

History 340  
Critical Periods in American History the 1890s  
Roger Williams University  
CAS 228  
M, W, F, 12:00 - 12:50  
Fall Semester, 2007

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## Introduction

The final decade of the nineteenth century dramatized the hopes and fears of American about the course of industrial "progress." The "gay nineties" of popular lore were a time of adventure and excitement. Mustachioed men in derby hats promenaded along tree lined streets with elegant women in high-buttoned shoes, bustles, and flowing lace dresses. In melodious harmony, people crooned the new popular songs like "Daisy" and "The Sidewalks of New York." At the local saloon patrons could still enjoy a free lunch with frosty mugs of beer that cost only a nickel. When the World's Fair opened in Chicago in 1893, people came from all over the country to marvel at the achievements of technology and the evidence of rapid progress demonstrated at the "great white city" erected by the lakefront.

John Whiteclay Chambers II, *The Tyranny of Change*

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The 1890s were a time of disastrous events that evoked deep foreboding among Americans. The year 1893, which marked the opening of the World's Fair, also ushered in the worst depression the country had yet experienced. Some 500 banks and 15,000 businesses failed. Hundreds of thousands of people were thrown out of work without savings or relief. For the first time large numbers of tramps roamed the countryside. In one of the first mass protest marches on the nation's capital, a group of jobless men, led by Jacob Coxey and calling themselves "Coxey's Army," marched on Washington, vainly urging federal relief. They were arrested....Industrial violence, crime, disease, and extensive urban poverty challenged American ideals of freedom, democracy, and a relatively classless and harmonious society.

John Whiteclay Chambers II, *The Tyranny of Change*

## Course Texts:

Chambers, John Whiteclay, *The Tyranny of Change, America in the Progressive Era, 1890-1920*  
New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000

Fink, Leon, *Major Problems in the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era*

Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001

Schlereth, Thomas J., *Victorian America: Transformations in Everyday Life*  
New York: Harper Perennial Editions, 1992

It would be hard to imagine two paragraphs more different from each other than the two paragraphs with which I began this introduction. Both paragraphs really are written by the same person. Indeed, they appear within pages of each other. It is the contrast between good times and disasterous times which makes the 1890s such an interesting period in American history. Change is a constant in American life, but few decades were as conscious of the pace of change as the nineties were. Consider for a moment the generation most like you... those who were emerging from their teens in 1890 or thereabouts. The Civil War was less a part of the distant past than the Viet Nam War is now. Native born Americans were likely to have parents or other relatives who had engaged in that conflict. At twenty, young people of the nineties had been raised with the horse and buggy. At forty, these same people (now middle aged) would likely have ridden in a motor car and may even have witnessed a "flying machine". At they would have witnessed flying machines applied to the art of war. At sixty, they may have been up in one themselves... they certainly would have heard radio.

Sorting out and coping with all that change must have been a mammoth task back then. Understanding the impact of that change will be our task over the next fourteen weeks. We're going to define the 1890s more broadly than mathematicians would accept. We'll pick up the story about 1885, and conclude it in the early years of the 20th century.

To help us with this task we have three textbooks, and I'm going to ask you to delve into a good deal of outside material, as well. Chambers' *The Tyranny of Change* and Schlereth's *Victorian America: Transformations in Everyday Life* work nicely as a pair. I think we are all aware that we partake in two histories: on the one hand there are the major events, movements, and changes which sweep across the nation and which concern the larger society as a whole. These form the focus of Chambers' book. We will read something like the first two hundred pages.

On the other hand, we have our private lives to live as well. Most of us don't spend every waking moment thinking about politics or economics: when we do think about them, we think about their impact on our lives--what we can do to capitalize on  $x$  or how we can avoid the negative impact of  $y$ . As the subtitle of Schlereth's book implies, we will become informed of the changes in everyday life through it.

Leon Fink's *Major Problems in the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era* supplements the other two texts by providing us with a series of interpretive essays and primary source documents. I think that the documents chosen will be especially useful to us, because in many instances they represent materials which ordinary Americans would have encountered at the time they were written, in other words, they are public documents rather than private ones and popular ones rather than academic, technical, or political ones.

This course relies heavily on the Internet, as well. I will be providing a web syllabus for you, and this will direct your attention to many additional sources which I will expect you to use.

### Work for the course

If you've taken courses from me before you know pretty much how I operate. Classes will be in the form of informal lectures and free-ranging discussions on readings which I will have asked you to prepare in advance. I will provide a set of guidelines for reading and discussion about once a week, usually on Thursdays. I generally assume that the materials in the readings are understood, unless questions are raised in the course of the class. I don't mind being interrupted, so feel free to enter into active participation.

In addition to the reading assignments to prepare you for class discussion, I'm asking you to do three things:

1. I want each of you to **read an American Novel** published between 1885 and 1910. I'll hand out a list of authors and titles shortly. The novels on this list will be, by and large, the kinds of things that literate Americans were reading during those days. Later, some of them came to be considered "classics". Others disappeared from public consciousness as fads and interests changed. I will ask you to write a short report in which you reflect on what the novel contributes to your understanding of life around the turn of the century.
2. I want each of you to **conduct research, using internet sources**, on a movement, event, person, art form, leisure activity, fashion, or whatever, as practiced during the 1890s. You will report your work in a short project (5 pages or so), which can be either an informal paper (body notes, bibliography) or a web page if you prefer.
3. You will **keep a Journal as if** you were living through the period under investigation. I want you to invent a character (age, economic background, ethnic background, gender, political and philosophical stances, etc.) and then react to the materials in your texts as if you were that person. Write in this journal *every* time you do reading for this course, and write about a page. Keep this journal in a loose-leaf notebook, and make sure your name is on every page. I will collect these journals at the middle and at the end of the semester. I may also collect them at random times throughout the semester with no prior notice. The best of these may well also include materials discovered in the course of research.

**The Final Exam will be *optional* for those who perform to a decent standard on the three elements above.**

### Grading:

Your grade for the course will be based on the following:

- a. **Semester Journal** (cumulative) **50%**
- b. **Midterm Take-home Examination** **20%**
- c. **Research Assignment** **20%**
- d. **Report on the Novel** **10%**
- e. **Final Exam** (*optional*) up to a 1.5 grade level boost. (for example: C work could be anything from C to B+, C+ anything from C+ to A-, B- anything from B- to A).  
Note: the optional exam will not lower your grade, but it does not guarantee your grade will be raised, either.