

The Way We Talk...

The way we talk says a lot about who we are. Our accents, dialects, and even the phrases we use can be telling of where we come from and how we live. In fact, elements of our nation's history is speckled throughout the English language.

Here's an interesting example. In the early 1800s, the northern half of the United States began to become a hot spot for industry, which led to the creation of several urban areas. The south, on the other hand, began to become a center for plantation farming and rural living. This division resulted in different needs and desires for the people of the north versus those living in the south. The tensions that began to build between the two regions was one of the primary causes of the Civil War.

The formation of this industrial north and the agrarian south created stereotypes that still exist today. Most people can quickly identify a "southern" accent versus a "northern" one. There are even phrases that obviously originated from the urban north or the rural south.

Consider:

Terms that originated in the "Industrial North"

Nuts and Bolts—meaning the small details. Originated from the inner workings of factory equipment.

New York Minute—meaning fast. Originated from the fast paced lifestyle of urban New York City.

Blow Off Steam—meaning to have a frustration tantrum. Originated from a factory engine blowing steam to avoid building up too much pressure.

Terms that originated in the "Agrarian South"

High Cotton—meaning luxurious. Originated from the riches that can be made from a successful cotton harvest.

Bought the Farm—meaning to die. Originated from the struggle of the American farmer, who could lose his farm if it was not profitable.

Country Mile—meaning a long way. Originated from the wide-open space in rural America.

What do these phrases tell you about life in the different parts of the United States during early 1800s? What common terms or phrases do we use today that will help future historians know about our society and culture?