn  d. outspoken social reformer and head of the birth control movement

_____ 5. Margaret Dreier Robins  e. one of the founding members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)

f. organizer of the influential Women's Trade Union League (WTUL)

B. Match the following entertainers with the appropriate description:

_____ 1. D. W. Griffith  a. “Empress of the Blues,” she made over eighty records that sold nearly ten million copies

_____ 2. Florenz Ziegfeld  b. talented and creative director, he produced the nation's first movie spectacular, The Birth of a Nation in 1915

_____ 3. Irving Berlin  c. classical dancer, she rejected traditional ballet steps to stress improvisation, emotion, and the human form

_____ 4. Bessie Smith  d. producer of the “Follies,” the peak of vaudeville entertainment
5. Isadora Duncan  
e. Russian immigrant composer, he set off a nationwide dance craze with his “Alexander's Ragtime Band” in 1911  
f. composer and businessman, he joined with others to form the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP) to protect musical rights and royalties

COMPLETION

Answer the question or complete the statement by filling in the blanks with the correct word or words.

1. The term “muckraker” was coined by ________________ in 1906 to describe the practice of exposing the corruption of public and prominent figures.

2. The federal government authorized partial national funding for road-building in states that established highway departments in the ____________ Act of 1916.

3. An industrial research laboratory where scientists and engineers developed new products was first established by ________________ in 1900.

4. The Rockefeller Sanitary Commission began a campaign in 1909 that eventually wiped out the ________________ disease in rural America.

5. Rejecting the gradualist approach toward civil rights for African Americans, ________________ provided inspiration for the Niagara Movement.

6. Labor agents, called ________________ among the Italians, Greeks, and Syrians, recruited immigrant workers, found them jobs, and deducted a fee from their wages.

7. Designed to curtail immigration from southern and eastern Europe, Congress passed a ________________ requirement over President Wilson's veto in 1917.

8. A militant labor union, the ________________, attracted the support of immigrant factory workers, migrant farm laborers, loggers, and miners.

9. New Orleans musicians Charles “Buddy” Bolden, Ferdinand “Jelly Roll” Morton, and Louis Armstrong helped popularize the new improvisational musical form called ________________.
10. During the Progressive Era, a new group of realistic artists in America, known to their critics as the ________________, painted scenes of American slums and tenements.

TRUE/FALSE

Mark the following statements either T (True) or F (False).

_____ 1. In responding to the disorder created by industrialization and urbanization, progressives remained hopeful of positive change.

_____ 2. Henry Ford applied the vital economic lesson that a larger unit profit on a smaller number of sales meant greater profits.

_____ 3. Progressive reformers unanimously agreed that business trusts should be broken up to restore individual opportunity and prevent price manipulations.

_____ 4. From 1900 to 1920 in the United States, the divorce rate dropped and the birth rate soared.

_____ 5. To discuss their campaign for civil rights in 1905, African American leaders had to meet on the Canadian side of Niagara Falls because no hotel on the American side would take them.

_____ 6. Mexican Americans significantly contributed to the economic development of the American Southwest.

_____ 7. Industrial psychologists argued that “time and motion” efficiency studies had to be complemented with consideration of worker satisfaction to improve productivity.

_____ 8. The Women’s Trade Union League attracted substantial numbers of members but exerted relatively little influence in the promotion of women’s rights.

_____ 9. The introduction of zoning laws tended to enforce racial and ethnic segregation in American cities.

_____ 10. The 1913 art show of European Post-Impressionists at the New York Armory was hailed by critics for the realistic presentations of ordinary people and familiar scenes.
MULTIPLE CHOICE

Circle the one alternative that best completes the statement or answers the question.

1. Which of the following topics investigated by progressive muckrakers is accurately linked with its author?
   a. urban corruption and Ida Tarbell
   b. industrial abuses and David Graham Phillips
   c. poisonous drugs and Lincoln Steffens
   d. unsanitary meatpacking and Upton Sinclair

2. According to Henry Ford, the key to “democratizing” the automobile was
   a. applying the principles of scientific management.
   b. mass production through a continuous assembly-line process.
   c. increasing workers' wages to $5 per day.
   d. granting workers' demands for an eight-hour workday.

3. The debate between progressives and business leaders over trusts
   a. represented a simple contest between high-minded reformers and greedy businesspeople.
   b. involved all progressives in a national attempt to break up big business.
   c. led businesspeople to oppose virtually all government attempts to regulate the economy.
   d. often found both groups in agreement on fundamental principles.

4. Frederick W. Taylor believed that
   a. machines would end the domination of well-paid craftspeople.
   b. the assembly line would dehumanize workers and damage productivity.
   c. workers should have the unrestricted right to organize.
   d. management should take responsibility for job-related knowledge and enforce its control of the workplace.

5. The Triangle Shirtwaist Company disaster in 1911 called national attention to
   a. militant labor strikes, which seemed to threaten a national revolution.
   b. inadequate regulation of railroads and public transportation.
   c. unsafe and oppressive working conditions in New York factories.
   d. overcrowded residential conditions in New York's Lower East Side.

6. In comparison to 1890, American farmers by 1920
   a. lived in greater isolation from urban society.
   b. had increased in terms of numbers and percentage of the total population.
   c. benefited from greater production and expanded markets.
   d. suffered from greater incidence of “farm-bred” diseases.
7. Most women workers of the early twentieth century
   a. earned minimum standards of wages in unskilled jobs.
   b. possessed the same education and job skills as their male counterparts.
   c. attained managerial or professional positions.
   d. tended to be married rather than single.

8. A notable victory for the NAACP during the Progressive Era occurred when the Supreme Court outlawed
   a. segregation in public schools.
   b. use of a “grandfather clause” in Oklahoma.
   c. discriminatory employment practices in industry.
   d. the poll tax as a voting restriction.

9. Chinese Americans differed from other immigrant groups coming to America during the Progressive Era in that they
   a. intended to remain and establish permanent homes.
   b. declined rather than increased in numbers due to exclusionary laws.
   c. were more likely to be female rather than male.
   d. worked hard to adopt American rather than maintain traditional Chinese customs.

10. Immigrants from Mexico to the United States
    a. arrived in increasing numbers after revolution there in 1910 forced many to flee.
    b. typically came from the lower classes, eager to escape poverty and violence at home.
    c. contributed significantly to the building of highways and railroads in the Southwest.
    d. all of the above

11. The key to success for the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in the early twentieth century was the union's
    a. acceptance for membership of all industrial workers.
    b. refusal to engage in strikes at the local levels.
    c. limited membership and a concentration on basic issues.
    d. ideological support for labor solidarity and ultimate social revolution.

12. The primary objective of the International Workers of the World (IWW) was to
    a. provide education and “Americanization” for foreign workers.
    b. overthrow the capitalist system.
    c. increase workers' wages and reduce their hours.
    d. convince politicians of the need for protective legislation.
13. In the important Hart Shaffner agreement, the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) gained for striking women workers
   a. substantial wage increases.
   b. drastic reduction in work hours.
   c. the right of collective bargaining.
   d. all of the above

14. From 1900 to 1920 in the United States, the
   a. life expectancy for most Americans increased.
   b. farm population significantly increased.
   c. incidence of heart disease and cancer declined.
   d. zoning of American cities reduced patterns of racial segregation.

15. Concerning the fine arts, which of the following trends marked the Progressive Era in America?
   a. Classical ballet steps were emphasized in dance.
   b. Traditional meter and rhyme were rejected as artificial constraints in poetry.
   c. Painting was romanticized and impressionistic.
   d. Americans rejected such crass musical forms as ragtime, blues, and jazz.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

To check your understanding of the key issues of this period, solve the following problems:

1. What factors combined to create the Progressive Movement for reform during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries?

2. Discuss the changes in managerial attitudes, business organization, and industrial worker roles during the early twentieth century.

3. Explain the conditions that prompted formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Evaluate its success during the Progressive Era.

4. Examine the causes for conflict in the industrial workplace from 1900 to 1920. How did workers and managers respond?

5. Was life in America “better” in 1920 than it had been in 1900? Explain.
CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS


Booker T. Washington, Atlanta Exposition Address (1895)

... Ignorant and inexperienced, it is not strange that in the first years of our new life we began at the top instead of at the bottom; that a seat in Congress or the state legislature was more sought than real estate or industrial skill; that the political convention or stump speaking had more attractions than starting a dairy farm or truck garden.

A ship lost at sea for many days suddenly sighted a friendly vessel. From the mast of the unfortunate vessel was seen a signal, "Water, water; we die of thirst!" The answer from the friendly vessel at once came back, "Cast down your bucket where you are." ... The captain of the distressed vessel, at last heeding the injunction, cast down his bucket, and it came up full of fresh, sparkling water. ... To those of my race who underestimate the importance of cultivating friendly relations with the southern white man, who is their next-door neighbor, I would say: "Cast down your bucket where you are"—cast it down in making friends in every manly way of the people of all races by whom we are surrounded.

Cast it down in agriculture, mechanics, in commerce, in domestic service, and in the professions. ... Our greatest danger is that in the great leap from slavery to freedom we may overlook the fact that the masses of us are to live by the productions of our hands, and fail to keep in mind that we shall prosper in proportion as we learn to dignify and glorify common labour, and put brains and skill into the common occupations of life. ...

No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem. It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top.

To those of the white race who look to the incoming of those of foreign birth and strange tongue and habits for the prosperity of the South, were I permitted I would repeat what I say to my own race, "Cast down your bucket where you are." Cast it down among the eight millions of Negroes whose habits you know, whose fidelity and love you have tested in days when to have proved treacherous meant the ruin of your firesides. Cast down your bucket among these people who have, without strikes and labour wars, tilled your fields, cleared your forests, built your railroads and cities, and brought forth treasures from the bowels of the earth. ... Casting down your bucket among my people ... you will find that they will buy your surplus land, make blossom the waste places in your fields, and run your factories. While doing this, you can be sure in the future, as in the past, that you and your families will be surrounded by the most patient, faithful, law-abiding, and unresentful people that the world has seen. ... In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the finders, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress. ...

The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing. No race that has anything to contribute to the markets of the world is long in any degree ostracized. It is important and right that all privileges of the law be ours, but it is vastly more important that we be prepared for the exercise of these privileges. The opportunity to earn a dollar in a factory just now is worth infinitely more than the opportunity to spend a dollar in an opera-house.
W. E. B. Du Bois, from "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others" (1903)

Easily the most striking thing in the history of the American Negro since 1876 is the ascendancy of Mr. Booker T. Washington. . . . His programme of industrial education, conciliation of the South, and submission and silence as to civil and political rights was not wholly original. . . . But Mr. Washington first indissolubly linked these things; he . . . changed it from a by-path into a veritable Way of Life. . . .

Mr. Washington represents in Negro thought the old attitude of adjustment and submission; but adjustment at such a peculiar time as to make his programme unique. This is an age of unusual economic development, and Mr. Washington's programme naturally takes an economic cast, becoming a gospel of Work and Money to such an extent as apparently almost completely to overshadow the higher aims of life. . . . Mr. Washington's programme practically accepts the alleged inferiority of the Negro races. . . . In the history of nearly all other races and peoples the doctrine preached at such crises has been that manly self-respect is worth more than lands and houses, and that a people who voluntarily surrender such respect, or cease striving for it, are not worth civilizing.

. . . Mr. Washington distinctly asks that black people give up, at least for the present, three things,-
First, political power.
Second, insistence on civil rights.
Third, higher education of Negro youth.

. . . The question then comes: Is it possible, and probable, that nine millions of men can make effective progress in economic lines if they are deprived of political rights, made a servile caste, and allowed only the most meagre chance for developing their exceptional men? If history and reason give any distinct answer to these questions, it is an emphatic No. . . .

. . . while it is a great truth to say that the Negro must strive and strive mightily to help himself, it is equally true that unless his striving be not simply seconded, but rather aroused and encouraged, by the initiative of the richer and wiser environing group, he cannot hope for great success.

. . . So far as Mr. Washington preaches Thrift, Patience, and Industrial Training for the masses, we must hold up his hands and strive with him, rejoicing in his honors and glorying in the strength of this Joshua called of God and of man to lead the headless host. But so far as Mr. Washington apologizes for injustice, North or South, does not rightly value the privilege and duty of voting, belittles the emasculating effects of caste distinctions, and opposes the higher training and ambition of our brighter minds,-so far as he, the South, or the Nation, does this, we must unceasingly and firmly oppose them.

Ida Wells Barnett, A Red Record (1895)

A word as to the charge itself. In considering the third reason assigned by the Southern white people for the butchery of blacks, the question must be asked, what the white man means when he charges the black man with rape. Does he mean the crime which the statutes of the states describe as such? Not by any means. With the Southern white man, any misalliance existing between a white woman and a colored man is a sufficient foundation for the charge of rape. The Southern white man says that it is impossible for a voluntary alliance to exist between a white woman and a colored man, and therefore, the fact of an alliance is a proof of force. In numerous instances where colored men have been lynched on the charge of rape, it was positively known at the time of lynching, and indisputably proven after the victim’s death, that the relationship sustained between the man and the woman was voluntary and clandestine, and that in no court of law could even the charge of assault have been successfully maintained.

It was for the assertion of this fact, in the defense of her own race, that the writer hereof became an exile; her property destroyed and her return to her home forbidden under penalty of death, for writing the following editorial which was printed in her paper, the Free Speech, in Memphis, Tenn., May 21, 1892:

“Eight Negroes lynched since last issue of the Free Speech: one at Little Rock, Ark., last Saturday morning where the citizens broke (?) into the penitentiary and got their man; three near Anniston, Ala., one near New Orleans; and three at Clarksville, Ga.; the last three for killing a white man, and five on the same old racket—the new alarm about raping white women. The same programme of hanging, then shooting bullets into the lifeless bodies was carried out to the letter. Nobody in this section of the country believes in the old threadbare lie that Negro men rape white women. If Southern white men are not careful, they will overreach themselves and public sentiment will have a reaction; a conclusion will then be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women.”

But threats cannot suppress the truth, and while the Negro suffers the soul deformity, resultant from two and a half centuries of slavery, he is no more guilty of this vilest of all vile charges than the white man who would blacken his name.

During all the years of slavery, no such charge was ever made, not even during the dark days of the rebellion. . . . While the master was away fighting to forge the fetters upon the slave, he left his wife and children with no protectors save the Negroes themselves. . . .

Likewise during the period of alleged “insurrection,” and alarming “race riots,” it never occurred to the white man that his wife and children were in danger of assault. Nor in the Reconstruction era, when the hue and cry was
against “Negro Domination,” was there ever a thought that the domination would ever contaminate a fireside or strike toward the virtue of womanhood. . . .

It is not the purpose of this defense to say one word against the white women of the South. Such need not be said, but it is their misfortune that the . . . white men of that section . . . to justify their own barbarism . . . assume a chivalry which they do not possess. True chivalry respects all womanhood, and no one who reads the record, as it is written in the faces of the million mulattoes in the South, will for a minute conceive that the southern white man had a very chivalrous regard for the honor due the women of his race, or respect for the womanhood which circumstances placed in his power. . . . Virtue knows no color line, and the chivalry which depends on complexion of skin and texture of hair can command no honest respect.

When emancipation came to the Negroes . . . from every nook and corner of the North, brave young white women . . . left their cultured homes, their happy associations and their lives of ease, and with heroic determination went to the South to carry light and truth to the benighted blacks. . . . They became the social outlaws in the South. The peculiar sensitiveness of the southern white men for women, never shed its protecting influence about them. No friendly word from their own race cheered them in their work; no hospitable doors gave them the companionship like that from which they had come. No chivalrous white man doffed his hat in honor or respect. They were “Nigger teachers”—unpardonable offenders in the social ethics of the South, and were insulted, persecuted and ostracized, not by Negroes, but by the white manhood which boasts of its chivalry toward women.

And yet these northern women worked on, year after year. . . . Threading their way through dense forests, working in schoolhouses, in the cabin and in the church, thrown at all times and in all places among the unfortunate and lowly Negroes, whom they had come to find and to serve, these northern women, thousands and thousands of them, have spent more than a quarter of a century in giving the colored people their splendid lessons for home and heart and soul. Without protection, save that which innocence gives to every good woman, they went about their work, fearing no assault and suffering none. Their chivalrous protectors were hundreds of miles away in their northern homes, and yet they never feared any “great dark-faced mobs.” . . . They never complained of assaults, and no mob was ever called into existence to avenge crimes against them. Before the world adjudges the Negro a moral monster, a vicious assailant of womanhood and a menace to the sacred precincts of home, the colored people ask the consideration of the silent record of gratitude, respect, protection and devotion of the millions of the race in the South, to the thousands of northern white women who have served as teachers and missionaries since the war. . . . These pages are written in no spirit of vindictiveness. . . . We plead not for the colored people alone, but for all victims of the terrible injustice which puts men and women to death without form of law. During the year 1894, there were 132 persons executed in the United States by due form of law, while in the same year, 197 persons were put to death by mobs, who gave the victims no opportunity to make a lawful defense. No comment need be made upon a condition of public sentiment responsible for such alarming results.

1. Which of the authors would most Whites of the day have found most acceptable, Washington, Du Bois, or Wells-Barnett? Explain.

2. What was the meaning of Washington’s admonition to “Cast down your bucket where you are?” To whom was he addressing this phrase?


4. According to Wells-Barnett, what was the purported cause of most lynchings of southern Black men? What evidence does she offer to prove such charges false?

5. Who are the real “moral monsters” in the view of Wells-Barnett?