America learned from Raleigh’s failures, and the later English colonial attempts succeeded.

Roaring Twenties
The 1920s, also known as the Roaring Twenties or the Jazz Age, were years of change as America recovered from World War I (1914–18) and embraced new ways of behaving and thinking.

The decade is often associated with outrageousness. Women broke free of the traditions and restraints of the Victorian era in favor of short dresses, short hairstyles, and carefree ways. In clubs and on the radio, the new sounds of jazz became the music of the day. As specified by the Eighteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (ratified in 1919), Prohibition went into effect in 1920, making the sale, transport, and manufacture of alcoholic drinks illegal. Speakeasies, which sold liquor illegally, became popular hangouts for those who wanted to drink.

The era was also one of increased crime. Societal attitudes began to shift, leading to what many viewed as a decline in moral values. The stock market crash of 1929 brought on the Great Depression (1929–41), bringing hard times to the nation and dampening the Roaring Twenties’ free-spiritedness.

Politics
Following the two terms of President Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924; served 1913–21), Republican Warren G. Harding (1865–1923; served 1921–23) was victorious in the 1920 election. His efforts to foster cooperation between government and business led directly to increased economic prosperity as industry grew every year of the decade.

Agriculture’s future was not nearly as bright. Farmers were producing too many crops, keeping profits low. In addition, they were paying high prices for the materials and equipment required to run their farms. The combination of large debt and low profits made the life of the American farmer one of daily struggle.

Immigration was restricted in the 1920s. Nativism, a policy favoring native-born, white citizens over immigrants, was prevalent at the time. Legal restrictions on immigration upset business owners, who depended on cheap foreign labor to run their factories and shops. One manifestation of nativism was the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), a secret organ-
ization advocating the supremacy of whites that reached its peak in the middle of the decade. KKK members engaged in acts of extreme brutality and violence against African Americans and anyone who befriended or supported them.

President Harding died suddenly in 1923 and was replaced by Calvin Coolidge (1877–1933; served 1923–29). Evidence of scandal and corruption in the Harding administration came to light during the first months of Coolidge’s term. As vice president, Coolidge had not been involved in the scandal and he won reelection as president easily in 1924. He embraced an economic policy of laissez-faire (a French phrase that means letting people do as they choose), which holds that the role of government is to stay out of the way of business and economic affairs unless people’s property rights are threatened. For example, Coolidge did not support efforts to provide government assistance to needy farmers.

Most Americans agreed with this policy, and in fact the American economy prospered under Coolidge’s leadership. Unemployment rates fell, and citizens were seized by a get-rich-quick attitude that led to unwise investment practices and stock market speculation. In 1929, this behavior had disastrous effects. The stock market crash plunged the country into the Great Depression.

The crash occurred on October 29, 1929, only eight months into the term of President Herbert Hoover (1874–1964; served 1929–33). The country’s prospects had seemed bright when he took office. But within a month of the crash, 700,000 to 3.1 million were unemployed. Millions were left hungry and homeless, and America spent the next decade searching for work and a new sense of identity.

**Prohibition and organized crime**

Prohibition, which was supported by many religious groups, doctors, and social reformers but opposed by the general public, had the opposite effect of making drinking fashionable and exciting. Illegal bars called speakeasies became all the rage, and bootleggers (makers and suppliers of alcohol) became modern-day heroes. The penalty for selling one alcoholic drink was five years in prison, and soon overcrowding in jails became a major problem.

As a direct result of Prohibition, organized crime increased. Gangsters like Al Capone (1899–1947) made huge profits off the illegal manufacturing and sales of liquor. Urban America—especially Chicago,
Illinois—experienced a drastic increase in violence as mobsters took control of the streets.

Prohibition was repealed in December 1933 and remains the only repealed amendment in the history of the U.S. Constitution.

**Pop culture**

Jazz swept the nation in the 1920s, and the boom in radio broadcasting brought it into American homes. Rebellious youth embraced the Charleston, a dance that originated among African Americans but became a craze among whites. Viewed by some as a “savage” dance, the Charleston craze was followed by other popular dance steps such as the Jitterbug, Cakewalk, and Turkey Trot.

In the speakeasies and on the dance floors, young women called flappers wore their hair in short bobs and their hemlines above the knees; they wore makeup and high heels and smoked and drank with the men. Both their “modern” behavior and their looks were considered scandalous at the time.

Some of the excesses of the Roaring Twenties came about because people had a little extra money to spend and more leisure time than ever before, as technology and industry gave them automobiles and household appliances. Whereas average citizens had once accepted hard work, restraint, and thrift as requirements of a civilized life, they now wanted to buy things to make life easier and give them more free time away from work. Popular women’s magazines featured articles on how a woman could raise her family and still have time for herself.

The theories of Sigmund Freud (1859–1939), the Austrian neurologist and founder of psychoanalysis, had gained great popularity around the world during this era. Americans became interested in Freudian ideas about psychology, human behavior, and personality. Self-improvement books became popular, and many put new emphasis on satisfying individual needs.

The movie industry was one of the most prosperous of the Roaring Twenties. By 1926, there were twenty thousand movie theaters in the United States. Silent film stars like Clara Bow (1905–1965) and Louise Brooks (1906–1985) embodied the ultimate flapper and became role models for young women. Men did their best to imitate the style and dress of dashing leading men such as Rudolph Valentino.
(1895–1926) and Douglas Fairbanks (1883–1939). Profits grew even larger after the first feature-length film with sound, *The Jazz Singer*, was released in 1927, and many more “talkies” followed. (Previously, the film industry had consisted primarily of silent movies.) Weekly movie attendance increased from fifty-seven million in 1927 to ninety-five million by 1929.

It was a time of fads and crazes as America’s youth took to marathons of all kinds, from dancing to flagpole-sitting. Crossword puzzles and a game called mahjongg became new national pastimes.

**Literature**

The spirit of the era was captured by novelist **F. Scott Fitzgerald** (1896–1940), who coined the term “Jazz Age.” Considered the premiere chronicler of the Roaring Twenties, Fitzgerald is still widely read. His wife, Zelda, was considered the ultimate flapper, and together the couple lived the life of excess and tragedy that has come to represent the era.

Fitzgerald’s best-known book is *The Great Gatsby*, published in 1925. It explores the themes of tradition versus modern culture, the shallow pursuit of wealth, and the disillusion of the American Dream. The book’s narrator, Nick Carraway, who befriends the mysteriously wealthy Jay Gatsby, is swept up by the glamour of the age but struggles with the excessive materialism and lack of morality that accompanied it.

Another important American author of the 1920s is novelist and short-story writer **Ernest Hemingway** (1899–1961). He was part of the Lost Generation, a term used to refer to several American writers, many of them living in Paris and elsewhere in Europe after World War I, who were disillusioned by the violence of the war. Seeking a new literary freedom, they injected their fiction with an unprecedented realism. Many also sought to break free of social conventions.

**Sports**

The increase in leisure time allowed people to enjoy sports both as participants and spectators. Throughout the 1920s, Americans spent about $200 million each year on sporting goods such as tennis rackets and golf clubs.

Baseball had been around for several decades, but it became hugely popular in the Roaring Twenties. Favorite players of the era included
Babe Ruth (1895–1948), Shoeless Joe Jackson (1887–1951), and Lou Gehrig (1903–1941). Sports at the time were still segregated, but the formation of the National Negro Baseball League in 1920 made the sport as popular among African Americans as it was among white spectators.

Before World War I, boxing was considered a violent, low-class sport. As rules changed and regulation of the sport increased, boxing gained respectability and was a favorite pastime of people from all social classes. Jack Dempsey (1895–1983) was a favorite boxer of the 1920s. He met rival Gene Tunney (1898–1978) in the ring in 1926 for the “Fight of the Century.” Although Tunney won the match and became the new heavyweight champion, he never matched Dempsey’s popularity.

Golf and tennis became popular sports among both men and women. Once a sport relegated to the upper class, golf now became a weekend sport for the middle class. By 1928, eighty-nine cities across the country had public golf courses.

End of innocence

The Roaring Twenties was the response of a nation weary of war and ready to have some fun. It was a decade of optimism, a time when most Americans thought that tomorrow would be better than today. But, culminating in the Depression, it was also the end of innocence.

Robber Barons

The term “robber barons” dates back to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when it described the feudal lords of land who used corruption to increase their wealth and power. Feudalism was a class system of medieval Europe. Only those in the upper class could own land; citizens of the lower classes could live on and work the land as long as they pledged their loyalty and services to the feudal landlords. The term was revived in the late nineteenth century to describe a handful of industrialists who used questionable means to build up personal fortunes. Today, these men would be billionaires; they had seemingly unlimited amounts of money and were not afraid to let people know it. These business owners used modern strategies such as vertical integration (the involvement of a business in all aspects of the production of a product) to increase their wealth and put competitors out of business.