

The Golden Age of American Political Cartoons

By Tom Culbertson, Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center

[Note: What follows is a selection from a recent exhibition on Gilded Age political cartooning at the Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center in Fremont, Ohio, a sponsoring institution of SHGAPE and this journal from their inception. As the essay explains, the Hayes Center's first-rate research library includes many sources for scholarship on this craft, which thrived during the late 1800s. In this illustrated essay, Hayes Center director Tom Culbertson, an avid scholar of political cartooning, provides background information on major personalities of Gilded Age political cartooning, their publications, politics, mindset, and techniques. Appearing in weekly magazines, frequently filling a full page and printed in color, drawn in copious detail and finely engraved, Gilded Age cartoons represented a lavish, at times gaudy form of political expression to which this six-by-nine inch, black-and-white journal cannot do justice. Teachers and scholars routinely use such cartoons to illustrate other points without much thought to the circumstances of their drawing and printing. Superficially familiar, these cartoons take on new life when seen in their original form and setting.]

The Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center staff created the exhibit *The Golden Age of American Political Cartoons*, which ran from August 2007 to May 2008. The purpose in part was to demonstrate the power and creativity of late nineteenth-century political cartoons. We also hoped to provide useful background information on the most popular cartoonists, their publications, and their political, business, artistic, and technological environment. Gilded Age historians have made liberal use of political cartoons to illustrate their published works and to punch up classroom lectures, but they often know little about the context in which a cartoon appeared. Our exhibit, a selection from which appears in this essay, fills that gap. Even though the exhibit has closed, the Hayes Center library maintains an extensive collection of some of the premier Gilded Age periodicals to employ cartoonists, including a complete run of *Harper's Weekly* and *Puck* as well as significant runs of *Judge*, the *New York Daily Graphic*, and *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*.

A combination of technical, market, political, and cultural factors enabled political cartooning to reach its peak of craft and influence during the post-Civil War decades. In these years, engraving and printing techniques grew inexpensive enough that magazines could afford routinely to run elaborate engravings, with no real competition yet from photography. Most historians would concur that the formative figure of Gilded Age political cartooning was Thomas Nast, who began drawing for *Harper's Weekly* just after

the Civil War. Nast demonstrated that cartoons could be a powerful force in shaping public opinion. His unrelenting attack on Tammany Hall and his destruction of Horace Greeley during the 1872 presidential campaign paved the way for rival cartoonists who eventually eclipsed him.

The Hayes Center exhibit focused on the most notable of the late nineteenth-century cartoonists: Nast, Joseph Keppler, Bernhard Gillam, James A. Wales, and Frederick Opper. They, along with dozens of other cartoonists, transformed their craft from the typical early American cartoons of people with dialogue balloons wafting from their mouths, to more complicated visual renderings that required few words. These skilled caricaturists married artistic mastery with a penchant for satire. After Nast, Austrian-born Keppler was especially influential. He founded the satire magazine *Puck* in 1876 in part to promote Democratic Party causes and candidates. *Puck* was an immediate success thanks to its irreverent humor and innovative color-printing techniques. Keppler's most enduring legacy was in mentoring other great cartoonists at *Puck*, including Gillam, Wales, and Opper.

Illustrated publications emerged in the second half of the 1800s as printing technology advanced. Even with technological developments, there was resistance from within the publishing industry to adding graphics to newspapers and magazines. Some publishers dismissed illustrations as gimmicky not worthy of serious journalism. They felt that words were for the educated and pictures were for the illiterate. Three types of publications regularly featured political cartoons: weekly news magazines, satire magazines, and daily newspapers. Up until 1900, nearly all political cartoons appeared in New York City-based news, general-interest, or satirical magazines. Very few large-circulation daily papers employed political cartoonists before the turn of the century. Many illustrated publications with odd names—*Wild Oats*, *Jolly Joker*, *Snap*, and *Tid Bits*—came and went. The best political cartoonists of the era worked for *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, *Harper's Weekly*, *Puck*, *Judge*, and eventually for mass-circulation newspapers such as the *New York Daily Graphic*, *New York World*, and *New York Journal*.

A special feature of the exhibit was a section devoted to James A. Wales, an Ohio native who is considered to be the first great American-born political cartoonist. Hayes Presidential Center staff members were able to track down some of Wales's descendants in New Hampshire. For the exhibit, the family lent the Hayes Center twelve original pen-and-ink cartoons, a sketch book, three photographs, and miscellaneous drawings. Much about Wales will remain a mystery unless new material is located. But at the very least, he left behind a large body of cartoons in the most influential publications of the late 1800s.

Late nineteenth-century political cartoonists had the luxury of time to work on their cartoons. There was no sense of urgency because their works appeared mainly in weekly publications. Printers had time to run pages through multiple presses in order to produce multicolored cartoons. With the advent of the photoengraving process in the 1890s, daily newspapers were able to run cartoons every day. As a result, cartoonists now had to meet daily deadlines so that their cartoon would match the news of the day. Their drawings accordingly became less elaborate and were printed in black and white. Newspaper cartoons often featured wonderful drawing but lacked the lush detail that distinguished the cartoons of the Gilded Age weeklies.

Publications

Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper

Launched on December 15, 1855, by Englishman Henry Carter, who had assumed the name Frank Leslie, this weekly was modeled after the publisher's former employer, the *London Illustrated News*. *Frank Leslie's* pages were filled with stories and illustrations about sports, crime, music, art, theater, travel, war, and everyday life. During the Civil War, the magazine kept a dozen correspondents and illustrators in the field. Afterward, *Frank Leslie's* devoted more space to politics as it attempted to keep pace with *Harper's Weekly* and its star cartoonist, Thomas Nast. In 1872, the weekly imported English cartoonist Matt Morgan to draw anti-Grant cartoons to counter Nast's pro-Grant drawings. *Frank Leslie's* gave a start to many prominent cartoonists, including Keppler, Wales, Gillam, and Opper. After Frank Leslie's death in February 1880, his newspaper's fortune rose and fell many times under new management before finally ceasing publication in 1922.

Harper's Weekly

The Harper Brothers began *Harper's Weekly* in 1857. Subtitled *A Journal of Civilization*, it was a general-interest illustrated magazine much like *Frank Leslie's*, though *Harper's* gained a special reputation for distinguished writing by first-rate American and British authors. Civil War scenes by Thomas Nast and fellow illustrators pushed the *Harper's Weekly* circulation above a hundred thousand. After the war, editor George Curtis recognized the impact of Nast's cartoons in his crusade to cleanse New York City politics of Tammany influence. *Harper's* role in destroying the Tweed Ring tripled the magazine's circulation. *Harper's* vigorously supported the Republican Party until 1884, when Curtis and Nast abandoned Republican presidential candidate James G. Blaine in favor of Democrat Grover Cleveland. *Harper's* lost its Republican base as a consequence, and subscriptions plummeted. Nast

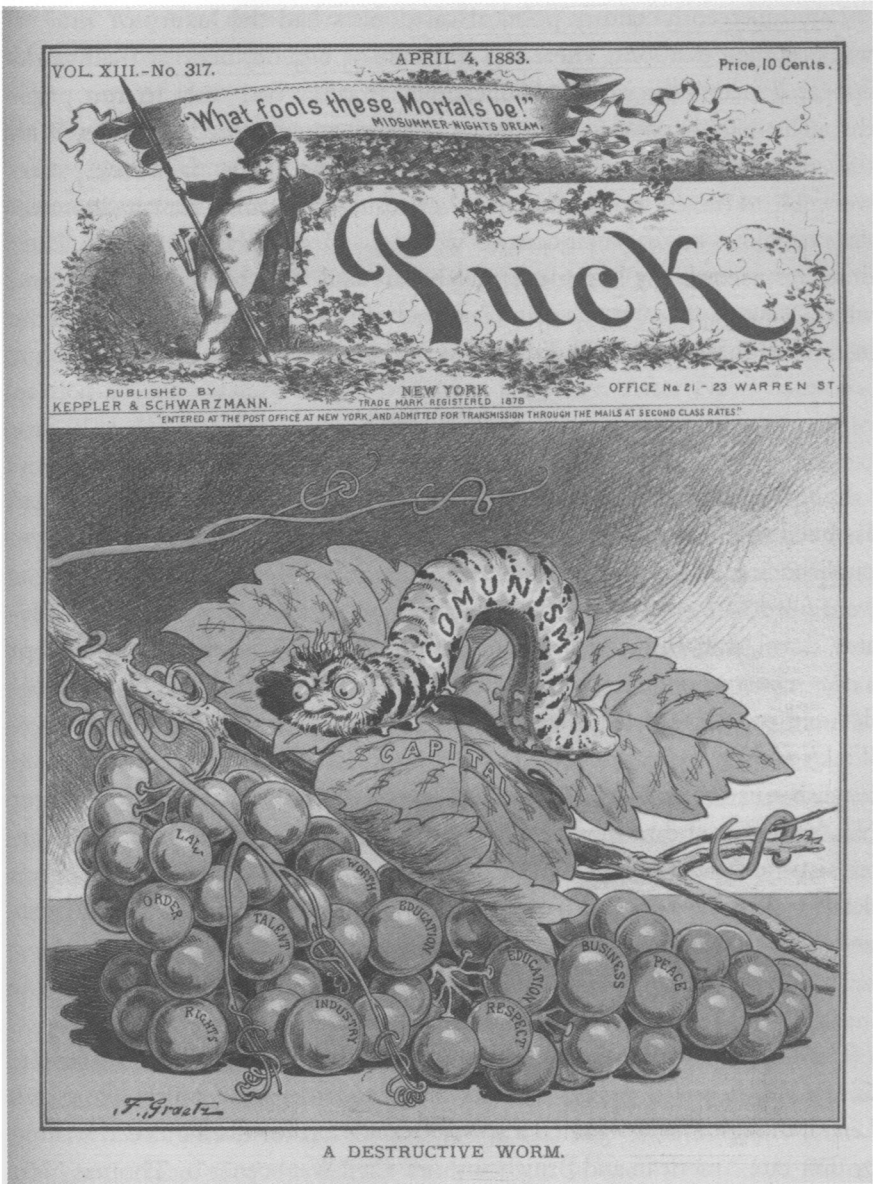


Figure 2: Friedrich Graetz, "A Destructive Worm," cover of *Puck*, Apr. 4, 1883. Graetz, an Austrian immigrant, misspells the word "communism" in his cartoon but still conveys an ominous message about it.

quit the magazine in 1886. *Harper's Weekly* never regained its readership or prestige and printed its last issue in 1915, survived by the monthly *Harper's*.

Puck

Cartoonist Joseph Keppler and business partner Adolf Schwarzmann founded America's first successful political satire magazine, *Puck*, in 1876. It

first appeared in German, but by 1877, editor Henry Brunner launched an English-language version that lasted nearly forty years. Keppler's ample use of color lithography gave *Puck* a fresh look that captured public attention. By the late 1880s, the Democratic *Puck* claimed a weekly circulation of nearly 90,000. Each issue had three color cartoons: one each on the front and back covers and a two-page spread in the middle. The other pages offered advertising, editorials, verses, puns, and humorous cartoons. *Puck's* masthead proclaimed, "What fools these Mortals be!" from Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and its cartoons and editorials often made targets appear to be fools. Joseph Keppler died in 1896, but *Puck* stayed in business until 1918, for several years with Joseph Keppler, Jr., as artistic editor.

Judge

In 1881, James A. Wales and other disgruntled *Puck* employees started a rival called *The Judge*. Like *Puck*, *The Judge* adopted the sixteen-page format with three color-lithographic cartoons. The new magazine struggled before becoming a Republican favorite in 1884. Now simply called *Judge*, the magazine countered *Puck's* assaults on James G. Blaine with relentless lampoons of Grover Cleveland. When Wales left *Judge* after the 1884 election, Bernhard Gillam and Eugene Zimmerman from *Puck* took over. They joined fellow political cartoonist Grant Hamilton to make one of the strongest teams of the age. By the 1890s, *Judge's* subscriptions outnumbered those of *Puck*. *Judge* finally folded during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

New York Daily Graphic

Started by a group of Canadian engravers in 1873, the *New York Daily Graphic* was the first illustrated daily newspaper in the United States, with at least half of each day's eight pages devoted to illustrations. Political cartoons often graced the front page. The *Daily Graphic* employed several prominent political cartoonists during its sixteen-year run, including Gillam, Louis Dalrymple, William A. Rogers, and Frank Bellew. The high cost of printing and low circulation put the *Daily Graphic* out of business in 1889. Over the next years, however, other daily newspapers made cartoons a fixture, including Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* and William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal*. Lured by Hearst from *Puck*, Opper joined Homer Davenport at the *Journal* to form an especially strong political cartooning team.

Major Cartoonists

Like Thomas Nast, who hailed from Germany, many talented cartoonists were foreign born, including Austrian Joseph Keppler and Englishman Bernhard Gillam. Eventually homegrown cartoonists such as James A.

Wales and Frederick Opper joined their ranks. The five cartoonists featured in the Hayes Center exhibit were the most prominent of a generation of talented craftsmen. Other noteworthy illustrators included Frank Bellew, Eugene Zimmerman, Friedrich Graetz, Matt Morgan, Charles G. Bush, A. B. Frost, Charles Jay Taylor, Louis Dalrymple, Samuel D. Ehrhart, William A. Rogers, Grant Hamilton, Thomas Worth, Walt McDougall, Udo Keppler, Victor Gillam, and Frank Beard.

Thomas Nast (1840–1902)

German-born Thomas Nast became America's archetypal political cartoonist. He first made his mark as an illustrator for *Harper's Weekly* during the Civil War. Best known for his 1871 campaign against Tammany Hall boss William M. Tweed and his New York City "ring," Nast helped to reelect Ulysses Grant in 1872 with an unrelenting pictorial assault on opponent Horace Greeley. An ardent Republican, Nast at his height supported civil rights, protective tariffs, civil service reform, and a strong dollar. Like many disillusioned Republicans, however, he gradually allowed condescension toward African Americans to creep into his images, while periodically giving vent to nativist and anti-Catholic stereotypes. Nast's style was to attack those who didn't share his views. He once said, "I try to hit the enemy between the eyes and knock him down." His use of symbols and imagery rather than words brought a new vitality to American political cartooning. Nast's legacy lives on today in the symbols that he created or popularized, including the Republican elephant, Uncle Sam, Miss Columbia, Santa Claus, and Boss Tweed. His constant battle with editors at *Harper's Weekly* for control over content finally led to his resignation in 1886. Many attempts to found his own magazine ended in failure. In 1902, he died in Guayaquil, Ecuador, while serving as an American consul.

Joseph Keppler (1838–1894)

Joseph Keppler came to America in 1867 at age twenty-nine, after working as an actor and caricaturist in his native Austria. Settling in St. Louis, he started a series of German-language satire magazines, all of which failed in short order. Keppler moved to New York in 1872, and Frank Leslie hired him as a staff illustrator. Keppler left four years later to start his own magazine, the satirical *Puck*, which was an immediate success thanks to its irreverent humor and innovative color-printing technique. Keppler contributed three color-lithograph cartoons to each issue: the front and back covers and a two-page middle spread to accompany the jokes, light verse, and satire. In contrast to the Republican Nast, Keppler supported the Democratic Party, sound money, and low tariffs. But it was his biting wit and expert artistry,

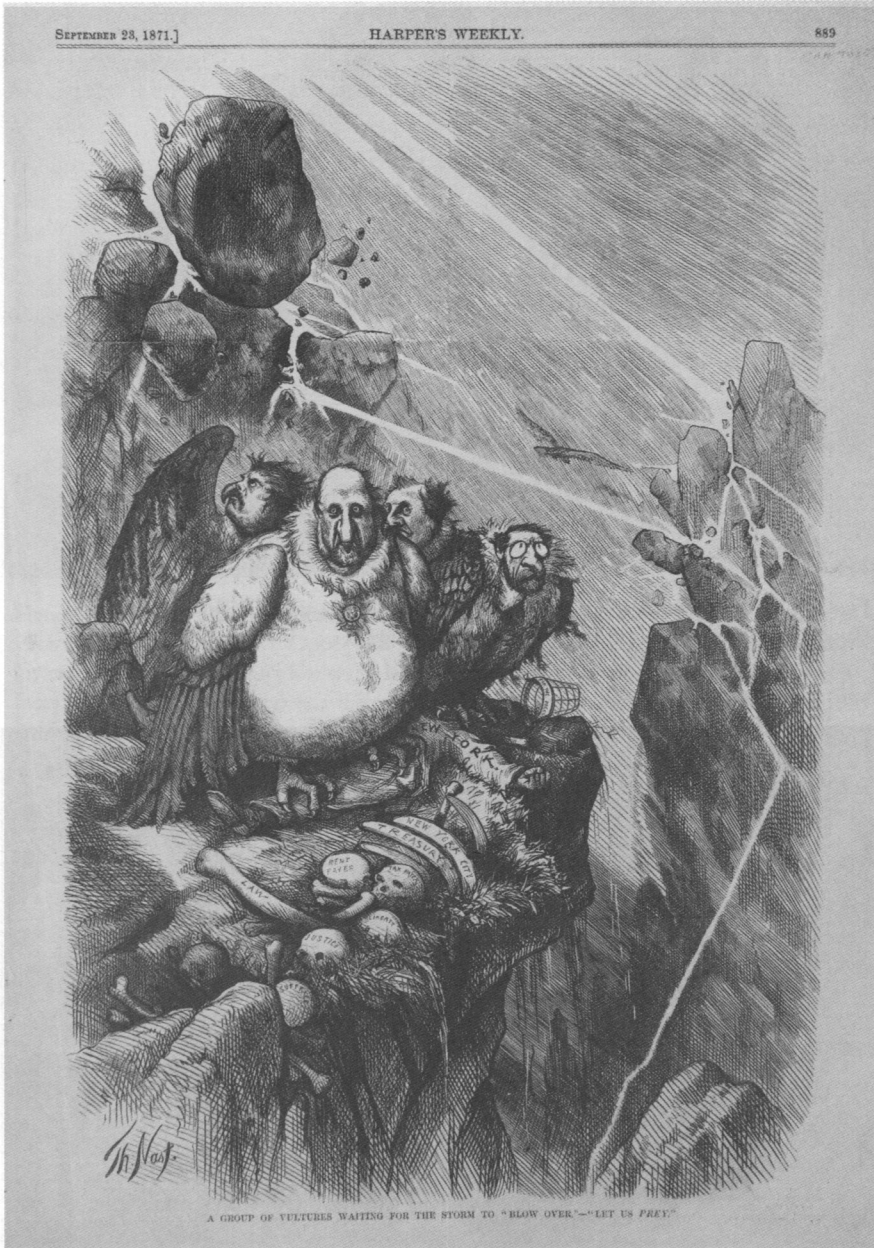
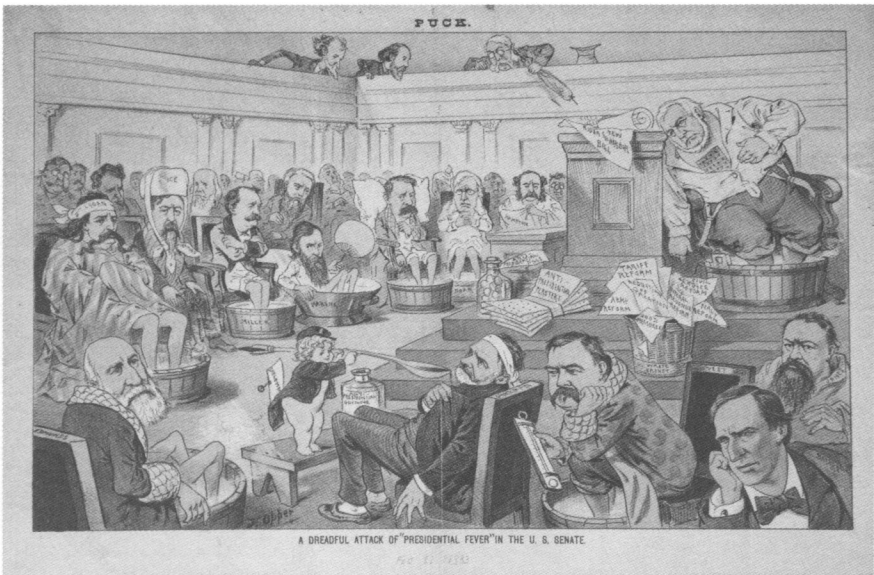


Figure 3: Thomas Nast, "A Group of Vultures Waiting for the Storm to 'Blow Over.'—'Let Us Prey,'" *Harper's Weekly*, Sept. 23, 1871. Using a cross-hatched style, Nast delivered messages with a minimum of words. This depiction of the Tweed Ring leaves no doubt that New York was at the mercy of predators.

not his politics, that sold magazines. By the 1880s, Keppler had surpassed Nast in popularity and was considered the dean of American political cartoonists. He died unexpectedly from a heart attack in 1894 at age fifty-six.



Figure 4: Thomas Nast's caricature of himself on an invitation. Original pen-and-ink sketch, courtesy Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center.



brought color into the previously black-and-white world of political cartooning. His innovative use of color lithography in his magazine, *Puck*, was more appealing than the use of stark woodcuts in *Frank Leslie's* and *Harper's Weekly*. His biting, satirical approach was entertaining as well as political. In this cartoon, Keppler depicts Democratic leaders left out in the cold as victorious Republicans enjoy the warmth of the White House once again in 1880.

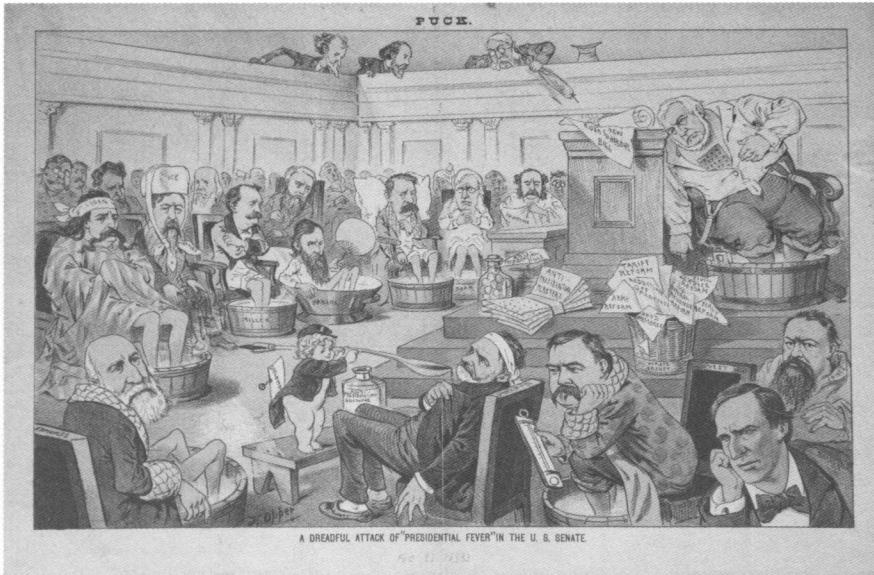


Figure 6: Frederick Opper, “A Dreadful Attack of Presidential Fever in the U.S. Senate,” *Puck*, Feb. 2, 1883. Frederick Opper had a highly developed sense of the absurd, and many of his works placed the nation’s leaders in less-than-flattering situations. In this cartoon, the faces of the senators convey their distress over having “presidential fever” before the 1884 presidential nominating conventions just over a year away.

Frederick Opper (1857–1937)

Born and raised in Madison, Ohio, Frederick Opper began his newspaper career as a teenager, working for the *Madison Gazette* until he set out for New York City at age sixteen. There, he worked for a succession of publications before joining Frank Leslie’s firm as a staff artist in 1877. When Leslie died in 1880, Opper moved to Keppler’s *Puck*, where he stayed for eighteen years. Under Keppler’s guidance, he contributed hundreds of black-and-white and color cartoons. Opper had an offbeat sense of humor and excellent technical skills. He was the only great nineteenth-century political cartoonist whose career extended into the twentieth century, when he made the move to newspapers, starting with Hearst’s *New York Journal* in 1899. His cartoon strip, “Happy Hooligan,” ran in the Hearst press as well as syndication from 1900 until his retirement in 1932.

Bernhard Gillam (1856–1896)

Bernhard Gillam came to the United States from England at age nine. After briefly studying law, he pursued a career as an engraver. By the late 1870s, he was drawing for illustrated publications, including *Harper’s Weekly*, the *New York Daily Graphic*, and *Frank Leslie’s*. In 1881, he joined *Puck*, where Keppler, recognizing Gillam’s talent, assigned him to draw the two-page



Figure 7: Bernhard Gillam, “The Circus Starts!” *Judge*, Oct. 8, 1887. The irreverent Gillam dressed characters in outrageous costumes and placed them in bizarre situations. Some critics contend that Gillam surpassed his mentor, Keppler, especially after Gillam left *Puck* for the Republican *Judge* in 1885. In “The Circus Starts!” a ludicrous Democratic Party passes in review.

center cartoon every other week. Gillam’s best work for *Puck* came in 1884 at the expense of Republican presidential candidate James G. Blaine, whom Gillam portrayed as the “tattooed man,” covered with the evidence of his corruption. In fact, Gillam voted for Blaine and decided to move to the Republican *Judge* in 1886. He died at age thirty-nine of typhoid fever.

James A. Wales (1852–1886)

A native of Clyde, Ohio, James A. Wales learned wood engraving in Toledo and studied drawing in Cincinnati. He drew for various newspapers in the Midwest before moving to New York City in 1873. After a stint with the short-lived *Wild Oats* magazine, Wales joined *Frank Leslie’s* in 1876 and then in 1879 moved to *Puck*, where he was able to display his talents using color lithography. In 1881, the restless Wales founded his own satire magazine, *Judge*, which struggled at first but remained in business for nearly fifty years. After the 1884 election, he left *Judge*, returning briefly to *Puck* and *Frank Leslie’s*. Wales hoped to start another satire magazine, perhaps in England. This dream was not to be. The creative, opinionated, temperamental Wales was at the height of his powers when he died at age thirty-four in 1886 from an accidental drug overdose.

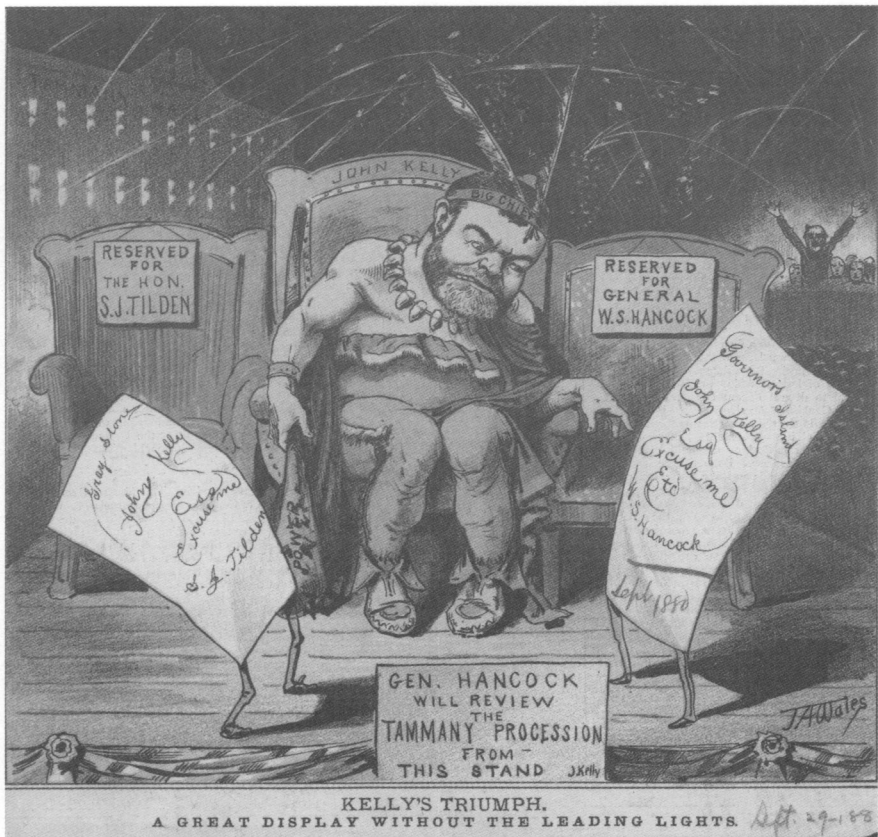


Figure 8: James A. Wales, “Kelly’s Triumph,” *Puck*, Sept. 29, 1880. Adept at both color lithography and black-and-white woodblock prints, Wales’s cartoons often require careful examination to appreciate them fully. This cartoon shows angry Tammany boss John Kelly being snubbed by New York Democratic leader and 1876 presidential candidate Samuel Tilden and 1880 Democratic nominee Winfield Scott Hancock. Note that their faces are formed by the letters in their excuse notes.

Inspiration

Late nineteenth-century political cartoonists drew inspiration from many sources, including the Bible, Shakespeare, classical literature, mythology, fables, art, sports, and other contexts and allusions that would have been understood by even moderately educated readers. A cartoonist could cast his protagonist as Moses leading his people to the Promised Land or David slaying Goliath, and the reader would recognize an admirable person. An individual portrayed as Brutus, Iago, or Judas was easily identified as a scoundrel. Not all settings for cartoons drew from the classics. In fact, cartoonists often placed their subjects as participants in sporting events or as characters in children’s stories. Cartoonists also borrowed heavily from other cartoonists.

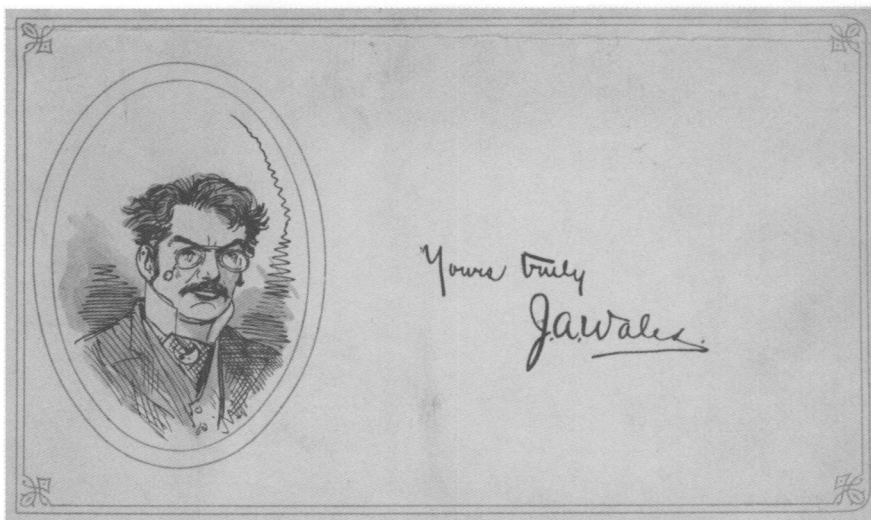


Figure 9: Self-caricature of James A. Wales. Courtesy descendants of James A. Wales.



Figure 10. Joseph Keppler, "The Cinderella of the Republican Party and Her Haughty Sisters," *Puck*, Oct. 13, 1880. Keppler's version of the fairy tale casts President Rutherford B. Hayes as the heroine surrounded by the good deeds of his administration. The haughty stepsisters, both unsuccessful candidates to succeed Hayes, are former president Ulysses Grant and New York senator Roscoe Conkling. Grant is clothed in a gown embellished with free tickets from his two-year trip around the world. The arrogant Conkling's costume makes him look like a strutting peacock. The "306" on Grant's hat is a giveaway that this came after James A. Garfield's nomination, as that was the delegate total Grant received in the hotly contested convention in June.

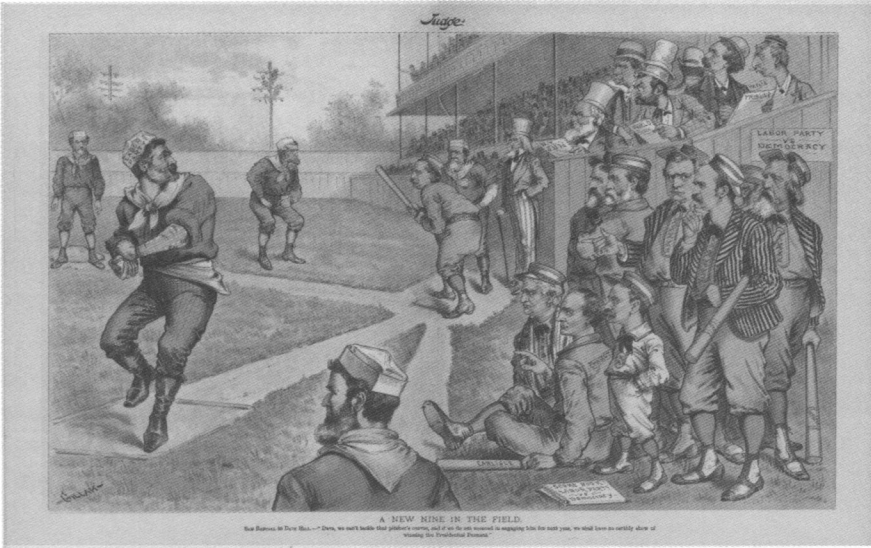


Figure 11. Bernhard Gillam, “A New Nine in the Field,” *Judge*, June 18, 1887. Gillam presents the Democratic Party’s prospects for the 1888 presidential race as a game of baseball. President Grover Cleveland will likely “strike out” unless the powerful Labor Party team members join his side. Concerned Democratic team members and newspaper editors observe the on-field action.

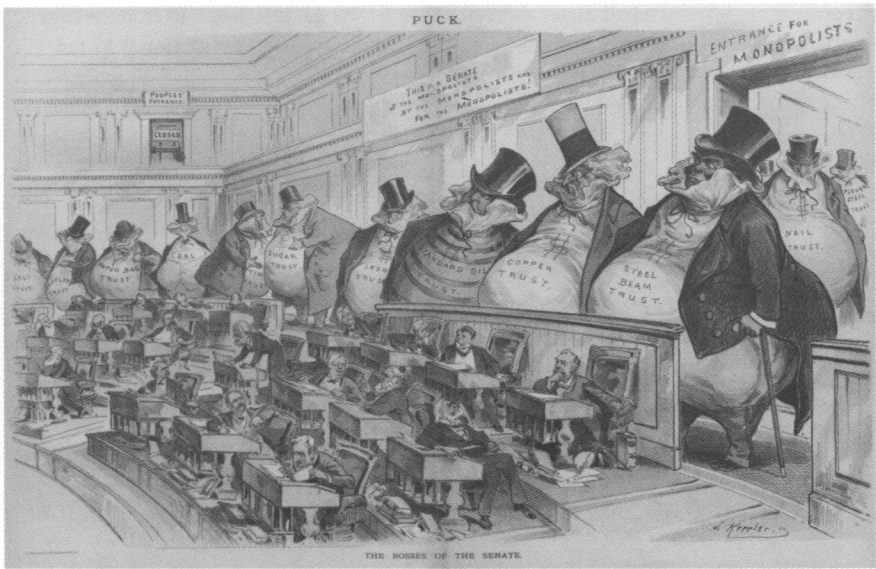


Figure 12. Joseph Keppler, “The Bosses of the Senate,” *Puck*, Jan. 23, 1889. In this famous cartoon, Keppler presents big business as bags of money looming over the U.S. Senate while ordinary citizens are barred access. Political cartoonists of the era were generally pro-business, but on occasion, they did attack the so-called trusts.

Causes

Political cartoonists had more difficulty dealing with issues than with personalities. Still, late nineteenth-century cartoonists churned out hundreds of

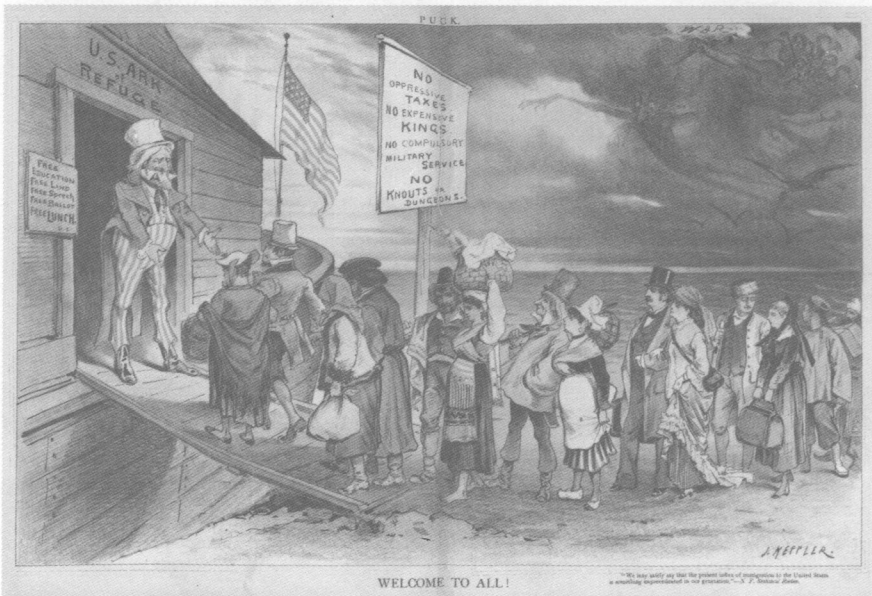


Figure 13. Joseph Keppler, "Welcome to All," *Puck*, Apr. 28, 1880. The Austrian-born Keppler presents the United States as a refuge for people seeking freedom from tyranny. Uncle Sam welcomes people from throughout the world into the American Ark as the specter of war looks on from the sky.

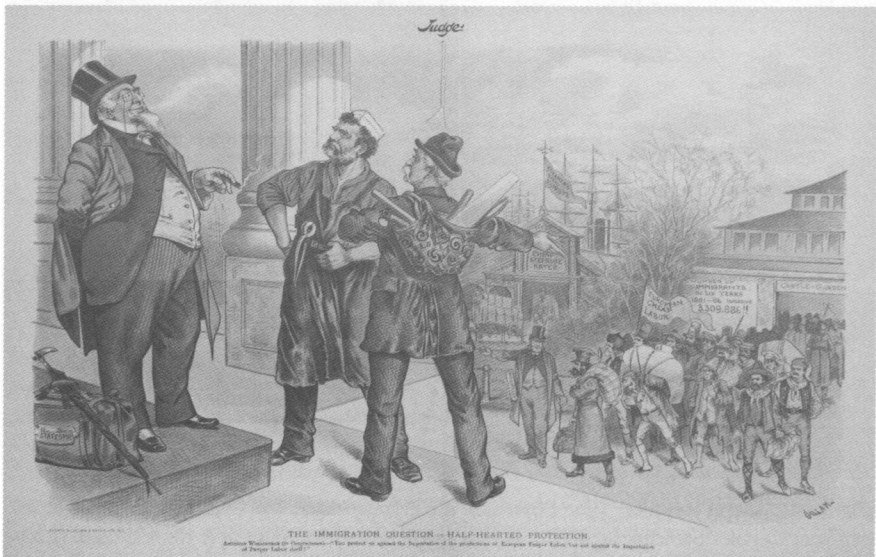


Figure 14. Bernhard Gillam, "The Immigration Question or Half-Hearted Protection," *Judge*, Mar. 5, 1887. By contrast, Gillam's working men take a congressman to task for placing a high tariff on cheap foreign goods while placing no restrictions on importing cheap labor from Europe.

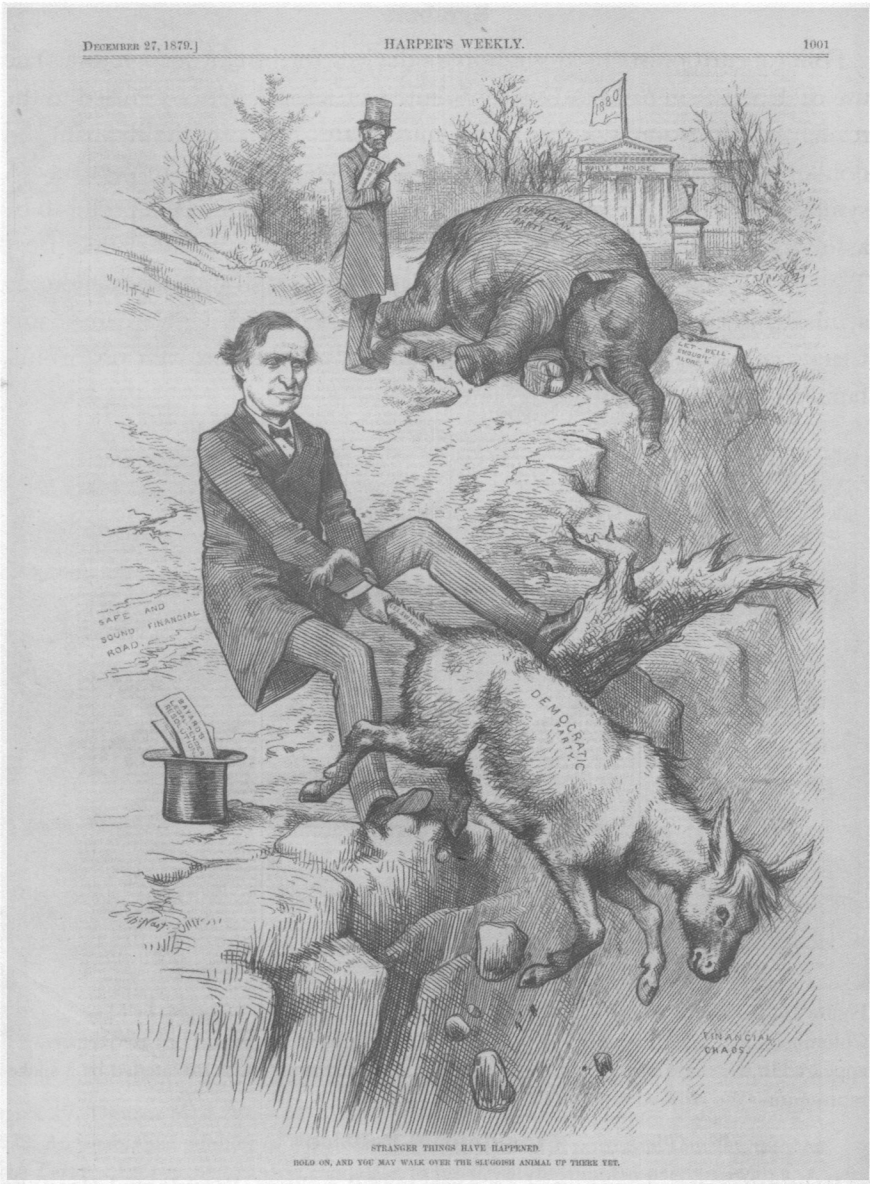


Figure 15. Thomas Nast, "Stranger Things Have Happened," *Harper's Weekly*, Dec. 27, 1879. Nast first associated the elephant with the Republican Party. The donkey had been used as a symbol for the Democratic Party before Nast adopted it. This is the first cartoon in which both the elephant and the donkey appear together as symbols for their parties.

cartoons covering issues such as immigration, corruption, monetary policy, religion, tariffs, poverty, labor, and race relations. They had to be at their creative best in order to get their point across. The most common device was to depict a threat as a monster or a menace.

Symbols

Political cartoonists used symbols as devices for instant recognition. The use of Uncle Sam or Miss Liberty as surrogates for America signaled to the reader that a cartoon was about the United States. Similarly, the elephant and donkey stood for the Republican and Democratic parties, respectively. A symbol lent dignity or ignominy to a subject. A politician would prefer to be associated with Abraham Lincoln or George Washington rather than Boss Tweed, the devil, or the grim reaper. Nast popularized numerous enduring symbols, including the elephant, donkey, Boss Tweed, Uncle Sam, Santa Claus, and Miss Liberty (or Miss Columbia, an alternate version of this familiar symbol of the United States).



Figure 16. Joseph Keppler, “In Danger,” *Puck*, Feb. 9, 1881. Miss Liberty—or Miss Columbia—had long served as the feminine equivalent to Uncle Sam. They frequently appeared in the same cartoon, as they do here. In this cartoon, she is threatened by a snake representing the railroad monopoly.

Presidential Politics

Political cartoonists thrived on presidential politics. Presidential elections happened every four years, but political cartoonists spent at least a year before the nominating conventions poking and prodding the aspiring candidates. The real fun began once the candidates were nominated. Unfortunately for the presidential contenders, cartoonists were more adept at attacking those they opposed than building up their favorites. Treated brutally by Nast in 1872, Liberal Republican candidate Horace Greeley may have summed up how all candidates felt about political cartoonists when he observed that he “scarcely knew whether he was running for the presidency or the penitentiary.”



Figure 17. Thomas Nast, “Save Me from My Tobacco Partner,” *Harper’s Weekly*, Nov. 2, 1872. An unabashed admirer of President Grant, Nast always portrayed Greeley, the *New York Tribune* editor-turned-hapless candidate, in his signature rumpled overcoat with a newspaper sticking out of his pocket. The tag on his coattail contains the name of vice-presidential running mate B. Gratz Brown, a senator from Missouri. In this cartoon, Nast links Greeley with Tammany boss William M. Tweed, an uncomfortable ally through Democratic support of the Liberal Republican movement.

Caricature

An effective caricature added extra meaning to a cartoon. With a few stokes of a pen, a skilled artist could make a subject appear sinister, silly, or dignified. From 1870 until his death in 1893, Benjamin F. Butler, the

Massachusetts politician and Civil War general, was a favorite target of polit-



Figure 18. Bernhard Gillam, “Narcissus; Or, the Man Who Was Mashed on Himself,” *Puck*, Sept. 17, 1884. Gillam and other *Puck* cartoonists incessantly ridiculed 1884 Republican candidate James G. Blaine, often hitting upon uncomfortable truths. Here, the self-absorbed Blaine is cast as Narcissus, the Greek mythological character who fell in love with his own image.



Figure 19. Bernhard Gillam, “The Cartoonist’s Last Hope,” *Judge*, Jan. 15, 1887. Gillam paid homage to Butler, a favorite target. On Gillam’s shelves are the busts of Gillam’s other favorites, now deceased.



Figure 20. James A. Wales, “Ben Deadeye,” pen-and-ink drawing for a cartoon published in *Puck* on Oct. 26, 1879. Wales portrayed Ben Butler as a sailor because of his staunch protection of the Massachusetts fishing industry. Courtesy descendants of James A. Wales.

ical cartoonists who considered him to be vain, corrupt, opportunistic, and dangerous. At different times a Democrat, Republican, and Greenbacker, Ben Butler favored currency inflation, defended rioting laborers, and opposed protective tariffs—positions directly opposite those of the major cartoonists. As an extra gift to cartoonists, Butler’s face and build lent themselves to caricature.