In more traditional fields of specialization, the outline of professional structures emerged boldly. The law established its first national professional association in 1878, librarianship in 1876, and social work in 1874. Dentistry founded its first university school (in contrast to a training school) in 1867, architecture and pharmacy in 1868, schoolteaching and veterinary medicine in 1879, and accounting in 1881. The Wharton School of Finance and Economy was founded in 1881, a prelude to the declaration that business was a profession. The first state license law for dentistry appeared in 1868, for pharmacy in 1874, for veterinary medicine in 1886, for accounting in 1896, and for architecture in 1897. By 1894, twenty-one states had established an examination system for medical doctors, and fourteen others permitted only graduates from accredited medical schools to practice.\[...\]

Mid-Victorians appreciated the value to a career of membership in professional associations with “distinguished” titles. In the 1870s and 1880s, at least two hundred societies were formed, in addition to teachers' groups. Scientists, for instance, began establishing specialized associations beyond the American Association for the Advancement of Science, a prestigious organization which itself had been founded as a specialized group in 1848. With relative haste, it spawned:

1876  American Chemical Society  
1880  American Society of Chemical Engineers  
1882  American Forestry Association  
1883  American Ornithologists' Union  
1883  American Society of Naturalists  
1884  American Climatological Society  
1885  American Institute of Electrical Engineers  
1888  Geological Society of America  
1888  National Statistical Association  
1888  American Mathematical Society  
1889  American Physical Society

Also in the 1880s, historians (1884), church historians (1888), economists (1885), political scientists (1889), modern-language scholars and teachers (1883), and folklorists (1888) all established their associations, which stepped beyond the American Social Science Association, originally founded in 1865. Nearly every group included "American" in its title, a symbol that served to emphasize the scope of both its membership and its professional interest.

What was the meaning of this professional interest? As commonly understood, a profession was a full-time occupation in which a person earned the principal source of an income. During a fairly difficult and time-consuming process, a person mastered an esoteric but useful body of systematic knowledge, completed theoretical training before entering a practice or
apprenticeship, and received a degree or license from a recognized institution. A professional person in the role of practitioner insisted upon technical competence, superior skill, and a high quality of performance. Moreover, a professional embraced an ethic of service which taught that dedication to a client's interest took precedence over personal profit, when the two happened to come into conflict.²

Yet, in the mind of the Mid-Victorian, professionalism meant more than all this. Professionalism was also a culture which embodied a more radical idea of democracy than even the Jacksonian had dared to dream. The culture of professionalism emancipated the active ego of a sovereign person as he performed organized activities within comprehensive spaces. The culture of professionalism incarnated the radical idea of the independent democrat, a liberated person seeking to free the power of nature within every worldly sphere, a self-governing individual exercising his trained judgment in an open society. The Mid-Victorian as professional person strove to achieve a level of autonomous individualism, a position of unchallenged authority heretofore unknown in American life.

In contrast to the tradesman and the craftsman, the professional person defined the unique quality of a subject its special basis in an exclusive and independent circle of natural experiences. The craftsman traditionally handled a series of individual objects, according to the custom of his work, varying his own specific practices by trial and error. The professional excavated nature for its principles, its theoretical rules, thus transcending mechanical procedures, individual cases, miscellaneous facts, technical information and instrumental applications. Frederick Jackson Turner, for instance, isolated the unique nature of American history and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., the unique nature of law in America; G. Stanley Hall isolated the characteristics of "adolescence," and Jane Addams the professional woman social worker's special, natural sensitivity to injustice.³ The intellectual pretensions of these persons were specific in aim and definite in purpose. As professionals, they attempted to define a total coherent system of necessary knowledge within a precise territory, to control the intrinsic relationships of their subject by making it scholarly as well as an applied science, to root social existence in the inner needs and possibilities of documentable worldly processes.[…]

Utilizing his trained capacity, the professional person interpreted the special lines along which such complex phenomena as a physical disease, a point of law, a stage of human psychological growth, or the identity of an historical society developed in time and space. The professional did not vend a commodity, or exclusively pursue a self-interest. He did not sell a service by a contract which called for specific results in a specific time or restitution for errors. Rather, through a special understanding of a segment of the universe, the professional person released nature's potential and rearranged reality on grounds which were neither artificial, arbitrary, faddish, convenient, nor at the mercy of popular whim. Such was the august basis for the authority of the professional.

The jurisdictional claim of that authority derived from a special power over worldly experience, a command over the profundities of a discipline. Such masterful command was designed to establish confidence in the mind of the helpless client. The professional person possessed esoteric knowledge about the universe which if withheld from society could cause positive harm. In the cases of the doctor, the lawyer, the engineer, and the chemist, the consequences could be lethal. No less, however, did society require the minister to recite knowingly at the grave, the teacher to instruct intelligently in the classroom, the national historian to discover a meaning that related the present to the past. Laymen were neither prepared to comprehend the mystery of the tasks which professionals performed, nor—more ominously—
were they equipped to pass judgment upon special skills and technical competence. Hence, the culture of professionalism required amateurs to "trust" in the integrity of trained persons, to respect the moral authority of those whose claim to power lay in the sphere of the sacred and the charismatic. Professionals controlled the magic circle of scientific knowledge which only the few, specialized by training and indoctrination, were privileged to enter, but which all in the name of nature's universality were obligated to appreciate.

For middle-class Americans, the culture of professionalism provided an orderly explanation of basic natural processes that democratic societies, with their historical need to reject traditional authority, required. Science as a source for professional authority transcended the favoritism of politics, the corruption of personality, and the exclusiveness of partisanship. And science as an attitude for professional discipline required inner control and an individual respect for rules, proven experience, and a system of hygienic laws concerned with such personal habits as diet, bathing, sex, dress, work, and recreation. Typically, middle-class Americans with professional pretensions translated the moral cause of temperance into a scientific truth for successful living. In the same way they transformed masturbation into a legitimate medical "disease," an abnormality of nature with its set of related signs and symptoms. Medical doctors made it possible for the deviant afflicted by masturbation to control his or her unnatural excitement by prescribing such radical treatments as vasectomy, clitoridectomy, castration, electrodes inserted into the bladder and rectum, and the cauterization of the prostatic urethra.

The person who mastered professional discipline and control emerged as an emulated example of leadership in American society. He was self-reliant, independent, ambitious, and mentally organized. He structured a life and career around noble aims and purposes, including the idea of moral obligation. But most importantly, the professional person absolutely protected his precious autonomy against all assailants, not in the name of an irrational egotism but in the name of a special grasp of the universe and a special place in it. In the service of mankind—the highest ideal—the professional resisted all corporate encroachments and regulations upon his independence, whether from government bureaucrats, university trustees, business administrators, public laymen, or even his own professional association. The culture of professionalism released the creative energies of the free person who was usually accountable only to himself and his personal interpretation of the standards of his profession. By pointing to and even describing a potential disaster, the professional often reduced the client to a state of desperation in which the victim would pay generously, cooperate fully and express undying loyalty to the knowledgeable patron who might save him from a threatening universe. The culture of professionalism tended to cultivate an atmosphere of constant crisis—emergency—in which practitioners both created work for themselves and reinforced their authority by intimidating clients.

Professionals not only lived in an irrational world, they cultivated that irrationality by uncovering abnormality and perversity everywhere: in diseased bodies, criminal minds, political conspiracies, threats to the national security. An irrational world, an amoral one in a state of constant crisis, made the professional person who possessed his special knowledge indispensable to the victimized client, who was reduced to a condition of desperate trust. The culture of professionalism exploited the weaknesses of Americans—their fears of violent, sudden, catastrophic, and meaningless forces that erupted unpredictably in both individual and mass behavior. Indeed, the ascending culture took advantage of the instinctive mistrust an apprehensive client might feel toward the universe around him. That universe intensified human suspicion of an all-pervasive cosmic irrationality, when the frightened client failed to come up
with an adequate response to such an elemental personal question as, "What have I done to deserve this grisly fate—Why me?"

Perhaps no Calvinist system of thought ever made use of the insecurities of people more effectively than did the culture of professionalism. The professional person extended the gift of his special powers to the client who was by definition unworthy of such attention. And in return the professional expected at the very least to receive the psychic reward of the client's unqualified gratitude; when appropriate he expected to receive an ample tangible reward from the client's pocketbook. The client would make payment in the magnanimous spirit of a thankful subject who offered an appreciative token in return for the original gift—a gift which could never adequately be returned or repaid. In the professional order of values, no client merited a crueler fate, no client was quite so undeserving and detestable, as the one who betrayed his patron by appearing to be ungrateful.[...]

In a vision restricted to uplifting, to enthusiasm, confidence, and trust, middle-class Americans with professional ambitions began comparing themselves to those of status, looking up to the next rung of the social ladder. However, not only the human failures who had lost the ability to climb looked downward. Everyone did. The fear of falling knawed away at every climber, and this fear—ubiquitous in the middle class—was often the source of a general anxiety within individuals which no amount of monetary security, public honors, or personal confidence seemed to eliminate. In competition with society, the professional ego was constantly sensitive to its achievement and it toiled mightily even as it attempted to relax.

The vertical vision obstructed any horizontal recognition as middle-class Americans refused to relate to each other as equals. For instance, with ambiguous feelings of nostalgia and contempt, the middle-class American might gaze at his previous station in life in the old neighborhood and with the old folk. But even as he condemned the old-fashioned ways of the past, mocked its quaintness, and asserted the superiority and progress of the present, the American needed to commemorate and perhaps even participate in the restoration of his historical origins. An individual's first concern was with his present position and future prospects in the vertically oriented society, and the edited past served to boost a struggling ego in continual need of both succor and stimulation.[...]


6 Advice literature on the fragile nature of success proliferated in America after 1840, and the fear of failure was evident throughout, as it was in much of the popular fiction of the century. For two examples nearly a half century apart, see "Success in Life," Harper’s New Monthly Magazine 7 (1853): 238-40; Theodore Roosevelt, "Character and Success," The Outlook 64 (1900): 725-27.