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American social progress dates back to the founding of the American colonies, which were founded out of a desire for social and economic freedom rather than economic prosperity. The Puritan migration to the New World is evidence of this, and held precedent for America to become a country founded upon individualism and democratic progress. Hence, reform movements progressied throughout American history, from Abigail Adams’ demands for women’s escape from the cult of domesticity to the call for the abolition of slavery. However, many historians claim that reform movements in the early nineteenth century were largely ineffective in expanding American democracy. However, this period saw the growth of social and religious reform movements, greater efforts for equal rights and the abolition of slavery, and the growth of women’s role in society. Thus, reform movements during the period from 1825 to 1850 greatly expanded American democracy by giving minority groups greater expression in American society.

The early nineteenth century was the setting of many major reform movements, most notably the Second Great Awakening. Through this religious revival, Americans of the frontier, along with criminals and shunned members of society, were able to actively engage in American society (Doc B). This movement was largely characterized by efforts at democratization, localization, and the removal of religious hierarchy. These efforts were largely successful in giving more remote western areas a greater level of local cohesion and government. An example of this is the Burned Over District in New York, which rose to national prominence due to its successful religious revivals and community aspect. Ultimately, this allowed more repressed members of society to play a greater role in their community, ultimately expanding their democratic influence. Additionally, this period also saw the formation of Utopian communities, such as the Brook Farm Association. This community aimed at establishing a new social order and method of governance based upon ideal communal and democratic values (Doc F). As such, these communities strove to provide better democratic and educational opportunities than previously offered in the West, allowing for democratic growth.

Another major success of this period of reform was the expansion of women’s roles in society. This was largely achieved through their participation in social reform movements such as the temperance movement and suffrage movement. The consumption of alcohol, viewed as one of the great ills of society and the downfall of male success, was greatly reduced during this time, primarily due to the efforts of women in the Temperance movement (Doc. H). The efforts of such women as Eliza Thompson ultimately resulted in Prohibition in the 1920s, which reveals the extent of their success. By working to reduce alcohol consumption, these women not only expanded their own democratic roles in society, but also improved the livelihoods of their husbands and the security of their families. Additionally, the women’s suffrage movement was

also highly influential during this time period. At the Seneca Falls Declaration in 1848, leaders of the women’s movement including Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott composed the Declaration of Sentiments, which demanded greater rights for women, including the right to vote and partake in government (Doc I). This convention, combined with the suffragette movement as a whole, was a monumental turning point in the women’s rights movement, as it sought to expand the political rights of women to equal that of men. Such efforts thus sought to drastically expand American democracy, as female suffrage would open up another half of the population to a role in American political life and decisions.

Reform efforts also took the shape of increased female participation in formerly male occupations, including factory work. The Lowell girls of Massachusetts are an excellent representation of this, as their demands for not only factory jobs, but also for greater working conditions led to a greater acceptance of women working outside of the home. As such, the Lowell girls and other young women were able to escape the “cult of domesticity,” ultimately smudging the line dividing the separate spheres that had so long been designated for men and women. Ultimately, these efforts were monumental in expanding American democracy to women, who gained a greater economic and political role in society through their work and labor reform efforts.

Additionally, the growth of the abolitionist movement also greatly expanded the roles of minority groups in American society. The works of David Walker, Sojourner Truth, and Frederick Douglass greatly contributed to the abolitionist effort, as accounts from former slaves humanized the institution and added a social argument to abolition. Such efforts were essential to the development of this movement, as more people began to call for abolition and equal rights for slaves. Such efforts thus sought to expand American civil rights and democracy.

Ultimately, the reform efforts of the early nineteenth century held major precedent for future American social progress. Labor movements would soon develop out of the efforts of young women and Irish immigrants to demand better working conditions and wages, leading to the creation of unions such as the American Federation of Labor and the development of socialist ideas in America. Additionally, the reform efforts of women during this period were crucial to developing their path to equal rights, as the suffragette movement would later result in the passing of the 19th amendment to guarantee women the right to vote. Finally, religious revivals and the formation of utopian communities during this time led to the development of a uniquely American frontier culture, as well as a lasting impact on society in the form of new church denominations and the continued existence of certain utopian communities into today’s society.