

Frederick Jackson Turner



(1861-1932)

"The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward explain American development." With these words, Frederick Jackson Turner laid the foundation for modern historical study of the American West and presented a "**frontier thesis**" that continues to influence historical thinking even today.

Turner was born in Portage, Wisconsin, in 1861. His father, a journalist by trade and local historian by avocation, piqued Turner's interest in history. After his graduation from the University of Wisconsin in 1884, Turner decided to become a professional historian, and received his Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University in 1890. He served as a teacher and scholar at the University of Wisconsin from 1889 to 1910, when he joined Harvard's faculty. He retired in 1924 but continued his research until his death in 1932.

Turner's contribution to American history was to argue that the frontier past best explained the distinctive history of the United States. He most cogently articulated this idea in "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," which he first delivered to a gathering of historians in 1893 at Chicago, then the site of the World's Columbian Exposition, an enormous fair to mark the four-hundredth anniversary of Columbus' voyage. Although almost totally ignored at the time, Turner's lecture eventually gained such wide distribution and influence that a contemporary scholar has called it "**the single most influential piece of writing in the history of American history.**"

Three years before Turner's pronouncement of the frontier thesis, the U.S. Census Bureau had announced the disappearance of a contiguous frontier line. Turner took this "closing of the frontier" as an opportunity to reflect upon the influence it had exercised. He argued that the frontier had meant that every American generation returned "to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line." Along this frontier -- which he also described as "the meeting point between savagery and civilization" -- Americans again and again recapitulated the developmental stages of the emerging industrial order of the 1890's. This development, in Turner's description of the frontier, "begins with the Indian and the hunter; it goes on with the disintegration of savagery by the entrance of the trader... the pastoral stage in ranch life; the exploitation of the soil by the raising of unrotated crops of corn and wheat in sparsely settled

farm communities; the intensive culture of the denser farm settlement; and finally the manufacturing organization with the city and the factory system."

For Turner, the deeper significance of the frontier lay in the effects of this social recapitulation on the American character. "The frontier," he claimed, "is the line of most rapid Americanization." The presence and predominance of numerous cultural traits -- "that coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and acquisitiveness; that practical inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things... that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism" -- could all be attributed to the influence of the frontier.

Turner's essay reached triumphalist heights in his belief that the promotion of individualistic democracy was the most important effect of the frontier. Individuals, forced to rely on their own wits and strength, he believed, were simply too scornful of rank to be amenable to the exercise of centralized political power.

Turner offered his frontier thesis as both an analysis of the past and a warning about the future. If the frontier had been so essential to the development of American culture and democracy, then what would befall them as the frontier closed? It was on this foreboding note that he closed his address: "And now, four centuries from the discovery of America, at the end of a hundred years of life under the Constitution, the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history."

More than a century after he first delivered his frontier thesis, historians still hotly debate Turner's ideas and approach. His critics have denied everything from his basic assumptions to the small details of his argument. The mainstream of the profession has long since discarded Turner's assumption that the frontier is the key to American history as a whole; they point instead to the critical influence of such factors as slavery and the Civil War, immigration, and the development of industrial capitalism. However, even within Western and frontier history, a growing body of historians has contested Turner's approach.

Some have long disputed the very idea of a frontier of "free land." Turner's formulation ignored the presence of the numerous Indian peoples whose subjugation was required by the nation's westward march, and assumed that the bulk of newly acquired lands were actually democratically distributed to yeomen pioneers. The numerous Indian wars provoked by American expansion contradict Turner's argument that the American "free land" frontier was a sharp contrast with European nations' borders with other states.

On a more analytic level, an increasing number of Western historians have found the very concept of a frontier dubious, because it applies to too many disparate places and times to be useful. How much do Puritan New England and the California of the transcontinental railroad really have in common? Many such critics have sought to replace the idea of a moving frontier with the idea of the West as a distinctive region, much like the American South.

Where Turner told the triumphalist story of the frontier's promotion of a distinctly American democracy, many of his critics have argued that precisely the opposite was the case. Cooperation and communities of various sorts, not isolated individuals, made possible the absorption of the

West into the United States. Most migrant wagon trains, for example, were composed of extended kinship networks. Moreover, as the 19th century wore on, the role of the federal government and large corporations grew increasingly important. Corporate investors headquartered in New York laid the railroads; government troops defeated Indian nations who refused to get out of the way of manifest destiny; even the cowboys, enshrined in popular mythology as rugged loners, were generally low-level employees of sometimes foreign-owned cattle corporations.

Moreover, these revisionist scholars argue, for many places the West has not been the land of freedom and opportunity that both Turnerian history and popular mythology would have us believe. For many women, Asians, Mexicans who suddenly found themselves residents of the United States, and, of course, Indians, the West was no promised land.

The more foreboding and cautionary tale which increasing numbers of Western historians have offered in place of Turner's account has provoked sharp controversy. "New" Western historians - many of whom actually echo and draw upon fairly old scholarly works -- often argue that their accounts offer a more inclusive and honest reckoning of the Western past. Western historians who still adhere roughly to Turner's approach accuse their opponents of mistaking a simple-minded political correctness for good scholarship in their quest to recount only the doom and gloom of the Western past. Often the rhetoric reaches an acrimonious crescendo. However, in a sense, the very acrimony of these debates takes us full circle back to Turner and his legacy, for debates about the significance of Western history are hardly ever confined to the past. In our understanding of what we are as a nation, if on no other level, the Western past continues to define us today.

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