

# standard of living

*This issue of The Ledger looks at “standard of living.” What is it? How do we measure it? How has it changed?*

Walk into a historic New England house, and you’re almost tempted to think: “Yes, I could live like this.” A cozy hearth, tidy living space, painstakingly restored furniture, well-tended gardens — what’s not to like?

Well, in fact, there was quite a bit not to like.

On any given day, the inhabitants of an early 19th century New England farmhouse would have been choking on the smoke from their fireplace, juggling a chamber pot, hauling water from a polluted well, or chopping wood until their arms were ready to fall off. And on a *really* bad day, someone — a family member, friend, or neighbor — would have been dying prematurely from typhoid, cholera, food poisoning, or simple infection.

Even in 1900, after a century of extraordinary economic and scientific progress, daily life remained uncomfortable, exhausting, and short. Average life expectancy was barely 50 years, and all too often those years were spent at hard labor, either in the workplace or at home. The average work week was 55 to 60 hours, and the average weekly wage was \$9 to \$12, most of which went towards food and shelter. Housework was a life sentence with no time off for good behavior; doing laundry was a daylong ordeal. And as for creature comforts and personal hygiene, well . . . let’s just say you probably wouldn’t have been happy. Hot water was a luxury, baths were infrequent, and the quality of toilet tissue left much to be desired.

Not that there’s a direct correlation between the quality of toilet tissue and the quality of life. Nor is it clear that material prosperity has made our lives happier or emotionally richer than the lives of our ancestors. Happiness and emotional fulfillment are, after all, difficult concepts to measure.



But one thing is certain: The rise in our standard of living has been remarkable. Technology and increased productivity have freed us from the back-breaking labor and never-ending drudgery that was so much a part of everyday life in 1800, or even 1900.

Life is also less limiting — and far more varied — than it used to be. Not only do we have more choices at the supermarket and the shopping mall, but we also have access to a much wider range of ideas, information, and amusements.

Which isn’t to say that everything about the present is better than everything about the past. Anyone who’s ever survived a vein-popping two-hour commute or raced to beat the 6:00 p.m. surcharge at a day care center knows a thing or two about the ambiguities of modern life; so does any kid who agonizes over getting into the “right” college or wearing the “right” designer label. And if you’ve just been “downsized,” or if your job was recently “exported,” we’re not trying to convince you that having 150 cable channels will offset the pain you’re going through.

All we’re saying is this: Our overall material standard of living has risen steadily since the early 1800s, and although we’re still a long way from utopia, maybe it’s okay to stop for a minute to look back at how far we’ve come.