

Why Are Americans such Reformers?

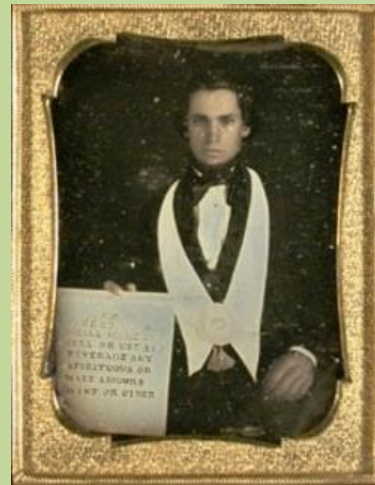
Today nearly every politician talks about reform! One of the first great ages of modern reform swept America between 1820 & 1860. Americans engaged in a host of reform causes—prohibition; suffrage for women voters; abolitionism; and public education. More controversial reforms and ideas also influenced some Americans—Mormonism, and various utopian communities flourished. Jails, hospitals, and mental patients were all targets of reform. Intellectual ideas supported the notion that “reason” could conquer evil. Nearly all of these reforms sincerely hoped to make life better!



This is an online image reveals a major jail reform—Sing Sing prison’s educational classes for inmates. Sing Sing Prison. Correctional History Org. Online image c. 1890. May 2010. Online image.
<<http://www.correctionhistory.org/html/chronicl/state/sing-sing/html/earlylife.html>>

Not an organized movement...

Some early American reform movements were highly organized –such as the tax protests against the British. But most American reforms have been loosely organized and included diverse goals and peoples. Women and men came together to try to reform what they felt was abuse of alcohol. Science was ignorant of the physical results of alcohol, but Americans worried that it caused unemployment and family disruption. This man has just been sworn into the Sons of Temperance, promising not to use or sell alcohol. For years several organizations fought alcohol, and eventually passed some state laws against drink.



National Heritage Museum. Sons of Temperance. Online image c. 1850. May 2010. Online image.
<http://nationalheritagemuseum.typepad.com/library_and_archives/sons-of-temperance/>



What was Successful Reform?

Today, many associate Government with reform—but not so in the early 1800s. Reform was the task of individuals. Some reform efforts failed completely; some advocated changes that would wait for the future; some, like Temperance, saw mixed results; and many became hotly debated. The rise of William Lloyd Garrison's Abolition Movement centered on such a debate! Members tended to be younger, urban and from protestant families. Soon women and free African Americans joined Garrison, and pro-slave groups fought him. Instead of uniting the Anti-Slavery movement, Garrison split with female and Black supporters; and slavery would be addressed by Civil War.

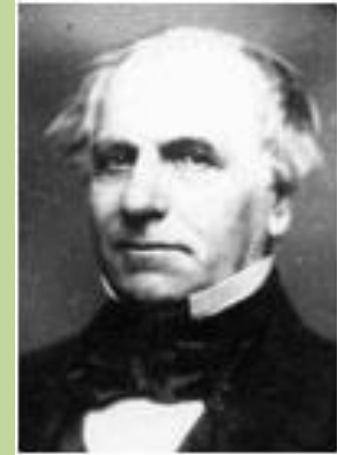


This is an online image of the American Anti-Slavery Almanac. The American Memory Project. African American Mosaic. Abolitionism. Library of Congress. Online image 1843. May 2010. <<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/african/images/alman.jpg>>



Seeing the Future

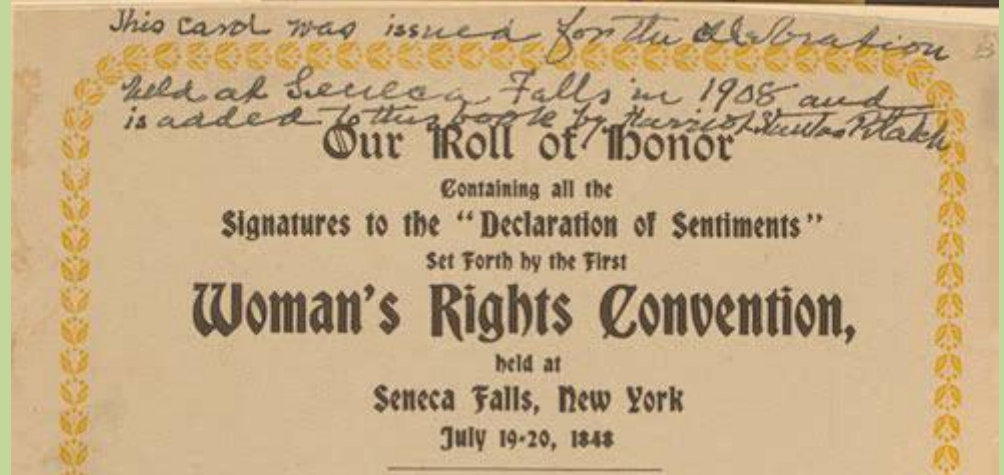
Sometimes, committees and their “reports” do help. Such was the case in 1850 when a reformer and Massachusetts lawmaker, Lemuel Shattuck, chaired a group writing a report of public health and vital statistics. His report identified nearly all modern public health concerns. It recommended a state system for maintaining statistics of diseases. He suggested “prevention” of “smoke nuisance”. He recommended public sewer drainage. He asked that food and drugs be unadulterated. And he recommended that care givers be educated and “registered”.



Lemuel Shattuck. *Pioneers in Public Health*, New York City. May 2010.
Online image.
<http://www.genealogyworldwide.com/lemuel_shattuck.php>



Woman's Rights



In 1848 men and women met in New York and adopted a controversial "Declaration of Sentiments" patterned after the Declaration of Independence, calling for the expansion of woman's rights—including voting. They had to wait until 1920 to vote.

The Library of Congress. Treasures. Seneca Falls Convention. November 21, 2002. May 2010. Online image. <<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/images/vc006195.jpg>>



Oneida

Several communal living ideas sprang up; but, these communities also ran afoul of neighbors' sensibilities, and soon many were criticized. The Brooke Farm commune lasted 7 years; & New Harmony created "villages of cooperation". John H. Noyes' Oneida tried to reform the institution of marriage. Older men who were closer to God would teach younger women the ideas of complex marriage, that all men were married to all women. Members (up to over 300) lived in a mansion and entertained quests, but soon complaints drove Noyes into exile.



This online image shows a bag bee at Oneida. Syracuse University Library. Oneida Community Collection. C. 18657. May 2010. Online image. <<http://libwww.syr.edu/digital/images/o/OneidaCommunityPhotos/111.jpg>>



What happened as a result??

Many diverse reforms swept the nation in the 1800s; they were tied together by faith; volunteerism; and a growing sense that mankind could and should improve life—not by government. Some produced lasting results in education, prisons, and the treatment of the mentally ill. Others raised questions on issues like slavery, and women's rights. The scattered Temperance movements finally got Maine to pass a bill, and some states followed—some partial success. Most of the utopian communities melted away, but would re-appear from time to time. The Sanitation Report from Lemuel Shattuck changed a few laws in some states at the time, but would become a national blueprint for public health in the twentieth century. The reform impulse would continue to grow, and soon become the darling of government reform.

