

TRACING THEMES

Economic Opportunity

The courage to take risks, the confidence to rely on one's self, the strength to stand in the face of despair, and the resourcefulness to make the most of opportunity—these are all qualities often considered distinctly American. Freedom requires individuals to discover or create opportunities for themselves. However, the government has also played a key role in distributing and creating economic opportunities.



1830s–1860s

◀ HOMESTEADING

Even before 1763, Americans looked toward the untamed west in search of greater wealth and freedom. In the 1830s, the Mormons went west to escape religious as well as economic persecution. The government helped to expand economic opportunities for whites by first clearing the land of its native inhabitants, relocating them to reservations or killing them.

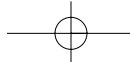
As the nation claimed ownership of the land, it also gave it away. The Homestead Act of 1862 provided free of charge 160 acres of public land to anyone 21 years of age or older or the head of a family who had inhabited the land for five years and had improved it. This provided Americans a chance to be independent and self-sufficient if they would work hard. From 1862 until 1900, between 400,000 and 600,000 families were provided homesteads.

1900s

IMMIGRATION ▶

While many people have come to the U.S. seeking political and religious freedom, economic opportunity has also been a key reason for immigration. In 1905, for instance, almost half a million people from southern and eastern Europe migrated to the United States in search of economic freedom and opportunity, as well as to escape religious persecution. Many found work at menial jobs for low pay but still were able to save enough money to eventually open their own businesses.





1960s–1970s

EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY AND AFFIRMATIVE ACTION ►

In the 1960s and 1970s, groups pressed for changes in the law to remove barriers to economic opportunity. Laws such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 were passed to prevent discrimination against women and racial and ethnic minorities in order to provide equity in educational and business opportunities.

As well, affirmative action policies were designed to remedy effects of past discrimination. The term affirmative action—first used by Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965—includes efforts to give work and educational opportunities to members of historically disadvantaged groups. Some have labeled affirmative action “reverse discrimination,” while others view it as a means to counterbalance continued discrimination that the law has been unable to prevent.



2000s

▼ COMPUTERS AND INTERNET STARTUPS

In recent years, many of the brightest college students have chosen to study computer science in hopes of landing a high-paying job. Alternatively, independent-minded computer experts might become entrepreneurs—people who start and run their own businesses. For an initial period of several months to several years, an entrepreneur may work upwards of 70 or 80 hours each week, yet the business will have no income.

Since the late 1990s, both groups have increasingly looked to the Internet for opportunities. Entrepreneurs seek money-making opportunities as they develop ways to expand the capabilities of this new technology. In turn, the growth of Internet-based businesses creates jobs for people who have specialized computer skills.



THINKING CRITICALLY

CONNECT TO HISTORY

- 1. Identifying Problems** What were some obstacles to achieving equal opportunity in each of the cases described on these two pages? Choose one of the time periods discussed and write a paragraph describing how these obstacles were overcome.

 **SEE SKILLBUILDER HANDBOOK, PAGE R5.**

CONNECT TO TODAY

- 2. Evaluating a Business Opportunity** What economic opportunities available to you seem most promising? Discuss with your family and teachers or guidance counselor what jobs and business opportunities they think you might be suited for, then choose one and investigate it. Summarize your research by making a chart listing the pros and cons of the opportunity.



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