

# LEISURE

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Leisure of the Civil War generation reveals much about the divergence between North and South that only war could reconcile. Indeed, leisure represented one of the key social characteristics separating the two sections. By the mid-nineteenth century, dramatic differences in the way Americans in each section pursued free-time activities reflected the distinctive economic systems evolving since the days of the early republic. Just as these economic systems shaped work, community, technology, and the family in contrasting ways, so leisure followed suit.

Northern and Southern leisure patterns began diverging in colonial times. Both sections inherited premodern leisure forms from British folk culture, which merged work and play within the agricultural cycle. Challenges of the American frontier stimulated the need for harvest festivals, work-related competition, and "blood sports" involving violence between men or animals. Old-world leisure found a receptive environment in Southern rhythms of agrarian production and customary parish festivals of the Anglican Church. Contrastingly, the influence of religious groups such as Puritans, Dutch Calvinists, and Quakers tended to restrain traditional pastimes in the North as impediments to the divine summons for steady industry and orderly community.

Industrialization in the nineteenth century accentuated differences in leisure. While the North's industrial development, fueled by free labor, spurred the growth of cities, national markets, and communication improvements, the South tied itself to plantation agriculture based on slave labor. With one section on a course of rationalization and urbanization, and the other remaining traditional and agrarian, the leisure gap widened.



Officers of the 114th Pennsylvania Infantry playing cards near Petersburg, Virginia, August 1864

**(Library of Congress)**

Although in the antebellum era a majority of Northerners continued living in rural areas, industrialization enfolded both country and city folk in the sweep of its economic and cultural changes. The North's tempo amazed visitors from overseas, who marveled at the sober diligence everywhere visible. Discipline required to meet production schedules drove leisure from the work day, segmenting time into work and nonwork units for everincreasing numbers of workers. Evangelical Christianity supported the new system by invoking familiar strictures about industry, self-improvement, frugality, sobriety, and self-control. Often revivalists went so far as to condemn all leisure, except observance of the Lord's Day, as morally suspect. In the process, they confronted commercial entertainment that emerged to satisfy the new need for play. Ranging from circuses, theater, and minstrel shows to cockfights, these entertainments reflected rationalization of the industrial era. Staged by specialists, they offered passive amusement rather than the participatory play of the premodern world.

An answer to the dilemma of leisure in a society demanding industry came from the Victorian culture that spanned the North by mid-century. Dominated by a genteel elite, this culture valued purposeful, methodical work and rejected both the lavishness of the elite and the irregular excesses of the working class. In the belief that economic and moral progress went hand in hand, however, this ethic encouraged leisure that aided human improvement. Leisure could serve as a handmaiden to progress, refreshing individuals for work, elevating character, and inculcating aesthetic sensibility. Optimistic and full of aspiration, the genteel elite believed that all Americans could be united under its moral direction.

At the center of Victorian culture rested belief in the family-centered domestic environment, where women created a morally nurturing and edifying haven from the competitive world outside. For the decorous Victorian male, self-control and aesthetic sensibility replaced aggression as the hallmark of masculine identity. From the communal and earthy pastimes of earlier America, leisure fell back on the home. A variety of leisure activities might be defined as elevating, including reading (literary journals proliferated thanks to printing improvements), playing musical instruments and singing, gathering natural specimens, or collecting stereographs of significant places. Raucous old communal holidays such as Christmas, long condemned as a pagan bacchanal by many Protestant churches, were sanitized and transformed into treasured, even

sacred, family gatherings.

By extension, Victorian culture sought to extend the nurturing influence by creating uplifting literature, architecture, graphic arts, and public spaces. New York's genteel elite, for example, created Central Park in the 1850s as a vehicle for unifying rich and poor, but also to refine and promote family life. Genteel approval of morally improving purchases helped popularize the belief that self-fulfillment could be found in consumerism. Goods such as pianos, carpets, prints, and books, or experiences such as theater, museums, and travel to scenic places could be justified for their uplifting potential. Of course, impresarios tailored their promotion to capture the market for improving leisure. Successful showmen as exemplified by P. T. Barnum spread a patina of morality over sensational amusement. Circuses with animal acts might be billed as instructive of the natural world; museums advertising educational displays masked the macabre and prurient with exhibits of mummies or artwork featuring nudes.

But the genteel agenda never completely prevailed over other forms of leisure. By no means did the North realize a uniform, mass society in the years before the Civil War. Immigrants, working poor, and single men gravitated to leisure that the genteel hoped to vanquish. Traditional forms of leisure such as drinking, gambling, visiting houses of prostitution, and attending commercialized blood-sports events continued for those who sought masculine identity in such pastimes. Newspapers and book publishers captured a working-class and rural market for sensational literature with racy, monstrous, and morbid crime stories. Premodern folk pastimes persisted in the countryside, although in a piecemeal fashion revolving around work.

From other quarters too appeared resistance to genteel reform. Some Victorians who agreed that leisure should uplift disagreed that it required repose. To them, Victorian culture seemed to smother manly nature with domestication and to breed American males too enervated for leadership roles. Genteel elites such as Oliver Wendell Holmes, Henry Ward Beecher, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson argued for a "muscular Christianity" that used physically demanding leisure to invigorate character and body. Higginson, for example, whose **Army Life in a Black Regiment** later became a classic chronicle of the war, wrote in 1858 that only strenuous exercise could prepare youth to "grasp the rudder of the age" and confront social crises. Baseball clubs that mushroomed before the war, playing an organized version of an old English children's game variously known as "townball" and "rounders," provide an example. They attempted to demonstrate that through vigorous leisure young men might avoid violence, drinking, and other vices while imbibing virtues through gentlemanly competition.

Some traditional pastimes outpaced reformers when those pastimes were somewhat cleansed and promoted in a nation connected by mass print media and telegraphy. Although most leisure remained local, some sports of ancient lineage, such as horse racing and prize fighting, captured an enormous popular following—to the genteel elite's dismay. Yet the demand for such leisure augured the emergence of mass society with its love of spectacle, presaging large-scale spectator sports later in the century. Sports reporting in the penny press and specialized sporting journals, a departure in publishing, tried to quench the public thirst for sports information. In a scenario increasingly repeated later in the century, genteel elites disagreed but could not ignore the power of this burgeoning market for unimproving leisure. In 1860, for example, **Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper** railed against prizefighters as the heroes of brothels, gambling dens, and saloons, yet nevertheless dispatched reporters and artists to cover a much-anticipated bout in London the same year.

Although elements of Northern leisure existed in the South, Southern leisure in general reflected the region's precapitalist status. Agrarian life along with a homogeneous population encouraged the persistence of leisure integrated with the seasonal nature of work. With wealth gravitating upward, plain folk and slaves never reached the stage of a consumer market for commercial leisure. Instead of a genteel elite promoting leisure as a means of complementing industry, a planter elite set the tone for work as a means to enjoy free time. Leisure unified the South, but hardly in the manner envisioned by the North's genteel elite.

Travelers in the South invariably expressed shock or amusement over the indolent and improvident behavior they witnessed. One observer wrote in 1855 of Southerners: "Life to them is but a play-day, and the question of every morning is—how to kill time?" From the lowland South's cotton cycles to herd farming of the upland,

customary leisure contrasted with labor-intensive industry of Northern mills and small farms. In the Southern environment, where leisure permeated the entire social order, virtues prized in the North such as industry, self-control, discipline, and thrift never took root. As in premodern Europe, time flowed from the present backward with little pensiveness about the future.

The institution of slavery provided the stoutest pillar supporting this leisure-indulgent society. Slavery blurred class differences among whites because the “mudsills” represented a servile class that bore the burden of work. Instead of dignifying labor, slavery degraded it. Work in Southern culture meant perpetual servitude and toil, the mark of Cain rather than a purposeful, organizing principle. Slavery bonded all whites because all whites shared the privilege of its opposite, leisure. Through play and not work, whites earned status in the South’s patriarchal system. Status could be achieved in a number of ways harking back to premodern Europe. These included displays of strength, aggression, and skill.



Photographer Mathew Brady (**center**) and General Ambrose Burnside (**right**) relaxing in camp, probably near Cold Harbor, Virginia, 1864

(Library of Congress)

The English aristocracy provided planters a model for a leisurely lifestyle that cotton supported. Visitors at sumptuous mansions recorded lavish hospitality, including banquets, fox hunting, balls, and card parties. A Northerner remarked about the typical planter: “Leisure and ease are inmates of his roof....He takes no note of time.” Although the planters comprised a tiny minority of Southerners, the planters’ conspicuous consumption and sporting leisure earned status from those below. Mutuality that characterized the patriarchal system rested on sociability of planters toward common folk. A planter might invite neighbors to barbecues, harvest festivals, or horse races. But he also might participate in the common Southerners’ more typical pastimes such as cockfights, hunting parties, fist fights, or “gander pulling” (a live gander with

greased neck would be hung upside down while mounted riders competed to yank off its head). By sharing frolic and aggressive sport, white males demonstrated their status and reconfirmed their dominance over women and slaves.

Play unified white males and maintained the social hierarchy, but it also enabled planters to retain control of slaves. A planter might threaten his operation by neglecting to indulge slaves and participate in their leisurely diversions. Some planters more than others permitted slaves more leisure, allowing them to attend horse races or cockfights, fish, and own firearms for hunting. On many plantations, slaves looked forward to Saturday night dances that an eyewitness termed "one of the finest specimens of animated nature I ever gazed upon." (Ironically, but poignantly, urban audiences simultaneously paid to watch songs and dances by blackface minstrels that purported to enact plantation life.) Planters usually joined slaves in work-related festivities such as hog killing or corn shuckings. Slaves often fondly remembered such occasions that featured drinking, eating, dancing, singing, and shouting while the work went on.

Few planters dared not host annual Christmas holidays, which slaves eagerly anticipated all year. Replicating premodern Christmas, the holiday involved suspension of ordinary routine and inversion of the social hierarchy. Slaves, for example, entered the "big house" and demanded gifts. A week of convivial drinking, eating, and dancing followed, lubricated by liquor supplied by the planter. The reuniting of slave families made the holidays all the merrier. "The whole exhibited a scene which might more than compare with the bacchanal feasts and amusements of antiquity," a jarred Bostonian remembered of one Christmas scene. Like the European aristocracy, planters encouraged the Christmas revelry as a safety valve ensuring loyalty the rest of the year. In his autobiography, Frederick Douglass identified the holidays as a psychological tool that planters used not only to maintain control, but also to create greater dependency. "Their object seems to be, to disgust their slaves with freedom, by plunging them into the lowest depths of dissipation," Douglass wrote.

Leisure then acted as a thread drawn from top to bottom of Southern society. As slaves enabled Southerners to employ leisure as a kind of cultural glue, so perhaps were Southerners willing to commit themselves to war as a way to protect their leisure and hence their status. On the basis of Northern and Southern disparities in leisure, it is perhaps less surprising that such divergent societies could settle their differences only on the battlefield. One society set itself on a path of rationalized and commercial leisure based on systematic work; in the other, leisure reflected premodern play and formed an integral, not auxiliary, part of the social system.

Once under way, the war curtailed leisure for a brief time. With three million men under arms during the conflict, participation in pastimes such as yachting, baseball, rowing, and horse racing dwindled. The public initially abstained from commercial entertainments such as theater and travel. But in the North the war galvanized new forms of leisure. For example, the first exchange of New York, Brooklyn, and New Jersey baseball teams with Philadelphia teams occurred during the war years. During the war, baseball teams played to crowds of as many as 15,000. New wealth in the North opened floodgates of consumer spending and ushered in excesses of extravagance that the genteel elite found immoral. For rich and poor, the war signaled a holiday from the genteel agenda. Horse racing, prizefighting, and billiard matches ratcheted stakes upward like never before. Elite summer resorts such as Saratoga and Nahant boomed with patrons fitted out in luxurious finery. During the war, entrepreneur A. T. Stewart built his Cast Iron Palace, an eight-story retail establishment that occupied a full block in Manhattan. Illuminated with gaslights, hundreds of windows, and a glass dome, its lush shopping areas featured laces, silk gowns, and \$1,000 camel-hair shawls. "There is something saddening, indeed revolting, in the high glee with which the people here look upon what ought to be, at any rate, a grievous national calamity," a **London Times** correspondent observed in a 3 November 1863 column. "The indulgence in every variety of pleasure, luxury, and extravagance is simply shocking."

Yet Southerners hardly displayed abstemious behavior either, although new money did not prompt their immoderation. In fiery sermons, Southern clergy thundered against pleasurable leisure activities that angered God against the Southern cause. These excesses were the timeless sins of drinking, gambling, sex, and merry-making. Concert halls and theaters in Southern cities continued to do a brisk business. In 1863, residents of Richmond, a city "favored with fun," according to the **Richmond Enquirer**, could choose among

burlesque, drama, concerts, and comedy in a variety of theaters.



Soldiers at rest after drill, Petersburg, Virginia, 1864

#### **(National Archives)**

Soldiers from both sides appear to have shown fewer differences in their leisure than did their respective regions. Soldiering was, in a sense, a form of leisure itself, for it provided a way to prove one's masculinity much like a fight, a wager, or a feat of strength. But it also provided boys with excitement, adventure, and release from the endless humdrum of labor on farms or in mines and mills. Army life presented long stretches of free time punctuated by the terror of combat. It assembled tens of thousands of men from different classes who brought their leisure practices to camp. Premodern, modern, and improving leisure forms mingled and pervaded camp life. Traditional pastimes familiar to country boys included foot races, hunting, shooting matches, gander pulling, brawling, and other folderol. Yet, as reformers pointed out, some traditional leisure threatened self-discipline, self-control, and sober habits. Many soldiers testified to the pernicious influence of army camps on morals. Removed from the restraints of home and community, soldiers on both sides gambled, drank, and visited prostitution houses. Gambling, perhaps the most common indulgence, introduced many youths not only to cards, dice, and chuck-a-luck, but also to traditional wagering events such as cockfighting and horse racing. Drinking proved such a problem that it concerned both commanders and moralists. General George B. McClellan, for example, claimed that abstinence from liquor would mean an extra 50,000 troops to his army.

Union and Confederate recruits integrated modern leisure activities into the playful chaos of premodern pastimes. Thanks to printing improvements and the common school, soldiers on both sides read extensively, although Federals enjoyed an abundance of print unknown to Confederates. Newspapers, religious material, and pulp fiction such as Beadle's Dime Book series predominated. Music also provided a popular pastime in all camps. Soldiers sang whenever possible, formed glee clubs, and played banjos, fiddles, and guitars brought from home. Publishers capitalized on the rage for music with a flood of patriotic and sentimental song sheets printed in an accordion fold-out format. Commercial theater, minstrel shows, and circuses were emulated in camp, with organizers often charging admission. Baseball became the favorite organized sport in both Union and Confederate camps, although versions of the game differed. Because of the game's challenging diversion and orderly release of energy, officers often staged baseball matches.

As might be expected, in Union camps soldiers and outsiders tried to restrict play to improving activities. Army chaplains, U.S. Christian Commission representatives, and other reform-minded missionaries tried to discourage common camp vices, but with mixed results. Dismayed at drunkenness, gambling, obscene

literature, pictures of minimally clothed or naked women, and bawdy singing, reformers tried to introduce the moral influences of domesticity into camp. Some tried to improve soldiers' use of leisure by organizing literary associations with lending libraries. Soldiers formed debating societies and mounted genteel "lyceums" that included an edifying agenda of recitations, speeches, and spelling bees.

Soldiers returned home exposed to new leisure forms and practices. The irregular pattern of army life legitimized leisure for many accustomed to continual toil, and it introduced others to both meaningful and debased ways to spend free time. In camp, recruits created the largest aggregate of Americans ever to play organized sports up to that time, aiding the postwar boom in team sports. But the conflict transformed leisure in more significant ways than promoting the spread of leisure through veterans. Appreciation of war's physical and spiritual demands brought muscular Christianity and its derivatives into the mainstream of the genteel agenda. After the war, vigorous exercise was viewed as a way to build character and avoid national decadence. Cultural leaders promoted team sports such as football to inculcate selfless action and moral toughness in youth.

More important, long-term effects from the war's expansion of capital, markets, productive capacity, and communication networks helped create a national culture. Leisure grew ever more commercial, uniform, rational, and specialized. With the triumph of free-labor industrial capitalism over slavery, the war kicked out leisure as a prop of the South's old social order and began the slow process of bringing the South into national life. New wealth produced by the conflict introduced thousands of Northerners to commercial entertainment and the purchase of luxury goods, which moved the nation closer toward its transformation into a consumer culture. By the end of the century, the genteel elite no longer could contain pressure that burst forth as mass culture in amusement parks, popular literature, department stores, and spectator sports. In its effects on leisure, the Civil War was no less revolutionary than in other areas of American life.

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