

The Course of the Republic: American Responses to Technology in the Nineteenth Century

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In a speech he gave on July 18, 1867, to the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Cambridge University, Ralph Waldo Emerson extolled nineteenth-century innovation and its effect on the individual imagination.

Great strides have been made within the present century. Geology, astronomy, chemistry, optics have yielded grand results. The correlation of forces and the polarization of light have carried us to sublime generalizations—have affected an imaginative race like poetic inspirations. We have been taught to tread familiarly on giddy heights of thought, and to wont ourselves to daring conjectures.¹

An author and philosopher who captured the spirit of the age in his writings, Emerson serves as an entry point for learning more about the affects of technology on nineteenth-century American society. Major changes were occurring throughout society, as the rise of full-fledged factories brought record numbers of women into the urban work force. The Lowell cotton mill in Massachusetts, comprised predominantly of female workers, was one of the most notable factories. Emerson, along with the workers at Lowell Mill, offers a glimpse of the ideals that shaped not only the industrial

age of the nineteenth century, but the modern technological age.

This article provides an overview of teaching and learning activities that combine both historical and civics instruction with the study of technology, in line with NCSS thematic strand **III SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, AND SOCIETY.**² Specifically, these integrative teaching activities focus on Lowell Mill and Emerson, within the context of the profound political and technological changes of the nineteenth century. The activities are based on the premise of cultural historian John Kasson that “The experiences Americans have historically brought to their technology are profoundly rooted in their understanding of the entire republican experiment.”³

Below I provide historic background to contextualize republican ideology and its origins in the American movement for independence. I outline the ideals of a republic as conceived by Americans at the time and trace the conflict between agrarian and manufacturing interests in the young republic. Next, I offer two examples, Lowell Mill and the works

of Emerson, as a means to explore the relationship between republicanism and American responses to technology. Lowell Mill, considered by contemporaries to be a “republican factory,” offered an alternative to the poor conditions observed in foreign factories. Ralph Waldo Emerson described in his writings his internal conflict between elation over new technology and fear that it would impair civic virtue and personal freedom. For both Lowell Mill and Emerson I suggest relevant, digitized primary sources and discussion questions for students.

Historical Background

As industrialization developed, American culture came to assign technology with republican values. In the eighteenth century “republicanism” was not a reference to a particular political party. Rather it summarized the values of a republic and referred to both political and moral ideals. According to Kasson, “The notion of republicanism began with a conception of the relationships among power, liberty, and virtue.”⁴ The belief held that the delicate balance between power, liberty, and virtue was constantly threatened by power. In order to check power, people within a republic were called upon to demonstrate personal restraint. The notion of “public virtue” meant that

individuals put the good of the republic first, over personal desires. Public virtues included “social service, industry, frugality, and restraint.”⁵ Ultimately, the eighteenth-century view of republicanism served to mobilize American dissent against British imperial rule. At the same time, it also led Americans to believe they were part of a radically new and fragile political and ethical system. This sense was captured in the motto of the Great Seal as “Novus Ordo Seclorum” or a “New World Order.” There was great pride within the young American republic related to its civic mission and, simultaneously, great anxiety about its future.⁶

Contributing to this anxiety were questions about the role technology would play in the republic. Americans were keenly aware of the British experiences with industrialization and pondered whether technology would help or hinder their young republic, according to Kasson:

Could modern technology expand the possibilities for creative power and human liberty, free Americans from drudgery and deadening routine, and bring them into closer communication with one another and nature? Or might technology instead blunt people’s imaginations and ethical sensibilities, alienate them further from the environment, and perhaps even serve as a new instrument of tyranny?⁷

This anxiety persisted throughout the revolution and into the period of confederation. Questions about the role technology would play in the new republic were consistently raised. Would technology advance the cause of republicanism?

The long cultural tradition of husbandry in the colonies is key to understanding eighteenth-century apprehension about the role of technology in the republic. Prior to the American Revolution, the majority of the population worked on farms. The farmer became the symbolic hero of the early American republic.⁸

Perhaps no one was more responsible

for raising the independent farmer to high status as Thomas Jefferson. In Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* not only did he supply an economic argument for agriculture to remain the mainstay of the new nation, he also proposed a moral objection to manufacturing.⁹ He warned, for instance, of “mobs of great cities” and “moral corruption” that would erode the republic if manufacturing was allowed to run rampant.

There were counter-arguments, however, that gained acceptance during the period leading up to the American Revolution. Events such as the Stamp Act Congress brought about a growing sense of the need for domestic manufacture. Homespun goods became essential to the resistance against British taxes through non-importation and non-consumption. The same held true as the colonies struggled to build armaments to fight a war of independence. After the revolution, arguments favoring domestic manufacture were revived during the period of confederation due to trade imbalances with Britain and an increasing national debt. While proponents of manufacturing had a clear economic argument in favor of the development of domestic technology, they still lacked the moral arguments of Jefferson.

The publication of the Federalist Papers and the clarification of the federalist and anti-federalist arguments provided a moral justification that linked American ideals of republicanism with technology. It was during this time, “The characteristic qualities of mechanization—regularity, uniformity, subordination, harmony, efficiency—appeared to offer a model for government and society in general.”¹⁰ The Constitution as conceived by the federalists provided for federal control of commerce, transportation, and other sectors of economic development. Both James Madison and John Jay argued in favor of a country unified through technological improvements.¹¹

The federalists saw technology as a means to preserve national unity and the republic. They believed, for instance, that improvements in transportation and communication would link the states and

unify them into one nation conceived on the principles of republicanism. At first anxious that technology would be a divisive force in society and, perhaps, even lead to tyranny, Americans eventually came to attach technology with republican values. They came to view technology as a positive, unifying force that would lead to progress for the young nation. As Kasson wrote, “... the seeds of the great era of American industrial and technological growth in the second half of the nineteenth century were planted much earlier and cultivated meticulously through the Revolutionary period to the ratification of the Constitution.”¹²

Teaching and Learning Activities

Students today can answer for themselves whether the federalist insistence that technology would serve to unify the nation and further the republic succeeded. The teaching and learning activities outlined below encourage students to determine—through the example of the Lowell Mill and the musings of Ralph Waldo Emerson—the manner in which republicanism was used to understand and describe the role of technology in American society in the nineteenth century.

Lowell Mill

Proto-industrialization in America in the eighteenth century gave rise to the growth of full-fledged factories in the nineteenth century—of which the Lowell Mill, or “Lowell experiment,” is one of the better known. To many Americans, the cotton mill and surrounding town of Lowell represented a “republican factory.” Its organizational design was intended to circumvent many of the ills of British factories and to instill republican ideals among its workers. According to *The Lowell Offering*, a periodical written by female mill workers, high wages attracted “worthy, virtuous, intelligent, and well-educated girls to Lowell.”¹³

In 1813, Francis Cabot Lowell, Nathan Appleton, and Patrick Tracy Johnson built a weaving factory in Waltham, Massachusetts, that used water power and vertical integration in the manufac-

ture of cotton cloth.¹⁴ In 1822, Appleton and Johnson built an even larger mill in Lowell (named after their deceased partner). Soon Lowell became a leading industrial town that attracted the daughters of New England farmers as workers spinning strands of thread and weaving cloth in the factory.¹⁵

Statistics from July 1836 indicate that 74 percent of the workers at Lowell were female; 96 percent were native born; 75 percent were between 15-30 years old; and 75 percent were living in the company's boarding houses.¹⁶ This marked a dramatic change in American labor history. "By taking these new jobs women chose not only to work outside their homes, but also to leave their families and to live in a radically different environment," wrote Thomas Dublin.¹⁷

According to Harriet Robinson, a mill operative, working in the mill dramatically changed women's social position. No longer just "savers," these women began to earn their own money. Robinson explained that often the women raised money for the education of a male relative "to make a gentleman of a brother or son."¹⁸

Lowell Mill was distinct not only for its demographics, but also because of the sense of community and interdependence that developed around the mill.¹⁹ In response to criticism about the degrading experience of factory life, the mill's social programs created an "integrated and harmonious republican community."²⁰



Winslow Homer's *Bobbin Girl* from William Cullen Bryant's *The Song of the Sower*.
Courtesy of the Lowell National Historical Park

Known as the "city of spindles" the architecture and daily life of Lowell was dominated by boarding houses. Some historians presume these cultural structures were built to protect the morals of the female workers. "Rules of social discourse" were enforced by the mill clergy and boarding house supervisors (generally widows).²¹ These rules included regular church attendance, curfews, and restrictions on personal space. An 1840 article titled "Factory Girls" from *The Lowell Offering* described the culture of the mill:

We are under restraints, but they are voluntarily assumed and we

are at liberty to withdraw from them, whenever they become galling or irksome. Neither have I ever discovered that any restraints were imposed upon us but those which were necessary for the peace and comfort of the whole.²²

Female Lowell workers were encouraged to participate in a variety of company-sponsored organizations, designed to promote their moral growth and the good of the community. These included improvement circles, lending libraries, debating clubs, and lyceum lectures given by distinguished speakers such as

Digital Primary Sources and Discussion Questions:

Front cover of *The Lowell Offering* [ocp.hul.harvard.edu/ww/magazines.html—Scroll down to *The Lowell Offering* for a thumbnail of the image. To see an enlarged image, click on the image and select “title page” from the navigation menu.]

- Describe the image. (Pay particular attention to what the mill girl is wearing and what she carries in her hands.)
- Describe the symbolism of the images.
- What does this image suggest about the lifestyle of the mill girl?
- What do you think the publishers of *The Lowell Offering* are suggesting about the conditions of mill life?

“Beauty and Wealth” (October 1840) in *The Lowell Offering* [ocp.hul.harvard.edu/ww/magazines.html—Select *The Lowell Offering*, October 1840 edition, p. 11.]

- What can historians glean about the values of the Lowell community from this document written by female workers in the mill?
- To what extent do these values relate to the republican ideals of the time?

“Factory Girls” from *The Lowell Offering* (December 1840) [ocp.hul.harvard.edu/ww/magazines.html—Select *The Lowell Offering*, December 1840, pp. 17-19].

- The author defends factory girls in the face of a critique from Mr. Brownstein—whom she calls “slandrous.” How does the author compare the Lowell workers to their counterparts in English factories?
- How does she describe the “character” of Lowell girls? How does this compare to “Beauty and Wealth” above and some of the later primary sources below?

“The Spirit of Discontent” from *The Lowell Offering* (April 1841)

[ocp.hul.harvard.edu/ww/magazines.html—Select *The Lowell Offering*, April 1841, pp. 111-114.]

- According to this article, what were the author’s views of the advantages and disadvantages of living and working at the mill?

“Letters from Susan” from *The Lowell Offering* (May 1844) [ocp.hul.harvard.edu/ww/magazines.html. Select *The Lowell Offering*, May 1844, p. 152. Note: this is an on-going column that appears in several volumes.]

- How does Susan portray her life at

Lowell? (For instance, what kind of work do the women engage in? How do they spend their free time?)

- Do any of these pursuits resonate with republican values (such as social service, industry, frugality, and restraint)?

“The Lowell Girls Go on Strike”

[Excerpt of Harriet Hanson Robinson, *Loom and Spindle or Life among the Early Mill Girls* (New York, T. Y. Crowell, 1898), 83-86. nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:607334]

- Lowell workers and labor spokesmen feared that the oppressive factory conditions would reduce American workers to an ignorant and enfeebled class, slaves to the new industrial system. What evidence can you gain from Robinson’s recollections to support or refute their concerns?
- How do these workers use the aims of republican society to further their cause?

Other Notable Web Resources:

- Lowell National Historic Park www.nps.gov/archive/lowe/loweweb/Lowellpercent20History/prologue.html
- Harriet Robinson on Mill Girls www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/robinson-lowell.html

John Quincy Adams and Ralph Waldo Emerson.²³

The reality of mill life at Lowell did not always match the serene image of the “republican factory.” Robinson recalled the conditions in her memoir: “The working hours of all the girls extended from five o’clock in the morning until seven in the evening, with one half hour each, for breakfast and dinner. Even the doffers were forced to be on duty nearly fourteen hours a day. This was the greatest hardship in the lives of these children.”²⁴ In 1836, the mill operatives went on strike to protest the long hours and a cut in wages, forcing a shut down.

Although the mill owners continued to defend its place within the republic, by the end of the nineteenth century, the Lowell experiment appeared to have ended in failure.

The sample of digitized resources above describes some of the experiences of the Lowell Mill community. With the exception of Harriet Robinson’s memoirs, all of the primary sources come from *The Lowell Offering*.²⁵ Although historians debate whether its contributors were subject to the censorship of the mill owners, it nonetheless provides a remarkable account of the day-to-day lives and values of Lowell workers. Combined with

Robinson’s memoirs, these resources encourage reflection on the extent to which the community achieved its mission to become a republican factory.

All of these resources are available through Harvard University’s open collection *Women Working, 1800-1930* at ocp.hul.harvard.edu/ww/index.html. The veracity of the digitized primary sources is supervised by the digital collection’s librarians. Instructions for accessing the specific primary sources and excerpts are provided in brackets below.

Lithograph of
Ralph Waldo
Emerson by
Leopold Grozelier,
1859.

Courtesy of the
Library of Congress



Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)

While the Lowell Mill experiment illustrated a distinctly American effort to ensure that technology fulfilled the aims of a republican community, Emerson exemplified the individual struggle to come to terms with technology in the nineteenth century. Emerson was a leader of the American transcendentalist movement, which emphasized imagination and connection to nature. Emerson believed that the root of democracy was individual freedom and that nature was the surest means to this freedom. He wrote, “Nature is made to conspire with spirit to emancipate us.”²⁶ Emerson’s largest concern remained whether new technology would enable greater human freedom and imagination or whether it would stunt its growth. He was very aware of the economic and cultural changes that corresponded with the advent of manufacturing (for instance, he was a college classmate and close

friend of Francis Cabot Lowell) and wrote about the impact of technology on the human imagination frequently.²⁷ In *Nature*, he captured the thrilling effect of new technology on the imagination when he wrote:

What new thoughts are suggested by seeing a face of country quite familiar, in the rapid movement of the railroad car! Nay, the most wanted objects, (make a very slight change in the point of vision,) please us most. In a camera obscura, the butcher’s cart, and the figure of one of our own family amuse us. So a portrait of a well-known face gratifies us.²⁸

Emerson represented much of the age’s continued reliance on Enlightenment ideals such as faith in progress, individualism, and an interest in scientific thought. He wrote, “For it is not the plants or the animals, innumerable as they are, nor the whole magazine

of material nature that can give the sum of power, but the infinite applicability of these things in the hands of thinking man, every new application being equivalent to a new material.”²⁹ Throughout his life Emerson maintained an interest in science and nature. It was from the perspective of a scientist and democratic intellectual that he reflected on the role of technology within a republic.

In an 1847 editorial, Emerson portrayed the daily experience of the individual in a technical age. He situated his “everyman” on a passenger train observing the milieu: “He reflects on the power which each of these plain republicans can employ; how far these chains of intercourse and travel reach, interlock and ramify; what levers, what pumps, what exhaustive analyses are applied to Nature for the benefit of masses of men.”³⁰ Here Emerson contextualizes the republic within a new and dramatically changed social and cultural landscape. His concern is not only for the new innovations—he notes the speed with which the train and newspapers travel and compares his age to that of the “fabulous magnificence of Assyria and Persia, of Rome and Constantinople”—but also for their effects on peoples relationship with nature. Emerson’s editorial betrays his deep concern that technology not be allowed to blunt the power of imagination. He asks, “Has it [technology] generated, as great interests do, any intellectual power? Where are the works of the imagination—the surest test of a national genius?”³¹

Perhaps the greatest test the American republic faced, the Civil War, was also a pivotal experience for Emerson. In his last public appearance, he recalled the “great crisis in its [America’s] history” due in part to the industrial age and a growing dependency on southern cotton.³² At the time he spoke, he felt hope for the future:

But I see in all directions the light breaking. Trade and government will not alone be the favored aims of mankind, but every useful,

every elegant art, every exercise of the imagination, the height of reason, the noblest affection, the purest religion will find their home in our institutions, and write our laws for the benefit of men.³³

Here Emerson summarized his repeated argument that technology (and the subsidiaries of technology, such as trade) be balanced by other virtues—reason, purity, grace and imagination—for the republic to succeed.

The sample of digitized writings on this page specifically focuses on Emerson's observations about technology and his deep concern that it would serve as an instrument of physical and imaginative freedom. These selections encourage readers to not only encounter technology as Emerson viewed it, but to also distill from them the republican values he held dear.

The complete works of Emerson can be found in the University of Michigan's digital collection, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, available at www.hti.umich.edu/e/emerson. This digital library provides students the capability of browsing the collection and searching for specific resources. It includes searchable annotations and notes. Again, teachers can be assured that the resources provide acceptable scholarly content, in context. This library is unique in that students can select resources to add to a "book bag" and download them to print or save.

Conclusion

The examples above, Lowell Mill and Emerson, illustrate the self-consciousness with which Americans approached technological innovation in the nineteenth century. These examples indicate the persistence of republican ideas and values within American culture. Due in large part to the experiences constructing a new nation—conceived as a republic—Americans continued to couch their descriptions in republican ideas.

To extend this discussion, we might encourage students to return to Kasson's thesis that American understanding of

Digital Primary Sources and Discussion Questions:

Selected chapters from *Nature*

[From *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Nature Addresses and Lectures*, volume 1. www.hti.umich.edu/e/emerson. Search for Nature, select "Nature Addresses and Letters" and "Table of Contents."]

- In Chapter 2, "Commodity," in *Nature* Emerson refers to the "useful arts." What examples does he offer of man's ever-growing control over nature? Does he view this control as beneficial to man? Provide evidence.
- In Chapter 6, "Idealism," in *Nature* locate the excerpt that begins with "What new thoughts are suggested by seeing a face of country quite familiar, in the rapid movement of the railroad car!" As you read this passage, what connections can you make between Emerson's views of technology (in this case a train) and its impact on human perception and imagination?
- How do these two chapters connect to the republican notion of maintaining a balance between power, liberty, and virtue?

The Young American: A Lecture Read before the Mercantile Library Association, Boston (February 7, 1844.)

[From *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Nature Addresses and Lectures*, volume 1. www.hti.umich.edu/e/emerson. Search for *The Young American*.]

- In *The Young American*, how does Emerson discern the impact of technology on the lives of young Americans? More specifically, how has the "American sentiment" changed in his view, and what is the best preparation/education for this?

- What virtues does Emerson think men should possess to meet the challenges of the day?

Editor's Address, *Massachusetts Quarterly Review (December 1847)*

[From *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Miscellanies*, volume, 11. www.hti.umich.edu/e/emerson. Search for *Massachusetts Quarterly Review*. Select "Search Details" to find the editorial.]

- Read Emerson's editorial, paying careful attention to his mention of technology, "plain republicans," and patriotism. How does Emerson define these concepts and what seems to be his sense of the interrelationship between them?

The Fortune of the Republic

[From *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Miscellanies*, volume 11. www.hti.umich.edu/e/emerson. Search for "The Fortune of the Republic".]

- What responsibility does Emerson give the United States in world history? What support does he offer for this position?
- What leads Emerson to feel hopeful for the U.S. at the end of the Civil War?

Other Notable Web Resources

- The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson www.rwe.org/comm
- Ralph Waldo Emerson www.vcu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/emerson

technology is rooted in republican ideology and consider whether or not this is true today. For instance, some have described Weblogs as altering what it means to assemble, as national political elections in 2004 and 2006 have demonstrated. The extent to which the Internet democratizes access to information continues to be a focus of national interest. By exploring these and other connections between history, civics, and technology, students realize the interconnectedness of American culture. They also can begin to examine their own understanding of republicanism and the impact of this eighteenth-century concept on American culture throughout history. 📖

Notes

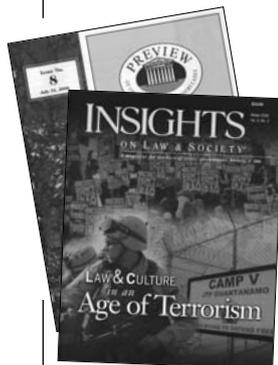
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