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## The Roots of American Economic Growth

### The Growth of Cities

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At the beginning of the 19th century, the United States was a nation of farms and rural villages. The nation's four largest cities together contained only 180,000 persons and were the country's only cities with more than 10,000 inhabitants. Boston, which in 1800 contained just 25,000 inhabitants, looked much as it had prior to the Revolution. Its streets, still paved with cobblestones, were unlighted at night. Older gentlemen could still be seen dressed in three-cornered hats, knee-breeches, white-topped boots, ruffled shirts, and powdered wigs. New York was so small that Wall Street was considered to be uptown and Broadway was a country drive. New York's entire police force, which only patrolled the city at night, consisted of 2 captains, 2 deputies, and 72 assistants.

During the 1820s and 1830s, the nation's cities grew at an extraordinary rate. The urban population increased 60 percent a decade, five times as fast as that of the country as a whole. In 1810, New York City's population was less than 100,000. Two decades later it was more than 200,000. Western cities grew particularly fast. Between 1810 and 1830, Louisville's population climbed from 1,357 to 10,341.

The chief cause of the increase was the migration of sons and daughters away from farms and villages. The growth of commerce drew thousands of farm children to the cities to work as bookkeepers, clerks, and salespeople. The expansion of factories demanded thousands of laborers, mechanics, teamsters, and operatives. The need of rural areas for services available only in urban centers also promoted the growth of cities. Farmers needed their grain milled and their livestock butchered. In response, a grain processing and meat-packing industry sprouted up in "Porkopolis," Cincinnati. Manufacturers in Lexington produced hemp sacks and ropes for Kentucky farmers, and Louisville businesses cured and marketed tobacco.

Pittsburgh's growth illustrates these processes at work. Frontier farmers needed products made of iron, such as nails, horseshoes, and farm implements. Pittsburgh lay near western Pennsylvania's coal fields. Because it was cheaper to bring the iron ore to the coal supply for smelting than to transport the coal to the side of the iron mine, Pittsburgh became a major iron producer. Iron foundries and blacksmith shops proliferated. So did glass factories, which required large amounts of fuel to provide heat for glassblowing. As early as the 1820s, Pittsburgh had three newspapers, nine churches, three theaters, a piano maker, five glass factories, three textile mills, and a steam engine factory. Pittsburgh's population tripled between 1810 and 1830.

As urban areas grew many problems were exacerbated, including the absence of clean drinking water, the pressing need for cheap public transportation, and most importantly, poor sanitation. Sanitation problems led to heavy urban mortality rates and frequent typhoid, dysentery, typhus, cholera, and yellow fever epidemics.

Most city dwellers used outdoor privies, which emptied into vaults and cesspools that sometimes leaked into the soil and contaminated the water supply. Kitchen wastes were thrown into ditches; refuse was thrown into trash piles by the side of the streets. Every horse in a city deposited as much as 20 pounds of manure and urine on the streets each day. To help remove the garbage and refuse, many cities allowed packs of dogs, goats, and pigs to scavenge freely. The editor of one New York newspaper described the filth that plagued that city's streets in vivid terms: "The offal and filth, of which there are loads thrown from the houses in defiance of an ordinance which is never enforced, is scraped up with the usual deposits of mud and manure into big heaps and left for weeks together on the sides of the streets."

Following the War of 1812, elite urbanites began to enjoy such amenities as indoor toilets and coal-burning iron ranges. To provide light after darkness fell, Boston in 1822 introduced the first gas-fueled street lights, and individual households relied on new kinds of lamps burning whale oil or turpentine. The first urban stagecoach service (the forerunner of the public bus system) appeared in New York City in 1828. Then in the 1830s, the first full-time professional police forces in the United States were formed.

The cities' poorest inhabitants lived in slums. Slums appeared on New York's lower east side as early as 1815. By the 1840s, more than 18,000 men, women, and children were crowded into damp, unlighted, ill-ventilated cellars with 6 to 20 persons living in a single room. In 1849, Boston's Committee on Internal Health reported that men, women, and children lived "huddled together like brutes without regard to sex, age or a sense of decency, grown men and women sleeping together in the same apartment, and sometimes wife, brothers and sisters in the same bed." Despite growing public awareness of the problems of slums and urban poverty, conditions remained unchanged for several generations.