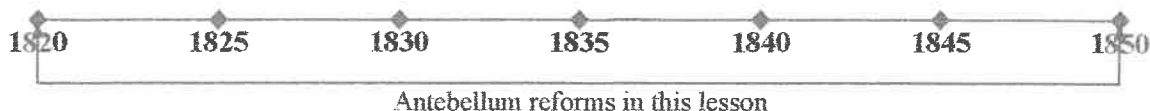


LESSON 2: ANTEBELLUM REFORMS

Student Handout 1: Problem

ANTEBELLUM AMERICA



It is the antebellum period (the period before the Civil War, in this case, about 1820 to 1850) and there are a great many social and economic changes taking place in America. Trade and industry are expanding rapidly, which is bringing prosperity to many Americans. It is also causing Americans to be more and more influenced by general economic forces such as supply, demand, shippers, and accountants, rather than local personal relationships. One religious belief held by many Americans at this time is the ideal of making society better. Religious and non-religious people have proposed a number of reforms for American society. Read each of the problems below and decide what, if anything, to do about them. You are a reform-minded citizen in each case.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Women face many forms of discrimination in antebellum America. Married women cannot own property (though single women can). In fact, they are considered the property of their husbands. Married women can't hold jobs unless their husbands approve, and their wages are their husband's legal property. They cannot hold insurance in their own names. If a married couple divorces or separates, the children are legally under the husband, so the husband generally gets custody. If the husband dies, the household becomes the property of the eldest son, not the wife. The son is obligated to allow his mother to live on the property, but it is owned by the son. A wife is expected to obey her husband, who is the head of the household. Some religious leaders say that women are helpmates, and that women have a special place to support leaders, but women should not be leaders in the church or the family. Men and women are believed to have "separate spheres." Men work in the world of business and conflict, while women provide a place of refuge from conflict for men and children at home.

Girls can go to school, but their courses are designed to prepare them for household duties, not professional careers. Women cannot go to college and are excluded from professional occupations such as medicine or law. Women cannot vote or hold office in government.

Decision 1—Women's rights: What rights will you demand in your effort to overcome some or all of this discrimination against women?

ALCOHOL

Americans drink large quantities of alcohol. The average adult consumes more than seven gallons of alcohol a year (by contrast, in 1995, people consumed an average of 2.8 gallons). Many people drink a whiskey before breakfast, and have liquor at 11:00am, 4:00pm, and again in the evening (a nightcap). This high level of alcohol consumption leads to problems, such as spousal and child abuse and neglect, poor working habits, and crime.

Decision 2—Alcohol: What will you do about alcohol consumption, if anything? Be clear about your strategies.

CRIME

In the 1840s, crime is on the rise and has been increasing for the past 20 years. The punishments for crime include hanging (for major crimes), public whippings, branding, confinement to stocks, fines, and banishment from the community. There are a few jails for holding people awaiting trial and for locking up debtors (people who had failed to pay their debts), but none for punishing criminals. Conditions in these jails are very poor. Men and women of all ages are confined together, often in large groups. Basically, criminals are punished physically, not by having their freedom taken away but by being locked up in jail.

Decision 3—Crime: What will you do, if anything, to reform punishments for criminals?

EDUCATION

The literacy rate in the United States is the highest in the world, and formal schooling (going to school buildings with paid teachers) is widespread. Nevertheless, the major form of education for children is apprenticeships (the apprentice trains with a master craftsman). Many children learn to read and write in “dame schools,” where a woman takes a number of children into her home for instruction. Many other children attend one-room schoolhouses with children of different ages.

Reformers are trying to improve the education for American children. They feel more children should attend school (only about 40–50% of students attend school) and should attend more regularly (many children attend school only a few months per year). They want to improve the quality of teaching and the curriculum. They claim better education will improve American society. One reformer, T. Harris, says, “The modern industrial community cannot exist without free popular education carried out in a system of schools...” Americans see that organized, regular services have started in other areas of life, such as police, an army, and public health. The reformer Horace Mann has argued that systematic schools in Prussia (now a part of Germany), including graded classes, separate rooms for each class, and test requirements to move to the next grade, have been very successful.

Decision 4—Funding for schools: List various ways that schools could be funded (who will pay the expenses of schools?). Which is the best choice from your list?

Decision 5—Curriculum and instruction: The curriculum (what is taught), method of instruction (the way topics are taught), and the quality of teachers are left to the local schools, so there is no uniformity. Make a list of five or more ways to improve the curriculum and instruction in schools. Which of those five would you actually put into action and why?