To accommodate larger populations, city buildings grew higher. Before the war, none was higher than four or five stories. Elevators, developed in 1861 and run by electricity beginning in the 1890s, and steel girders made skyscrapers possible. The first appeared in Chicago. By 1900, buildings reached 30 stories. Cities also developed specialized business areas. Banks, financial offices, lawyers, and government offices congregated in one neighborhood, retail shops and department stores in another. Industrial, wholesale, and warehouse districts formed in a ring around the center.

Most newcomers to the city had few choices about housing. Some moved into houses built for them by mill and factory owners. The rest found rooms or apartments in buildings abandoned by middle-class residents and converted into multifamily units. Speculators also built cheap tenements in vacant lots or backyards. As trees and shrubs disappeared, killed off by the soot and grime from coal-fired steam engines and boilers, many old urban residential neighborhoods turned into slums.

Slum life was miserable. Hundreds of families crammed into spaces meant for a few. The air stank from open sewers, horse droppings, and backyard privies. Basements were damp or flooded, making homes for rats, vermin, and disease. There were few toilets and almost no bathtubs. Highly contagious diseases raged. In his novel Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto (1896), recent immigrant Abraham Cahan described a character on New York's Lower East Side having to "pick and nudge his way through dense swarms of bedraggled half-naked humanity; past garbage barrels rearing their overflowing contents in sickening piles, and lining the streets in..."
malicious suggestion of rows of trees; underneath tiers and tiers of fire escapes, barricaded and festooned with mattresses, pillows, and featherbeds not yet gathered in for the night. The pent-in sultry atmosphere was laden with nausea....” In this kind of atmosphere, fires, such as those that struck Chicago in 1871 and Boston in 1872, were devastating. Crime and vice also flourished in the slums. Some slums became ghettos, sections of cities identified with certain ethnic or racial groups.

While some ghettos were voluntary, forming when immigrants chose to live where others of their ethnic group had settled, others were involuntary, taking shape when real estate restrictions, known as covenants, forced certain groups into segregated neighborhoods or confined them to certain areas. African Americans, Mexicans, and Asian Americans often lived in such ghettos, which tended to be in the worst sections of town.

As industrial wage earners moved into the cities, many native-born, white, professional, and wealthier urban dwellers built homes in the suburbs. A few cities preserved wealthy areas near the city center, such as Boston’s Beacon Hill, Chicago’s Gold Coast, or San Francisco’s Nob Hill. But those who lived there also had country estates and were quite insulated from poverty. For them, city life was new and exciting. They enjoyed commercial and personal services unimaginable to earlier generations and could take advantage of cities’ cultural and entertainment resources—museums and libraries, sporting events, theatrical and operatic spectacles, luxurious restaurants and ballrooms, and eventually grand motion picture houses. Even though the working classes were less able to enjoy such pleasures, they also delighted in the many cheap recreational venues that cities now offered, such as saloons, dance halls, nickelodeons, excursion boats, and amusement parks.

As cities expanded in this period, pressures increased on officials to provide improved police and fire protection, sewage disposal, electricity and water, transportation systems, and health care. To deliver these services, cities had to raise taxes and set up offices. Whoever dominated these offices could make a great deal of

This bird’s-eye view of Oklahoma City in 1890 depicts an established community laid out in a neat grid. The city, in the former Indian territory of Oklahoma, was less than a year old at the time.
money through graft, a bribe in exchange for the award of a city job or contract.

Various groups vied for control. Often, one group would represent the middle and upper classes, which tended to be of native-born, white, and Protestant or German Jewish backgrounds. Opposing this group might be another made up primarily of immigrant and working-class residents representing Irish or Italian Catholics or eastern European and Russian Jews. State legislatures and city governments also vied for power. Because states levied taxes that provided services to cities, state and city governments fought over which had priority in jurisdiction. In addition, rural interests resisted having to pay higher taxes or sacrifice natural resources, such as water or acreage, to meet city needs.

Out of these clashing political and economic interests, city “machines” often arose. These were unofficial organizations designed to keep a particular party or group in power. “Bosses” usually ran them, sometimes holding political office themselves, but more usually picking others to run for office and then helping them win. The bosses also appointed leaders, usually saloon or hotel keepers, for each of a city’s political districts, or wards. These men handed out city jobs and contracts and did favors for residents. In return, residents supported the machine ticket on election day.

Machines held sway in dozens of Gilded Age cities, controlling jobs in police and fire departments, public works, and even education. Sometimes they encouraged fraudulent voting. When investigations exposed their corruption, some bosses landed in jail. But their organizations usually survived, primarily because working people relied on them for jobs and favors.

SEE ALSO
Health, public; Immigration; Machine politics; Parks and playgrounds; Progressive movement; Reform movements; Transportation, public

FURTHER READING