Chapter 9 Video Script

[[Big Idea: What were the causes and consequences of the Industrial and Market revolutions, and how did they change the way ordinary Americans lived?]]

Between 1800 and 1860, a revolution transformed the American economy and the material lives of its citizens. These years witnessed so many transforming economic events that we discuss the far-reaching implications of these changes in two chapters. In Chapter 9 you will learn about the industrial and market revolutions that profoundly altered life in the Northeast and Midwest. And then, in Chapter 12, we will take up the great expansion of the “cotton economy” of the South.

Historians used to portray the industrial revolution in Britain and America as driven by the textile industry. And certainly the use of water- and steam-driven machines to spin and weave woolen and cotton cloth dramatically boosted output—and made cheap, durable clothing widely available. But advances in output were equally great in the shoe, clock, and flour industries. The subsequent invention of new machine tools—lathes, grinders, drills—then created a bonanza of new consumer goods: iron stoves and ovens, sewing machines, comfortable furniture. Thanks to industrialization, ordinary people lived better, easier lives.

A revolution in transportation and markets efficiently distributed these goods. Private entrepreneurs joined with state governments to build turnpikes, canals, and railroads. Commercial and manufacturing cities—Buffalo, Chicago, St. Louis—sprouted along this Midwestern transportation network, and grew as well in the East. In this way the economic revolutioncreated movement toward an urban society.

The new economy also increased social inequality. Especially in cities and manufacturing towns, society fragmented into distinct classes: a small, wealthy business elite, a prosperous middle class, and a growing mass of propertyless wage earners. By increasing class divisions, the economic revolution posed a momentous challenge to the America republican ideal of free and equal citizens.

To moderate these divisions—and cope with an influx of immigrants from Germany and Catholic Ireland—well-to-do Americans led movements of benevolent reform. They offered aid to the “worthy” poor, campaigned against alcohol abuse, and encouraged Charles Finney and other religious revivalists. As Chapter 11 will explain, these reform movements would soon take a radical turn and challenge the established order. Economic and social transformation went hand-in-hand.