The Turner Thesis — a Problem in Historiography

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When Frederick Jackson Turner quietly announced his frontier thesis 60 years ago, it caused little more than a ripple in historical circles. Thirty years later, not only was it widely accepted as the primary explanation of American growth, but American historiography had benefited from thousands of monographs, articles and other historical tomes which emerged in a steady flow from universities, historical societies and libraries.

The fact that the frontier thesis produced little immediate reaction is not surprising. The current vogue was the “germ” school, best fostered and developed in the seminars of Herbert Baxter Adams at Johns Hopkins University. However, no school or theory was well set: American historiography was in a period of rapid change and ferment. American history as an academic discipline was in its incipient stages. As late as 1880, J. Franklin Jameson remarked that there were only eleven professors of history in the United States. Yet within a generation, due to the tremendous accomplishments of these pioneer universities and early historians, American history was well established at the graduate level.

The new scholar-historian had several traditions which were conveniently at hand for his use. The romantics, in the immediate background, used a different fabric than the “scientific” historian to weave their historical tale; in many instances they were just as careful in the use of their sources. A second tradition was what Harry Stevens has chosen to call the “ethical and spiritual” approach, introduced by Andrew Dixon White at Michigan. White, who, Carl Becker said, “probably had a greater influence on the history of higher education in the United States in the nineteenth century than anyone else,” matriculated at the College de France and the Sorbonne. He also attended the University of Berlin for a short time. White returned to the United States in 1857 and was hired as a professor of history at Michigan. He began implementing his vision of an academic program in the History and Political Science Department. Lectures, accompanied by liberal dosages of wide collateral reading, were White’s prescription for all “worthy young men.”

Evolution as a method in approaching historical thought was sliding into the historical scene at nearly the same time White was at work in Michigan. Comtian positivism sought to apply the natural sciences to ferret out laws of historical development which could provide the sign posts for a study of direct evolution. While the social evolutionist sent reverberations down many a historical spine, it is hard to find a historian before James Harvey Robinson who used evolution as the central theme of his work.

It was in this evolutionary and nationalistic milieu that the new “scientific” historian emerged in the latter quarter of the nineteenth century. The new professionals were faced with two main alternatives. They could either convert history into a sociological and evolutionary science or they could apply “scientific” methods to the writing of history. Their German training influenced the professional historian and finally swayed him to the “scientific” approach.

Charles Kendall Adams was one of the


5 Henry Adams first accepted and then rejected the evolutionary concept in history.

first to drift toward the "scientific" procedure. A former student of White, Adams followed his mentor as professor of history at the University of Michigan in 1869. Professor Adams' first seminar consisted of discussions in class and an undergraduate thesis. By 1882, with the establishment of a School of Political Science (due largely to Adams' efforts) the seminar had developed into something akin to present-day graduate form. Two papers from the 1882-1883 seminar were published in the first volume of *Papers* issued by the American Historical Association in 1886. Again following in the steps of his master, Adams arrived at Cornell University in 1885 to take over the presidency.  

While Charles Kendall Adams was pioneering in a historical seminar at Michigan, the first genuine graduate work was taking place under Henry Adams at Harvard. Adams trained the first Harvard doctors of philosophy in history. A moody and eclectic genius, Adams was stopped short in his use of evolution as a key to social advancement, when he was unable to harmonize the Grant administration with cosmic progress! Restless and unsatisfied, Adams resigned from Harvard in 1877, writing "Failure" as the title of the chapter dealing with this experience in his autobiography.  

A year previous to Adams' resignation, John W. Burgess was appointed to a professorship of history, political science and international law at Columbia University. Burgess, a graduate of Amherst College, had studied at Leipzig, Göttingen and Berlin. Four years after his arrival at Columbia, Burgess persuaded the trustees to establish a School of Political Science. He originated a program of three years' study which ultimately culminated in a doctorate of philosophy.  

In the same year that Burgess became a professor at Columbia, Herbert Baxter Adams—age 26—received a fellowship from the Johns Hopkins University. As were many of the "scientific" historians, Adams was trained in German universities. Quickly Adams developed a historical seminar that was patterned by universities over the land. The annual yields from these seminars were published in the *Johns Hopkins University Studies in History and Political Science*, which were begun in 1882. These volumes won for the editor the appellation of "Father of Monographic history."  

In Adams' seminars the Teutonic hypothesis was developed to its fullest extent. Along with Moses Coit Tyler and Albert Bushnell Hart, Adams espoused the belief in the idea that the United States had been the recipient of Teutonic "seeds" brought over from England, just as originally these "seeds" were brought to England from the German forest by the Anglo-Saxons. United with the Teutonic hypothesis was the Social Darwinist conception that these "seeds" had produced the democratic institutions of the New England town, democratic elements in the governments of New England states and finally reached its fruition in the United States Constitution. Adams' endorsement of the Teutonic hypothesis was put in an article on the "Germanic Origins of New England Towns." Professor Adams wrote that in the German forest were "planted the seeds of Parliamentary or Self-Government of Commons and Congresses. Here lay the germs of religious reformation and of popular revolutions, the ideas which have formed Germany and Holland, England and New England, the United States in the broadest sense of that old Germanic institution."  

In 1889, a student a thousand miles from his beloved Wisconsin forests, enrolled in Adams' seminar. Born and raised in the frontier community of Portage, Wisconsin, Frederick Jackson Turner found the "germ"...
theory wanting in explaining American institutional growth. Turner was emotionally and intellectually interested in the American scene; the remote "seed" of the Teutonic theorist stood in a poor second place in his ideas on the American development. As he wrote in his autobiographic letter to Constance Skinner,

My people on both sides moved at least every generation, and built new communities. . . . My father was named Andrew Jackson Turner at his birth in 1832 by my Democratic grandfather, and I still rise and go to bed to the striking of the old clock that was brought into the house the day he was born, at the edge of the Adirondack forest. My mother's ancestors were preachers. Is it strange that I preached rise and go to bed to the striking of the old clock in 1832 by my Democratic grandfather, and I still...20

Turner was looking for a historical summit from which to view American history and by 1893, when he delivered his address in Chicago, he had discovered that vantage point. In one famous sentence, Turner outlined the next stage in American historiography; "The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development." Turner then stated that the emerging political institutions in America were due to environmental conditions and not to race as the Teutonists claimed.16

That most important "area of free land" provided the atmosphere wherein the individual frontiersman unchained himself from the European social rigidity and bounded forth to enjoy economic equality, social mobility and democracy.17 In a word, wrote Turner, "free lands meant free opportunity." From the impact of the frontier on the individual was forged the American character. For Professor Turner this meant the pioneer was nationalistic yet individualistic and that above all he had a passionate belief in democracy.19

With the passing of the frontier, Turner discerned the advancement of a social homogeneity which in turn launched him on his next search for factor explaining this phenomenon. Finally, he settled on the section as the agent which would aid in the comprehension of the forces at work on the closing of the frontier.20

Two major questions have received much attention from scholars in American historiography: One, into what magic barrel or barrels did Turner dip for his ideas? Two, what are the reasons for three decades of almost unqualified acceptance of Turner's theories? Obviously many of Turner's concepts have been floating around in the historical mist. But Turner did what his precursors did not do: he unified and dramatized the material on the frontier. One might list a host of names whose ideas can be found somewhere in Turner's writings.21 To attempt to link Turner in direct historiographic line with these names is neither fruitful nor pertinent. This is not to say that the study of the frontier concept before Turner is not profit-

14 In his formative years Turner did not reject the Teutonic theory entirely. He was very much interested in the social evolutionary approach throughout his life. See the review by Turner of Theodore Roosevelt's Winning of the West in Dial, 10:71-73 (August, 1889); Merle Curti, "The Section and the Frontier in American History: The Methodological Concepts of Frederick Jackson Turner," in Methods in Social Science, edited by Stuart A. Rice (Chicago, 1931), 353-367.


16 For a discussion of evolutionary thought see, Stow Persons, Evolutionary Thought in America (New Haven, 1950); Ralph Henry Gabriel, The Course of American Democratic Thought (New York, 1956).


18 Ibid., 259-260.

19 Ibid., 358.

20 How Turner evolved the sectional approach is given in Max Farrand's introduction to Turner's The Significance of Sections in American History (New York, 1932), iii-v; Fulmer Mood, "Origin, Evolution and Application of the Sectional Concept, 1750-1900," in Regionalism in American History, edited by Merrill Jensen (Madison, 1952), 5-98.

able. Indeed, it may be extremely worthwhile, as the Mood and Benson studies have demonstrated.22

Fulmer Mood, who has produced the best work on Turner's early life, traced the evolution of the frontier concept among census analyzers and statisticians. Mood points out that Turner had available a long heritage of men who had worked with and developed, in part, the ideas that Turner so forcibly turned out.23

Why Turner's ideas were unilaterally adopted by the historical profession has caused much more speculation, and so far no one diagnosis has proven completely valid.24 A myriad of explanations are readily apparent. At the time that Turner announced his thesis, American history was dominated by two principle themes: the Teutonic hypothesis and the obsession with the slavery controversy.25 The Age was ripe for a nationalistic explanation of America's growth. Young historians who were casting about for something more "American" than the Teutonic school adopted the thesis for a solution to the uniqueness of American history. By following Turner one could be in the yeast of the Progressive movement but still not be labelled a Marxist.26 The thesis was in the mold of the Jeffersonian democracy of a century earlier.

Other factors in the background of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries contributed to the acceptance of the frontier thesis. There was wide reception given to evolutionary doctrines. In addition to this, increase in county histories, state historical societies, libraries and museums cultivated the intellectual climate for the Turner thesis. Now, each historian in his own bailiwick was provided with a historical theory upon which to test his personal observations, and in so doing he was given the feeling of contributing to the interpretation of his nation.

Besides the frontier thesis, the attention of these local historians was focused on the frontier by the revolutionary changes that were going on in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.27 Lee Benson outlined these as (1) the communication revolution which riveted the attention of Americans on the public domain of the West and (2) the general belief in the inexhaustibility of public lands. There was a general feeling that one could always go West. Turner's calm announcement of the Superintendent of Census' observation that the frontier was gone jolted many scholars into revising their attitudes.28

Another reason for the endorsement of the frontier school is often overlooked. Much of what the frontier theorizers wrote was well written, stimulating and provocative. But the major reason for the assent given to Turner's concepts was the stream of graduate students whom Turner taught over the years. There is ample testimony that Dr. Turner's graduate seminars became laboratories for testing the stimulating ideas of master and student. The results then spread to the four corners of the United States. Seldom has a teacher incurred deeper devotion from his students. A high percentage of them consecrated their lives to

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23 In 1956, a Norwegian and former Curti student, Sveaas Anderson, analyzed the genesis of Turner's ideas by using six "active concepts": the frontier, free land, the idea of nature, the idea of evolution and the economic thought complex of land and trade. Taking these six concepts, the author investigates, in reverse chronology, how each idea developed in 12 of Turner's articles. Sveaas Anderson, Westward Is the Course of Empires (University of Oslo Press, 1956).


exploring the unknowns of the “hither edge.” If Professor Turner had never written a word his concepts would have been well-known through the publicizing powers of his students.

As early as 1905, Turner’s students were scattered over the United States. Joseph Schafer was at Oregon, Edmond Meany at Washington, Clark at Texas, Hibbard at Ames, Libby at North Dakota, Becker at Kansas.29 In succeeding years these newly trained historians would be followed by a score of others.30 When one further considers that many of these students were the first trained historians in their various locales, the wonder of unilateral acceptance of the frontier thesis continues to diminish.31

The early criticism of Turner and the frontier thesis was sketchy, ill-defined and usually directed at one or two points of the thesis, which points the critics, from their personal experience, believed to be inaccurate.32 Curiously enough, the first published criticism of the frontier thesis came from a Turner student, Edmond S. Meany, at the University of Washington. In a paper published in the Annual Report of the American Historical Association for 1909, Meany took exception to Turner’s statement that “The trading posts became the nuclei of later settlement; the trader’s trails grew into the early roads, and their portages marked out the location for canals. Little by little the fur-trade was undermining the Indian society and paving the way for the entrance of civilization.”33 Meany conceded the validity of this evolution when used east of the divide, but he stated that it could not be employed for the Pacific Northwest. Professor Meany demonstrated that the nuclei for early settlement in the Pacific Northwest were usually sawmills, available water power, a mine or a crossroad. As far as can be detected, Meany’s criticism made little impression on the historical profession.34

Twelve years elapsed before the next attack on Turner was recorded. Charles A. Beard directed his assault on the frontier thesis along four lines. First, the Agrarian West, servility, labor and capitalism together explained American development, but certainly not free land and the Westward Movement alone. Second, Beard objected to the reasoning that the frontier is the most effective factor in the process of Americanization. Dr. Beard admitted that there was a certain plausibility to the thesis, but he proceeded to cite the cohesiveness of the frontier Germans of Pennsylvania who clung tenaciously to their customs long after the frontier was passed. Third, Professor Beard took exception to the phrase that legislation was conditioned by the frontier. He maintained that legislation was “influenced” but not “conditioned” by the frontier. Fourth, Beard found little evidence to support Turner’s contention that loose construction of the constitution increased as the

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nation marched Westward. Beard said there was no period more loose than that between 1789 and 1795, and furthermore, a hundred years later Western capitalists in Colorado and California were a long way from loose construction when it came to income tax legislation. Dr. Beard climaxed his argument by invoking the historical profession to pay more attention to the conflict between capital and labor.35

The same year that Beard first registered his dissent with the Turner thesis, Clarence W. Alvord rejected one aspect of the frontier thesis. Alvord's particular pique was with the famous sentence in which Turner describes the migration from the East. "Each passed in successive waves across the continent. Stand at Cumberland Gap and watch the procession of civilization, marching single file—the buffalo following the trail to the salt springs, the Indians, the fur trader and hunter, the cattle-raiser, the pioneer farmer—and the frontier has passed by."36 Professor Alvord expressed the opinion that the division of classes was not as distinct as this sentence would lead one to think. Did not Richard Henderson accompany Daniel Boone? Alvord believed that frontier migration would be characterized by a flood—not by successive waves. In the same article, Professor Alvord observed what later critics were to hammer at—to wit, Turner ignored the role of the land speculator.37

Four years after Beard's and Alvord's attacks, John C. Almack published one of the first general discordances with the whole thesis. After writing that the Turner thesis was not based upon facts, Almack stated that he did not believe that the frontier was the motivating force behind such governmental reforms as free tax supported schools, direct legislation, civil service reform and primary nominations. Almack noted that labor was the prime mover behind many of these reforms. Professor Almack ended by saying that the frontier was not unique.38

A fellow Californian of Almack's, John Carl Parish, focused his criticism on the frontier thesis in another quarter. Writing in the Yale Review in 1926, Parish offered the hypothesis that the Westward Movement persisted after the 1890's. New frontiers of conservation, intensive farming, banking, manufacturing and cultural arts continued to advance in progression after 1890. Parish held the opinion that the "ancient spirit" of the frontier would be kept alive by the twin tendencies of culture to change as it migrates and the continued strength of sectionalism.39

With the advent of the 1930's, criticism of Turner and the frontier thesis increased in force. Some reasons for the high pitch of these criticisms were clear, others were opaque. The 'thirties was a period of disillusionment. The depression was having repercussions among all strata of society. The intelligentsia—literary critics, academicians, leaders of the new "technocracy" and political reformers—reflected a desire to remedy the "system" that had brought this economic holocaust upon them. The intellectual vogue was for blanket condemnation of the "robber barons" and malefactors of great wealth. The country at large was demanding a "new deal." Bread lines, "Hoovervilles" (groups of tar-papered shacks inhabited by homeless masses of shifting peoples), apple peddlers and the ubiquitous shovel-leaner appeared—to be vanquished onto American folklore.

The editors of Fortune wrote in 1936, "The present day college generation is fatalistic.... If we take the mean average to be truth, it is a cautious, subdued, unadventurous generation, unwilling to storm heaven, afraid to make a fool of itself, unable to dramatize its predicament."40 How would a thesis that extolled the benefits of America's past, the uniqueness of the American way of life, individualism and equal opportunity stand up against this onslaught? All was forgotten in the rush to blame something or somebody.

38 John C. Almack, "The Shibboleth of the Frontier," Historical Outlook, 16: 197-201 (May, 1925).
The depression element in the criticism of the 'thirties can be over-emphasized. Had there been no depression, the frontier thesis would still have come under searching and minute examination in the light of gigantic strides being made in industrialization, regimentation of labor forces and urbanization.

The 1930's disputations opened with a professor of government at Harvard University, Benjamin F. Wright, questioning the growth of democracy on the frontier. Dr. Wright thought that the greatest shortcoming of the frontier interpretation was "its tendency to isolate the growth of American democracy from the general course of Western Civilization." Professor Wright questioned whether democracy came out of the American forest; he thought a truer truism would be that it came from the East and found in the West a congenial atmosphere upon which to nurture.

In a succeeding essay, Wright developed another area of dissent. He was not concerned with institutional growth as found in the constitutional history of the new West. So far as Dr. Wright was able to determine there was no considerable desire on the part of the men who framed the early Western constitutions to differ from those already long established in the East. From his research, Professor Wright found that the frontiersmen were imitative, not creative. Furthermore, Dr. Wright wanted a better definition of the frontier than Turner had provided; had not Turner over-emphasized the geographic factors and minimized ethnic and cultural factors? 41

Differing from Wright, Louis Hacker approached the Turner interpretation from essentially a Marxian angle. Dr. Hacker saw "amazing errors" in the frontier thesis. Of the uniqueness of the frontier experience and the continuity of sectional differences, Hacker said, "Merely to mention these rather naive ideas, as I have is enough to refute them." In agreement with Professor Wright, Dr. Hacker claimed that excessive stress on the uniqueness of American experience and sectional development had turned American historiography inward upon itself, whereas "all eyes should have been on events going on beyond the country's borders." Professor Hacker enunciated that agriculture of the Western region was really the "catspaw" of industry; once having served to develop the nation's capital, it could be abandoned both politically and economically. Finally, Hacker expressed adherence to the safety-valve theory and its evil effect on American labor. By continuing to draw off workingmen to free lands the American labor movement was robbed of preserving a continuous revolutionary tradition. 42

Charles Beard renewed his charges in the year that saw the beginning of Franklin D. Roosevelt's second term. Again he was perplexed by the neglect of the Turners to deal with the "democratic impulses in Eastern idealism" of the labor movement. 43 Professor Beard asserted that co-operation, as much as individualism, was in evidence on the frontier. Beard did not believe that the frontier had as much influence as Turners imagined, but he was desirous in knowing just what kind and how much influence the frontier did have. 44

When the migrants were trekking across Southwestern United States in the middle 'thirties, there occurred the most important and thorough research that has been done by

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42 Louis M. Hacker, "Sections or Classes," The Nation, 137: 108-110 (July, 1933). Dr. Hacker muted his disgust with the frontier thesis to a great degree by 1947. While he was still not willing to accept the frontier as the full explanation of American life, he was willing to concede that the frontier theory was a partial explanation. Louis M. Hacker, The Shaping of the American Tradition (2 vols., New York, 1947) 1: xv-xxiv.

43 Charles A. Beard, An Appraisal (New York, 1939), 61-71. For a great deal of insight into Beard see Samuel E. Morison's By Land and By Sea (New York, 1953), 328-345. A professor at Michigan State University, Robert E. Brown, has delivered a scathing attack on Beard's analysis of the Constitution. Contrary to Beard, Brown claims that the Constitution was adopted by middle-class democratic society. Robert Brown, Charles Beard and the Constitution (Princeton, 1956).
the critics of frontier on American development. These scholars concentrated their intellectual diligence on the safety-valve theory. The safety-valve concept was not an integral part of the Turner thesis, although Dr. George Pierson commented that a good deal of the charm and optimism of the frontier thesis was derived from the notion that the Golden West was a land of opportunity.46

The opening salvo in the safety-valve controversy was fired by Professors Carter Goodrich and Sol Davison of Columbia University.46 In their study, Davison and Goodrich made little use of the manuscript census of the General Land Office records.47 The methodological difficulties encountered with these two sources were that the Census did not show where the worker first practiced his occupation and the Homestead entries were of little use since the information contained on occupations was mentioned only occasionally. Their chief source of information was the files of contemporary newspapers.

On the basis of availability of newspaper files, Goodrich and Davison chose Fall River, Massachusetts, for their pilot study. They discovered that a number of workers went West.48 But of the emigrants that went West, seven out of ten returned to the East. After quickly surveying the town records of Lowell and Springfield, Massachusetts, the investigators offered their conclusion. First, the most serious obstacle to Western migration was the lack of capital; second, there was a definite move to overcome this handicap by group colonization enterprises, which on occasion were supported by philanthropic funds. While migration projects may have raised the percentage of industrial workers traveling West, Goodrich and Davison conclude that, "the movement of Eastern wage earners to the Western lands was surprisingly small." Too few industrial workers reached the frontier to attract notice in the amounts of settlements. What is more striking, too few wage-earners left the industrial centers to exert any marked effect on the labor situation. Having stated this conclusion, Professors Goodrich and Davison emphasized that there was nothing in the present study that would throw doubt upon the doctrine that the growth of industrial America was delayed by the presence of the frontier. Their analysis confirmed that many potential wage-earners left for the Western lands. Hence, there was a safety-valve for the farmer rather than the wage-earner which seemed to operate best from states contiguous to the frontier land.49

The Goodrich and Davison study touched off a fast and furious race among scholars to present their varied findings. In July, 1936, just three months after the Goodrich-Davison study, Professor Fred A. Shannon published the results of his research in the American Historical Review.50 Dr. Shannon discovered that because of the many weaknesses in the Homestead Act, the Act failed to aid the emigrant. Second, Shannon said that the West was merely beginning to fill up by 1890. In addition, Professor Shannon was convinced that if any movement occurred, it was from farm to farm or from farm to city, but rarely from city to farm.

Two months after Shannon's findings were announced, Murray Kane presented a statistical analysis of selected counties in Michigan and Massachusetts. Dr. Kane ascertained that in times of depression there was an increase in the population of these states and simultaneously a decline in industrial employment. This led Kane to deduce that a

47 While the safety-valve controversy was in its incipient stages, an Illinois scholar, Earl W. Hayter applied the frontier thesis to his state's early culture. Hayter's research led him to conclude that the frontier made only slight modifications on the economic, political and social institutions of pioneer communities in Illinois. Earl W. Hayter, "Sources of Early Illinois Culture," Transactions of the Illinois State Historical Society, 36: 1-16 (1936).
49 Colorado was the destination of some Fall River emigrants. See J. F. Willard and Colin B. Goodykoontz, Experiments in Colorado Colonisation, 1869-1872, Historical Collections of the University of Colorado, 3: 160-180 (Boulder, Colorado, 1926).
50 One of the best works on internal migration is Lewis D. Stilwell, Migration from Vermont (Montpelier, 1948). Stilwell provides the historian with motivations for Vermonters' treks to other sections of the United States. Exploitation of the soil, climate and topography, lack of industrialization and the educational system were suggested by Stilwell as causes of emigration. In the same area as Stilwell's study is Stewart Holbrook, Yankee Exodus (New York, 1950).
A reply to these detractors of the safety-valve was made by a Turner student, Joseph Schafer, in a series of three articles between December, 1936 and December, 1937. In answer to Goodrich and Davison, he pointed out that even they admitted that the frontier tended to hold up the level of industrial wages. He took issue with them on the methodology of their research. Dr. Schafer claimed the material was there if you cared to dig for it. Why had Davison and Goodrich not made use of county histories? Schafer's major point was the psychological effect the frontier land had. These lands were an omnipresent threat to employers, a hope for the unemployed and a constant agent in the minds of the general public. So whether the people migrated or not to free land in the West was not as important as the fact that they thought they could. 

A year and a half after Schafer finished his rebuttal, Goodrich and Davison wrote a rejoinder. They still disagreed over the use of the manuscript census. Second, they were interested in eastern migration, not the immigrant from abroad. Third, they accepted Schafer's point on the psychological effect of the frontier, but commented that this element was not measurable.

Seven years and one World War later, Fred A. Shannon endeavored to nail the coffin lid shut on the “safety-valve myth.” After a detailed statistical inquiry, Shannon wrote that 20 farmers moved to urban centers for every industrial worker that went to the farm. In addition, 10 sons of the agricultural hewers went to the city for every son that became the proud owner of a new farm. Professor Shannon debated the conclusion that immigrants moved on to the farms after serving a tenure under the smokestacks. More often, Dr. Shannon reported, they stayed on, becoming a drag on the labor market. Dr. Shannon attested to the fact that when industrial violence was reaching its peak during the 1870's and 1880's the safety-valve was supposedly blowing its optimum steam; he wondered whether this labor unrest would have come about if wages had been buoyed up by a scarcity of labor? Professor Shannon generalized that if there were any safety-valve, it was the city.

In spite of Shannon's efforts to bury the safety-valve, the lid on the coffin blew off with volcanic force at the fifty-first annual meeting of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association, in Minneapolis, April, 1958. Norman J. Simler of the College of St. Thomas, St. Paul, believed that critics as well as the advocates of the safety-valve had overlooked a major point in the whole controversy.

Utilizing economic theory, Simler argued that more germane than whether the safety-valve performed perfectly was whether it operated at all. Simler believed than an economic safety-valve was certainly at work. He was quite willing to agree with the social safety-valve adherents viewpoint that “the West, by and large, offered no easy avenue of escape for propertyless wage-earners.”

However, Simler stated this did not deny that an economic safety-valve of some type was functioning. Indeed, his work with eco-

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55 Another writer who has chosen to ignore Professor Shannon’s injunctions is Samuel Lubell. Lubell, in his Future of American Politics (New York, 1952), has made use of the safety-valve concept in his analysis of Urbanism. Prognosticator Lubell saw the urban frontier advancing along the “Old Tenement Trail,” from suburb to suburb, being driven by the hunger for social status. For thoughts somewhat in line with Lubell’s, see Charles Morrow Wilson, “The Surviving American Frontier,” Current History, 34: 189-192 (May, 1931).
56 Norman J. Simler, “The Safety-Valve Doctrine Re-evaluated” (Presented to the Fifty-first Annual Meeting of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association, April, 1958). I am indebted to Dr. Simler for sending me a copy of his paper, which appears in this issue of Agricultural History. As can well be imagined, this session of Mississippi Valley Historical Association was one of the most stimulating of the entire meeting. Professors Shannon and Kane were on hand to present their vigorous rebuttals.
nomic theory definitely showed the operation of some economic safety-valve. Simler pointed out that after all the West was populated and “it clearly did not get that way by spontaneous generation.”

The next criticism shifted from the Middle West to the South Atlantic section. Dr. Thomas Abernethy of the University of Virginia wrote that the frontier did not give birth to democracy but to opportunism, crudity and aristocracy. The land speculator-politician dominated the frontier scene. Abernethy saw the speculator as the originator of separatist movements. “So closely did democracy cling to its leaders and so tenaciously were voting habits and political traditions, that we find the strange phenomenon of men voting against their own economic interests without regard to changing issues.”

The disapprobations on the frontier thesis during the 1940’s and 1950’s in some measure formed a continuous line with those voiced in the 1930’s. A general trend may be noted—the vehemence of the arguments declined. Instead of just criticizing the frontier thesis, the dissentors started offering a thesis of their own to supplant the frontier thesis. The urban-industrial thesis received increasing examination over the next two decades. This had the beneficial result of providing the historical profession with new pockets of unmined data.

Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., an apostle of urbanism, initiated the criticism of the 1940’s. Dr. Schlesinger enunciated that American history was long overdue for a new interpretation. It was Professor Schlesinger’s aim to remedy this situation. Dr. Schlesinger’s most forceful exposition of his views was presented in an article in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*. Professor Schlesinger said that by 1820 the migration to the cities was faster than to the frontier. And by 1860, one out of every six persons in the United States was living in population centers of 8,000 or more. Dr. Schlesinger stated that in the pre-Civil War period most humanitarian impulses centered in the cities. Furthermore, the cultural lag between city and rural areas highlighted the differences between the two ways of life. Between 1790 and 1890, Professor Schlesinger notes, the population growth of the nation as a whole was 16-fold, contrasted with the urban population which had grown 139-fold. In light of this, Dr. Schlesinger wrote that the historic announcement in the 1890 census was less a prophecy of an end to an old civilization than a long overdue admission of the arrival of a new one.

Sixteen weeks after Schlesinger’s article was published, Murray Kane launched his disagreement with the frontier thesis. Kane’s primary concern was with Turner’s interpretative ability. Professor Kane finds Turner’s historical interpretation dominated by anthropological and geographical determinism. Not only does Turner misplace the anthropological and geographical elements but he over-accentuates them in his historical structure. According to Dr. Kane, this has the consequence of making Professor Turner’s theories a statistical interpretation of history rather than a historical interpretation of statistics. Kane registered agreement with Dr. Turner for stressing economic

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67 The land speculator’s role has been the subject of a number of scholars, with Paul W. Gates probably being the most prominent (Hedges, Whitaker, Evans, Carpenter, Overton, Billington and Hubbert are others). Gates credits the land speculators as important in five areas: (1) they influenced the formation of tenancy in the United States; (2) land speculators had a nationalizing influence on public lands—for example, they favored internal improvements; (3) location of county seats and capitals; (4) the successful land speculator of one generation became the banker of the next; (5) cultural fields. Paul Wallace Gates, “Role of the Land Speculator in Western Development,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 66: 314-333 (July, 1942); Paul Wallace Gates, “Land Policy and Tenancy in the Prairie States,” *Journal of Economic History*, 1: 60-82 (May, 1941); Paul Wallace Gates, *The Illinois Central Railroad and Its Colonization Work* (Cambridge, 1934); Paul Wallace Gates, *Fifty Million Acres: Conflicts Over Kansas Land Policy, 1854-1890* (Ithaca, New York, 1954). Survey of the literature on the land speculator is given in Ray A. Billington, “The Origin of the Land Speculator as a Frontier Type,” *Journal of Illinois State Historical Society*, 43: 28-45 (January, 1950).


factors, but felt that he traded the terminology of the economist for that of the geographer.60

A prolific critic of the frontier thesis is George W. Pierson. In a succession of articles from 1940 to 1942, Pierson undertook a broadgauge overhauling of Turner and the frontier thesis. First, Pierson wondered why Turner had neglected such aspects of nature as climate, crops, animals and disease. Second, Turner over-stressed the freehold phase of the frontier. Third, Turner exaggerated the uniformity of the frontier experiences.61 Fourth, Professor Pierson was disturbed by the lack of a consistent definition of key terms—"frontier" and "democracy."62 Dr. Pierson summarized his article thus,

It should be observed that a large quarter of the thirteen essays still remain unanalyzed, and that in any case, prior to trial, doubts must not be stretched into established proof. Notwithstanding, it would already seem reasonable to recognize that Turner's "frontier" was hazy and a shifting concept, riddled with internal contradictions, overlaid with sectional bias, and saturated with nationalistic emotion.63

A year later Dr. Pierson presented his maturing ideas in the New England Quarterly. Professor Pierson conceded that the frontier offered novel problems, but its influence was strengthened by repetition—copying became easy. What happens to originality? Was the social and democratic legislation of the Populists and progressive reformers to be ascribed to the frontier? What about the evolution of Parliament, colonial legislatures, New England town meetings and self-government of Congregational churches? Pierson thought Turner was deterministic—almost fatalistic. Professor Pierson does not credit Turner with inventing the "escape concept" that Pierson sees inherent in the safety-valve. "Yet if today our leaders still hitch our star to a covered wagon, the frontier theory may share the responsibility," Pierson ended by writing that the frontier theory in its "full development" does not hang together. Nationalism contradicts sectionalism, innovations are secured by repetition, materialism winds its way into idealism. "In what it proposes, the frontier hypothesis needs painstaking revision. By what it fails to mention, the theory disqualifies itself as an adequate guide to American development."64

In 1945, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. provided lucid exposition of the urban-industrial thesis. Schlesinger, Jr. expounded his theories in the Pulitzer-prize winning volume, The Age of Jackson. Schlesinger sought to prove two main theses: Jacksonian democracy was better understood in terms of classes than sections and liberalism in the United States has most commonly been a movement of other "sections of society to restrain the power of the business community." Dr. Schlesinger's tome had not been published long before criticism appeared. These criticisms will be treated later in this paper.65

In the same year that The Age of Jackson was published, Dr. Carlton J. H. Hayes pre-
sented his presidential address to the American Historical Association. Dr. Hayes entitled his remarks, "The American Frontier—Frontier of What?" Actually, Professor Hayes' title summarized his address. He believed that the obsession of the American People with sectional and local history had led to an extreme self-centeredness and isolationism. Dr. Hayes thought this was "unrealistic, contrary to basic historical facts, and highly dangerous for our country at the present and in the future." What was demanded of American scholars and citizens was a broader knowledge of Europe.

James C. Malin, a year after Dr. Hayes' address, presented a tightly reasoned case, which Thomas Le Duc has called Malin's "ideas to action" analysis. Malin based his disagreement with Turner on what he chose to designate as Turner's "peculiar absorption" with the closed space doctrine. Professor Malin declared that if mobility is the true answer to opportunity for the individual, there should be no occasion to worry about a substitute for the frontier. For so long as the communication revolution continues indefinitely, mobility in space is assured. Malin hastened to point out that he was not sure that either of the above points were valid.

David M. Potter, a colleague of Pierson's at Yale, found the frontier thesis of little help in explaining the American character. Dr. Potter, in a series of provocative lectures delivered at the University of Chicago in 1953 (the Charles G. Walgreen Lectures), delved into the effect of abundance on the American character.

Concerning the Turner thesis Potter had several objections: (1) Turner, by his overemphasis on the benefits of the frontier, had induced apprehension and pessimism as to the state of society in the post-frontier era; (2) Turner's obsession with the beneficial effects of agrarian milieu caused him to overlook the circumstances in the American environment which were operating for constant change and experimentation; (3) "Turner did not recognize that the attraction of the frontier was simply as the most accessible form of abundance, and therefore he could not conceive that other forms of abundance might replace it as the lodestone to which the needle of American aspirations would point."

In concluding his comments on the Turner thesis, Professor Potter was willing to admit that Turner's geographical determinism had some validity. In support of his viewpoint, he cited Walter P. Webb's *The Great Frontier*. However, Potter diverged from Webb when the latter claimed for the frontier an exclusive domain in the production of American abundance. This, wrote Professor Potter, was not taking cognizance of technology. After all, hadn't technological revolutions historically preceded periods of discovery and experience?

Contemporary with Professor Potter, two historians, Henry Nash Smith and Richard Hofstadter, were writing about what they believed to be basic discrepancies in Turner's theories. Smith interpreted Turner as believing the highest social values were to be found in "the relatively primitive society just within the agricultural frontier." Smith reasoned that Turner, in juxtaposition, held the opinion that society evolved through various stages to an eventual industrial civilization. Professor Smith saw Turner as wavering between these two judgements. Smith then took cognizance of a second inconsistency. The frontier has nourished an "agrarian myth" which has tended to divert the attention from American industrialization and promote a...
one sided view of American development. The "agrarian myth" has had a pronounced effect on American politics. Distrust of the city has impeded co-operation and abetted ignorance on the part of both urban and rural population. Reiterating Carlton J. H. Hayes' contention, Professor Smith argues that the agrarian tradition has made it difficult for Americans to think of themselves as effective members of a world community. But the foremost difficulty of the agrarian tradition is "that it accepted the paired contradictory ideas of nature and civilization as a general principle of historical and social interpretation. A new intellectual system was requisite before the West could be adequately dealt with in literature or its social development could be fully understood." 72

The "agrarian myth" was also explored by Richard Hofstadter. Dr. Hofstadter wrote that the triumph of commercial agriculture had spelled the doom of the "agrarian myth," but at the same time the victory of commercial agriculture revealed the idea of the self-made man.

The same forces in American life that had made Jacksonian egalitarianism possible and had given to the equitable theme in agrarian romance its most compelling appeal had also unleashed in the nation an entrepreneurial zeal probably without precedent in history, a rage for business, for profits, for opportunity, for advancement. 73

The next stage was the land speculator. The increasing land values in the new areas incited quick liquidation and frequent migration casting the small entrepreneur in the role of a land speculator. According to Hofstadter, the huge public domain did more to create a gambling spirit than a freeholding idea. The agricultural society became attracted to land values instead of to the soil per se. Dr. Hofstadter gathered his perceptions into one generalization: the United States did not produce a distinctively rural culture (if you take as your criterion a pre-capitalist soil centered viewpoint). This observation led Hofstadter to weave his analysis into interpreting agriculture discontent and the Populist movement. He found that Populism can be best understood not as a product of the frontier, but as "an effort on the part of a few important segments of a highly heterogenous capitalistic agriculture to restore profits in the face of much exploitation and under unfavorable market and price conditions." 74

A Swiss student, Roland H. Beck, discerned relationships between the Turner writings and the romantics' outpouring of the early nineteenth century, along with an undercurrent of scientific and evolutionary concepts of the latter part of the century. Beck was critical of Turner's concepts in general, but was willing to concede some usefulness might result from applying the frontier thesis to the period 1775-1830 of our history. 75

In tracing the historiographical trends of the frontier school I have chosen to include personal observations of Turner and his methodology (since both criticism and defense have been based on this), charges against the urban-industrial interpretation and specific rebuttals. Much of the defense of the frontier thesis centered around the personality of Turner rather than around the thesis itself. Just as much of the attack concerned the progenitor of the thesis. As a whole, Turner's students were devoted to their teacher and many became highly incensed over the nature of the criticisms. Unfortunately, emotionalism on the part of both skeptics and disciples has colored and distorted many phases of the controversy.

The early criticisms of the frontier thesis aroused few attempts at refutation. It is possible that many advocates felt the way their master did when Almack's article was pub...
lished. A former student of Turner's informed the writer that one day Turner walked into his seminar and passed out copies of Almack's essay. His students indignantly queried Professor Turner as to when he was going to issue his rebuttal. Turner replied to the effect that he saw no reason to answer Almack.

One of the first important men of the frontier school was Frederic L. Paxson. While he cannot be classed as defending it in his main works, he used the frontier thesis and wrote one of the first scholarly and important histories of the frontier. In his _Last American Frontier_, which described the Westward Movement beyond the Mississippi, Paxson wrote, "The influence of the frontier has been the strongest single factor in American history..." Fourteen years later, Paxson, in the _History of the American Frontier, 1763-1893_ said, "The first century of American independence was dominated by the influence of the frontier; its second seems likely to be shaped by industry and pressure of the outside world." This sentence illustrates a point that has often been overlooked when discussing Paxson's work. He can definitely be considered a part of the frontier school, but Paxson had some qualifications and reservations about the frontier thesis.

The first specific rejoinder to the critics came in an appreciation of Turner by Carl Becker. In a beautifully written tribute, Professor Becker emphasized traits which later defenders were to repeat. Becker said that Professor Turner's explanatory and descriptive style should not cloud over the knowledge that he conducted exhaustive research. Dr. Becker stressed the lack of dogmatism on the part of Turner and that if Dr. Turner displayed any bias, it was Americanism. As a scholar, Becker thought Turner's approach was basically to understand rather than to judge institutions. Becker ended his appraisal with the following, "And his pupils understand it better than any others, because his pupils know, better than any others, that the man is more than his work. And so I end as I began—with 'that man Turner,' who laid upon all the spell of his personality."

Merle Curti, in his essay on the methodological concepts of Turner, stressed, as Becker had, Turner's lack of dogmatism toward his research. "It is the essence of his method that he works as though his wiser successor would correct, reconstruct, and be reconstructed." Turner's methodology resembled the natural scientist in that he consistently used the multiple hypothesis to test his observations. In his method of using the physiographic map to correlate political and cultural behavior, Turner was especially careful in applying the multiple hypothesis. Professor Curti also had a reply for those who felt that Turner had given industrial capitalism an inadequate place in his thesis. Curti pointed out that Turner recognized the importance of industrial capitalism as was illustrated by his 1910 presidential address before the American Historical Association. But Turner was primarily concerned with the United States in its agricultural era; after all, industrial capitalism has only recently invaded wide regions of the country.78

Joseph Schafer, in 1933 and 1934, wrote in answer to some of Frederic Paxson's detrac-

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76 Frederic L. Paxson, _The Last American Frontier_ (New York, 1910); Frederic L. Paxson, _The History of the American Frontier, 1763-1893_ (Boston, 1924). On the fortieth anniversary of the Turner thesis, Frederic L. Paxson called for a reassessment of the frontier thesis. I have emphasized that Paxson had qualifications as to the Turner thesis, and these Paxson enunciated in this article and another two years later. Paxson questioned whether composite nationality was derived from the frontier. He believed that the degree of Americanization needed re-evaluation. Paxson was also troubled by the fact that non-frontier countries made progress towards democracy in the nineteenth century; just how much did the frontier influence democracy? Dr. Paxson believed that the frontier did have an effect on democracy, but that it was not the sole force at work. Frederic L. Paxson, "A Generation of the Frontier Hypothesis, 1893-1932," _Pacific Historical Review_, 2: 34-51 (March, 1933).


tions. Schafer echoed the same points that Curti and Becker had underlined—namely, that Turner did not consider Western expansion as the only explanation of American history, but as the most important single process.80

Benjamin Stolberg differed from the former supporters in that he was not as much concerned with defending the frontier thesis as with refuting Hacker's Marxian polemics. Writing in the Nation, a month before President Roosevelt's quarantine speech in Chicago, Stolberg censured Hacker for the latter's conception of frontier agriculture as the tool of industrialism. To say this, said Stolberg, was to ignore the "tremendous psychological effects of the frontier upon our nation's mentality." Stolberg declared that after our frontier was closed the spirit of individualism was carried over into finance, labor and industry.81

One of the most vocal and influential of Turner's students is Avery Craven. Although Dr. Craven disagrees with Turner on some features of the frontier thesis, the overwhelming balance of his comments are on the side of buttressing the thesis. Four years after Hacker's article appeared in the Nation, Craven replied.82 In contrast to Hacker, Craven claimed that exposure of institutions to free land was a unique experience. Furthermore, to assert completely the urban-industrial perspective over the agricultural interpretation would be to deny the effect of 200 years of rural dominance.

Craven, dispensing with Hacker, turned his attention to the contradictions, generalizations and apparent inaccuracies that detractors kept forging to the front of the controversy. Craven readily admitted that there were apparent contradictions and that it was impossible to remove all contrarieties, for those "who knew the man and his work at first hand were seldom conscious of contradictions."83 Turner abhorred generalizations, wrote Craven, but his kind of history required generalizations. Professor Craven reflected that Turner's whole emphasis was on change in general, not specifically. "The approach [Craven insisted on the term approach instead of thesis] was the important thing, not some exact pattern which might appear in its application."84

Professor Craven, in the Charles G. Wal-green lectures of 1941, registered a minor disagreement with the Turner approach.85 Discussing the general theme of democracy in American life, Dr. Craven noted that frontier democracy was only half the picture. Freedom was, more often than not, a physical thing—freedom to do what the majority condoned. The positive contribution of the frontier to democracy lay in another direction: protest. Dr. Craven saw the periodic revolts keeping the democratic dogma alive.

A year later, Professor Craven again impressed upon his readers that Turner's contribution to American historiography was a veritable landmark.86 The breadth, all-inclusive character and unity of Dr. Turner's conceptions were a contribution not to be regarded lightly. Professor Craven gave a prominent place to the philosophical current in his teacher's writings: "he had the ability to see deep into the meaning of things and power to catch the universals."

A year after the turn of mid-century, Craven again came forward to testify for Turner at a symposium on the frontier held at the University of Kansas City.87 Professor Craven still had faith in the frontier approach. Nevertheless, some of the main canons of his faith were shaken by modern day scholarship. What Craven had staunchly defended in previous years was now open to question. He told his audience, "In the light of present day scholarship, it seems quite apparent that Turner overstressed the comparative influence of the frontier in producing both nationalism and democracy. Other influences certainly had a hand in this. He recognized

83 Ibid., 258-259.
85 Avery Craven, Democracy in American Life (Chicago, 1941), 38-67.
87 Avery O. Craven, "Frederick Jackson Turner and the Frontier Approach," University of Kansas City Review, 18: 3-17 (Autumn, 1951).
but he did not always properly evaluate the contradictions inherent in his approach. The West was both national and provincial in its temper; it was both materialistic and idealistic; it was both radical and conservative; it was both individualistic and cooperative. Turner also applied his findings to the Old West and he lent his findings to other wests where they won't work."

Differing in outlook from Craven, John D. Hicks has preferred to walk the middle ground. Although describing himself as a reasonably orthodox Turnerian, Professor Hicks feels that frontier historians have neglected the industrial era. In an article labeled, "The 'Ecology' of the Middle Western Historians," Dr. Hicks takes historians to task for endeavoring to write about unfamiliar regions and institutions. Hicks cites a reviewer of Frederic L. Paxson's description of the "long drive" saying, "The Author simply does not know his cows." Comments Hicks, "how could he? One might about as well try to explain agriculture without ever having lived on a farm." Professor Hicks saw the current tendency to break away from the frontier thesis as a natural historical phenomenon. After all, Professor Turner had written his essay from the background of his environment; was it not conceivable that today's historians would approach history from the urban-industrial environment?

From another perspective, the frontier thesis was defended in 1941. Gilbert J. Garraghan thought more attention should be placed on the non-economic features in the frontier movement. Dr. Garraghan summarized his assertions in three propositions: (1) the most significant phenomenon in American History was the frontier; (2) the most "tangible and effective factor" in causing the movement was the free land in the West; (3) the movement cannot be explained entirely on an economic basis—non-economic factors such as religion and education share the responsibility.

As noted previously, the year 1945 saw the publication of Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s Age of Jackson. No more than a year had passed before the volume, and especially the urban-industrial thesis, came under heavy criticism. These animadversions are included here because some of the most prominent criticism of Turner and the frontier school has come from advocates of the urban-industrial interpretation. The following comments can by no stretch of the imagination be considered a defense of the frontier thesis per se, but only as a critique of the urban-industrial theorists' explanations, which they seek to substitute for the frontier as a causal factor.

The first detraction from Schlesinger, Jr.'s findings was registered by Bray Hammond. After reprimanding Schlesinger for not making use of the standard authorities on the United States Bank, Hammond agreed with the pre-eminence given in the Age of Jackson to the concept that Eastern forces as well as frontier forces were at work for democracy in the Jacksonian period. But Dr. Hammond said this was only part of the story; what were the Eastern business interests doing at this time? How did these business interests influence democratization?

Twenty months later the urban-industrial thesis as presented in the Age of Jackson was again put under the historical microscope for dissection. Taking Philadelphia as a case study, Dr. William A. Sullivan found that after the 1828 election little evidence could be conjured to support the conclusion that labor cast its ballots for the Democrats. In fact, Sullivan discovered that it was the inability of the Democrats to hold the labor vote which ultimately led to their defeat in Philadelphia.

Whereas in Philadelphia Dr. Sullivan had decided that what slight labor support the Democrats did receive preceded the bank war, the pattern in Dr. Edward Pessen's study of Boston was somewhat different. According

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88 Ibid., 16.
89 John D. Hicks, "The 'Ecology' of the Middle Western Historians," Wisconsin Magazine of History, 24: 377-384 (June, 1941).
90 John D. Hicks, "The Development of Civilization in the Middle West, 1860-1900," Sources of Culture in the Middle West, edited by Fox (New York, 1934), 73-101.
to Dr. Pessen, in Boston it was not until the middle 1830's that Jackson was able to swing small majorities in any of the working class wards. Pessen attributed the lack of Democratic success to such factors as the power of Whig merchants in local politics; the open ballot voting system which may have intimidated the workers to keep them from voting "wrong"; internal dissension which cropped up in the Democratic party. Dr. Pessen determined that "the eastern workingmen" who did win a few local victories for Jackson in Massachusetts were the yeomen of the western counties.94

Dr. Joseph Dorfman, in a peppery analysis, took up the cudgel against the wage-earner thesis.95 First of all, Dorfman was quick to take on the proponents of the Jackson wage-earner thesis, who emphasized the demand of the Democratic Party for the alleviation of imprisonment for debt. Professor Dorfman denied that amelioration for debtors was the sole concern of the working class. The small businessman and often the large entrepreneur was just as concerned. How were debtors able to pay their obligations in prison? Dr. Dorfman agreed that the Jacksonians were in favor of monetary reform, but the purpose of this was to create better business conditions and diminish panics—not to help labor.96 The advocates of the wage-earner thesis have fallen into the common trap of definition. The term "workingman" did not include merely the manual laborer, but every man who, in the words of George Evans, earns his bread by "useful exertion, whether mental or physical." When understood in this broad concept, the so-called labor organizations became anti-aristocratic rather than anti-capitalistic. Dorfman reasons this is why the labor movement has frequently had within it both humanitarian and business elements. At times the humanitarian element advanced the impetus towards reform, but was decidedly paled by the business aims. Dr. Dorfman states, "after all the Age of Jackson was an age of expansion, a great age of business enterprise." 97

Ten months after Professor Dorfman's critique, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., replied. Schlesinger said the Age of Jackson did not pronounce a class conflict between the large capitalist and the mass of property-less wage-earners. But he would contend there was a real struggle between non-business groups and business domination. Concerning the connection between the Jacksonian era and later reform movements, Schlesinger, Jr., maintained that the Age of Jackson claimed no more than a trace of psychological and political similarity. He asserted that altogether, Professor Dorfman's reflections did not alter the main thesis of the Age of Jackson, "that more can be understood about Jacksonian democracy if it is regarded as a problem not of sections but of 'classes' and 'Liberalism' in America has been ordinarily the movement on the part of the other sections of society to restrain the power of the business community." 98

The controversy stands pretty much at that point today. There is still a great deal of research, thought and general digging to be done before any definite conclusions (if definite conclusions are possible) can be arrived at. Pennsylvania and Massachusetts have received study, but what about the other areas of the country? To what extent did business elements support Jackson in these regions? These and other questions will have

96 Richard B. Morris of Columbia University may have indicated an additional reason for the lack of support that Jackson received from laboring classes. In the Irish labor disturbance at Williamsport, Maryland, in 1834, Professor Morris appraised Jackson's role, "The most charitable judgment is that Jackson was neutral in the strife between labor and capital, and that on the one occasion when the issue seemed to call for federal intervention he used the power of his office to help throttle labor, to support a company which did not scruple to employ the blacklist, private police and labor spies to maintain discipline among its workers." Richard B. Morris, "Andrew Jackson, Strikebreaker," American Historical Review, 55: 54-68 (October, 1949).
to be answered before light is thrown on many shadows.99

Beginning with Ray A. Billington's *Westward Expansion* in 1949,100 the seven next years saw the frontier thesis rigorously applied and tested. Dr. Billington, with the collaboration of James B. Hedges, sought to present the whole sweep of American expansion from colonial days to 1896. In his preface, Professor Billington left no doubt as to the master plan of his work. Dr. Billington desired to use Turner's geographical premises plus "specific suggestions left behind in his writings." The outline of his work was to follow Dr. Turner's seminar in the history of the frontier at Harvard.101 Billington and Hedges' history soon became a standard work. One of the most valuable features of the entire work was the extensive bibliography.102

Different in area of application of the Turner thesis from Billington was Walter P. Webb's *The Great Frontier*.103 Webb undertook the gigantic task of using the frontier thesis to interpret all of Western Civilization since 1500. In his previous works, *The Great Plains* and *Divided We Stand*, Professor Webb has indicated the direction of his thinking.104 Dr. Webb in *The Great Plains* contrasted the civilization of the Great Plains (characterized by level land surface, treeless region and subhumid climate) to Eastern United States. Professor Webb pictured an "institutional fault" roughly following the 98th meridian. "Practically every institution that was carried across it was either broken and remade or else greatly altered." East of the Mississippi, proclaimed Webb, civilization had stood on the three legs of water, land and timber. West of the Mississippi there remained but one leg. The key word was contrast. "The salient truth, the essential truth is that the West cannot be understood as a mere extension of things Eastern."

According to Dr. Webb in *Divided We Stand*, the closing of the frontier in 1890, together with the rise of corporations, spelled a crisis for American democracy and individualism. A laissez-faire policy had abetted the rise of corporations, but with the depression of the 'thirties corporations were subjected to governmental regulation. New types of relief were substituted for the old ones of the frontier. Dr. Webb closed his argument with a plea for the end of sectionalism, which he believes would be accomplished only by a political party on a national rather than sectional basis.

Following some of the main premises enunciated in the *Great Plains* and *Divided We Stand*, Professor Webb plunged into suggesting the frontier thesis for Western Civilization in *The Great Frontier*.105 As the age of discovery dawned in the Metropolis (Webb's term for western Europe), the poverty-stricken population was crowded onto the Metropolis' land mass at the ratio of 26.7 per square mile. A hundred and fifty years after
the year 1500, the ratio of man to land in Europe plus the frontier had dropped to 4.8. Then the deluge of wealth created a business boom such as the world had not known before.

Webb was convinced this “boom” had far-reaching effects. By 1930 the population had increased over 1500 by 629 percent, gold and silver by 18,308 percent and “things, goods or commodities” by an indeterminable ratio. This climate of abundance provided man with unlimited opportunities for development; capitalism flourished, democracy and individualism were fostered, international and commercial law arose, literature bloomed, democratic churches contested authoritarian dogmas and the arts were given a practical and democratic touch.

However, by the end of four centuries, the Great Frontier rapidly diminished. By 1930 the population had increased till the ratio per square mile had surpassed the 1500 mark. Webb saw the same thing happening that he had described in Divided We Stand. With cheap goods and land vanishing, man began to construct controls needed to deal with a larger society. What is Professor Webb’s prognosis? Society as it thickens will become more closely intergrated and its members more interdependent. Governments will tend to become stronger, using more compulsion in order to meet their obligations. There will be a tendency toward socialization as exhibited in the United States and Great Britain or toward absolutism as exhibited by the fascist states and by Russia. The individual will become relatively less important and will tend to loose his identity in a growing corporate life.106

Dr. Webb is not entirely pessimistic about the future;107 the challenge today is whether we can manage the products of the Great Frontier.108

In 1953, a year after The Great Frontier appeared, John D. Barnhart’s Valley of Democracy was published.109 The scope, approach and intention of Barnhart’s volume was radically different from The Great Frontier. Dr. Barnhart chose “a testing of the Turner interpretation by an application to a specific area and time.” The specific area was the Ohio Valley—the time, 1775-1818. Professor Barnhart admitted that certain factors such as land speculation and the plantation were not adequately handled by Turner. But Dr. Barnhart held the opinion that the main opportunity for historians lay in “supplementing and completing Turner’s work rather than in trying to refute it.”110

Dr. Barnhart saw the basic issue as one of

106 Ibid., 415.
107 For essays on the application of the Turner thesis to world frontiers see Walker D. Wyman and Clifton Kroeber, eds., The Frontier in Perspective (University of Wisconsin Press, 1957).
108 As can be readily understood Professor Webb’s books aroused considerable discussion. A critique of The Great Plains was conducted at Skytop, Pennsylvania, September 9, 1939. Fred A. Shannon’s criticism, along with the rest of the proceedings, was published by the Social Science Research Council. Fred A. Shannon, et al., “An Appraisal of Walter Prescott Webb’s The Great Plains: A Study in Institutions and Environment,” Critiques of Research in the Social Sciences: III (New York, 1940). Dr. Shannon’s main point was that Webb had overstated the “singularly unique” character of the Great Plains in contrast with the region east of the Great Plains and west of the Great Plains. John W. Caughley came back in defense of Dr. Webb in “A Criticism of the Critique of Webb’s The Great Plains,” Mississippi Valley Historical Review, 27; 442-449 (December, 1940).
When The Great Frontier appeared, it caused as much comment as had The Great Plains. J. H. Hexter probably wrote the most vitriolic review. Dr. Hexter said that Webb knew little European history to test his hypothesis and if he had known more European history he wouldn’t have considered the hypothesis to begin with. J. H. Hexter, “Review of Walter P. Webb’s The Great Frontier,” American Historical Review, 58: 963 (July, 1953). Ray A. Billington thought that Webb had “advanced one of the most stimulating ideas in twentieth-century historiography.” R. A. Billington, “Review of Walter P. Webb’s The Great Frontier,” Mississippi Valley Historical Review, 40: 107-108 (June, 1953). Recently, Billington was seconded by Henry S. Commager; Commager wrote in the London Times, “one of the most penetrating of all monographs on American history.” Henry S. Commager, “Historical Writings,” The London Times Literary Supplement, 55:xxxvii (January 6, 1956).
An English historian, Geoffrey Barraclough, had serious reservations about The Great Frontier, but he thought it a major attempt at illustrating the present was not a continuation of the past. Geoffrey Barraclough, History In a Changing World (Oxford, 1953), 135-153. John D. Hicks undoubtedly voiced the feelings of many historians when he said “Whatever one may think of his hypothesis, he must agree that only a brave man would have dared to put it in a book.” John D. Hicks, “Review of Walter P. Webb’s The Great Frontier,” Saturday Review of Literature, 35: 10-11 (December 27, 1953).
tracing the struggle of the Ohio Valley Peoples for a political democracy. With this aim in mind, he meticulously analyzed the early constitutions of the Valley. He kept in mind such general questions as causes of the constitutional conventions, factionalism in the state as a whole and then in the conventions, backgrounds of the delegates and the origin of specific sections of the constitutions. Barnhart discerned an ever-present trend in all of the early governments: yeoman against planter, frontier against tidewater and democratic elements against aristocratic. The pioneer governments of Watauga, Monongahela-Ohio region, Cumberland and the State of Franklin represented only slight tendencies towards political democracy. From these early communities, Barnhart turned his attention to the political evolution in Kentucky, Tennessee, Ohio, Indiana and Illinois. He considered Kentucky had won a substantial victory in loosening the control of the Tidewater aristocracy. Of the five methods of aristocratic control in Virginia (property qualifications, inequality of representation, well established church, large land holdings and slavery) "only the last two crossed the mountains." The story in Tennessee was much the same. The frontier forces managed to have some democratic features embodied in the constitution, but the conservative features of property qualifications and life tenure for the justices of the peace remained undefeated.

Turning north of la belle rivière, Professor Barnhart discovered that when democracy was unhampered by the inequitable distribution of land and slavery, significant gains were made toward laying the foundation of future democratic procedure. Barnhart summed up the gains made, when he wrote, How did all this conform to Frederick Jackson Turner's views? The last chapter of Valley of Democracy was assigned to a discussion of the findings in relation to the Turner thesis. Barnhart concluded that his results closely followed Turner's interpretations, observing that there was ample evidence of the democratic influence on the frontier, and that Turner did not claim that democracy originated on the frontier, "merely those characteristics which distinguished it from European democracy." The pioneers of the Ohio Valley had contributed a great deal to the democratic ideals of America.112

Following closely the Barnhart study, Stan-

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111 John D. Barnhart, Valley of Democracy, 214. Recently, Elisha Douglas of the University of North Carolina has produced a study of democracy in the period preceding Barnhart's work and through the Revolution. Dr. Douglas was concerned with the evolution of democracy on the Atlantic seaboard. He found little progress made toward democracy in this period. The reasons for this slow advancement were that the individuals who were interested in democratic reform lacked leadership; the wide dispersal of agrarian interests of the "vast majority"—the conflict between the haves and the have-nots; finally, the ideals of much of the revolution were achieved, lessening the impetus for social reform. Elisha Douglas, Rebels and Democrats (Chapel Hill, 1955), 317-321. In disagreement with Douglas is Dr. Robert Brown whose research in colonial Massachusetts proved to him that economic, political and religious democracy were in operation in Massachusetts before the Revolution. Robert Brown, Middle-Class Democracy and the Revolution in Massachusetts, 1631-1780 (Cornell, 1955). A volume attuned to Barnhart's interpretation is Theodore G. Thayer's Pennsylvania Politics and the Growth of Democracy (Harrisburg, 1953).

112 One definite similarity between The Great Frontier and the Valley of Democracy was the amount of polemics that was caused by the publication of each volume. In their reviews of the Valley of Democracy, Drs. Clark and Abernethy both wished more attention had been placed on James Wilkinson's activities. Professor Clark suggested that perhaps the machine and factionalism were as important in the functioning of democracy as the democratic ideal. Thomas D. Clark, "Review of John D. Barnhart's Valley of Democracy," American Historical Review, 60: 383-385 (January, 1955); Thomas A. Abernethy, "Review of John D. Barnhart's Valley of Democracy," Journal of Southern History, 20: 257-259 (May, 1954). Fletcher Green believed that there were inconsistencies in the case for democracy south of the Ohio. Fletcher Green, "Review of John D. Barnhart's Valley of Democracy," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, 40: 506-507 (December, 1954). On the pro-Barnhart view, Dr. Carl Wittke called the Valley of Democracy significant for its clear synthesis. Carl Wittke, "Review of John D. Barnhart's Valley of Democracy," Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Quarterly, 63: 204-205 (April, 1954). Robert Riegel wrote, "possibly most interesting of the recent pro-Turner production is the very well done Barnhart book ... " Robert E. Riegel, "The Historian and American West, During the Past Decade," Montana Magazine of Western History, 6: 16-22 (April, 1956).
ley Elkins and Eric McKitrick, sought "A Meaning For Turner's Frontier." The two scholars decided that Turner's critics should be allowed all concessions, with the exception of "political democracy as a habit and the American as a unique political creature." They felt that Turner had stated an indisputable fact—that there was an organic connection between American democracy and this country's frontier. The problem to these University of Chicago professors was how to test this belief in a conceptual framework.

They knew that sociologist Robert K. Merton had discovered, from research on two housing developments, that whenever a new community faces a multitude of problems without a structured leadership the community is forced into co-operative democratic participation in their government. McKitrick and Elkins decided to apply Merton's theory to new communities on three American frontiers: the Old Northwest, the Southwest frontier of Alabama and Mississippi and the Puritan frontier of Massachusetts Bay.

Their findings based on research of new communities in each of these frontiers proved to Elkins and McKitrick's satisfaction that practical democracy was strong in both the Old Northwest and Massachusetts Bay, but somewhat less in evidence in the South where imported leadership structured the colonists' lives.

The authors concluded:

Yet Turner, after all, has been preempting the frontier long past his time. It should no longer be necessary to force literal meaning from his texts, now that they have entered our cultural metaphor. At the same time a host of problems may be examined with fresh interest if we put in testable terms facts which he knew by instinct: the fact that the experience forced by the frontier was unique—that in a century of westward expansion it was repeated over and over, that in a multitude of forms it found its way into the daily habits of the people, making Americans truly and profoundly different from anyone else in the world.

Dr. Merle Curti has gone about as far from Professor Webb's spatiality as it is possible to go. Professor Curti used a small region in Wisconsin—Trempealeau County—to examine the Turner thesis at the grass roots level. In a preliminary report to the Newberry Conference on American Studies, Dr. Curti wrote:

The plan was to study an actual frontier and to see what the records and other evidence still at hand did show about democratic practices on that frontier—about individualism, widespread participation in the making of decisions about the common life, and equality of economic and cultural opportunity. As far as we know, no one has yet examined microscopically a given area that experienced transition from wilderness to a settlement community with the purpose of determining how much democracy, in Turner's sense, did exist initially, in the first phase of settlement during the process of settlement itself, and in the period following settlement.

In carrying out his research project, it was Curti's aim to use quantitative methods in hopes that such employment would contribute to the further development of these methods as historical tools.

Dr. Curti's choice of Trempealeau County was dictated more on the basis of the availability of public records than on any other consideration. For comparative purposes, Curti and his staff chose 11 contiguous townships in northern Vermont. The townships were principally rural areas from which many Trempealeanians had migrated. Using quantitative methods, the staff thoroughly investigated all householders and gainfully employed persons who were listed in the unpublished manuscript censuses of 1850, 1860, 1870 and 1880. The researchers discovered that the main ground for political democracy in Trempealeau was the tailor-made county government imposed by the State of Wisconsin and was not due to particular frontier attitudes.

Then the investigators attacked the problem of whether or not there was economic equality in Trempealeau County. Was there a progression for national origin groups up the agricultural ladder from farm hand to farm owner? Curti's research disclosed that in general there was progress up the ladder for those who stayed in the county. Did a few men dominate the agricultural life of the community? Professor Curti answered with a resounding "No." When Trempealeanians needed capital (and often they did need it), they borrowed it from a neighbor, merchant or businessman. Usually, they gave a mortgage for $50 to $200—rarely more than $200.

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114 Ibid., 602.
was ever borrowed. Futhermore, this year’s debtor might be next years creditor. Dr. Curti thought this was significant. “The Democratic implications of this tendency are obvious, and the natural assumption, common today, that the lending of money and the taking of mortgages in turn is apt to be centered in a few well-to-do men, did not hold for pioneer Trempealeau.”

Professor Curti, et. al., were interested in the educational opportunities that were open to the citizen of Trempealeau County. The results showed that though the foreign-born children had a lower attendance record at schools, they did not encounter anti-democratic or hostile attitudes. From this preliminary report, Curti and his colleagues state, “Whatever the economic, political and social inequalities, and there were indeed more than the Turner thesis would lead one to expect. The statistical picture we have drawn is not in itself a refutation.” Dr. Curti’s opinion seems to be that though the Turner thesis is in need of qualification and revision, in most aspects the frontier thesis holds true.117

The focus of Turner defense shifted from the United States to England in 1957 with the publication of an essay by H. C. Allen entitled, “F. J. Turner and the Frontier in American History.”118 Allen, Commonwealth Fund Professor of American History at the University of London, was ready and willing to defend fervently almost any of Turner’s concepts. In fact, during the course of his essay, the London professor agreed with the former Harvard professor on almost all of the latter’s major ideas. That the frontier fostered democracy, individualism, nationalism and idealism, were accepted by Allen with little qualification. Equally well received by the British professor were Turner’s thoughts on the importance of free land in American development and the frontier as a line of rapid and effective Americanization. Blaming Turner’s followers for most of the exaggerations and falsifications in the frontier thesis, Professor Allen noted that when all is said and done, Turner’s ideas “contained a very small proportion of dross.”

In summary, there have been a number of main criticisms of the frontier thesis. The frontier as an explanation of American development has been over-stressed. The urban-industrial factors have not been given enough consideration. Land speculation on the frontier has too often been ignored by frontier theorists. Democracy was not originated on the frontier but was imported there. Terms such as “frontier” and “democracy” are hazy and conflicting; better definitions are needed. Geographical and anthropological elements have generally been emphasized beyond their merit. The thesis should have been modified with the discovery of new material. The frontier thesis is full of contradictions, frontiersmen were both materialistic and idealistic, nationalistic and provincial, individualistic and co-operative, democratic and autocratic. Finally, Turner’s methodology was “loose” and poorly constructed.

Defenders of the frontier thesis claim that many critics have been picayunish, attacking the minor points and giving too little attention to the over-all value of the thesis. Turner did not claim that democracy originated on the frontier, but only those aspects which differentiated it from European democracy. How is one able to apply the urban-industrial thesis to a rural-dominated first century of our history? The frontier thesis was a gigantic step forward in American historiography and should be judged in this light. Contradictions will inevitably appear in a thesis of this general nature, but these contradictions should not diminish its value as a guide-post to the understanding of American history. Finally, Professor Turner’s history demanded the narrative style, and one should remember that hours of exhaustive and meticulous research were behind each interpretative sentence.

In what repute is the frontier thesis held by Clio’s practitioners today? One fact easily discerned is that few historians today would whole-heartedly embrace the Turner thesis or unilaterally discount the frontier in American history. Most historians would find themselves in the position of echoing John D.

117For more of Curti’s ideas on the frontier and democracy, see Merle Curti, “The Democratic Theme in American Historical Literature,” Mississippi Valley Historical Review, 39:3-28 (June, 1952); Merle Curti, Probing Our Past (New York, 1955), passim.

Hicks, rather than Joseph Schafer or George W. Pierson.

It was not within the present scope of this study to undertake a poll of historians such as Dr. Pierson did in 1941. However, the author did survey 13 college text-books,119 with the purpose of ascertaining whether they were pro-frontier thesis or anti-frontier thesis. The results were enlightening. Nine authors accepted the frontier thesis (though some with strong qualifications). There were two rejections, and in two text-books, no mention was made of the thesis. Obviously, one cannot assume on this basis that the frontier thesis is accepted or rejected by the historical profession. But perhaps it may be a rough indication of the views of a segment of leading historians.120

One striking observation to the present writer is the need for more investigation of all current theses. Cumulatively the past seven decades have been an era of immense productivity and growing maturity for historians in their search for the explanation of the American character. Only the most unimaginative mind could fail to be intrigued by what possible findings will result from seven more decades of research on the interpretative theories of American civilization.

Whether one agrees or not with Fulmer Mood that, "the main professional obligation of the times" 121 is resolving the frontier issue, no one has yet completely ascertained the many-faceted effects of the frontier on American civilization.


120 In the fall of 1957, Roy F. Nichols, University of Pennsylvania, delivered a paper at the European Association for American Studies in Paris, France, on "The Present State of American Research on the Frontier Problem." Nichols devotes a large section of his paper to work that has been accomplished on the frontier thesis since 1950. Especially valuable are the reports of unpublished work of demographer Everett Lee, University of Pennsylvania, and its implications for the frontier thesis. Professor Nichols concludes "Historians and social scientists are hard at work studying the implications of the mobility of American population and its influence upon American national character and democracy. They, in a sense, have released themselves from the spell of Turner's vision and even now new data is being mobilized. Undoubtedly a more realistic and comprehensive theory of American cultural development will be formulated by some new Turner, who may be a committee. It will be more complex but it may well still be concerned primarily with migration. This new theory will probably still be based on the great factor of population movement but it will not be simply westward movement but complex movement in all directions." Roy F. Nichols, "The Present State of American Research on the Frontier Problem," (Unpublished, Presented to European Association for American Studies in Paris, France, September, 1957). The writer is indebted to Dean Nichols for allowing him the use of this paper.


A POLITICIAN CRITICIZES AMERICAN FARMERS

"If St. Paul worthily had his spirit stirred within him by the senseless idolatry of polished, intellectual Athens, I feel that an honest man, who knows what agriculture might and should be in the United States, can hardly restrain his indignation in view of what it quite commonly is. To look over an average farm on this Atlantic sea board, and see its owner gravelly ploughing around and over the same stones that his great grandfather ploughed over a century ago, when they should long since have been removed, or the fields containing them given up to the growth of timber—grow two hundred bushels of corn per annum on ten acres, when he might grow that quantity so much cheaper on four, I feel that patience with such infatuation is scarcely less than a crime."

—Quoted in Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture (1863)