

**TEACHING AMERICAN HISTORY PROJECT**  
***Lesson Title – Workers during the Gilded Age***  
***From Asia Boxtton***

Grade – 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>

Length of class period – 60 minutes

Inquiry – How did the Gilded Age effect the living and working conditions of various types of employees?

Objectives:

1. Students will be able to describe the living standards and working conditions of employees during the Gilded Age. (Content)
2. Students will be able to compare and contrast the experiences of domestic and industrial workers during the Gilded Age. (Skill)
3. Students will be able to compose a journal entry that accurately depicts the life of a worker during the Gilded Age. (Skill).

Materials:

1. Workers During the Gilded Age Worksheet
2. Interviews with Journalist Helen Campell, 1880s
3. Thomas O'Donnell: Testimony before a U.S. Senate Committee, 1885
4. Gilded Age Workers Reading Guide

Activities:

1. Teacher will hand students “Workers During the Gilded Age Worksheet” as they come into class. Teacher will explain that the students will use the picture of the workers and their previous knowledge to predict what life was like for workers during this time. Students will write 1-2 paragraphs with their predictions. (10 minutes)
2. Teacher will ask students to share some of their guesses about what life was like for workers during the Gilded Age. As students share their responses teachers will write answers on the board for students. (5 minutes).
3. Teacher will explain that students will be learning about the experiences of average Americans during the Gilded Age by reading some interviews and testimonies. Teacher will hand students either “Interviews with Journalist Helen Campell, 1880s” or “Thomas O'Donnell: Testimony before a U.S. Senate Committee, 1885”. (The different readings can be handed out to students based on varying ability levels). Students will individually read their article and fill out their Gilded Age Workers Reading Guide to be handed in at the end of class. Teacher will walk around helping students. (15 minutes).
4. Students that read different articles will then be paired together and will share the overall working experiences of their workers. Students should complete the other section of their Gilded Age Workers Reading Guide (the questions that pertain to reading that they did not read) with the help of their partner. (10 minutes)
5. The teacher and students will then come together as a whole class and share the answers to the reading. The class will discuss the overall experience for industrial and domestic

workers during the Gilded Age; specifically how these experiences were both similar and different. (10-15 minutes).

6. Students will start to create a one-page journal article in which they pretend to be a worker during the Gilded Age (either an industrial or domestic worker). Students should discuss some of their daily experiences and challenges that they might have faced during this time. Teacher will walk around and help students generate ideas if needed. The journal entry will be finished for homework and turned in the following class. (5-10 minutes)

How will you assess what student learned during this lesson?

- Students will be informally assessed on their paragraph at the start of class predicting the experiences of workers during the Gilded Age.
- Students will be informally assessed on their classroom participation during discussions.
- Students will be informally assessed on their ability to explain their readings to a partner.
- Students will be formally assessed on their reading guide responses.
- Students will be formally assessed on their journal article that describes the experiences of an industrial or domestic worker during the Gilded Age.

Connecticut Framework Performance Standards –

- 1.1. Demonstrate an understanding of significant events and themes in United States history.
- 2.2. Interpret information from a variety of primary and secondary sources, including electronic media (e.g. maps, charts, graphs, images, artifacts, recordings, and text).
- 2.3 Create various forms of written work (e.g. journal, essay, blog, Web page, brochure) to demonstrate an understanding of history and social studies issues.
- 3.1 Use evidence to identify, analyze, and evaluate historical interpretations.

## Workers During the Gilded Age

Directions: Below is a picture of workers during the Gilded Age. Using this picture and your own previous knowledge what do you think life was like for these workers? Briefly write a paragraph or two predicting the experiences that Gilded Age workers might have had.



## Domestic Servants on Household Work

*Millions of women worked in factories and shops during the Gilded Age. Millions more worked as domestic servants for people who could afford to pay somebody else to do household chores. Many women preferred to become factory laborers or shop clerks rather than domestic servants. In the 1880s, journalist Helen Campell interviewed a number of former servants to find out why. A selection of Campell's interviews follows.*

### Interviews with Journalist Helen Campell, 1880s<sup>1</sup>

First on the list stands Margaret M-----, an American, twenty-three years old, and for five years in a paper-box factory. Seven others nodded their assent, or added a word here and there as she gave her view, two of them Irish-Americans who had had some years in the public schools.

"It's freedom that we want when the day's work is done. I know, some nice girls, Bridget's cousins, that make more money and dress better and everything for being in service. They're waitresses, and have Thursday afternoon out and part of every Sunday. But they're never sure of one minute that's their own when they're in the house. Our day is ten hours long, but when it's done it's done, and we can do what we like with the evenings. That's what I've heard from every nice girl that ever tried service. You're not sure that your soul 's your own except when you are out the house, and I couldn't stand that a day. Women care just as much for freedom as men do. Of course they don't get so much, but I know I'd fight for mine."

"Women are always harder on women than men are," said a fur sewer, an intelligent American about thirty. "I got tired of always sitting, and took a place as a chambermaid. The work was all right and the wages good, but I'll tell you what I couldn't stand. The cook and the waitress were just so common, uneducated Irish, and I had to room with one and stand the personal habits of both, and the way they did at the table took all my appetite. I couldn't eat, and began to run down; and at last I gave notice, and told them the truth when they asked why. The lady just looked at me astonished: 'If you take a servant's place, you can't expect to be one of the family,' she said. 'I never asked it,' I said; 'all I ask is a chance at common decency.' 'It will be difficult to find an easier place than this,' she said and I knew it; but ease one way was hardness another, and she couldn't see that I had any right to complain. That's one trouble in the way. It's a mixing up of things, and mistresses don't think how they would feel in the same place."

Third came an Irish-American whose mother had been cook for years in one family, but who had, after a few months of service, gone into a jute-mill, followed gradually by five sisters.

"I hate the very words 'service' and 'servant,' she said. "We came to this country to better ourselves, and it's not bettering to have anybody ordering you around."

"But you are ordered in the mill."

---

<sup>1</sup> From Helen Campell, *Prisoners of Poverty* (1900); reprinted in *Roots of Bitterness: Documents in Social History of American Women*, ed. Nancy F. Cott (Boston: Northeastern University Press 1996), 322-26

“That’s different. A man knows what he wants, and doesn’t go beyond it; but a woman never knows what she wants, and sort of bosses you everlastingly. If there were such a thing as fixed hours it might be different, but I tell you ever girl I know, ‘Whatever you do, don’t go into service. You’ll always be prisoners and always looked down on.’ You can do things at home for them as belongs to you that somehow it seems different for strangers. Anyway, I hate it, and there’s plenty like me.”

“What I minded,” said a gentle, quiet girl, who worked at a stationer’s and who had tried household service for a year, -“what I minded was the awful lonesomeness. I went for general housework, because I knew all about it, and there were only three in the family. I never minded being alone in the evenings in my own room, for I’m always reading or something, and I don’t go out hardly at all, but then I always know I can, and that there is somebody to talk to if I like. But there, except to give orders, they had nothing to do with me. It got to feel sort of crushing at last. I cried myself sick, and at last I gave it up, though I don’t mind the work at all...”

“Oh, nobody need to tell me about poor servants,” said an energetic woman of forty, Irish-American, and for years in a shirt factory. “Don’t I know the way the hussies’ll do, comin’ out of a bog maybe an’ not knowing the names even, let alone the use, of half the things in the kitchen, and asking their twelve and fourteen dollars a month? Don’t I know it well, an’ shame it is to ‘em! But I know plenty o’ decent, hard-workin’ girls too, that give good satisfaction an’ this is what they say. They say the main trouble is, the mistresses don’t know, no more than babies, what a day’s work really is. A smart girl keeps on her feet all the time to prove she ain’t lazy, for if the mistress finds her sitting down, she thinks there can’t be much to do and she doesn’t earn her wages. Then if a girl tries to save herself or is deliberate, they call her slow. They want girls on tap from six in the morning till ten and eleven at night. ‘Tisn’t fair. And then, if there’s a let-up in the work, maybe they give you the baby to see to. I like a nice baby, but I don’t like having one turned over to me when I’m fit to drop scabbling to get through and sit down a bit...Women make hard mistresses, and I say again, I’d rather be under a man, that knows what he wants. That’s the way with most.”

“I don’t see why people are surprised that we don’t rush into places,” said a shop-girl. “Our world may be a very narrow world, and I know it is; but for all that, it’s the only one we’ve got, and wrong or right, we’re out of it if we go into service. A teacher or cashier or anybody in a store, no matter of they got common-sense, doesn’t want to associate with servants. Somehow you get sort of smooch. Young men think and say, for I have heard lots of the, ‘Oh, she can’t amount to much if she hasn’t brains enough to make a living outside of a kitchen!’ You’re just down once [and] for all if you go into one.”

## A Textile Worker Explains the Labor Market

*Wageworkers had jobs as long as they could be hired. Employers laid off workers during business slumps or replaced those whose jobs could be done cheaply by a machine or a worker with a lower wage. In 1883, Thomas O'Donnell, who had worked as a mule spinner (operating a machine that spun cotton fiber into yarn) for eleven years in a textile mills in Fall River, Massachusetts, testified before the U.S. Senate Committee on Relations between Labor and Capital. O'Donnell explained to Senator Henry W. Blair of New Hampshire what it was like to be a working man in the 1880s.*

Thomas O'Donnell: Testimony before a U.S. Senate Committee, 1885<sup>2</sup>

**Senator Blair:** Are you a married man?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** Yes, sir; I am a married man, I have a wife and two children. I am not very well educated. I went to work when I was young, and have been working ever since in the cotton business; went to work when I was about eight or nine years old. I was going to state how I live. My children get along well in the summer time, on account of not having to buy fuel or shoes or one thing or another. I earn \$1.50 a day and can't afford to pay a very big house rent. I pay \$1.50 a week for rent, which comes to about \$6.00 a month.

**Senator Blair:** That is, you pay this where you are at Fall Rivers?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** Yes, Sir.

**Senator Blair:** Do you have work right along?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** No, sir; since that strike we had down in Fall River about three years ago I have not worked much more than half the time, and that has brought my circumstances down very much.

**Senator Blair:** Why have you not worked more than half the time since then?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** Well, at Fall River if a man has not got a boy to act as 'back-boy' it is very hard for him to get along. In a great many cases they discharge men in that work and put in men who have boys.

**Senator Blair:** Men who have boys of their own?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** Men who have boys of their own capable enough to work in a mill to earn \$.30 or \$.40 a day.

**Senator Blair:** Is the object of that to enable that the boy earn something for himself?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** Well, no; the object is this: They are doing away with a great deal of mule spinning there and putting in ring spinning<sup>3</sup>, and for that reason it takes a good deal of small help to run this ring work, and throws men out of work...For that reason they get all the small help they can to run these ring-frames. There are so many men in the city to work, and

---

<sup>2</sup> From U.S. Congress, Senate, *Report of the Senate Committee on Relations between Labor and Capital* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1885).

<sup>3</sup> Ring-spinning: A method of spinning that expedited the process and allowed mills to hire children and pay lower wages.

whoever has a boy can have work, and whoever has no boy stands no chance. Probably he may have a few months of work in the summer time, but will be discharged in the fall. That is what leaves me in poor circumstances. Our children, of course, are very sickly from one cause or another, on account of not having sufficient clothes, or shoes, or food, or something. And also my woman; she never did work in a mill; she was a housekeeper, and for that reason she can't help me do anything at present, as many women help their husbands down there, by working, like themselves....

**Senator Blair:** How much [work] have you had within a year?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** Since Thanksgiving I happened to get work in the Crescent Mill, and worked there exactly thirteen weeks. I got just \$1.50 a day, with the exception of a few days that I lost because in following up mule-spinning you are obliged to lose a day once in a while; you can't follow it up regularly.

**Senator Blair:** Thirteen weeks would be seventy-eight days, and at \$1.50 a day, that would make \$117, less whatever time you lost?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** Yes. I worked thirteen weeks there and ten days in another place, and then there was a dollar I got this week, Wednesday.

**Senator Blair:** Taking a full year back can you tell how much you have had?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** That would be about fifteen weeks' work....

**Senator Blair:** That would be somewhere about \$133, if you had not lost any time?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** Yes, sir.

**Senator Blair:** That is all you have had?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** Yes, sir.

**Senator Blair:** Have you had any help from outside?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** No, sir.

**Senator Blair:** Do you mean that yourself and wife and two children have had nothing but that for all this time?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** That is all. I got a couple dollars' worth of coal last winter, and the wood I picked up myself. I goes around with a shovel and picks up clams and wood.

**Senator Blair:** What do you do with the clams?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** We eat them. I don't get them to sell, but just to eat, for the family. That is the way my brother lives, too, mostly. He lives close by us.

**Senator Blair:** How many live in that way down there?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** I could not count them, they are so numerous. I suppose there is one thousand down there?

**Senator Blair:** A thousand that live on \$150 a year?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** They live on lee.

**Senator Blair:** Less than that?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** Yes; they live on less than I do.

**Senator Blair:** How long has that been so?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** Mostly so since I have been married.

**Senator Blair:** How long is that?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** Six years this month.

**Senator Blair:** Why do you not go West on a farm?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** How could I go, walk it?

**Senator Blair:** Well, I want to know why you don't go out West on a \$2,000 farm, or take up a homestead and break it and work it up, and then have it for yourself and family?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** I can't see how I could get out West. I have nothing to go with.

**Senator Blair:** It would not cost you over \$1,500.

**Thomas O'Donnell:** Well, I never saw a \$20 bill, and that is what I have been getting a month's pay at once. If someone would give me \$1,500 I will go...

**Senator Blair:** Are you a good workman?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** Yes, sir.

**Senator Blair:** Were you ever turned off because of misconduct or incapacity or unfitness for work?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** No, sir.

**Senator Blair:** Or because you did bad work?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** No, sir.

**Senator Blair:** Or because you made trouble among the help?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** No, sir...

**Senator Blair:** How old are you?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** About thirty.

**Senator Blair:** Is your health good?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** Yes, sir.

**Senator Blair:** What would you work for if you could get work right along; if you could be sure to have it for five years, staying right where you are?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** Well, if I was where my family could be with me, and I could have work every day I would take \$1.50, and be glad to...

**Senator Blair:** You spoke of fuel-what do you have for fuel?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** Wood and coal.

**Senator Blair:** Where does the wood come from?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** I pick it up around the shore-any old pieces I see around that are not good for anything. There are many more that do the same thing.

**Senator Blair:** Do you get meat to live on much?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** Very seldom.

**Senator Blair:** What kinds of meat do you get for your family?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** Well, once in a while we get a piece of pork and some clams and make a clam chowder. That makes a very good meal. We sometimes get a piece of corn beef or something like that....

**Senator Blair:** What have you eaten?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** Well, bread mostly, when we get it; we sometimes couldn't make out to get that, and we have to go without a meal.

**Senator Blair:** Has there been any day in the year that you have had to go without anything to eat?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** Yes, sir, several days.

**Senator Blair:** More than one day at a time?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** No...

**Senator Blair:** What have the children got in the way of clothing?



**Thomas O'Donnell:** They have got along very nicely all summer, but now they are beginning to feel quite sickly. One has one shoe on, a very poor one, and a slipper that was picked up somewhere. The other has two odd shoes on, with the heel out. He has got a cold and is sickly now.

**Senator Blair:** Have they any stockings?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** He had got stockings, but his feet come through them, for there is a hole in the bottom of his shoe.

**Senator Blair:** What have they got on the rest of their person?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** Well, they have a little calico shirt-what should be a shirt; it is sewed up in some shape-and one little petticoat, and a kind of little dress.

**Senator Blair:** How many dresses has your wife got?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** She has got one since we married, and she hasn't worn that more than half a dozen times; she has worn it just going to church and coming back. She is very good in going to church, but when she comes back she takes it off, and it is near as good now as when she brought it.

**Senator Blair:** She keeps that dress to go to church in->

**Thomas O'Donnell:** Yes, sir.

**Senator Blair:** How many dresses aside from that has she?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** Well, she got one here three months ago.

**Senator Blair:** What did it cost?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** It cost \$1.00 to make it and I guess about a dollar for the stuff, as near as I can tell...she has an undershirt that she got given to her, and she has an old wrapper, which is about a mile too big for her; somebody gave it to her....

**Senator Blair:** Do you see any way out of your troubles-what are you going to do for a living-or do you expect to have to stay right there?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** Yes. I can't run around with my family.

**Senator Blair:** You have nowhere to go to, and no way of getting there if there was any place to go to?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** No sir; I have no means nor anything, so I am obliged to remain there and try to pick up things as I can.

**Senator Blair:** Do your children go to school?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** No, sir; they are not old enough; the oldest child is only three and a half; the youngest one is one and a half years old.

**Senator Blair:** Is there anything else you want to say?

**Thomas O'Donnell:** Nothing further, except that I would like some remedy to be got to help us poor people down there in some way. Excepting the government decides to do something with us we have a poor show. We are all, or mostly all, in good health; that is, as far as the men who are at work go.

# Gilded Age Workers Reading Guide

	<b>Interview with Journalist Helen Campell, 1880s</b>	<b>Thomas O'Donnell: Testimony before a U.S. Senate Committee, 1885</b>
<b>What were some work challenges that people described in the reading?</b>		
<b>Describe the standard of living of the workers in the reading?</b>		
<b>How did society view the people in the reading?</b>		
<b>How did the workers feel that their circumstances could be improved?</b>		

--	--	--