

Key Themes in History

What are the key themes of U.S. history?

Introduction

In *History Alive! The United States Through Industrialism*, you will learn about various peoples, cultures, and advancements that occurred all around the United States. Although historical events can happen in different places and at different times, there are many common themes among them. While history is typically studied in the order that each event happened, it can also be studied with these themes in mind.

You probably recognize the word *theme* from English class. A theme is a big idea that can be used to write or talk about many different situations in a topic. Since themes are such big ideas, a topic can have many themes. The word *key* refers to the themes that are the most important or the most useful ones for exploring a topic. There are seven key themes that you can use when you study about all of the people, events, and issues that are part of world history and U.S. history.

The seven key themes are:

- Patterns of Population
- Uses and Abuses of Power
- Worlds of Exchange
- Haves and Have-Nots
- Expressing Identity
- Science, Technology, and the Environment
- Spiritual Life and Moral Codes

Throughout this program, you'll learn about how unique American culture, history, and people are through events that have occurred in the notable past of the United States. But first, let's explore them based on their common themes. Keep these patterns in mind as you explore the past of our great nation.



**Social Studies
Vocabulary**

demography

identity

morality

population

spirituality

tenement

1. Patterns of Population

A **population** is the total number of people who live in an area, country, or region. Populations can grow or decline. They can also move when people decide to leave one place and go somewhere else. Scientists and historians study population using characteristics like gender, age, ethnicity, or race. This information can help experts learn about things like where different populations have chosen to live, why they might have lived in these places, what resources and technologies they used or needed so they could live there, and how they might have organized the population into smaller groups.

When a population moves into or out of an area, it is migrating. Scientists and historians have always been interested in investigating how populations move or what happens to an area when its population becomes too large or too small. There are several different theories about the exact way that early humans migrated to North America and arrived in what is now the United States. Much later in history, experts studied the movement of millions of African Americans from the South into the North, Midwest, and West between 1916 and 1970. This was known as “The Great Migration.” The study of how populations have lived and changed throughout history to the present day is known as **demography**.



2. Uses and Abuses of Power

As the human population has organized itself into groups like villages, states, and nations, the concept of power has emerged. History is filled with stories of leaders

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who were given the authority to make decisions for others. Sometimes they gained this authority through force or violence. Sometimes the people living in an area willingly voted for their leaders and gave them power.

Of course, all leaders in history did not gain power in the same way. They did not all use their power in the same way either. From the past to the present, there have been leaders who have used power to improve the lives of their people. There have also been many leaders who have created fear, unrest, or violence with their power. The uses and abuses of power have both created nations and torn them apart.

In U.S. history, the leaders of the colonies used the combined power of their knowledge and their troops to gain independence from Great Britain and form a new nation. However, there have also been times when the United States has abused its power. Unfortunately, this has often happened to people from minority cultures, such as the removal and “re-education” of American Indians during the 1800s and the segregation of African Americans that continued until the middle of the 20th century.

Power has also affected the type of work that humans do, who does that work, and how that work and the people who do it are valued by others. Power is reflected in the status that individuals or groups have in a society and in the amount of money or other currency that they are able to gain by doing work. The wealthy have often held significant power throughout history. So have employers and companies that give people jobs like the U.S. railroad and mining industries in the mid- to late 1800s. The way that wealth and work are viewed by a society can influence the way power in that society can be used and abused.



3. Worlds of Exchange

The idea of exchange is to give or receive an item or service in return for a different item or service. Even today, nations routinely exchange goods with one another. For example, the United States is one of the nations that are part of the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement, known as NAFTA, which deals with the import and export of goods among Canada, the United States, and Mexico.

From some of the earliest times in human history, people have exchanged their goods and services. These first exchanges were often built on the idea of barter or trade. Over time, the concept of currency and money developed, which led to the creation of great trading empires and cities. As transportation and technology developed, these worlds of exchange expanded within countries, among countries, and across the many regions of the world. For example, New York City began as New Amsterdam. This colony was designed to control and protect Dutch interests in the fur trade. Now, New York City is a major center for the financial trade of stocks and bonds on Wall Street.



4. Haves and Have-Nots

Trade, exchange, and money have been three major reasons that the concept of “the haves and have-nots” has become part of history. Nations and regions that had great amounts of resources to sell or trade often became wealthy. Such wealth allowed some leaders and business people to build great cities as well as offer their people jobs and the chance to receive an education.

During a historical period known as “The Gilded Age” of the late-19th century, businessmen like Andrew Carnegie became incredibly rich. Carnegie made his money in the steel industry, but he was also responsible for building libraries and establishing colleges. Therefore, his wealth made it possible for many others to increase their knowledge and skills.

However, history shows that not everyone has always been given the chance to have such opportunities. Large numbers of people were desperately poor during “The Gilded Age.” Many lived in **tenements**, which were buildings filled with small apartments that were overcrowded with people. Tenements were usually unsafe

structures where garbage and waste piled up and disease spread quickly. People lived and died in these conditions because they could not afford to go anywhere else. Some “Gilded Age” political leaders, like a man from New York City nicknamed “Boss” Tweed, provided some services to the poor. However, they also did things like take illegal payments from corporations. Men like Tweed favored their own personal greed over their political responsibilities to the people they were supposed to serve.

Additionally, human societies have also had different ways of thinking about who should be given something or even if it is possible for something to be given at all. For example, many societies throughout history only offered most of their educational opportunities outside of a child’s home to boys and young men. Girls were expected to learn about topics like housekeeping, cooking, and sewing. Another example is when the Europeans believed that land could be owned by an individual, despite the American Indian belief that it was impossible to give land to anyone since it belonged to everyone.



5. Expressing Identity

Identity is the group of characteristics and qualities that a person uses to describe himself or herself. In history, one of the most common forms of identity

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has come from the place or region where a person has lived. People often look at themselves through the customs and traditions that they practice. Language and religious beliefs can also be ways that people express their identities as well.

History has shown that humans regard their sense of identity with great pride, but this pride has not always affected people in positive ways. Many significant historical conflicts have taken place because one person or group has decided that it has the right to define identity for another group of people. The American Revolution happened because the colonists had formed a set of ideas and beliefs that had become different from British views. Regional identity between the North and the South was one of the factors that led to the Civil War. Adolf Hitler brought about World War II because he believed that the Aryan (German) identity was so superior that all others were not allowed to exist.

Gender and race are two more characteristics that humans have used to define identity. For centuries, many societies defined a woman's identity in terms of her husband or father. Blacks and people of other races were allowed to be part of American society, but the white European definition of identity was viewed as superior. Expressions of identity during the women's rights movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as well as the civil rights movement years later, impacted and changed how many Americans define their identity today.



6. Science, Technology, and the Environment

Science and technology have made it possible for human beings to survive. Humans have learned to make tools so that they could hunt game and farm land. They have created modes of transportation like ships, cars, and railroads to move themselves and their goods from place to place. Science and technology have made it possible for humans to go somewhere else when they needed new resources, to explore other parts of the world, and to develop innovations like antibiotics and electricity that cure disease or make life easier.

Such discoveries have not come without a cost, however. Things like railroads and oil pipelines connect parts of the United States, but they have also changed the landscape of our nation and the habitats of animals who once freely roamed the land. President Theodore Roosevelt was among the first and most forceful voices to champion conservation so that the American people would not lose the natural beauty and resources of the United States.

In U.S. history, this theme can be used to discuss Eli Whitney's invention of the

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cotton gin in 1794. You can also use it to talk about the effects the atomic bomb had on Japan after the United States dropped it in 1945. This one theme can be applied to two completely different time periods. Themes are often repeated, so people recognize them again and again.



7. Spiritual Life and Moral Codes

Humans have historically tended to join the ideas of morality and spirituality together in their daily lives. **Spirituality** is the belief in a force or deity that is supreme to humans and has some impact on how humans live. Some cultures view spirituality through the idea of a single deity known by names such as Allah, God, or Yahweh. Others have defined spirituality through multiple gods that are connected to nature. Humans have also found spirituality in the sun, moon, and stars.

Morality is the human sense that ideas and actions are “good” or “bad.” Like identity, the human sense of spiritual life and morality has often led to historical conflict. For example, John Winthrop and the Puritans established the

Massachusetts Bay Colony in the New World because they felt they were being persecuted in England for their religious beliefs. The Salem Witch Trials of the late 1600s were an example of how humans intertwined spirituality and morality. Women were hanged because they were believed to have caused behavior in others that was considered “witchcraft.”

How someone defines his or her spirituality and morality remains such a personal (and at times deeply divisive) issue that the founders of the United States mandated that Church should remain separate from national matters of State. Americans have also been given the explicit right to worship, or not worship, in whatever way they choose. Still, the ideas of spirituality and morality remain a part of social, political, and judicial decisions in the United States, and this will probably continue to be true in the future.



Lesson Summary

Patterns of Population

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Investigating how populations have lived, migrated, and changed throughout history can help historians discover patterns within our history.

Uses and Abuses of Power

Some leaders use their power to help and improve the lives of others. However, some leaders remain greedy and seek to better themselves rather than the people they are responsible for.

Worlds of Exchange

Exchanging ideas, goods, and services with others has and will continue to be a very important contributor to the success of the United States.

Haves and Have-Nots

Nations who have access to natural resources are often wealthier than those that do not.

Expressing Identity

People often embrace their own unique identities. Unfortunately, conflicts can arise when an individual person or group decides that it has the right to dictate the identities of others.

Science, Technology, and the Environment

Inventions have been advancing the United States throughout its history. However, many of these inventions have had negatively affected our environment.

Spiritual Life and Moral Codes

Every culture has its own spirituality and moral codes. It is important to respect these differences and to ensure that all Americans can live their lives according to their own beliefs.

