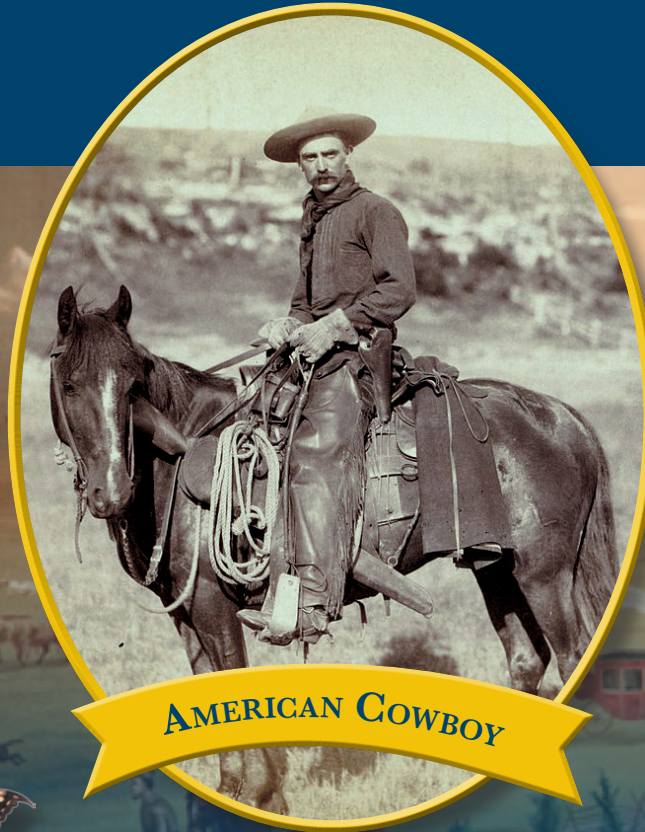


HOW THE FRONTIER SHAPED THE AMERICAN CHARACTER

BY RAY ALLEN BILLINGTON



AMERICAN COWBOY

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The cowboy was the quintessential symbol of the American frontier, above.

HOW THE FRONTIER SHAPED THE AMERICAN CHARACTER

BY RAY ALLEN BILLINGTON

AMERICAN HERITAGE | APRIL 1958 | VOLUME 9 | ISSUE 3

<http://www.americanheritage.com/content/how-frontier-shaped-american-character?page=show>

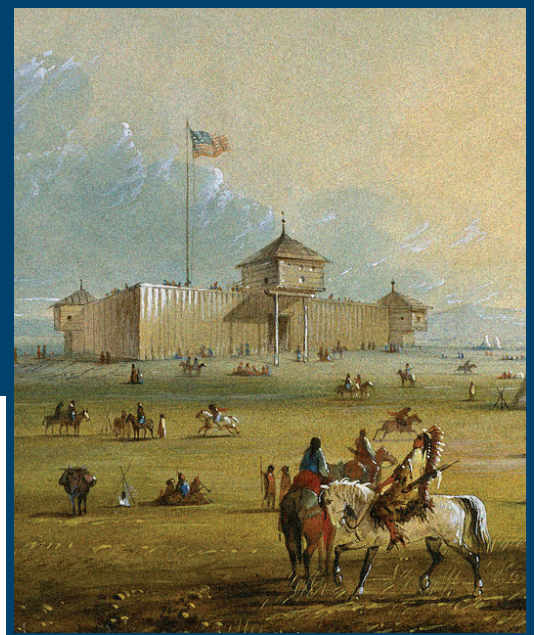
A distinguished historian finds that after 65 years Frederick Jackson Turner's disputed "frontier theory" is still a valid key to understanding modern America.

Since the dawn days of historical writing in the United States, historians have labored mightily, and usually in vain, to answer the famous question posed by Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur in the eighteenth century: "What then is the American, this new man?" Was that composite figure actually a "new man" with unique traits that distinguished him from his Old World ancestors? Or was he merely a transplanted European? The most widely accepted—and bitterly disputed—answer was advanced by a young Wisconsin historian named Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893. The American was a new man, he held, who owed his distinctive characteristics and institutions to the unusual New World environment—characterized by the availability of free land and an ever-receding frontier—in which his civilization had grown to maturity. This environmental theory, accepted for a generation after its enunciation, has been vigorously attacked and vehemently defended during the past two decades. How has it fared in this battle of words? Is it still a valid key to the meaning of American history?

Turner's own background provides a clue to the answer. Born in Portage, Wisconsin, in 1861 of pioneer parents from upper New York state, he was reared in a land fringed by the interminable forest and still stamped with the mark of youth. There he mingled with pioneers who had

trapped beaver or hunted Indians or cleared the virgin wilderness; from them he learned something of the free and easy democratic values prevailing among those who judged men by their own accomplishments rather than those of their ancestors. At the University of Wisconsin Turner's faith in cultural democracy was deepened, while his intellectual vistas were widened through contact with teachers who led him into that wonderland of adventure where scientific techniques were being applied to social problems, where Darwin's evolutionary hypothesis was awakening scholars to the continuity of progress, and where searchers after truth were beginning to realize the multiplicity of forces responsible for human behavior. The young student showed how well he had learned these lessons in his master's essay on "The Character and Influence of the Fur Trade in Wisconsin"; he emphasized the evolution of institutions from simple to complex forms.

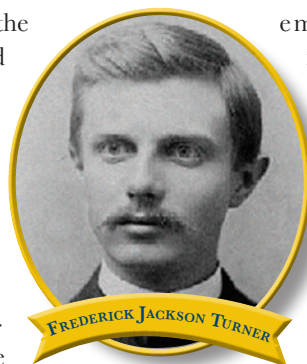
From Wisconsin Turner journeyed to Johns Hopkins University, as did many eager young scholars of that day, only to meet stubborn opposition for the historical theories already taking shape in his mind. His principal professor, Herbert Baxter Adams, viewed mankind's development in evolutionary terms, but held that environment had no place in the equation; American institutions could be understood only as outgrowths of European "germs" that had originated among Teutonic tribes in the forests of medieval Germany. To Turner this explanation was unsatisfactory. The "germ theory" explained the



Alfred Jacob Miller - Fort Laramie.

similarities between Europe and America, but what of the many differences? This problem was still much in his mind when he returned to the University of Wisconsin as an instructor in 1889. In two remarkable papers prepared during the next few years he set forth his answer. The first, "The Significance of History," reiterated his belief in what historians call "multiple causation"; to understand man's complex nature, he insisted, one needed not only a knowledge of past politics, but a familiarity with social, economic, and cultural forces as well. The second, "Problems in American History," attempted to isolate those forces most influential in explaining the unique features of American development. Among these Turner believed that the most important was the need for institutions to "adapt themselves to the changes of a remarkably developing, expanding people."

This was the theory that was expanded into a full-blown historical hypothesis in the famous essay on "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," read at a conference of historians held in connection with the World Fair in Chicago in 1893. The differences between European and American civilization, Turner stated in that monumental work, were in part the product of the distinctive environment of the New World. The most unusual features of that environment were "the existence of an area of free land, its continuous



FREDERICK JACKSON TURNER

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recession, and the advance of American settlement westward.” This free land served as a magnet to draw men westward, attracted by the hope of economic gain or adventure. They came as Europeans or easterners, but they soon realized that the wilderness environment was ill-adapted to the habits, institutions, and cultural baggage of the stratified societies they had left behind. Complex political institutions were unnecessary in a tiny frontier outpost; traditional economic practices were useless in an isolated community geared to an economy of self-sufficiency; rigid social customs were outmoded in a land where prestige depended on skill with the axe or rifle rather than on hereditary glories; cultural pursuits were unessential in a land where so many material tasks awaited doing. Hence in each pioneer settlement there occurred a rapid reversion to the primitive. What little government was necessary was provided by simple associations of settlers; each man looked after his family without reliance on his fellows; social hierarchies disintegrated, and cultural progress came to a halt. As the newcomers moved backward along the scale of civilization, the habits and customs of their traditional cultures were forgotten.

Gradually, however, newcomers drifted in, and as the man-land ratio increased, the community began a slow climb back toward civilization. Governmental controls were tightened and extended, economic specialization began, social stratification set in, and cultural activities quickened. But the new society that eventually emerged differed from the old from which it had sprung. The abandonment of cultural baggage during the migrations, the borrowings from the many cultures represented in each pioneer settlement, the deviations natural in separate evolutions, and the impact of the environment all played their parts in creating a unique



Frontiersmen needed protection against the Indians, as depicted in *Five Indians and a Captive*, painted by Carl Wimar in 1855.

social organism similar to but differing from those in the East. An “Americanization” of men and their institutions had taken place.

Turner believed that many of the characteristics associated with the American people were traceable to their experience, during the three centuries required to settle the continent, of constantly “beginning over again.” Their mobility, their optimism, their inventiveness and willingness to accept innovation, their materialism, their exploitive wastefulness—these were frontier traits; for the pioneer, accustomed to repeated moves as he drifted westward, viewed the world through rose-colored glasses as he dreamed of a better future, experimented constantly as he adapted artifacts and customs to his peculiar environment, scorned culture as a deterrent to the practical tasks that bulked so large in his life, and squandered seemingly inexhaustible natural resources with abandon. Turner also ascribed America’s distinctive brand of individualism, with its dislike of governmental interference in economic functions, to the experience of pioneers who wanted no hindrance from society as they exploited nature’s riches. Similarly, he traced the exaggerated nationalism of the United States to its roots among frontiersmen who looked to the national govern-

ment for land, transportation outlets, and protection against the Indians. And he believed that America’s faith in democracy had stemmed from a pioneering experience in which the leveling influence of poverty and the uniqueness of local problems encouraged majority self-rule. He pointed out that these characteristics, prominent among frontiersmen, had persisted long after the frontier itself was no more.

This was Turner’s famous “frontier hypothesis.” For a generation after its enunciation its persuasive logic won uncritical acceptance among historians, but beginning in the late 1920s’s, and increasingly after Turner’s death in 1932, an avalanche of criticism steadily mounted. His theories, critics said, were contradictory, his generalizations unsupported, his assumptions inadequately based; what empirical proof could he advance, they asked, to prove that the frontier experience was responsible for American individualism, mobility, or wastefulness? He was damned as a romanticist for his claim that democracy sprang from the forest environment of the United States and as an isolationist for failing to recognize the continuing impact of Europe on America. As the “anti-Turner” vogue gained popularity among younger scholars of the 1930’s with their international, semi-Marxian views of history, the criticisms of the frontier theory became as irrational as the earlier support rendered it by overenthusiastic advocates.

During the past decade, however, a healthy reaction has slowly and unspectacularly gained momentum. Today’s scholars, gradually realizing that Turner was advancing a hypothesis rather than proving a theory, have shown a healthy tendency to abandon fruitless haggling over the meaning of his phrases and to concentrate instead on testing his assumptions. They have directed their efforts primarily toward re-examining his

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hypothesis in the light of criticisms directed against it and applying it to frontier areas beyond the borders of the United States. Their findings have modified many of the views expressed by Turner but have gone far toward proving that the frontier hypothesis remains one essential tool—albeit not the only one—for interpreting American history.

That Turner was guilty of oversimplifying both the nature and the causes of the migration process was certainly true. He pictured settlers as moving westward in an orderly procession—fur trappers, cattlemen, miners, pioneer farmers, and equipped fanners—with each group playing its part in the transmutation of a wilderness into a civilization. Free land was the magnet that lured them onward, he believed, and this operated most effectively in periods of depression, when the displaced workers of the East sought a refuge from economic storms amidst nature's abundance in the West, "The wilderness ever opened the gate of escape to the poor, the discontented and oppressed," Turner wrote at one time. "If social conditions tended to crystallize in the east, beyond the Alleghenies there was freedom."

No one of these assumptions can be substantiated in the simplified form in which Turner stated it. His vision of an "orderly procession of civilization, marching single file westward" failed to account for deviations that were almost as important as the norm; as essential to the conquest of the forest as trappers or farmers were soldiers, mill-operators, distillers, artisans, storekeepers, merchants, lawyers, editors, speculators, and town dwellers. All played their role, and all contributed to a complex Iron tier social order that bore little resemblance to the primitive societies Turner pictured. This was especially the case with the early town builders. The hamlets that sprang up adjacent to each pioneer settlement were products

of the environment as truly as were the cattlemen or Indian fighters; each evolved economic functions geared to the needs of the primitive area surrounding it, and, in the tight public controls maintained over such essential functions as grist-milling or retail selling, each mirrored the frontiersmen's community-oriented views. In these villages, too, the equalitarian influence of the West was reflected in thoroughly democratic governments, with popularly elected councils supreme and the mayor reduced to a mere figurehead.

The pioneers who marched westward in this disorganized procession were not

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attracted by the magnet of "tree land," for Turner's assumption that before 1862 the public domain was open to all who could pay \$1.25 an acre, or that acreage was free after the Homestead Act was passed in that year, has been completely disproved. Turner failed to recognize the presence in the procession to the frontier of that omnipresent profit-seeker, the speculator. Jobbers were always ahead of farmers in the advance westward, buying up likely town sites or appropriating the best farmlands, where the soil was good and transportation outlets available. When the settler arrived his choice was between paying the speculator's price or accepting an interior site. Even the Homestead Act

failed to lessen speculative activity. Capitalizing on generous government grants to railroads and state educational institutions (which did not want to be bothered with sales to individuals), or buying bonus script from soldiers, or securing Indian lands as the reservations were contracted, or seizing on faulty features of congressional acts for the disposal of swampland and timberland, jobbers managed to engross most of the Far West's arable acreage. As a result, for every newcomer who obtained a homestead from the government, six or seven purchased farms from speculators.

Those who made these purchases were not, as Turner believed, displaced eastern workers fleeing periodic industrial depressions. Few city-dwelling artisans had the skills or inclination, and almost none the capital, to escape to the frontier. Land prices of \$1.25 an acre may seem low today, but they were prohibitive for laborers earning only a dollar a day.

Moreover, needed farm machinery, animals, and housing added about \$1,000 to the cost of starting a farm in the 1850's, while the cheapest travel rate from New York to St. Louis was about \$13 a person.

Because these sums were always beyond the reach of factory workers (in bad times they deterred migration even from the rural East), the frontier never served as a "safety valve" for laborers in the sense that Turner employed the term. Instead, the American frontiers were pushed westward largely by younger sons from adjacent farm areas who migrated in periods of prosperity. While these generalizations apply to the pre-Civil War era that was Turner's principal interest, they are even more applicable to the late nineteenth century. During that period the major population shifts were from country to city rather than vice versa; for every worker who left the factory to move to the

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farm, twenty persons moved from farm to factory. If a safety valve did exist at that time, it was a rural safety valve, drawing off surplus farm labor and thus lessening agrarian discontent during the Granger and Populist eras.

Admitting that the procession to the frontier was more complex than Turner realized, that good lands were seldom free, and that a safety valve never operated to drain the dispossessed and the malcontented from industrial centers, does this mean that his conclusions concerning the migration process have been completely discredited? The opposite is emphatically true. A more divergent group than Turner realized felt the frontier's impact, but that does not minimize the extent of the impact. Too, while lands in the West were almost never free, they were relatively cheaper than those in Europe or the East, and this differential did serve as an attracting force. Nor can pages of statistics disprove the fact that, at least until the Civil War, the frontier served as an indirect safety valve by attracting displaced eastern farmers who would otherwise have moved into industrial cities; thousands who left New England or New York for the Old Northwest in the 1830's and 1840's, when

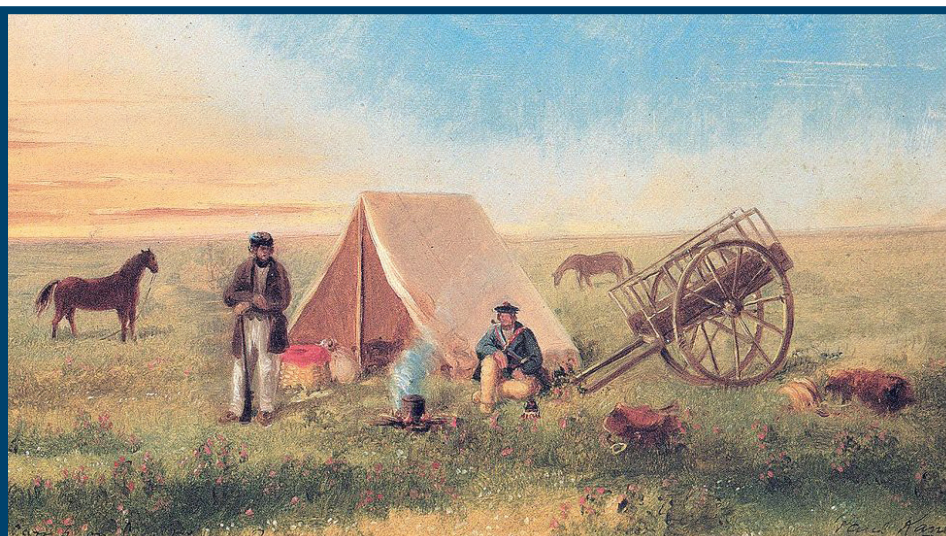
the "rural decay" of the Northeast was beginning, would have sought factory jobs had no western outlet existed.

The effect of their exodus is made clear by comparing the political philosophies of the United States with those of another frontier country, Australia. There, lands lying beyond the coastal mountains were closed to pioneers by the aridity of the soil and by great sheep ranchers who were first on the scene. Australia, as a result, developed an urban civilization and an industrialized population relatively sooner than did the United States; and it had labor unions, labor-dominated governments, and political philosophies that would be viewed as radical in America. Without the safety valve of its own West, feeble though it may have been, such a course might have been followed in the United States.

Frederick Jackson Turner's conclusions concerning the influence of the frontier on Americans have also been questioned, debated, and modified since he advanced his hypothesis, but they have not been seriously altered. This is true even of one of his statements that has been more vigorously disputed than any other: "American democracy was born of no theorist's dream; it was not carried in the Susan Constant to

Virginia, nor in the Mayflower to Plymouth. It came out of the American forest, and it gained a new strength each time it touched a new frontier." When he penned those oft-quoted words, Turner wrote as a propagandist against the "germ theory" school of history; in a less emotional and more thoughtful moment, he ascribed America's democratic institutions not to "imitation, or simple borrowing," but to "the evolution and adaptation of organs in response to changed environment." Even this moderate theory has aroused critical venom. Democracy, according to anti-Turnerians, was well advanced in Europe and was transported to America on the Susan Constant and the Mayflower; within this country democratic practices have multiplied most rapidly as a result of eastern lower-class pressures and have only been imitated in the West. If, critics ask, some mystical forest influence was responsible for such practices as manhood suffrage, increased authority for legislatures at the expense of executives, equitable legislative representation, and women's political rights, why did they not evolve in frontier areas outside the United States—in Russia, Latin America, and Canada, for example—exactly as they did here?

The answer, of course, is that democratic theory and institutions were imported from England, but that the frontier environment tended to make them, in practice, even more democratic. Two conditions common in pioneer communities made this inevitable. One was the wide diffusion of land ownership; this created an independent outlook and led to a demand for political participation on the part of those who had a stake in society. The other was the common social and economic level and the absence, characteristic of all primitive communities, of any prior leadership structure. The lack of any national or external controls made self-rule a hard necessity, and the frontiersmen, with their experience in community co-operation at cabin raisings, log rollings, corn-huskings, and road or



Camping on the prairie. 1846

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school building, accepted simple democratic practices as natural and inevitable. These practices, originating on the grass roots level, were expanded and extended in the recurring process of government-building that marked the westward movement of civilization. Each new territory that was organized—there were 31 in all—required a frame of government; this was drafted by relatively poor recent arrivals or by a minority of upper-class leaders, all of whom were committed to democratic ideals through their frontier community experiences. The result was a constant democratization of institutions and practices as constitution-makers adopted the most liberal features of older frames of government with which they were familiar.

This was true even in frontier lands outside the United States, for wherever there were frontiers, existing practices were modified in the direction of greater equality and a wider popular participation in governmental affairs. The results were never identical, of course, for both the environment and the nature of the imported institutions varied too greatly from country to country. In Russia, for instance, even though it promised no democracy comparable to that of the United States, the eastward-moving Siberian frontier, the haven of some seven million peasants during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was notable for its lack of guilds, authoritarian churches, and all powerful nobility. An autocratic official visiting there in 1910 was alarmed by the “enormous, rudely democratic country” evolving under the influence of the small homesteads that were the normal living units; he feared that czarism and European Russia would soon be “throttled” by the egalitarian currents developing on the frontier.

That the frontier accentuated the spirit of nationalism and individualism in the United States, as Turner maintained, was

also true. Every page of the country's history, from the War of 1812 through the era of Manifest Destiny to today's bitter conflicts with Russia, demonstrates that the American attitude toward the world has been far more nationalistic than that of non-frontier countries and that this attitude has been strongest in the newest regions. Similarly, the pioneering experience converted settlers into individualists, although through a somewhat different process than Turner envisaged. His

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emphasis on a desire for freedom as a primary force luring men westward and his belief that pioneers developed an attitude of self-sufficiency in their lone battle against nature have been questioned, and with justice. Hoped-for gain was the magnet that attracted most migrants to the cheaper lands of the West, while once there they lived in units where co-operative enterprise—for protection against the Indians, for cabin-raising, law enforcement, and the like—was more essential than in the better established towns of the East. Yet the fact remains that the abundant resources and the greater social mobility of frontier areas did instill into frontiersmen a uniquely American form of individualism. Even though they may be sheeplike in following the decrees of social arbiters or fashion dictators, Ameri-

cans today, like their pioneer ancestors, dislike governmental interference in their affairs. “Rugged individualism” did not originate on the frontier any more than democracy or nationalism did, but each concept was deepened and sharpened by frontier conditions.

His opponents have also cast doubt on Turner's assertion that American inventiveness and willingness to adopt innovations are traits inherited from pioneer ancestors who constantly devised new

techniques and artifacts to cope with an unfamiliar environment.

The critics insist that each mechanical improvement needed for the conquest of the frontier, from plows to barbed-wire fencing, originated in the East; when frontiersmen faced such an incomprehensible task as conquering the Great Plains they proved so tradition-bound that their advance halted until eastern inventors provided them with the tools needed to subdue grasslands. Unassailable as this argument may be, it ignores the fact that the recurring demand for implements and methods needed in the frontier

advance did put a premium on inventiveness by Americans, whether they lived in the East or West. That even today they are less bound by tradition than other peoples is due in part to their pioneer heritage.

The anti-intellectualism and materialism which are national traits can also be traced to the frontier experience. There was little in pioneer life to attract the timid, the cultivated, or the aesthetically sensitive. In the boisterous western borderlands, book learning and intellectual speculation were suspect among those dedicated to the material tasks necessary to subdue a continent. Americans today reflect their background in placing the “intellectual” well below the “practical businessman” in their scale

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of heroes. Yet the frontiersman, as Turner recognized, was an idealist as well as a materialist. He admired material objects not only as symbols of advancing civilization but as the substance of his hopes for a better future. Given economic success he would be able to afford the aesthetic and intellectual pursuits that he felt were his due, even though he was not quite able to appreciate them. This spirit inspired the cultural activities—literary societies, debating clubs, “thespian groups,” libraries, schools, camp meetings—that thrived in the most primitive western communities. It also helped nurture in the pioneers an infinite faith in the future. The belief in progress, both material and intellectual, that is part of modern America’s creed was strengthened by the frontier experience.

Frederick Jackson Turner, then, was not far wrong when he maintained that frontiersmen did develop unique traits and that these, perpetuated, form the principal distinguishing characteristics of the American people today. To a degree unknown among Europeans, Americans do display a restless energy, a versatility, a practical ingenuity, an earthy practicality. They do squander their natural resources with an abandon unknown elsewhere; they have developed a mobility both social and physical that marks them as a people apart. In few other lands is the democratic ideal worshiped so intensely, or nationalism carried to such extremes of isolationism or international arrogance. Rarely do other peoples display such indifference toward intellectualism or aesthetic values; seldom in comparable cultural areas do they cling so tenaciously to the shibboleth of rugged individualism. Nor do residents of non-frontier lands experience to the same degree the heady optimism, the rosy faith in the future, the belief in the inevitability of progress that form part of the American creed. These are pioneer traits, and they have become a part of the national heritage.

Yet if the frontier wrought such a

transformation within the United States, why did it not have a similar effect on other countries with frontiers? If the pioneering experience was responsible for our democracy and nationalism and individualism, why have the peoples of Africa, Latin America, Canada, and Russia failed to develop identical characteristics? The answer is obvious: in few nations of the world has the sort of frontier that Turner described existed. For he saw the frontier not as a borderland between unsettled and settled lands, but as an accessible area in which a low man-land ratio and abundant natural resources provided an unusual opportunity for the individual to better himself. Where autocratic governments controlled population movements, where resources were lacking, or where conditions prohibited ordinary individuals from exploiting nature’s virgin riches, a frontier in the Turnerian sense could not be said to exist.

The areas of the world that have been occupied since the beginning of the age of discovery contain remarkably few frontiers of the American kind. In Africa the few Europeans were so outnumbered by relatively uncivilized native inhabitants that the need for protection transcended any impulses toward democracy or individualism. In Latin America the rugged terrain and steaming jungles restricted areas exploitable by individuals to the Brazilian plains and the Argentine pampas; these did attract frontiersmen, although in Argentina the prior occupation of most good lands by government-favored cattle growers kept small farmers out until railroads penetrated the region. In Canada the path westward was blocked by the Laurentian Shield, a tangled mass



Homesteaders on the American frontier.

of hills and sterile, brush-choked soil covering the country north and west of the St. Lawrence Valley. When railroads finally penetrated this barrier in the late nineteenth century, they carried pioneers directly from the East to the prairie provinces of the West; the newcomers, with no prior pioneering experience, simply adapted to their new situation the eastern institutions with which they were familiar. Among the frontier nations of the world only Russia provided a physical environment comparable to that of the United States, and there the pioneers were too accustomed to rigid feudal and monarchic controls to respond as Americans did.

Further proof that the westward expansion of the United States has been a powerful formative force has been provided by the problems facing the nation in the present century. During the past fifty years the American people have been adjusting their lives and institutions to existence in a frontierless land, for while the superintendent of the census was decidedly premature when he announced in 1890 that the country’s “unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line” remaining, the era of cheap land was rapidly drawing to a close. In attempting to adjust the country to its new, expansionless future, statesmen have frequently called upon the frontier hypothesis to justify everything from rugged individualism to the welfare state,

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and from isolationism to world domination.

Political opinion has divided sharply on the necessity of altering the nation's governmental philosophy and techniques in response to the changed environment. Some statesmen and scholars have rebelled against what they call Turner's "Space Concept of History," with all that it implies concerning the lack of opportunity for the individual in an expansionless land. They insist that modern

technology has created a whole host of new "frontiers"—of intensive farming, electronics, mechanics, manufacturing, nuclear fission, and the like—which offer such diverse outlets to individual talents that governmental interference in the nation's economic activities is unjustified. On the other hand, equally competent spokesmen argue that these newer "frontiers" offer little opportunity to the individual—as distinguished from the corporation or the capitalist—and hence cannot duplicate the function of the frontier of free land. The government, they insist, must provide the people with the security and opportunity that vanished when escape to the West became impossible. This school's most eloquent spokesman, Franklin D. Roosevelt, declared: "Our last frontier has long since been reached. ... Equality of opportunity as we have known it no longer exists. ... Our task now is not the discovery or exploitation of natural resources or necessarily producing more goods. It is the sober, less dramatic business of administering resources and plants already in hand, of seeking to reestablish foreign markets for our surplus production, of meeting the problem of under-consumption, of adjusting production to consumption, of distributing wealth and products more equitably, of adapting existing economic organizations to the service of the people. The day of enlightened administration has

come." To Roosevelt, and to thousands like him, the passing of the frontier created a new era in history which demanded a new philosophy of government.

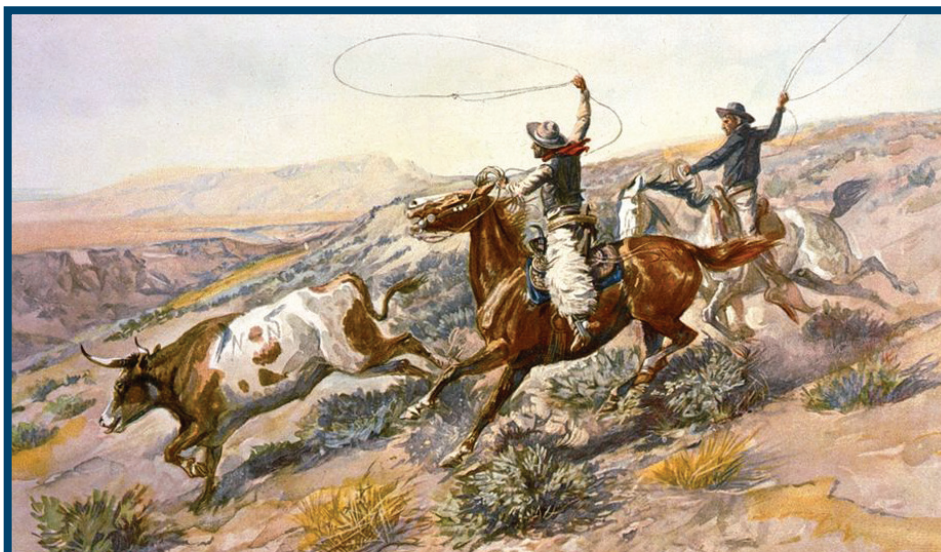
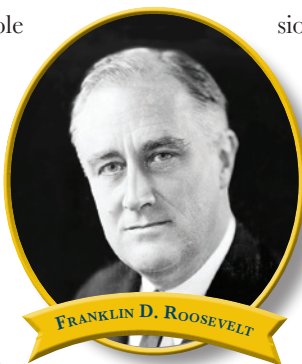
Diplomats have also found in the frontier hypothesis justification for many of their moves, from imperialist expansion to the restriction of immigration. Harking back to Turner's statement that the perennial rebirth of society was necessary to keep

alive the democratic spirit, expansionists have argued through the twentieth century for an extension of American power and territories. During the Spanish-American War imperialists preached such a doctrine, adding the argument that Spain's lands were needed to provide a population outlet for a people who could no longer escape to their own frontier. Idealists such as

Woodrow Wilson could agree with materialists like J. P. Morgan that the extension of American authority abroad, either through territorial acquisitions or economic penetration, would be good for both business and democracy. In a later generation Franklin D. Roosevelt favored a similar expansion of

the American democratic ideal as a necessary prelude to the better world that he hoped would emerge from World War II. His successor, Harry Truman, envisaged his "Truman Doctrine" as a device to extend and defend the frontiers of democracy throughout the globe. While popular belief in the superiority of America's political institutions was far older than Turner, that belief rested partly on the frontier experience of the United States.

These practical applications of the frontier hypothesis, as well as its demonstrated influence on the nation's development, suggest that its critics have been unable to destroy the theory's effectiveness as a key to understanding American history. The recurring rebirth of society in the United States over a period of three hundred years did endow the people with characteristics and institutions that distinguish them from the inhabitants of other nations. It is obviously untrue that the frontier experience alone accounts for the unique features of American civilization; that civilization can be understood only as the product of the interplay of the Old World heritage and New World conditions. But among those conditions none has bulked larger than the operation of the frontier process. ♦



A classic image of the American Frontier as portrayed by C.M. Russell.

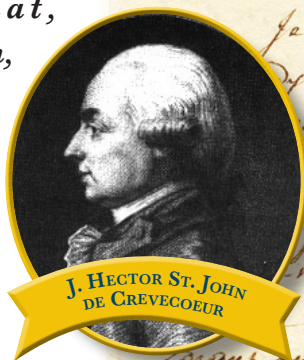
HOW THE FRONTIER SHAPED THE AMERICAN CHARACTER: Document 1

J. HECTOR ST. JOHN DE CREVECOEUR | *LETTERS FROM AN AMERICAN FARMER* | 1782

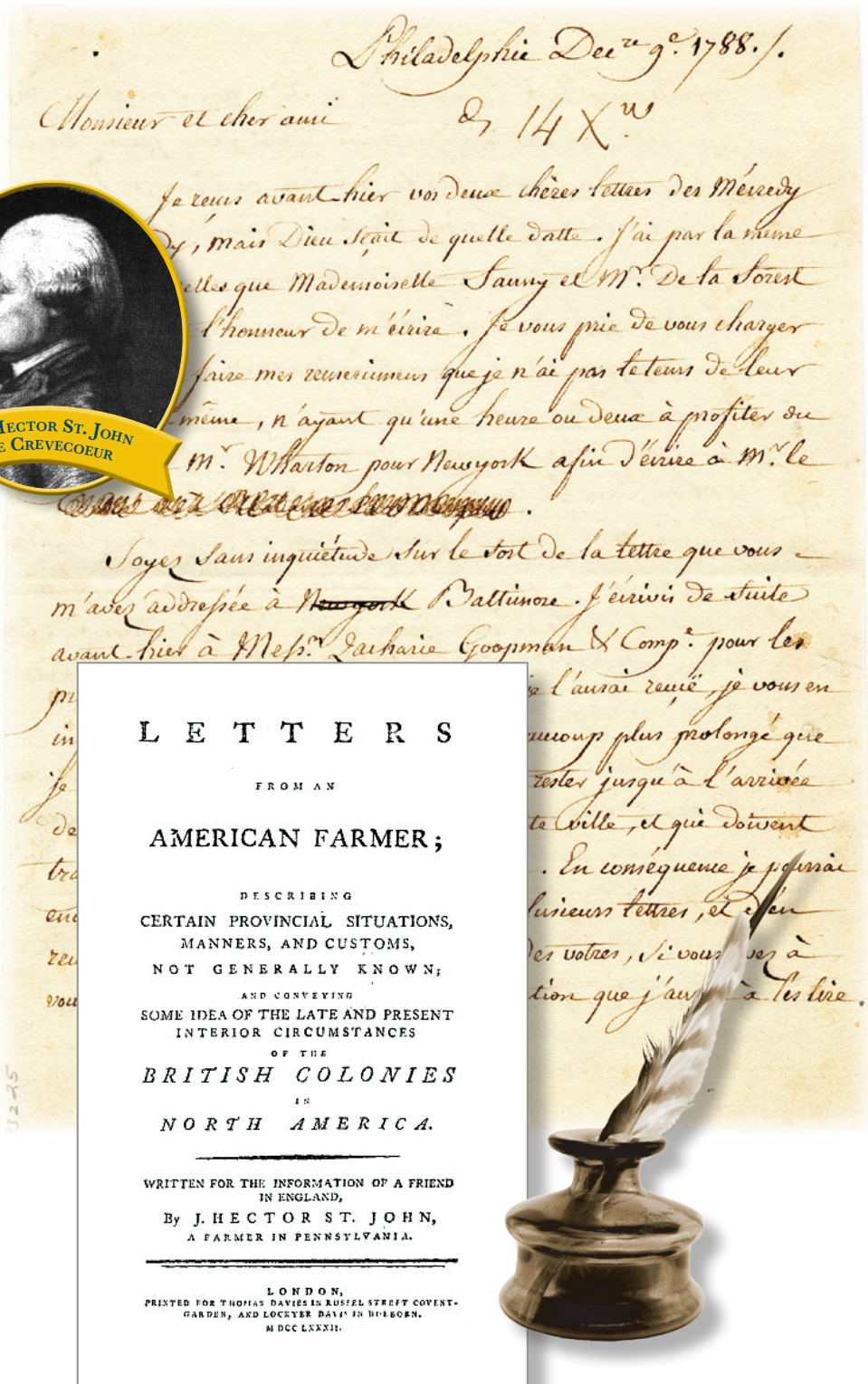
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"...whence came all these people? They are a mixture of English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes... What, then, is the American, this new man? He is neither a European nor the descendant of a European; hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country.

I could point out to you a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have now four wives of different nations. He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. . . . The Americans were once scattered all over Europe; here they are incorporated into one of the finest systems of population which has ever appeared." ♦



J. HECTOR ST. JOHN DE CREVECOEUR

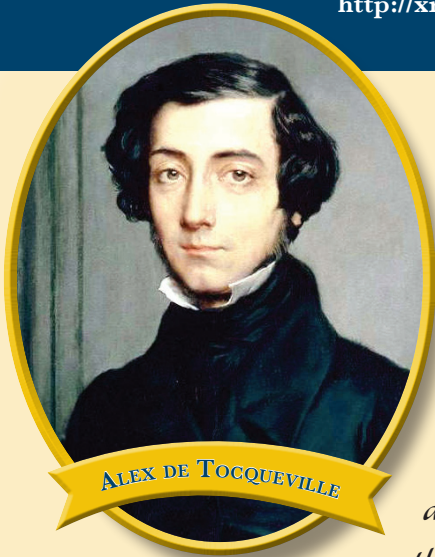


HOW THE FRONTIER SHAPED THE AMERICAN CHARACTER: Document 2

ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE, *DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA*, 1831

CHAPTER XVII: PRINCIPAL CAUSES WHICH TEND TO MAINTAIN
THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC IN THE UNITED STATES

http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/DETOC/1_ch17.htm



Often, in the course of this work, I have alluded to the favorable influence of the material prosperity of America upon the institutions of that country. This reason had already been given by many others before me, and is the only one which, being palpable to the senses, as it were, is familiar to Europeans. I shall not, then, enlarge upon a subject so often handled and so well understood beyond the addition of a few facts. An erroneous notion is generally entertained that the deserts of America are peopled by European emigrants who annually disembark upon the coasts of the New World, while the American population increase and multiply upon the soil which their forefathers tilled. The European settler usually arrives in the United States without friends and often without resources; in order to subsist, he is obliged to work for hire, and he rarely proceeds beyond that belt of industrious population which adjoins the ocean. The desert cannot be explored without capital or credit; and the body must be accustomed to the rigors of a new climate before it can be exposed in the midst of the forest. It is the Americans themselves who daily quit the spots which gave them birth, to acquire extensive domains in a remote region. Thus the European leaves his cottage for the transatlantic shores, and the American, who is born on that very coast, plunges in his turn into the wilds of central America. This double emigration is incessant; it begins in the middle of Europe, it crosses the Atlantic Ocean, and it advances over the solitudes of the New World. Millions of men are marching at once towards the same horizon; their language, their religion, their manners differ; their object is the same. Fortune has been promised to them somewhere in the West, and to the West they go to find it. ♦

HOW THE FRONTIER SHAPED THE AMERICAN CHARACTER: Document 3

JOHN L. O'SULLIVAN, 1839

<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/manifest-destiny/>

The American people having derived their origin from many other nations, and the Declaration of National Independence being entirely based on the great principle of human equality, these facts demonstrate at once our disconnected position as regards any other nation; that we have, in reality, but little connection with the past history of any of them, and still less with all antiquity, its glories, or its crimes. On the contrary, our national birth was the beginning of a new history, the formation and progress of an untried political system, which separates us from the past and connects us with the future only; and so far as regards the entire development of the natural rights of man, in moral, political, and national life, we may confidently assume that our country is destined to be the great nation of futurity.

It is so destined, because the principle upon which a nation is organized fixes its destiny, and that of equality is perfect, is universal. It presides in all the operations of the physical world, and it is also the conscious law of the soul — the self-evident dictates of morality, which accurately defines the duty of man to man, and consequently man's rights as man. Besides, the truthful annals of any nation furnish abundant evidence, that its happiness, its greatness, its duration, were always proportionate to the democratic equality in its system of government. . . .

What friend of human liberty, civilization, and refinement, can cast his view over the past history of the monarchies and aristocracies of antiquity, and not deplore that they ever existed? What philanthropist can contemplate the oppressions, the cruelties, and injustice inflicted by them on the masses of mankind, and not turn with moral horror from the retrospect?

America is destined for better deeds. It is our unparalleled glory that we have no reminiscences of battle fields, but in defence of humanity, of the oppressed of all nations, of the rights of conscience, the rights of personal enfranchisement. Our annals describe no scenes of horrid carnage, where men were led on by hundreds of thousands to slay one another, dupes and victims to emperors, kings, nobles, demons in the human form called heroes. We have had patriots to defend our homes, our liberties, but no aspirants to crowns or thrones; nor have the American people ever suffered themselves to be led on by wicked ambition to depopulate the land, to spread desolation far and wide, that a human being might be placed on a seat of supremacy.

We have no interest in the scenes of antiquity, only as les-

sons of avoidance of nearly all their examples. The expansive future is our arena, and for our history. We are entering on its untrodden space, with the truths of God in our minds, beneficent objects in our hearts, and with a clear conscience unsullied by the past. We are the nation of human progress, and who will, what can, set limits to our onward march? Providence is with us, and no earthly power can. We point to the everlasting truth on the first page of our national declaration, and we proclaim to the millions of other lands, that "the gates of hell" — the powers of aristocracy and monarchy — "shall not prevail against it."

The far-reaching, the boundless future will be the era of American greatness. In its magnificent domain of space and time, the nation of many nations is destined to manifest to mankind the excellence of divine principles; to establish on earth the noblest temple ever dedicated to the worship of the Most High — the Sacred and the True. Its floor shall be a hemisphere — its roof the firmament of the star-studded heavens, and its congregation an Union of many Republics, comprising hundreds of happy millions, calling, owning no man master, but governed by God's natural and moral law of equality, the law of brotherhood — of "peace and good will amongst men." . . .

Yes, we are the nation of progress, of individual freedom, of universal enfranchisement. Equality of rights is the cynosure of our union of States, the grand exemplar of the correlative equality of individuals; and while truth sheds its effulgence, we cannot retrograde, without dissolving the one and subverting the other. We must onward to the fulfilment of our mission — to the entire development of the principle of our organization — freedom of conscience, freedom of person, freedom of trade and business pursuits, universality of freedom and equality. This is our high destiny, and in nature's eternal, inevitable decree of cause and effect we must accomplish it. All this will be our future history, to establish on earth the moral dignity and salvation of man — the immutable truth and beneficence of God. For this blessed mission to the nations of the world, which are shut out from the life-giving light of truth, has America been chosen; and her high example shall smite unto death the tyranny of kings, hierarchs, and oligarchs, and carry the glad tidings of peace and good will where myriads now endure an existence scarcely more enviable than that of beasts of the field. Who, then, can doubt that our country is destined to be the great nation of futurity? ♦

HOW THE FRONTIER SHAPED THE AMERICAN CHARACTER: Document 4a&b

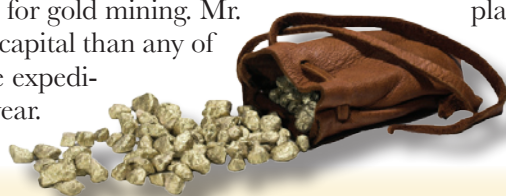
A GOLD HUNTER'S EXPERIENCE, BY CHALKLEY J. HAMBLETON, 1898

<http://archive.org/stream/agoldhuntersexpe29335gut/29335.txt>

Document 4A

Gold had been discovered in the fall of 1858 in the vicinity of Pike's Peak, by a party of Georgian prospectors, and for several years afterward the whole gold region for seventy miles to the north was called "Pike's Peak." Others in the East heard of the gold discoveries and went West the next spring; so that during the summer of 1859 a great deal of prospecting was done in the mountains as far north as Denver and Boulder Creek. Those who returned in the autumn of that year, having perhaps claims and mines to sell, told large stories of their rich finds, which grew larger as they were repeated, amplified and circulated by those who dealt in mining outfits and mills. Then these accounts were fed out to the public daily in an appetizing way by the newspapers. The result was that by the next spring the epidemic became as prevalent in Chicago as cholera was a few years later. Four of the fever stricken ones, Enos Ayres, T. R. Stubbs, John Sollitt and myself, formed a partnership, raised about \$9,000 and went to work to purchase the necessary outfit for gold mining. Mr. Ayres furnished a larger share of the capital than any of the others and was not to go with the expedition, but might join us the following year.

Mr. Stubbs and I were both to go, while Mr. Sollitt was to be represented by a substitute, a relative whose name was also John Sollitt, and who had been a farmer and butcher and was supposed to know all about oxen. Mr. Stubbs was a good mechanic, an intelligent, well-read man, and ten years before had been to California in search of gold. Our outfit consisted of a 12-stamp quartz mill with engine and boiler, and all the equipments understood to be necessary for extracting gold from the rock, including mining tools, powder, quicksilver, copper plate and chemicals; also a supply of provisions for a year. The staple articles of the latter were flour, beans, salt pork, coffee and sugar. Then we had rice, cornmeal, dried fruit, tea, bacon and a barrel of syrup; besides a good supply of hardtack, crackers and cheese for use while crossing the plains, when a fire for cooking might not be found practicable. These things were all purchased in Chicago, together with the fourteen wagons necessary to carry them across the plains. Then all were shipped by rail to St. Joseph, Mo., where the oxen were to be purchased. The entire outfit when loaded on the cars, weighed twenty-four tons. ♦



Document 4B

Coin and bank bills were seldom seen. The universal currency was retorted gold, broken up into small pieces, which went at \$16 an ounce. Every man had his buckskin purse tied with a string, to carry his "dust" in, and every store and house had its small scales, with weights from a few grains to an ounce, to weigh out the price when any article from a newspaper to a wagon was purchased. No laws were in force or observed except miners' laws made by the people of the different districts. When a few dozen miners, more or less, settled or went to work in a new place they soon organized, adopted a set of laws and elected officers, usually a president, secretary, recorder of claims, justice of the peace and a sheriff or constable. Appeals from the justice, disputes of importance over mining claims, and criminal cases were tried at a meeting of the miners of the district. We were in the district of Russell's gulch. Sometimes we had a meeting of the residents of our own gulch. One chap there stole a suit of clothes. The residents were notified to meet at once, and the same day the culprit was tried and found guilty, and

a committee, of which I was one, was appointed to notify him to leave our locality within two hours and not to return, on penalty of death. He went on time. Had he been stubborn and refused to go, I don't know what course the committee would have taken. This member of it would have been embarrassed. An adjoining district was made up mostly of Georgians. They had their own tastes and prejudices. Soon after we came to the mountains, at their miners' meeting a man was convicted for some offence and sentenced to receive thirty lashes from a heavy horse-whip. The day for the execution of the sentence was regarded as a kind of holiday and the miners collected from all the country around. All our men, including Sollitt, went to the whipping. Stubbs and I stayed at home. We had no relish for that sort of amusement. A thief was more sure of punishment than a murderer. There was so much property lying around in cabins unguarded, while the owners were off mining or prospecting, that stealing could not be tolerated, while the loss of a man now and then by killing or otherwise did not count for much. ♦

HOW THE FRONTIER SHAPED THE AMERICAN CHARACTER: Document 5

MARTHA SANDWEISS | AMHERST COLLEGE

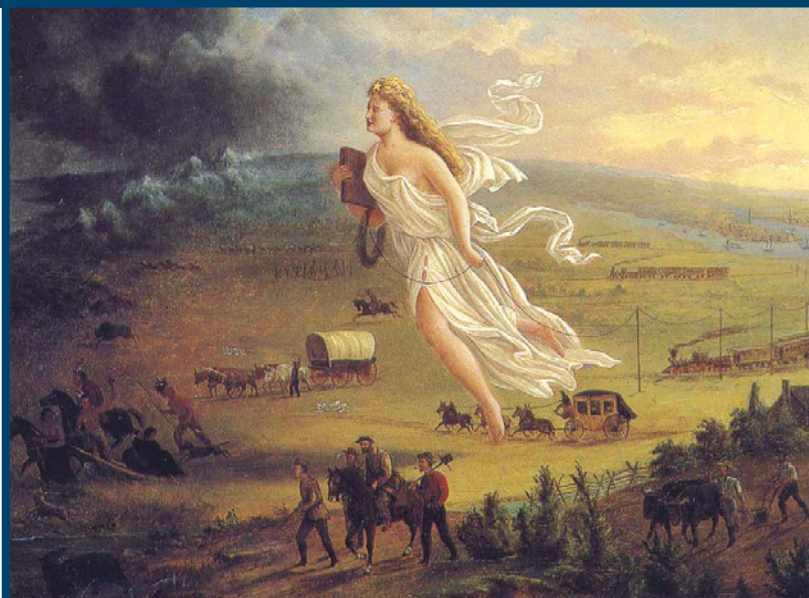
JOHN GAST'S *AMERICAN PROGRESS*, 1872

http://picturinghistory.gc.cuny.edu/item.php?item_id=180

John Gast, a Brooklyn based painter and lithographer, painted this picture in 1872 on commission for George Croft, the publisher of a popular series of western travel guides. Few Americans saw the actual painting, but many encountered it in reproduction. Croft included an engraving of it in his guidebooks and produced a large chromolithographic version for his subscribers. The painting is so rich in detail that my students—encountering it as a slide projected on a screen—usually imagine it

to be a large canvas. But in fact it is tiny, just 12 3/4 x 16 3/4 inches in size.

I use this image early on in my western history classes for several reasons. First, even students with little experience in talking about visual images find it easy to talk about what they see here. Second, students quickly grasp that although the painting does not convey a realistic representation of actual events, it nonetheless expresses a powerful historical idea about the meaning of America's westward expansion. This sparks a discussion about the ways in which ideas—whether grounded in material fact or not—can both reflect and shape human actions. Finally, after a discussion of the larger cultural ideas embodied in this image, we move to a discussion of Frederick Jackson Turner's celebrated 1893 essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." Students quickly perceive that while Turner had a way with words, his argument was not wholly original. He distilled ideas already



John Gast's, *American Progress*.

present in American popular thought and many of them are present in this painting, painted some two decades earlier.

As students begin to describe what they see, they quickly realize that they're looking at a kind of historical encyclopedia of transportation technologies. The simple Indian travois precedes the covered wagon and the pony express, the overland stage and the three railroad lines. The static painting thus conveys a vivid sense of the passage of time as well as of the inevitability of technological progress. The groups of human figures, read from left to right, convey much the same idea. Indians precede Euro-American prospectors, who in turn come before the farmers and settlers. The idea of progress coming from the East to the West, and the notion that the frontier would be developed by sequential waves of people (here and in Turner's configuration, always men) was deeply rooted in American thought.

Then, of course, there is that "beauti-

ful and charming female," as Croft described her, whose diaphanous gown somehow remains attached to her body without the aid of velcro or safety pins. On her head she bears what Croft called "the Star of Empire." And lest viewers still not understand her role in this vision of American destiny, he explains: "In her right hand she carries a book—common school—the emblem of education and the testimonial of our national enlightenment, while with the left hand

she unfolds and stretches the slender wires of the telegraph, that are to flash intelligence throughout the land." The Indians flee from progress, unable to adjust to the shifting tides of history. The painting hints at the past, lays out a fantastic version of an evolving present, and finally lays out a vision of the future. A static picture conveys a dynamic story.

The ideas embodied in this painting not only suggest the broad sources for Turner's essay about the importance of the frontier in American life, they suggest that his essay reached an audience for whom these ideas were already familiar. Students often imagine the issues raised by visual images to be peripheral to the more central questions raised by literary sources. The Gast painting, however, allows one to demonstrate the ways in which painters, too, could engage large historical questions, cultural stereotypes and political ideas, by using a visual vocabulary that viewers found both familiar and persuasive. ♦

HOW THE FRONTIER SHAPED THE AMERICAN CHARACTER: Document 6

CAROLINE M. CHURCHILL

“LITTLE SHEAVES” GATHERED WHILE GLEANING AFTER REAPERS
— BEING LETTERS OF TRAVEL COMMENCING IN 1870, AND ENDING IN 1873 —

lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/
calbk:@field%28DOCID+@lit%28calbk091div1%29%29



The theory of woman's rights meets with much opposition, but the broadest and most catholic latitude is allowed it in practice. Three ladies are practicing medicine here, one of whom has a surgical reputation, and all are prosperous, proving that California flesh is, after all, heir to disease, in spite of the climate. Ladies engage in money making and business pursuits without attracting the envy or opposition or contempt of the weak-minded of both sexes. If woman will but earnestly walk onward in the path of rectitude and duty, success will surely sooner or later crown her efforts.

A regular live Woman Suffrage Association is organized here, and is in good running and working order. Though women by no means yet enjoy equal rights they hope to do so by-and-by.

A lady applied for a vacant postoffice clerkship, but was told that she could not serve Uncle Sam in that capacity, for she was not a citizen. When she replied that as she was born in the United States, she would really like to be informed whose citizen she was if not Uncle Sam's, the laughing rejoinder came, "Well, well, you're a non-voting citizen, and it don't pay to give clerkships to sish like."

Another lady, a teacher, eminently qualified, and endorsed by many influential citizens, applied for the position of school superintendent. The position was almost awarded to her, when, lo! the reigning powers pronounced her inelligible, because she was a "non-voting citizen."

Non-voting citizens are permitted to pay taxes, to give birth to and rear voters, aided or unaided, as the case may be; to wash, to sew, to teach and to scrub; to be tried by a jury of voting citizens, to be imprisoned, and to be responsible as voting citizens in every responsible way, and yet enjoy only the political privileges of serfs and aliens, idiots, criminals and lunatics. ❖

HOW THE FRONTIER SHAPED THE AMERICAN CHARACTER: Document 7

BENJAMIN SINGLETON

RECRUITMENT OF BLACK HOMESTEADERS, 1878

<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/odyssey/archive/05/0513001r.jpg>



Black homesteaders pose
in front of farmhouse

ONE OF THE MANY
POSTERS CALLING ON
SOUTHERN BLACKS TO
LEAVE FOR KANSAS.

Ho for Kansas!

Brethren, Friends, & Fellow Citizens:

I feel thankful to inform you that the

REAL ESTATE

AND

Homestead Association,

Will Leave Here the

15th of April, 1878,

In pursuit of Homes in the Southwestern
Lands of America, at Transportation
Rates, cheaper than ever
was known before.

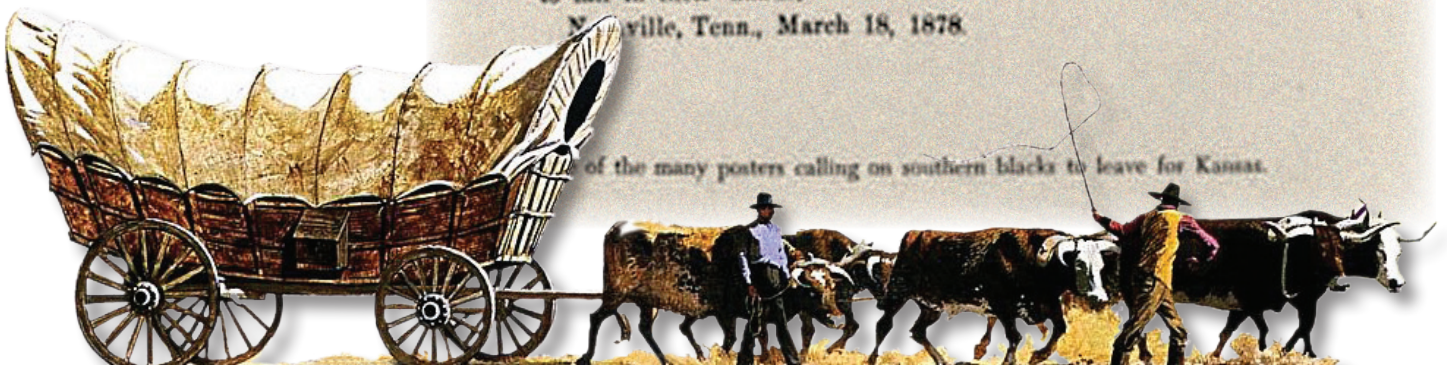
For full information inquire of

Benj. Singleton, better known as old Pap,
NO. 5 NORTH FRONT STREET.

Beware of Speculators and Adventurers, as it is a dangerous thing
to fall in their hands.

Nashville, Tenn., March 18, 1878.

One of the many posters calling on southern blacks to leave for Kansas.



HOW THE FRONTIER SHAPED THE AMERICAN CHARACTER: Document 8

HOMESTEAD ACT COMMEMORATIVE STAMP

— FRED HULTSTRAND HISTORY IN PICTURES COLLECTION —

NDIRS-NDSU | FARGO | WASHINGTON, D.C. | U.S. GOVT. PRINT. OFFICE, 1962

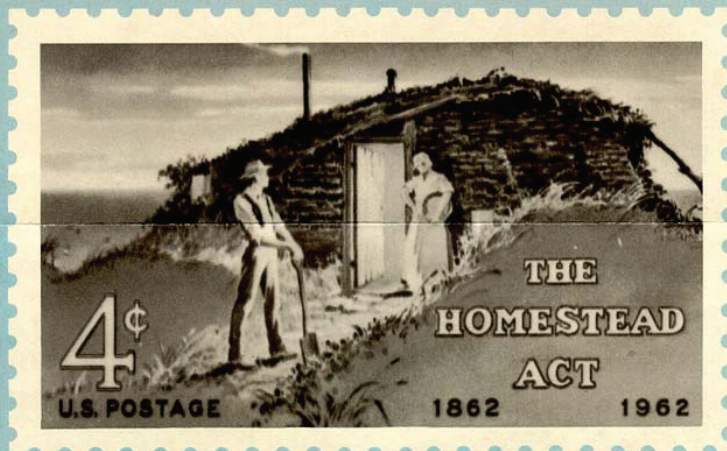
<http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/AMALL:@field%28NUMBER+@band%28ndfahult+c241%29%29>

TEXT

The 4-cent Homestead Act commemorative stamp will be first placed on sale at Beatrice, Nebraska, on May 20, 1962, on the centennial anniversary of the signing of the Act by President Abraham Lincoln. The stamp, designed by Charles R. Chickering of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, portrays a sod hut, typical of the early homesteading dwellings, with a man and his wife standing in the illuminated walk way. A bluish-gray color has been selected for the stamp, representing a late evening and emphasizing the bleakness of the plains. In the lower right corner of the stamp is the wording 'The Homestead Act,' arranged in three lines, in white face Roman, with the dates '1862 1962' just below in dark face Gothic. In the lower left corner is '4 cents' in white face Roman, and below the denomination is the wording 'U.S. Postage' in dark face Gothic. The Homestead Act stamp, measuring 0.84 by 1.44 inches in dimension, arranged horizontally, will be printed on the Cottrell presses, electric-eye perforated and issued in panes of 50, with an initial printing of 120 million. The vignette was engraved by Matthew D. Fenton, and the lettering and numerals by Kenneth C. Wiram. Collectors desiring first day cancellations may send addressed envelopes, together with remittance to cover the cost of the stamps to be affixed, to the Postmaster, Beatrice, Nebraska. A close-fitting enclosure of postal card thickness should be placed in each envelope and the flap either turned in or sealed. The envelope to the Postmaster should be endorsed 'First-day Covers 4 cent Homestead Act Stamp.' Orders for covers must not include requests

4-CENT HOMESTEAD ACT

COMMEMORATIVE POSTAGE STAMP



AVAILABLE AT YOUR LOCAL POST OFFICE

MAY 21, 1962

The 4-cent Homestead Act commemorative stamp will be first placed on sale at Beatrice, Nebraska, on May 20, 1962, on the centennial anniversary of the signing of the Act by President Abraham Lincoln.

The stamp, designed by Charles R. Chickering of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, portrays a sod hut, typical of the early homesteading dwellings, with a man and his wife standing in the illuminated walk way. A bluish-gray color has been selected for the stamp, representing a late evening scene and emphasizing the bleakness of the plains. In the lower right corner of the stamp is the wording "The Homestead Act," arranged in three lines, in white face Roman, with the dates "1862 1962" just below in dark face Gothic. In the lower left corner is "4¢" in white face Roman, and below the denomination is the wording "U. S. Postage," in dark face Gothic.

The Homestead Act stamp, measuring 0.84 by 1.44 inches in dimension, arranged horizontally, will be printed on the Cottrell presses, electric-eye perforated and issued in panes of 50, with an initial printing of 120 million. The vignette was engraved by Matthew D. Fenton, and the lettering and numerals by Kenneth C. Wiram.

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U. S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE: 1962 O-672344

Poster showing reproduction of 1962 Homestead Act postage stamp with descriptive text.

for uncanceled stamps. The cover requests should be postmarked not later than May 15, 1962. ♦

—Text on poster. Fred Hullstrand History in Pictures Collection, NDIRS-NDSU, Fargo.