Historical Background

The 1920s brought great changes to American culture, society, and politics. The “Roaring Twenties,” as the decade was called, saw the popularization of jazz, flappers, speakeasies, and bootleg liquor, as well as major advances in women’s rights. African American cultural expression (such as jazz) started to appeal to mainstream America, even as Jim Crow laws restricted the rights of African Americans. Economically, the 1920s began as a time of prosperity, but ended with the disastrous stock market crash in October 1929.

In the 1920s, America experienced extreme prosperity for most of the decade. Borrowing on credit and buying on installment plans was hugely popular during this decade, as was trading on the stock market. The stock market crash of 1929 was the end of the prosperity and brought about the beginning of the Great Depression.

The influence of the temperance movement led to the passage of the eighteenth amendment to the Constitution, which enacted Prohibition throughout the United States. This change brought about many unintended consequences, including bootlegging, speakeasies, and a rise in organized crime.

Women gained suffrage in the U.S. during this decade, as well as greater freedom in the social sphere. Women began to participate more in sports, dress in different manners that asserted their independence and newfound agency, and exercise their political agency as well.

The African American experience during this time was fraught with highs and lows. Race riots continued throughout the country, but the Harlem Renaissance began during this same time. African Americans also founded the American Negro Labor Conference, Opportunity magazine, Negro History Week, and the Atlanta Daily World during this decade. Black Americans continued to fight for new roles as well as create organizations in which they could stand together against racial discrimination.

Suggestions for Teachers

The Library of Congress has several great resources for the teaching of 1920s culture, society, and politics. There are several related primary source sets (here and here) as well as collections like Prosperity and Thrift: The Coolidge Era and the Consumer Economy, 1921-1929.

Using the images in this primary source set, students can compare and contrast the cultural and political gains of women and African Americans during the 1920s. You can also incorporate sources from popular culture, such as music recordings and magazine advertisements, to discuss the role of popular culture in society and how it relates to economic and political trends.

Additional Links:

- TPS-MTSU newsletter: The 1920s
- Progressive Era to New Era, 1900-1929 (American Memory Timeline)
- The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow: The Harlem Renaissance (1917—1935) (PBS)
- Prohibition (PBS)
- Jazz (PBS)
- Tennessee State Library and Archives—The 1920s and the Great Depression
Prohibition

Moonshine still recently confiscated by the Internal Revenue Bureau photographed at the Treasury Department [between 1921 and 1932]

A fair haul by the liquor squad [1922]

Bud Getchin's ten-year-old has a scared-rabbit look—he knows that he is confronting them Revenues [1920]

Policeman standing alongside wrecked car and cases of moonshine [1922]

Latest thing in flasks. Mlle. Rhea, dainty dancer who is now in the city as part of the Keiths program inaugurates the garter flask fad in Washington [1926]

[How does she come to him?] [1938]
Col. Sherrell, Supt. of Public Buildings and Grounds, has issued an order that bathing suits at the Washington bathing beach must not be over six inches above the knee … [1922]
Sports

[Miss Vivian Marinelli giving lesson in dancing the Charleston to basketball players of Washington, D.C.'s Palace Club: Jones, Conway, Grody, Saunders, Kearns, Glascoe, and Manager Kennedy] [1926]

[Rosedale Girls Basketball team] [1924]

“Jewels” [1920]

Mouse-trap armor for caddies - here is the newest safety device seen on California links [192-]

Jacob Ruppert, Gov. Al Smith & wife at opening of Yankee Stadium, 4/18/23 (baseball) [1923]
Victor records; vocal blues, religious spirituals, red hot dance tunes, sermons, novelties. [1929]

Recordings from the 1920s from the National Jukebox:

The 1920s was a time of musical exploration and experimentation. New genres were emerging and flourishing across the country, as well as new dances and attitudes/styles to go along with them. This playlist includes various songs recorded in the 1920s that showcase the different genres that were gaining popularity during this decade.
The history of the Harlem house-party dates back as far as the World War. To understand what gave such an impetus and community-wide significance to this institution, it is necessary to get a picture of living conditions as they were in Harlem at that time.

During the early nineteen twenties it is estimated that more than 800,000 Negroes migrated to Harlem. Most of them, Africans and American Negroes from the cotton fields and some Negroes of the Deep South. They were all aggregated in a small section of Manhattan about fifty blocks long and seven or eight blocks wide; an area teeming with life and activity. Housing experts have estimated that, sometimes, as many as five to seven thousand people have been known to live in a single block.

Nevertheless, living conditions under such circumstances were anything but wholesome and pleasant. It was a typical slum and tenement area little different from many others in New York except for the fact that its Negro races were higher always have been.

[Harlem Rent Parties] [1939]
Recording: Governor James M. Cox, "A world war has been fought, historic, unprecedented. For many, many months civilization hung in the balance. In the despair of dark hours it seemed as though a world dictator was inevitable. The very soul of America was touched with the fear that our liberties might be taken away." [date unknown]
Ten Financial Commandments

To Help the Individual in the Business of Making a Life

The National Thrift Program of the Young Men's Christian Association is based on the following Ten Financial Commandments. Every one is character building in its results.

1. Work and Earn. An increase in production helps to lower the cost of living and stabilize the economic situation. Every individual can help by putting maximum energy into the day's work.

2. Make a Budget. Careful thinking people recognize the need of a budget in business finances. It is of equal importance that the individual citizen plan expenditures in advance by making a personal or family budget.

3. Record Expenditures. Having made a budget, it is essential that careful spending be followed by keeping a record of expenditures. This enables one to check all actual costs with the budget estimates.

4. Have a Bank Account. It is simply good business judgment to deposit the income in a bank. Part of it may be put in a savings account where it will be safe and draw interest; the balance in a checking account for a safe and convenient method of paying bills.

5. Carry Life Insurance. The individual has a moral obligation to create an estate which will be available for the support of loved ones in case of unexpected disaster. Life insurance offers a splendid medium to this end.

6. Own Your Own Home. The increased happiness in family life which comes through home ownership can be readily secured through the cooperation of reliable builders, building and loan associations, bankers, and real estate dealers.

7. Make a Will. The individual going on a long journey naturally arranges that his affairs be properly conducted in his absence. Making of a will is simply having the foresight to arrange one's affairs in such a way that they will best serve the interests of loved ones in case death cuts off the regular financial support.

8. Pay Your Bills Promptly. The curse of debt has put the goal of success beyond the reach of many men. It has destroyed self-respect and credit. Such a disaster can be avoided by rigidly adhering to the plan of paying bills promptly.

9. Invest in Reliable Securities. Among those securities which are put down as absolutely reliable are government bonds. Reliable advice shall be secured when investing in securities.

10. Share With Others. The individual is under obligations to treat all material resources as a sacred trust and to share a definite and liberal proportion of them with others by giving to the church and to worthy individuals and causes.

The EFFECT OF BUDGETING on the AMERICAN HOME

Address given over the Radio, Station WEAF, December, 1935
By the Director of the Wanamaker Budget Service

The question has been asked, “What effect has a Budget on the American home?”

We might ask just as reasonably “What effect does a Budget have on our Government at Washington?”

From the experience of several years as a Budget specialist, I can truthfully answer that there seems almost no part of family life that a Budget will not affect for the better. No two cases are alike, but they all have this in common: That we can get more out of life by using our brains than by living in a haphazard way and simply hoping for the best.

A great deal has been said in the past of how to make money. Stories of success are built around making money or saving money, but we are just waking up to the fact that there is a great field that has not been studied—the spending of money, that is, the wise spending of money.

This touches the American home more closely than anything else, for it is the home that spends the money. The head of the house earns money, but all his efforts are wasted if the housewife cannot spend it wisely. Therefore she must look to her lares.
Finance and the Stock Market Crash

Washington, Yakima, Monument to Depression. Unfinished hotel standing in center of town. Construction abandoned after collapse of 1929 [1939]

The only home of a depression-routed family of nine from Iowa [1936]

The Washington times, November 21, 1920, FINAL EDITION, Society and Drama, Image 17. [pdf]
Citations: 1920s

Teachers: Providing these primary source replicas without source clues may enhance the inquiry experience for students. This list of citations is supplied for reference purposes to you and your students. We have followed the Chicago Manual of Style format, one of the formats recommended by the Library of Congress, for each entry below, minus the access date. The access date for each of these entries is 02/19/19.


