The Life of an Idea: The Significance of Frederick Jackson Turner’s Frontier Thesis
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Frederick Jackson Turner, in his office in the State Historical Society of Wisconsin in Madison about 1892

The Life of Frederick Jackson Turner

University of Wisconsin,
Madison, Wis.

Feb. 21, 1893

School of Economics,
Political Science and History.

Dear Mr. C.K. Adams,

Univ. of Wis.,

I am very grateful for the invitation to present a paper at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association, and am glad to accept. My subject will be "The Significance of the Frontier in American History."

Yours truly,

Frederick J. Turner
One of the favorite discussion topics among American historians is the question: what piece of American historical writing has been most influential in American life? Although the subject seems almost trivial, given serious thought it is a challenge. There are, after all, only a handful of historians whose work has reached beyond the “Halls of Ivy” and even fewer who seem to have had an impact on American culture. Such a group would include Charles A. Beard, Alfred Chandler, Oscar Handlin, Richard Hofstadter, Perry Miller, Samuel Eliot Morison, Francis Parkman, Arthur Schlesinger, Frederick Jackson Turner, and C. Vann Woodward, to name only the more prominent.

From the works of these authors, Frederick Jackson Turner’s brief essay, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” is the most logical choice for the most influential piece of historical writing. Turner’s essay occupies a unique place in American history as well as in American historiography. There is a valid reason for this. It, more than any other piece of historical scholarship, most affected the American’s self and institutional perceptions. “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” is, in fact, a masterpiece.

A masterpiece is not merely an outstanding work or something that identifies its creator as a master craftsman in the field. A masterpiece should change the way a public sees, feels, or thinks about reality. It should explicitly or implicitly tell much about its own times, but it should also cast a long shadow. It should have a significant impact on the way people at the time and afterward both perceive their world and act in it.

To look outside of history for an example and find an analogy in art, it may mean creating a new sense of reality—as Braque did with the development of cubism. All of the parts of a reality exist in a cubist work by Braque, but they compel the viewer to confront reality in a new way. The world of art has never been the same because of Braque. Some in the aesthetic community embraced it; others denounced it; Hitler and Stalin saw it as degenerate and banned it. A historical masterpiece should also strike fire. It must attract imitators but defy emulation. Ironically, a masterpiece must have not only these favorable attributes but also it must, as in the case of cubism, generate serious criticism and hostility. “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” did all these things.
Western American art has influenced as well as been influenced by the frontier thesis, as illustrated here by Emanuel Leutze in his painting *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*, an oil on canvas painted in 1861 as a study for a mural in the United States Capitol. (43" x 33")

From the time Turner's essay was published in the 1890s until today it has been the one piece of American historical writing that historians have praised, denounced, and tried to ignore. It has been called both a North Star and an albatross in American history. But even more importantly, its themes regarding American society and character as depicted in fiction, art, drama, and film have so effectively captured the American public's imagination and are now so deeply woven into the American consciousness that it may still be a part of the American mentality a century from now. It is worth noting, too, that today, almost at the one-hundredth anniversary of the essay's publication, the March 18, 1990, issue of the New York Times Magazine as well as the May 21, 1990, issue of U.S. News and World Report carried articles attacking it as if Turner were alive and prepared to defend himself. No other historical interpretation of American society has left so lasting a legacy.

"The Significance of the Frontier in American History" is a profoundly personal as well as historical statement. Frederick Jackson Turner, very much a product of the Middle West and Victorian America, was born in Portage, Wisconsin, in November 1861. His parents belonged to the nation's white, native-born, urban, middle-class elite; his father was a Republican politician, a promoter-investor in pioneer enterprises like railroads, and a newspaper editor-publisher; his mother had taught school. From his boyhood Turner learned liberal ideas from political table talk, listened to discussions about the economic potential of underdeveloped Wisconsin, and came to appreciate the power of the written and spoken word. Little wonder that when Turner entered the University of Wisconsin he considered journalism a proper career for an up-and-coming young man.

Turner's cultural baggage also included a keen recognition of his boyhood environment. Portage was no longer a backward Wisconsin town by nineteenth-century standards but a bustling community of about five thousand inhabitants. Tales of the Indians, fur traders, trappers, and Irish lum-


berjacks, who had made up the early history of the place, were still told in the streets. Later, Turner himself recounted that he had seen Indians being shipped off to a reservation, loggers tying up their rafts, and the victim of a lynch mob left hanging as an example to would-be wrongdoers. To live in Portage during the immediate post-Civil War years, for Turner, was to feel a part of the great surge of national energy that was subduing, taming, developing, exploiting, and making America. That powerful force was also Americanizing Wisconsin's immigrants. These people, especially the Germans who lived near Portage, were entering fully into American society and sharing both political power and economic opportunity.

More than people and events influenced Turner. He embraced an implicit contradiction: on the one hand he took pride in American economic development, while on the other hand he felt that the American wilderness was a limitless pristine Garden of Eden, a view fashioned by his familiar Wisconsin countryside, with its sparkling brooks, its fish-filled lakes, its pristine piney forests. It is wrong to assume that Turner's response to the wilderness was naive Emersonianism. In a very real sense Turner never abandoned the countryside, even when he taught at Harvard or retired among the citrus groves at the Huntington Library in California. Turner never escaped his contradictory belief in an Edenic vision of underdeveloped America, which he both praised and tried to reconcile with his faith in economic progress.

The University of Wisconsin was a small land-grant college in 1880 when Turner arrived in Madison. As an unusually bright, highly motivated, articulate, well-bred youngster from a good small-town family, he was very successful. He joined a social fraternity, edited the school paper, engaged in debates, and walked off with the prestigious Burrows Prize, the most coveted oratorical award the university could bestow. This was at a time when the college orator rather than the college athlete was the campus hero. Although he read widely and studied rhetoric, his first love was history; and he was profoundly influenced by Professor William F. Allen, a Harvard-educated, German-trained scholar of ancient and medieval history who was the university's first and sole professor of history.

Graduated in 1884, the year the American Historical Association was organized, Turner briefly tried journalism, working for the Milwaukee Journal and the Chicago Inter-Ocean, before returning to Wisconsin to prepare for a teaching career. The decision to become a historian was a courageous one because jobs were scarce—Wisconsin had only one history professor—and a potential faculty member needed both Ph.D. and considerable skill as a lecturer. While a graduate student at Wisconsin, Turner taught rhetoric—which was then public speaking and composition—and history.

After earning a master's degree, he moved on to Johns Hopkins University for a doctorate because
it was the best place to study. The Johns Hopkins faculty, German in training or scholarly orientation, played a major role in introducing the critical seminar to America. At Hopkins, Turner rubbed shoulders with fellow graduate students and studied with professors who were to be the scholarly giants of the age: Charles Homer Haskins; Woodrow Wilson; J. Franklin Jameson; Richard T. Ely; and Herbert Baxter Adams.

The faculty and students at Hopkins worked in an atmosphere of zealotry approaching a religious revival. Determined to make the writing and teaching of history into a true profession, convinced that they could find and propound objective truth, they sought to create a new discipline of history that was based on larger knowledge and a more rigorous method of research.4 They were exposed to the works of leading European scholars. Turner thrived in this environment, where no assumption was sacred and where ideas were shared, debated, and openly criticized.

The Hopkins history department, however, was not free of doctrine. Herbert Baxter Adams, its dominant figure, espoused the so-called “germ theory,” which explained historical development more in terms of origins than of dynamics.5 Therefore, according to Adams, American institutions were merely an extension of medieval Teutonic structures that had been transferred first to England and then to North America. His thinking was compatible with that of the major literary scholars of the period, who were busy tracing historical linkages between Anglo-Saxon and English literature as it was taught in American schools. This approach was virtually sterile to historians deeply interested in their own past, however, because it denied the possibility that anything original or unique could stem from the American experience.

When Turner returned to Wisconsin in 1889, where the untimely death of his mentor, William F. Allen, opened the way for his advancement, he carried with him all the skills, zeal, and goals acquired at Hopkins. But he also brought with him both a profound faith in, and emerging doubts about, how to study American history. He slowly distanced himself from Herbert Baxter Adams’ view of history and changed his perception of how to understand the past. He accepted the broadest conception of history—denying that it was merely past politics or the activities of only elite groups—and insisted that historians should not overlook the doings of the “degraded tillers of the soil.” Yet he was loath to abandon Adams’ position completely because he still believed in historical continuity but was sorely troubled by how to unite the present and the past. Turner, like others of his generation, believed that objective historical scholarship could serve a higher purpose. Thus, Turner wrestled with severe intellectual problems in his early years of teaching and writing. Adams’ interpretation not only led away from any analysis of a national entity but also conflicted with Turner’s personal experience, with his interest in his native Middle West, and with his historical imagination.

Several generations of scholars have sought to determine exactly how and when Turner changed his ideas and how they evolved. They have searched for the sources of his thought in his reading notes and clipping files, his day book, his rhetorical

5. Herbert Baxter Adams was not only a power within the profession but also a “master promoter” who helped organize the American Historical Association. See David D. Van Tassel, Recording America’s Past: An Interpretation of the Development of Historical Studies in America, 1607-1884 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 171.
6. Martin Ridge, ed., “The Significance of History” in, Frederick Jackson Turner: Wisconsin’s Historian of the Frontier (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1986), 51. Turner’s continuing interest in studying the lives of ordinary people is captured in a 1923 letter to Dr. Theodore Blegen where he used within quotation marks the phrase “history from the bottom up.” There is some irony in the fact that the phrase was popular in the 1960s among radical social historians who rejected Turnerian thinking. Jesse Lemisch was probably unaware of its origin. See FJT to Blegen, March 16, 1923, Turner Papers, Huntington Library, San Marino, California.
studies, and his teaching. Some historians argued that the ideas he expressed were so common that they were in the air—everybody was thinking and talking about them. But as far as Turner was concerned, one thing is clear—his genius lay in a mind that was capable of what psychologists identify as both convergent and divergent thinking. Convergent thinking is required in areas of compelling inferences—in seeking solutions to questions. Divergent thinking is important for breaking new ground. These qualities were demanded of him when Herbert Baxter Adams recommended that he present a paper at the World Congress of Historians to be held during the Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition in July 1893.

Turner, at age thirty-three, probably under hurried conditions because he was a procrastinator, wrote “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” It is far more a manifesto, albeit a very florid one, than a piece of research. He called on Americans to turn away from the accepted paradigms of their past. “Our early history,” he conceded in a nod to his graduate school mentor, Herbert Baxter Adams, “is the study of European germ developing in an American environment.” But he added, “Too exclusive attention has been paid by institutional students to the Germanic origins; too little to the American factors.” He was equally critical of the constitutional historian Hermann Von Holst of the University of Chicago and the gifted amateur James Ford Rhodes for overemphasizing slavery and politics. In this way he eliminated two rival paradigms for understanding American development.

Turner said more: he called on historians to recognize the major American historical discontinuity of their own time. To dramatize this disfunction Turner quoted from the report of the Superintendent of the Census, who pointed out that by 1890 it was no longer possible, as it had been since 1790, to indicate on a map of the United States the existence of a frontier line of settlement. This simple statement, he asserted, marked “the closing of a great historic movement. Up to our own day,” he wrote, “America has been in large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West.” And he added, “The existence of an area of free land . . . and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.”

Turner left the definition of the frontier vague—“The term is an elastic one,” he wrote, but the most

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significant thing about the frontier was that it existed "at the hither edge of free land." The frontier was one of several vital forces behind constitutional forms, "that call these organs into life," he wrote, "and shape them to meet changing conditions."

The nation's institutions owed their originality to the fact that they had been "compelled to adapt themselves to the changes of an expanding people—to the changes involved in crossing a continent, in winning a wilderness, and in developing at each area of this progress, out of the primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier, the complexity of city life." The reconstruction of society made the frontier—"the meeting point between savagery and civilization"—the area of the "most rapid and effective Americanization."

The frontier helped create a new people and new institutions. Americans were a mixed race, as the term was used at the close of the nineteenth century. Newcomers on the frontier, whether from abroad or from different parts of the country, were integrated into a new American economic and political community, a process that redefined their cultural and national identity. They were "English in neither nationality nor characteristics." Frontier conditions made everyone more national than parochial because only the central government had the power to care for its new communities, build roads, provide for law and order, maintain an army to control Indians, and above all subsidize the economies of new regions. "Loose construction of the Constitution," resulted and, Turner argued, "increased as the nation marched westward." The Louisiana Purchase was an outstanding example.

A principal function of the frontier, as Turner saw it, was the "promotion of democracy here and in Europe." He espoused the idea that political democracy and land ownership were virtually inseparable. His frontier democracy was "born of free land," which resulted in the distribution of both political power and economic opportunity more equally than it had been in any country in the western world. This was part of a process that transformed the concept of Jeffersonian republicanism into the national republicanism of James Monroe and ultimately into the democracy of Andrew Jackson.

For Turner, America's political democracy reflected its frontier origins. It displayed the independent spirit of a landed class rather than the subservience of a peasant class. American democ-
racy was strong in selfishness and individualism, intolerant of administrative experience and education, and tended to press individual liberty beyond its proper bounds. It encouraged lawlessness, lax business honor, harmful currency policies. These behaviors, Turner pointed out, alarmed the less democratic East and resulted in severe tensions and conflict between the East and the West. In a sense, Turner implicitly argued that sectional conflict rather than class conflict was more significant in American history. He believed that the struggle on the frontier to redistribute political power and economic resources was one of the major issues in the nineteenth century.

Turner also sought out national traits spawned on the frontier that distinguished Americans from Europeans. In this context he wrote, "To the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics": coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; a practical inventive turn of mind, quick to accept expedients; a concentration on material things but a lack of concern for the aesthetic; a restless, nervous energy; a dominant individualism working for both evil and good; and, foremost among all these, the optimism and enthusiasm that came with the freedom of choice and place. These traits, he observed, were bred into the American people by three centuries of frontier experience.

In conclusion Turner returned to his original theme of historical discontinuity: the frontier era was at an end. He posed the critical question: what would happen to the United States without a frontier. As Turner's most impassioned advocate of the past generation, Ray Allen Billington, put it: "Never again would nature yield its gifts so generously. Never again would a stubborn environment help break the bonds of custom and summon mankind to accept its conditions. No longer would frontierizing," as Turner saw it, "furnish a new field of opportunity, a gate to escape from the bondage of the past." Now Americans would have to manage their economy and their politics in order to live in a closed-space world. For Turner, the first period of American history had ended with the closing of the frontier.

In asking Americans to reconsider their history through the prism of the frontier Turner did several things. First, he produced a radical manifesto for historians. Second, he advocated a theory of secular, democratic, American exceptionalism. Third, he asserted that the American people were a unique nationality or race, as the term was used at that time, with distinctive cultural traits based primarily on their own experience and not Teutonic antecedents. The unstated leitmotif of his essay was a strident chauvinism. Fourth, he claimed that the essence of American identity was not to be found in the New England Puritan mind or in the mentality of the former slaveholding tidewater South but among people on the moving frontier. Fifth, he insisted on the existence of a historical disjunction—the nation stood on the threshold of a new age: the story of how the frontier formed America remained to be written. And finally, he recognized that America in the 1890s represented the end product of a triumphal if bloody march of a pioneering people from a cluster of New England villages and tidewater plantations across the continent. Moreover, in a Darwinian sense it depicted a national evolutionary process from a simple extractive and pastoral entity to a complex urban organism. The essay was written in the idiom of modern evolutionary science.

More is the pity the voices of race, class, and gender were muted or absent in Turner's essay. This did not mean that Turner had sanitized the westering experience. It means that he legitimized the use of the frontier to explain the nation's history for wider audiences from the perspective of his generation and his personal experience.

If Turner expected anger or anguish from historians who held a dissenting view, he was surely disappointed for the immediate response to the essay was initial silence followed by an academic yawn. There was no discussion. There was not even a ripple. Turner repeated the paper at a December 1893 meeting of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, after which it was published by the Society. Turner also published it in The American Historical Association's Annual Report for 1893.

When Turner mailed copies to distinguished historians, newspaper and magazine editors, and other people of note, as some young professors and self-publicists are wont to do, the results were almost predictable. Theodore Roosevelt praised Turner for stating clearly the "thought that has been floating around rather loosely." Francis A. Walker, president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a leading statistician, praised the title—he may have read no further. Achille Loria, the Italian economist whose work Turner had read and referred to, applauded Turner for substantiating his views. John Fiske, perhaps the most successful popular historian of the period,

10. Ibid., 129-30.
Ai Turner was given this crayon-on-paper cartoon of his frontier thesis at an informal dinner in his honor at the time of his retirement from Harvard University in 1924.

told Turner the essay was excellent—he too was working along the same line. Turner’s biographer notes that the typical remark of eastern historians was that “Turner must be a very provincial type of historian.”10

Turner’s essay was anything but provincial in intent and scope. He offered a sophisticated holistic interpretation of American history and provided a unifying hypothesis around which to organize the study of the United States in the nineteenth century. But one need not be a Freudian psychoanalyst to realize that Turner’s essay represented the most obvious personal experiences in Portage and the University of Wisconsin, his faith in national growth and progress, his identification with the geography of his region, his insistence on the contributions of the near recent past, as well as his scholarship and his historical imagination.

No doubt, this same feeling stirred other members of his generation who were born or reared beyond the Appalachians, and it accelerated the widespread acceptance of his theory. State and local historians, whether in colleges, universities, museums, or historical societies, for the first time understood how their work fit into the broader context of American history and could take pride in their contributions to history. Why study Teutonic germs that said little of the present when there was so much to be told about the contributions of local or regional men and women whose exploits could be recalled by living people? The earliest period of exploration, settlement, and development—the nineteenth-century frontier era—loomed large in its own right as a field of study. Courses in the “History of the West” or the “History of the Frontier” cropped up in colleges and universities not only where Turner’s students taught but also throughout the nation as historians became familiar with his ideas. The ideas expressed in the “Significance of the Frontier in American History” may have been “floating around loosely” as Theodore Roosevelt put it, but their acceptance came first among people who felt themselves like the westering men and women who wanted to escape eastern hegemony. The implications of Turner’s thesis were not lost on geographers, economists, and political scientists who picked up on the idea of the frontier and used it in their work.

Within a decade and a half of Turner’s presentation at Chicago, he had captured most of the citadels of the profession. He was sought after to
One of the many photographs of Turner taken outdoors on camping or fishing trips during the 1920s.

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especially television have both popularized and trivialized his ideas about regional conflict, frontier types, lawlessness, and free land. Both have taken what should be considered vocational archetypes—such as the cowboy—and turned them into stereotypes in the worst sense. But even the cynical criticism that exists in contemporary film that makes anti-heroes of protagonists has not shattered the Turnerian model; it has simply reinforced the idea that the frontier was the vital factor that makes diversity an essential part of the American character.

Evidence of the pervasiveness of Turnerian rhetoric is so widespread that it has entered all aspects of American life. President Franklin D. Roosevelt used the closing of the frontier in a speech justifying a call for more economic planning. Both the domestic and foreign press depicted former President Ronald Reagan and President George Bush as either western badmen or steely-eyed sheriffs because of their foreign policy decisions. President John F. Kennedy saw space as a frontier. Americans call all areas of exploration and opportunity frontiers and speak of frontiers in medicine, physics, or even dentistry. No other nation in the world uses the word frontier as Americans do. Other peoples say frontier when they mean a border between nations.

There was no counterrevolution to Turnerianism in American historical writing—no one defended the "germ theory" per se, although a later generation of legal historians have reconstructed a version of it by emphasizing the taught tradition of law. 13 Over the years, however, the number and variety of attacks on the frontier thesis have been legion. Some historians seem to have made it a career choice. Oddly enough, the very vitriolic nature of the criticism, and its attending publicity have promoted continuing public awareness of the frontier influence on American life.

Turner's masterpiece, like Braque's cubist work—"Man with a Guitar"—has achieved a special place in American culture. It changed a vital part of the scholarly community, and its rhetoric has been absorbed into our everyday language. It changed the way most Americans continue to see themselves and their institutions. Moreover, it changed the way they are seen by others throughout the world. People who have never read "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" or heard of Frederick Jackson Turner—as is true of Braque and cubism—identify with it and recognize in it portions of a reality.

No other piece of American historical writing so legitimated the American historical imagination, stimulated so thorough an inquiry, precipitated so furious a dispute over so long a period, and embedded itself so deeply into the American psyche. To think of the history of "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" is to be reminded of a familiar passage from Christopher Marlowe's play, Dr. Faustus:

"Was this the face that launch'd a thousand ships,
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?"

In the case of Turner's masterpiece, the answer is yes.

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Grim facial expressions belie the frivolity of the scene as Geronimo, behind the wheel in top hat, and companions pose for an unlikely early twentieth-century scene that poignantly depicts the end of the frontier for whites and a dramatically changed way of life for Native Americans.