

THE IMPACT OF ELECTRIC LIGHTING ON AMERICAN FAMILIES

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Essential Questions

- How did life change for the average American family after the introduction of electric lighting?
- Was electric lighting a positive or detrimental force for the cohesion of American families?

Assessment

[R.A.F.T. Exercise](#)

Setting the Purpose

- Have students think-pair-share things they typically do in the evening, especially after sundown, and record their responses on the board
- After a substantial list has been established, ask the students which of these activities would not be possible without electric lights. As the students name these activities, draw a line through them.
- Noting the altered list on the board, ask students how significantly the advent of electric lighting changed life for the average American family and have them discuss whether these changes would support or undermine the unity of the family. Have students write down the essential questions and inform them that these will be the focus for this series of lessons.

Classroom Discussion/Activities

National Sources

- Discuss Edison's development of the improved electric light and introduce the documents of 1) [Edison's patent of the new light bulb](#) and 2) [the cartoon drawn by Edison's lab aide](#) of the smiling light bulb ("I shed the light of my shining countenance....")
- Discuss with students what the lab aide's doodle implies about Edison's plans for his invention (electrification/lighting of the country on a large scale)

Local Primary Sources and Secondary Sources

- Show the [satellite picture](#) of the United States at night and [Early American Museum pictures](#) of 19th century lamps, noting the contrast in power of electric light and oil lamps.
- Emphasize the drawbacks of oil lamps while presenting the pictures: inefficient, weak light source, smelly, dirty, and often dangerous (esp. camphor lamps).

Discuss also how these drawbacks might have influenced people's decisions on whether or not to stay up.

- Introduce the age of electric light with [night pictures of Parthenon in Memphis](#) lit up with electric lights.

Activity

Divide the class into small heterogeneous groups of 3-4 people after having set up several stations around the class where there are copies of the local primary documents and secondary documents. Instruct all class members to take with them a paper divided into three columns. 1) how life changed, 2) positive impacts on the family, 3) negative impacts on the family. Tell them to spend 10-15 minutes at each station (this will be over a couple of days) reading/discussing the documents and recording their findings in the appropriate columns of their papers. At the end of this activity students should have several items under each heading. These columns will now serve as the raw material for their R.A.F.T. activity. At the end of this activity, have students verbalize their understanding of the relationship between the national sources and the local sources.

Materials

- Copy of Edison's patent for the electric lamp and lab aide's doodle of smiling light bulb
- Early American Museum photographs of the history of lighting
- "Saturday Night Widow's Club" *Chicago Daily Tribune*. March 22, 1903
- "An Excellent Record" *Chicago Daily Tribune*. October 31, 1880
- Krazit, Tom. "[History Professor Sheds Light on Darkness in American Cities.](#)" *University of Connecticut* webpage November 17, 2003
- Cover of Orpheum Theatre program
- "Discusses Benefits from Electricity on Farms" *Chicago Daily Tribune*. July 23, 1931
- "Enjoy the Evening" *Chicago Daily Tribune*. December 26, 1897
- "Family Evening Can be Ruined by Homework" *Chicago Daily Tribune*. June 15, 1948
- Ekirch, A. Roger. *At Day's Close*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005. pages 329-335