

If I Lived 130 Years Ago

Poverty in the U.S. and Vermont in the 19th Century



By: The Committee on Temporary Shelter (COTS)
Adapted from "If You Lived 100 Years Ago" by Ann McGovern

Created: December 2018
By Samantha Prue, AmeriCorps VISTA

At COTS, we help all kinds of people, especially those facing or experiencing homelessness.

What does the word "homeless" mean to you?



Why do people become homeless?

People become homeless for many reasons. Sometimes they don't have enough money to pay bills or other important expenses.

In Vermont, people may experience homelessness because of the high cost of housing and low wages. This means that some families live paycheck to paycheck and sometimes can't make ends meet.





Saiger's grocery and department store, circa 1900.

Colodny's Supermarket, circa 1950

COTS helps people from across Vermont at our main office in Burlington's Old North End. Our building was originally built in 1893 and became Saiger's, a local grocery and department store. It was later home to Colodny's, Burlington's first supermarket.



COTS Administrative Offices

When COTS renovated the building in 2017, we helped preserve some of its history. But we were also curious...

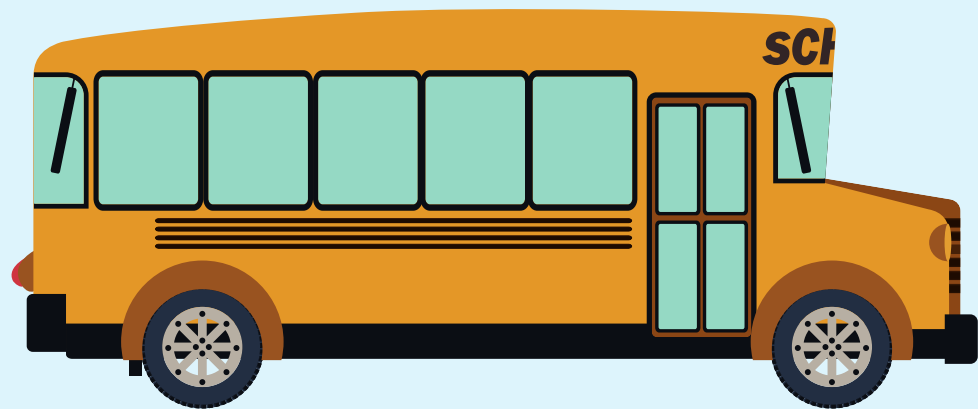
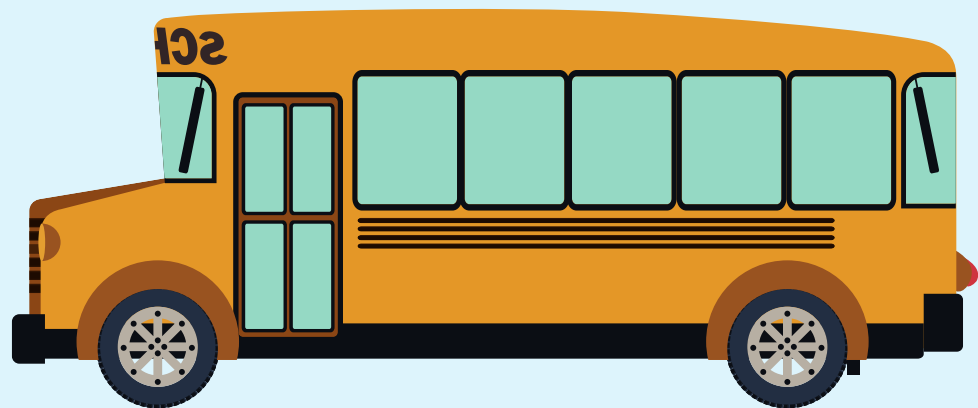
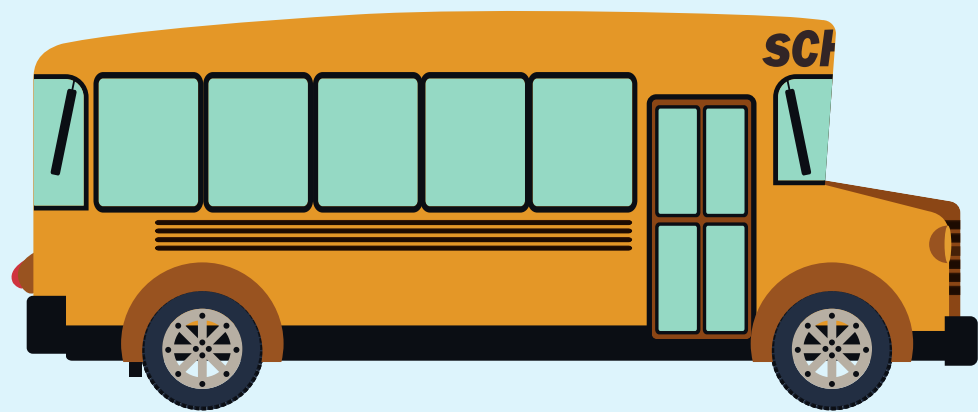
What was life like in the 1890s?

In the 1890s, life was changing quickly. Skyscrapers were built in big cities, and newspapers printed stories of new inventions every day.





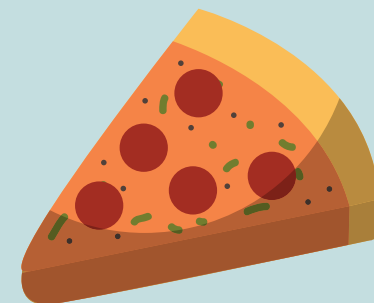
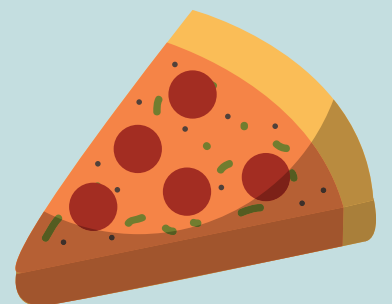
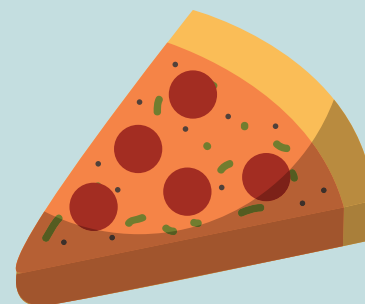
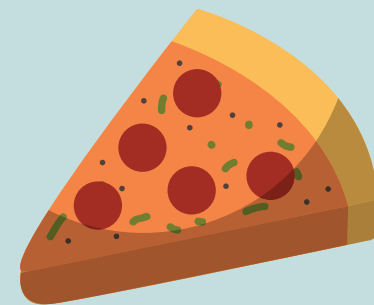
If you lived in the 1890s, you wouldn't know about cell phones, TVs, computers, airplanes, or space travel. Just turning on the lights would be a new experience.



How did you get to school today?
There were no school buses 130
years ago.

What did you eat today?

They didn't have pizza, french fries,
or frozen foods.



Many people call this time in American history "the good old days," but it wasn't good for everyone.

People in the 1890s often experienced hardships, such as low wages, unsafe working conditions, and crowded housing.



So let's go back in time...



What was life
like in the 1890s?



Where did people live?

Many low-income families lived in "tenements" with as many as 2,500 people per block. *

Each building had 4-6 floors with 2 apartments per floor.

The rooms were small and cramped with no fresh air or natural light.

* "Tenement" is another word to describe an apartment, but usually means the housing was far more crowded than apartments are today.



Tenements in New York City

More About Tenements

Tenements usually occupied the entire lot in which they were built. This lot was usually only 25 feet wide and 100 feet long.

Rooms were extremely small, and 12 adults sometimes slept in a room that was just 13 feet across.

You can learn more about tenements by visiting the Tenement Museum in New York City.

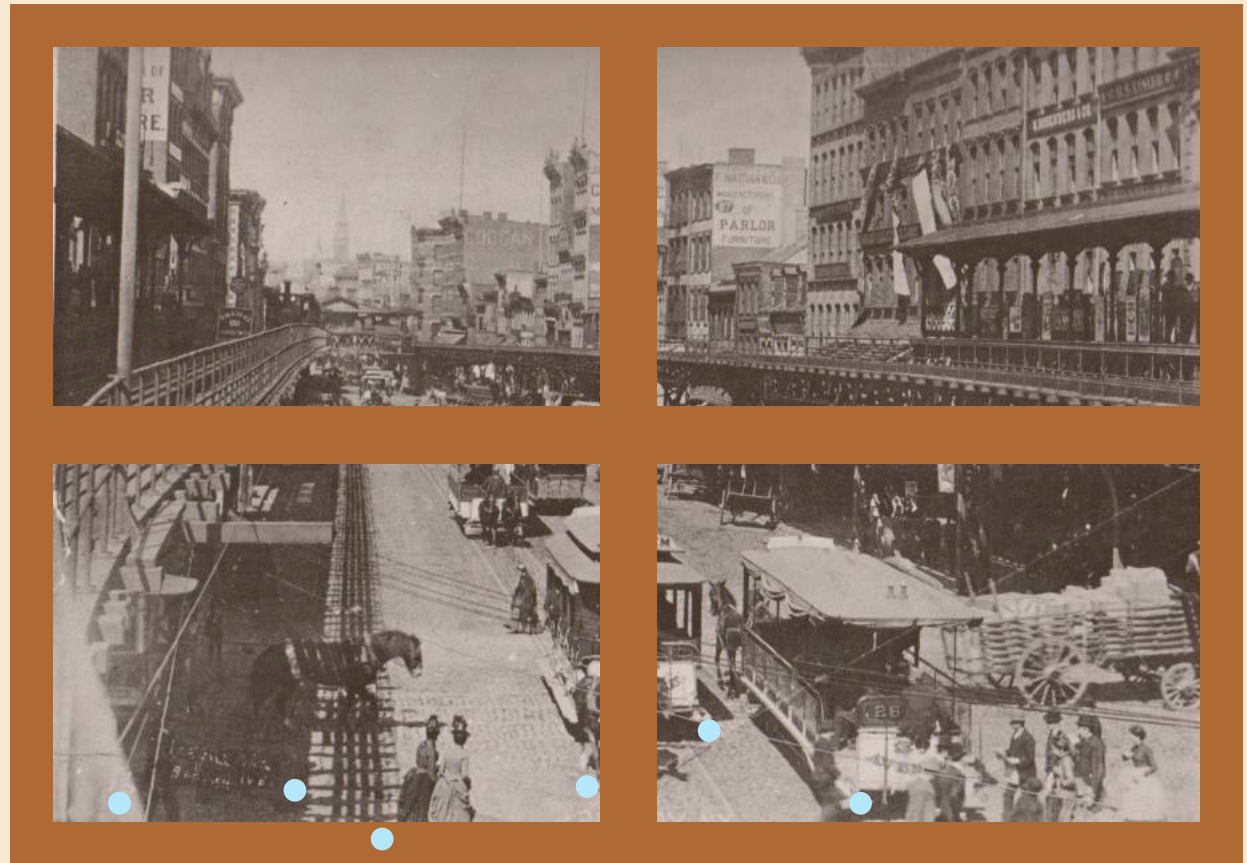


Laundry drying between tenements in Chicago

There was only one bathroom on tenement floors, and they were shared with almost 40 people.

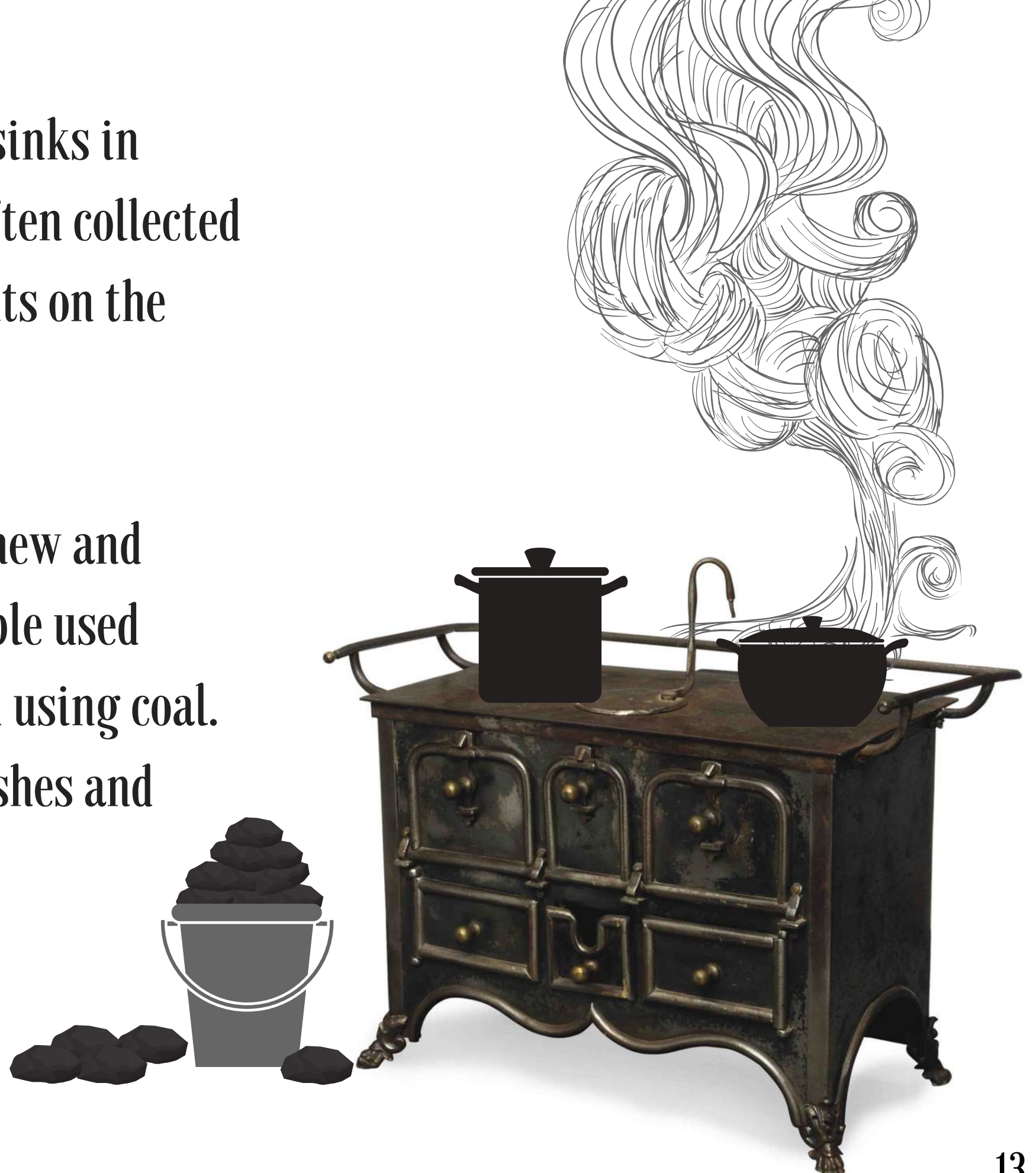
There were no bathtubs in the bathrooms either, so people bathed in a tub in the kitchen.

Can you imagine taking a bath in your kitchen?



There were only a few sinks in tenements, so people often collected water from fire hydrants on the street instead.

Electricity was brand-new and expensive, so most people used a stove that was heated using coal. People washed their dishes and their laundry by hand.



Many people came to Burlington in the 1890s, and the population grew rapidly as new migrants and immigrants arrived.

The three wards of Burlington also had their own tenements, which were very difficult places to live.



Do you recognize this street?

During this time, the city's health officers were concerned about the conditions of tenement housing in the North End.

'Horses, cows, hogs, hens, and children are mixed up, so that it is difficult to determine which is the hog pen and which is the nursery.'

- Dr. Charles Thayer, Burlington Health Officer



Where else did low-income families live in Vermont?

Some low-income families in Vermont lived at the "poorhouse," which was usually a farm outside of town. The first poorhouse in Burlington was established in 1816.

Poorhouses had terrible living conditions, and many people became sick or went hungry.

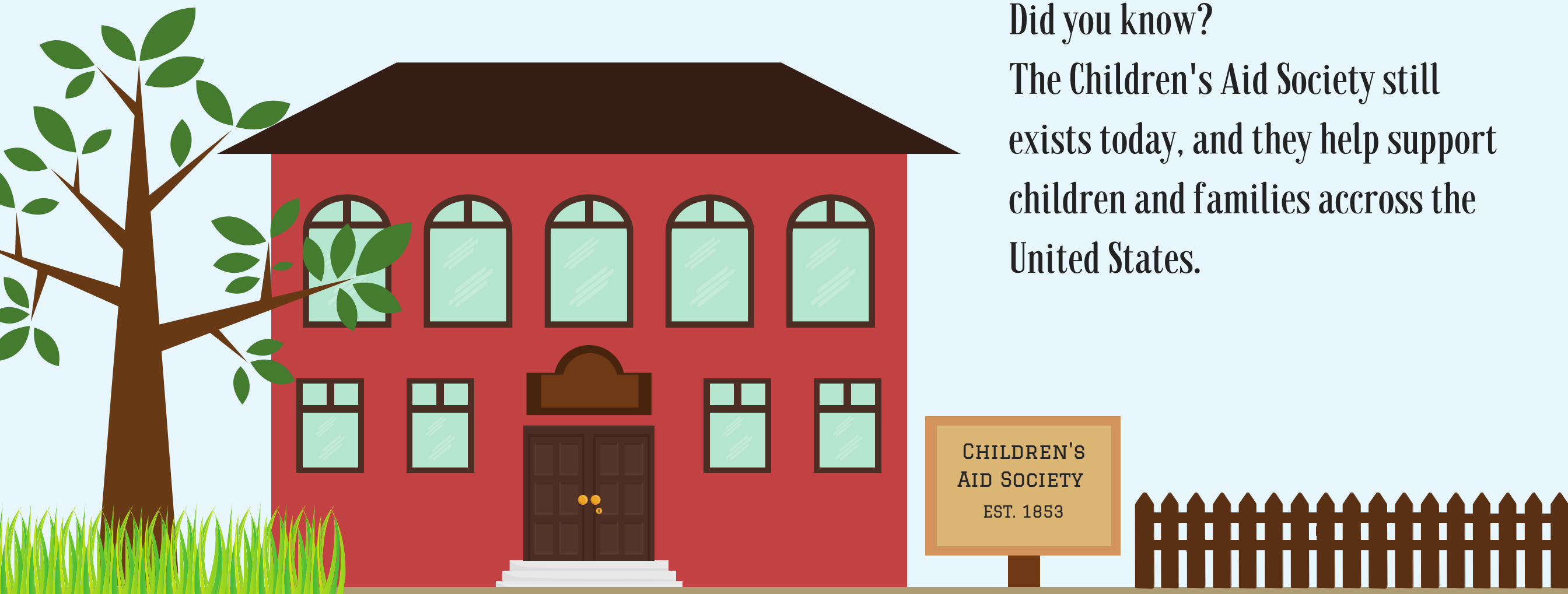


What about children who had no home?

In the 1890s, many children were homeless. Some lived in shelters run by the Children's Aid Society. They slept on a bunk and ate two meals a day.

Did you know?

The Children's Aid Society still exists today, and they help support children and families accross the United States.



What did you eat?

People bought groceries from vendors on the street who sold fish, fruit, and other foods.

People also could buy medicine and other items from street vendors.



Low-income families would often get old stale food, or shop from push carts.

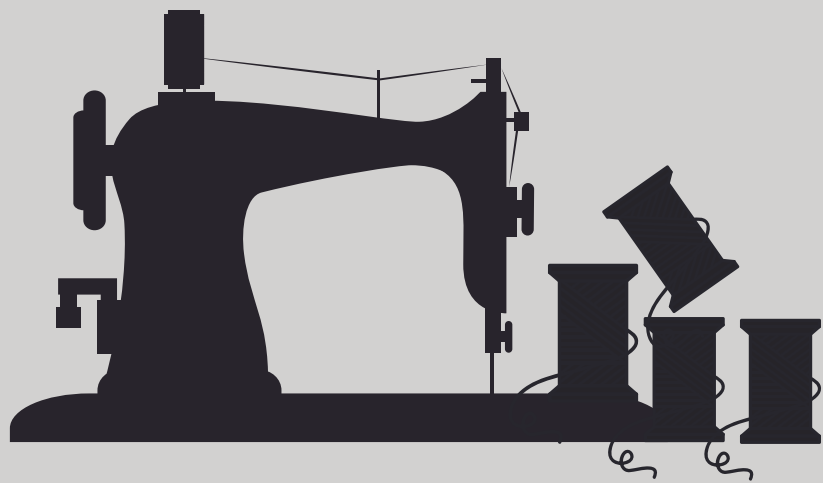
Restaurants would sell table scraps from the night before, and breakfast was mostly bread and tea.



What did women do for work?

Many women worked on machines in factories, or they worked at home taking care of their families.

Some worked as teachers, sales people, clerks or typists, and a few were doctors, lawyers, and scientists.



19th Century Factories in New York City

What did men do for work?

Men worked as teachers,
bricklayers, doctors, engineers,
police officers, and firefighters.

There were a lot of firefighters
because there were many fires.
Wooden buildings went up in flames
almost every single day.



Firefighters in Chico, California, 1870s

Did children work, too?

Yes. In the 1890s, children had jobs. There were no laws that prevented them from working. Children as young as 5 sometimes took jobs alongside their parents in factories.

The conditions were very poor, and they were often treated badly.



A young textile factory worker

Children who didn't work in factories tried to make money other ways.

Young boys polished shoes, or worked as chimney sweeps because of their small size.

Girls sold matches, toothpicks, ribbons, candy, and flowers on the streets.



Did children go to school?

Every child was supposed to go to school, but low - income families needed their children to work for money to help support the family.

Public schools were overcrowded and dirty. Some schools had no desks, and children had to sit on the floor.



In 1896, a law was passed that required separate schools for black and white children.

When did things get better?

In 1890, a newspaper reporter named Jacob Riis published photographs of the terrible working and living conditions in New York City. It was called "How the Other Half Lives."

After this, men and women began to work for changes.



When did things get better?

Housing:

Today, there are laws that ensure that houses and apartments are safe and healthy places to live.

In the 1930s, the first housing laws were put in place to help improve conditions for low-income families and eliminate the unsafe and unsanitary conditions that were found in tenements.



When did the poorhouses close?

The poorhouse system began to fade out during the Great Depression because of new federal welfare laws.

Poorhouses were not a dignified way to help people, and policies changed to better serve low-income households.

But in some places like Texas, poorhouses didn't close until the 1970s.



What if low-income families don't have a house today?

In Burlington, organizations like COTS provide emergency shelter and affordable housing for those who need it.

COTS works to prevent homelessness from ever happening, and COTS Housing Navigators in our Housing Resource Center connect individuals and families with affordable housing options.

COTS can help with financial assistance, too. This helps prevent families from losing their homes.

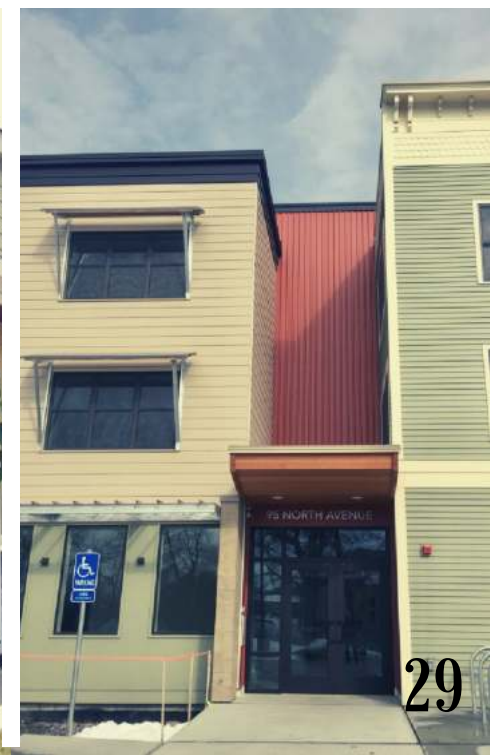


THE COMMITTEE ON
TEMPORARY SHELTER

COTS also focuses on helping people find and keep affordable housing.

COTS has permanent affordable housing units, and transitional units for those who are moving out of shelter.

Some of the people COTS serves also live in Single Room Occupancy Units (SROs) where they have their own room, but share a kitchen and bathroom.



When did things get better?

Food and Nutrition:

Access to nutritious, safe, and healthy food has improved dramatically since the 1890s.

Today, low-income families can receive help from the federal government thanks to a program called SNAP. They receive a certain amount of money each month that helps them buy groceries. In Vermont, this program is called 3SquaresVT.

There are also laws that require foods to pass inspections before they can be sold. Medicines are regulated to make sure they are safe, too.



People can access Food Banks or Food Shelves in their community. These are nonprofit organizations that distribute food so that people don't go hungry.

Some nonprofit organizations serve free meals. Did you know you can get three free meals a day in Burlington?

At COTS, we provide a hot, no-cost lunch 365 days a year at our Daystation. We also have a healthy snack and meal program in our family shelters.

Feeding Chittenden

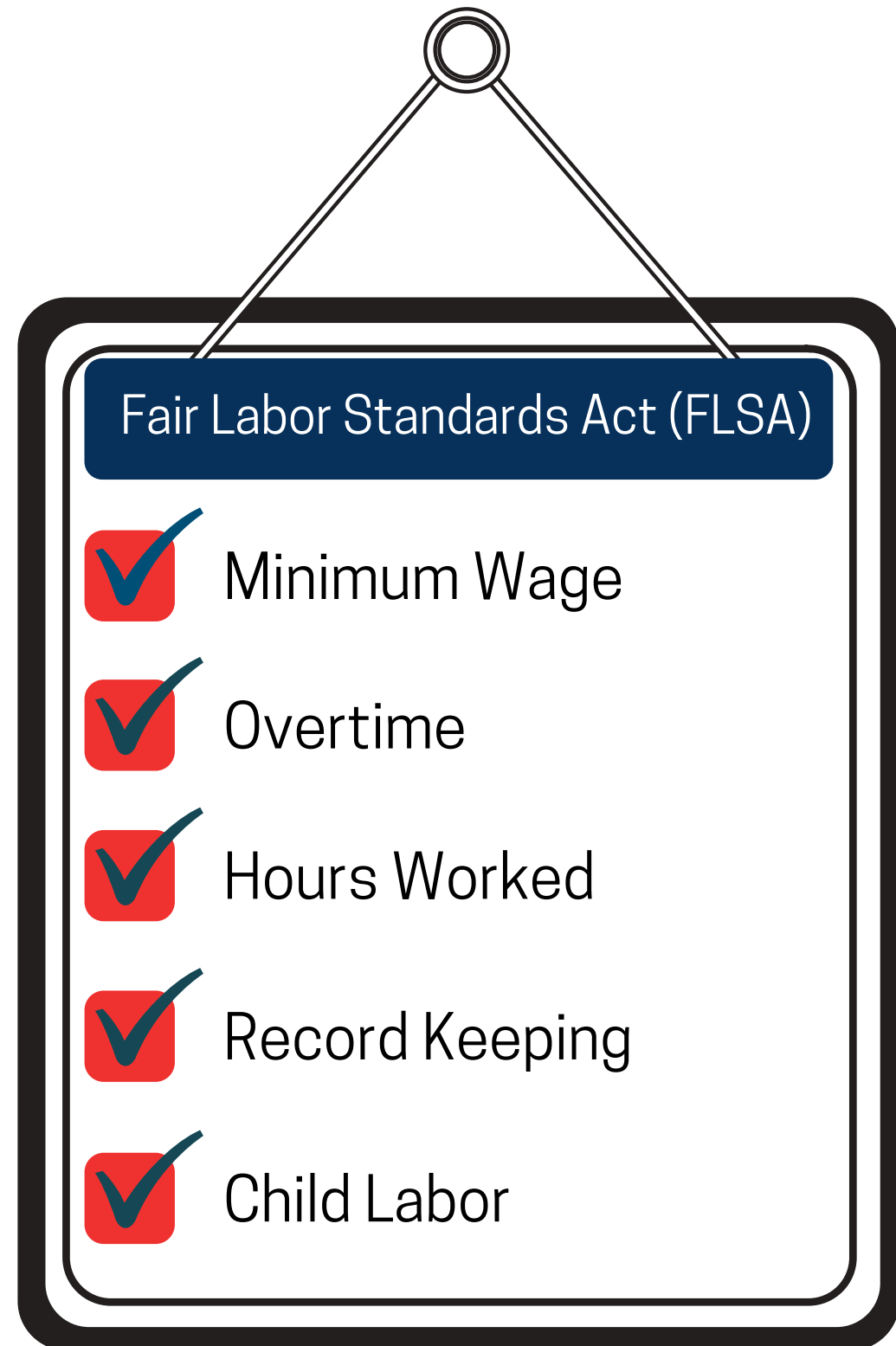


When did things get better?

Labor and Safety:

In 1938, Congress passed the Fair Labor Standards Act, which created minimum wage, and prohibited children from working until they reached a certain age.

The law was later amended in 1940 to also establish the 40-hour work week.



In 1970, laws were passed to make sure that employees have safe working conditions.

Employers are required to provide a hazard-free work environment where employees are not exposed to toxic chemicals, mechanical dangers, or unsanitary conditions.



Occupational Safety and Health Act

Employers must provide a work environment free from:

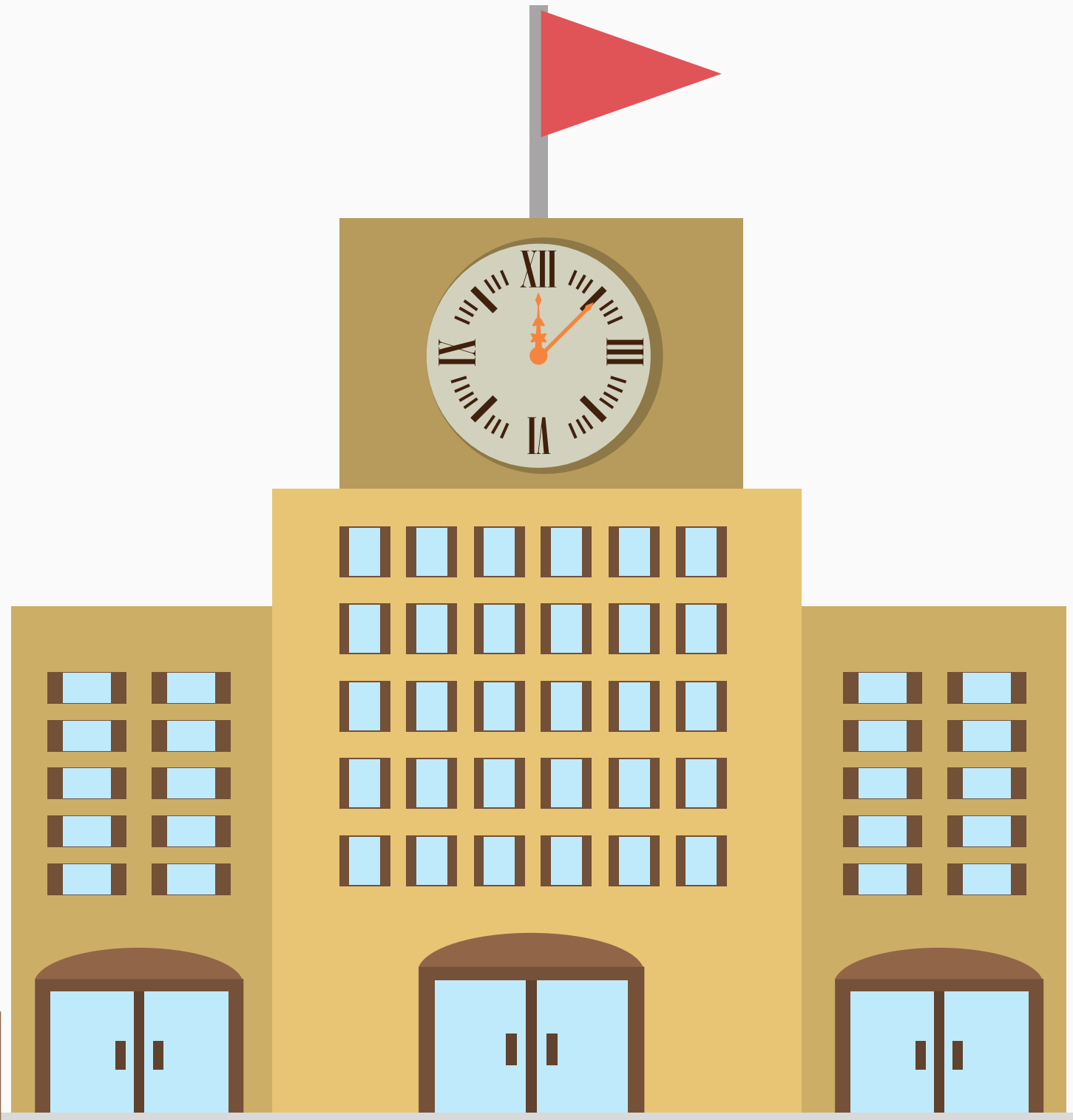
- ✓ Exposure to toxic chemicals
- ✓ Excessive noise levels
- ✓ Mechanical dangers
- ✓ Heat or cold stress
- ✓ Unsanitary conditions

When did things get better?

Schools:

During the early 1900s, people became more concerned with child labor. By requiring children to attend school, the public hoped that factory workers would stop exploiting children.

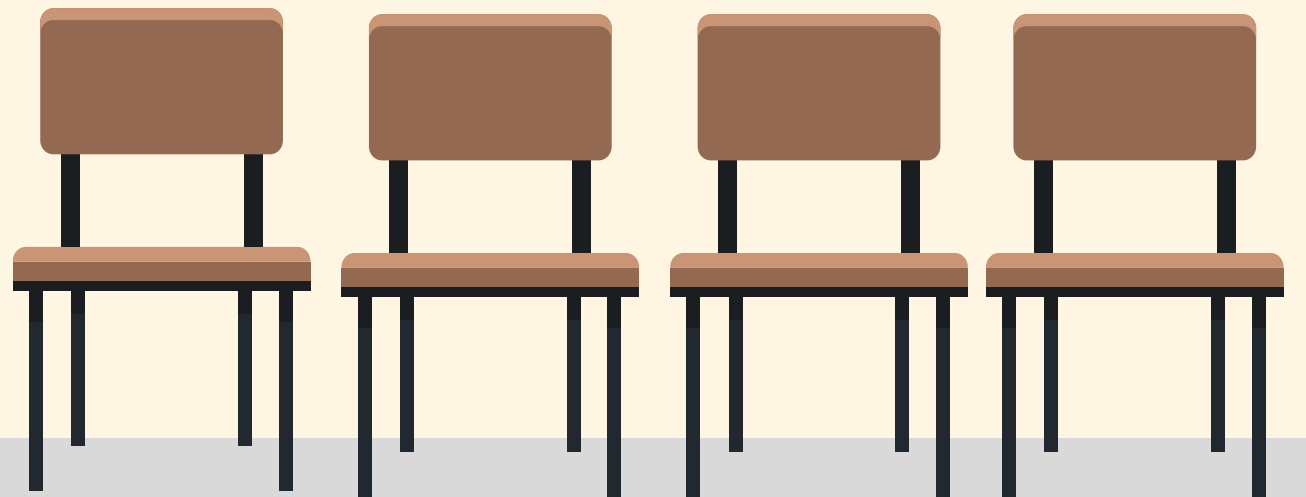
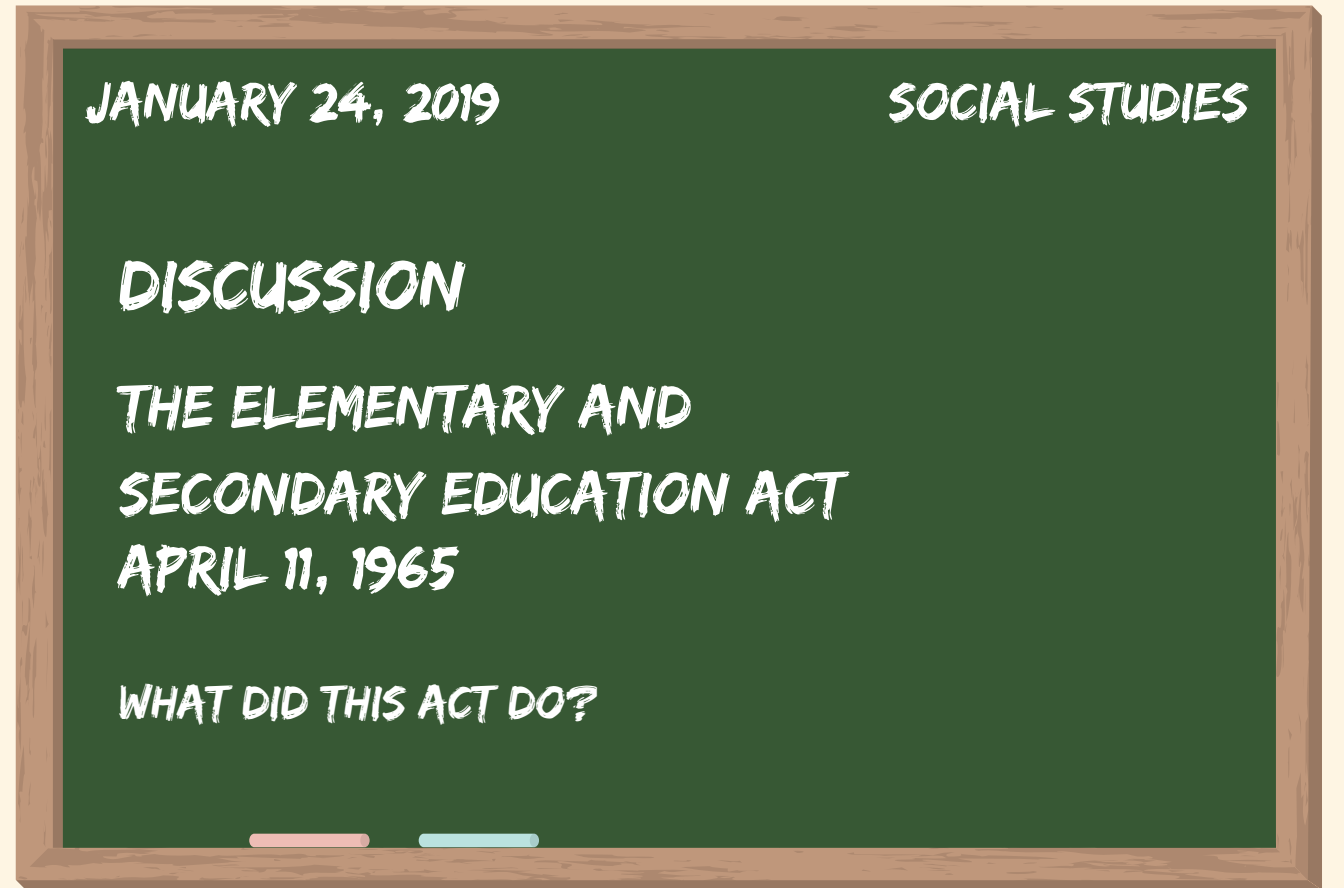
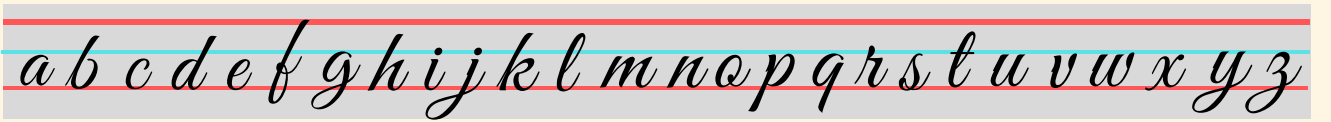
By 1918, every state required students to complete elementary school.



In the 1960s, new laws were passed to further fund primary and secondary education and emphasize equal access. The "Separate but Equal" law was ruled unconstitutional, which ended school segregation and meant children of all races could attend school together.

Today, there are laws that require children to attend school. In Vermont, attendance is mandatory between the ages of 6 and 16.

These laws also ensure that the schools are healthy and safe places to learn.



Questions for Discussion:

1. How are things different today than in the 1890s?
2. What are some ways life is better now?
3. What are some ways we can still improve life for low-income families?
4. What might life look like 130 years from now?

Learn more on how you can help:

- Advocate
- Volunteer
- Donate
- Visit cotsonline.org for more resources





THE COMMITTEE ON
TEMPORARY SHELTER

P.O. Box 1616
Burlington VT 05402

(802) 864-7402
cotsonline.org