Cincinnati, Queen City of the West
URBAN LIFE AND URBAN LANDSCAPE SERIES

Zane L. Miller and Henry D. Shapiro, general editors

Fragments of Cities: The New American Downtowns and Neighborhoods
Larry Bennett

Cincinnati Observed: Architecture and History
John Clubbe

Building Chicago: Suburban Developers and the Creation
of Divided Metropolis
Ann Durkin Keating

Silent City on a Hill: Landscapes of Memory and Boston's
Mount Auburn Cemetery
Blanche Linden-Ward

Plague of Strangers: Social Groups and the Origins of City Services
in Cincinnati, 1819–1870
Alan I Marcus

Polish Immigrants and Industrial Chicago: Workers on the South Side,
1880–1922
Dominic A. Pacyga

Washing “The Great Unwashed”: Public Baths in Urban America,
1840–1920
Marilyn Thornton Williams
Contents

FOREWORD by Carl Abbott vii

PREFACE xxiii

Introduction 1

Setting the Scene 11

1 The Material Basis of the Society 19

2 The Emergence of a Class Structure 48

3 Municipal Responsibilities 80

4 The Cooperative Spirit 107

5 The Outside World 141

6 Religion 170

7 Education 202

8 The Place of the Arts 228

9 Domestic Manners 258

10 Critics of the Status Quo 282

EPILOGUE 315

BIBLIOGRAPHY 325

INDEX 359
What makes a dissertation merit publication fifty years after its formal presentation? In the case of Daniel Aaron's *Cincinnati, 1818–1838: A Study of Attitudes in the Urban West* (its original title), the answers are quality and continuity. The first has to do with the work's inherent worth as an example of the historical craft. The second has to do with its contributions to the big questions of historical study, summed up in this case by the shorthand phrases "American community" and "American character."

Completed, defended, and dispatched to the library stacks of suburban Massachusetts in 1942, *Cincinnati* has been an interlibrary loan classic. It has been read by scholars specializing in the history of American cities, particularly those whose interests have turned to the great city-making era between the War of Independence and the Civil War, but it has been essentially unavailable to a wider audience interested in understanding American culture and character.

Daniel Aaron's study still stands as a valuable contribution to the history of American cities. I was impressed when I first consulted it for my own research on the antebellum Middle West more than twenty years ago, and a second and perhaps more thoughtful reading has confirmed the positive evaluation. Just as important for its publication in the closing decade of the twentieth century is its value as a document in American cultural history. Aaron's work gives us important insights into the intellectual concerns of the 1930s and early 1940s, when Americans at large were trying to define their national character and an active group of historians was starting to explore the processes that had made the United States an urban nation.

This is a thorough study that canvassed virtually all the published sources available at the time—newspapers, local magazines, travelers' accounts, guidebooks, local histories, published orations, reports of schools and charitable societies, and public documents. The research was supplemented by use of more than three dozen sets of manuscript materials on important Cincinnati families and businesses, most in the excellent collections of the Cin-
cinnati Historical Society (at that time still operating under its nineteenth-century name as the Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio). During the decade between 1935 and 1945, these were the same types of sources that Bayrd Still was using to outline the history of Milwaukee, Blake McKelvey to begin his urban biography of Rochester, Constance McLaughlin Green to profile the career of Holyoke, Massachusetts, and Bessie L. Pierce to research her multiple volumes on the growth of Chicago. Written in the same tradition, Aaron’s study of Cincinnati merits inclusion among the founding classics for the field of urban history.

Like his contemporaries, Aaron worked with words. He drew his evidence from published documents and unpublished letters and presented his findings in clear and often vivid prose. In comparison with urban historians of the 1970s and 1980s, he had little interest in either pictures or numbers. Readers in the 1990s may have an unsatisfied curiosity about the physical appearance and form of early Cincinnati or the precise character of the distinct industrial, commercial, and residential districts into which Cincinnati was dividing by the 1830s. Aaron preceded historians who since the 1960s have learned to devote great energies to counting and categorizing the people listed on census returns, in city directories, and in organizational membership lists. And while Aaron described a four-level class system based on the social standing and reputation of different occupations and races as an analytical concept, it was not until twenty-five years later that Walter Glazer estimated the actual number of Cincinnatians belonging to each class in 1840.

Aaron used the economic crises of 1819 and 1837 to define his period of study, a decision that stands up well even after fifty years. From financial panic to financial panic is a natural historical unit for nineteenth-century western cities, whose futures were determined by their ability to find a niche within the developing national economy and whose leaders in each era were often selected by their ability to survive the previous financial crisis. The period of the 1820s and 1830s coincided with the second generation of development for a city settled in the 1790s. It marked the height of Cincinnati’s


steamboat era, before the disturbing arrival of the railroads affected the “natural” balance of lakes and rivers.

In setting his chronological boundaries, Aaron was participating in an implicit dialogue on the best approach to periodizing urban history. The urban biographers working in the 1930s and 1940s were clear in rejecting the relevance of national politics for defining the stages of city history. Instead, they looked both to structural changes in urban economic development and to key events internal to each city. Bayrd Still used the grant of Milwaukee’s city charter in 1846 as one dividing point and the expansion of manufacturing in the 1870s as another. Bessie Louise Pierce used both the Chicago Fire of 1871 and the depression of 1893. Historians who followed in the 1950s and 1960s tended to emphasize periods of development based on the internal differentiation of individual cities. As Henry Shapiro has commented, however, Aaron’s approach followed Reginald McGrane’s history of the Panic of 1837, which treated the early Mississippi Valley cities as active participants in the national economy. Among Aaron’s contemporaries, Constance Green’s study of Holyoke most directly paralleled his work by linking local developments to the national economic cycle.

It is worth noting that a number of Cincinnati historians in recent decades have taken 1840 as an important transition point. Pursuing interests in the processes of modernization, they draw a contrast between a relatively simple, unified, and informal town and a far more complex, divided, and formally structured city—that is, between a pre-modern community before 1840 and a modernizing city after. Irwin Flack, Judith Spraul-Schmidt, and Alan Marcus have dated the rapid expansion of formal government to the 1840s and 1850s. Walter Glazer, Jed Dannenbaum, and Steven Ross have seen the same decades as a period of rapidly increasing economic complexity, growing disorder, and hardening of class lines. My own work found a fragmentation of economic interests and a collapse of consensus on growth strategies among the civic elite after 1840.


5. Glazer, “Cincinnati in 1840”; Jed Dannenbaum, Drink and Disorder: Temperance Reform in Cincinnati from the Washingtonian Revival to the WCTU (Urbana: University of Illinois Press,
The specific comparisons to Aaron’s contemporaries as urban historians suggest a more basic similarity. There was, in fact, a style of “new urban history” undertaken by a set of younger scholars who began their work in the 1930s and published their findings and interpretations in the late 1930s and 1940s. Although they seemed to be fulfilling Arthur M. Schlesinger’s call to place cities at the center of national history, these younger scholars’ concern was somewhat different. Their volumes are now often dismissed as “old-fashioned urban biographies” full of necessary but uninteresting information. It is clear in retrospect, however, that urban biographers and the authors of more narrowly focused historical community studies wanted to move beyond previous city history with its focus on politics and municipal institutions.

A context for their work was the new cultural history that scholars such as Thomas Cochran, Merle Curti, and Ralph Henry Gabriel explored and delineated at the 1939 meeting of the American Historical Association in a set of symposia devoted to the “study of history from the standpoint of total culture.” The papers and comments were edited by Caroline Ware and published the following year as The Cultural Approach to History. The underlying theme was the concept of culture, developed by anthropologists as a way to integrate diverse information on social, demographic, and economic patterns. The cultural approach promised breadth with discipline, Ware wrote in her introduction, and facilitated comparisons across time and space. It also led to a fascination with defining the “American character,” a project that took additional impetus from World War II and the Cold War.

different way, the cultural approach anticipated the new labor history of recent decades with its focus on informal as well as formal institutions. At the same time, the theorists of the cultural approach helped to provide a rationale for comprehensive city histories and community analyses.

The Cultural Approach to History included an essay by Constance McLaughlin Green on the value of local history. She argued, should explore the community in its entirety. Citing Daniel Aaron’s dissertation as one example, she asserted that local studies could test and refine vapid generalizations. They could also bring the workers and clerks to center stage along with the politicians and factory owners. In her own study of Holyoke, published the previous year, she had practiced what she preached, using the mill town to examine the social consequences of urbanization. Her monograph was informed by sociological theory and offered a comprehensive analysis of economic growth, labor, government, education, religion, social life, and civic reform. Another successful study that fit the same mold was Carolyn Ware’s 1935 book on Greenwich Village, which examined the interactions among artists and immigrants in a single evolving neighborhood.

The comprehensive approach that worked well for a district like Greenwich Village or a small city like Holyoke was difficult to execute when applied to larger cities. Bayrd Still’s ability to capture the growth and character of Milwaukee in a single volume made it the most readable of the urban biographies, but comprehensive accounts of larger cities such as Rochester and Chicago spilled over into several volumes. Green faced the same problem when she later undertook her history of Washington, D.C. Her single volume on Washington’s African-American subcommunity was more readable and more widely read than the two detailed volumes of her more inclusive urban biography.

This intellectual context for the practice of urban history in 1940 helps us to understand how Daniel Aaron approached his own work. The absence of detailed quantitative comparisons about the city’s residents, for example, is

---


congruent with Aaron’s goal of portraying Cincinnati, rather than Cincinnat
tians, by developing a comprehensive description of a single generation of
city-making. The dissertation was a historian’s conscious attempt to parallel
the related social science genre of the “community study,” which tried to
provide comprehensive depictions of carefully circumscribed settlements as
social and cultural systems.

The heart of the community study is the description and analysis of the
patterned relationships among the residents of a single place and of the per
sonal and social values that those relationships express and support. In a
phrase used by sociologist Robert Park in his influential essay “The City:
Suggestions for the Investigation of Human Behavior in the Urban Environ
ment,” the goal of community studies was to understand each community as
a “moral order” or set of shared ideas and attitudes that structure patterns of
social interaction. In the context of the 1920s and 1930s, the hope was to
explore the ways in which cities that were obviously fragmented by neighbor
hood, class, ethnicity, and race still managed to function as economic and
social units.12

The majority of the holistic community studies available at the end of the
1930s were products of the faculty and students of the sociology department
at the University of Chicago. Drawing on their personal knowledge and
studies of the great metropolis, members of the “Chicago School” viewed
cities as sets of smaller communities, each with its own closely defined terri
tory and each sharing little of its social life and values with the others. Per
haps the most dramatic statement of this postion was The Gold Coast and the
Slum, Harvey Zorbaugh’s 1929 study of Chicago’s affluent northside lakefron
t and the nearby neighborhood of Little Sicily. Despite their physical
proximity, the rich and the immigrant poor were isolated from each other,
confined to superficial and external contacts, and separated by great social
distances into their own little worlds.13

The Chicago sociologists’ negative assumptions and fears about declining
community cohesion found their concise summary in Louis Wirth’s twenty
four page essay “Urbanism as a Way of Life” (1938). City life, Wirth as
serted, brought “profound changes in virtually every phase of social life.”
Cities isolated the individual and leveled the group. Their density and size

Urban Environment,” in Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, and Roderick McKenzie, eds., The City
13. Harvey Zorbaugh, The Gold Coast and the Slum (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,
1929).
forced individuals in on themselves and turned everyone into a stranger in the crowd. Size and diversity undermined old values and beliefs, leaving the individual open to superficial appeals. Key adjectives for Wirth were competitive, transitory, and predatory. Along with European contemporaries such as José Ortega y Gasset, Wirth believed that urban society turned cultural institutions into social levelers that fostered the dominion of the commonplace and promulgated the values of mass society.14

The Chicago of Wirth or Zorbaugh can be found only in traces in Aaron’s antebellum Cincinnati. For example, Aaron disagreed about the socially isolating effects of urban life. The middle and upper classes whom he studied enjoyed an active associational life. The chapter on the cooperative spirit describes the city’s “widespread faith in the efficacy of association” and “the amazing proliferation of societies” for purposes of religion, charity, mutual aid, and mutual education. Unlike Wirth, who saw such formalized activities as poor substitutes for traditional social relations, Aaron concluded that early Cincinnati associations were deeply and substantially beneficial: “Merchants, mechanics, professionals—in short, the majority of the city’s population—met daily, even hourly, to discuss common interests, exchange information, and form new projects. Associations promoted, it is true, the qualities most prized by an acquisitive society—emulation, enquiry, and enterprise; but even more significant, they symbolized an active democracy.”15

Aaron found it more difficult to reconcile his assumptions about Cincinnati’s intellectual life with his evidence. Following Wirth’s indictment of popular culture and education as pitched to the lowest common denominator, Aaron asserted that Cincinnati reflected the shallowness of American intellectual life. That the majority of citizens preferred entertainment that was “derivative and commonplace” simply “reflected the national attitude in microcosm.”16 His study also showed, however, that Cincinnati was an active center of artistic and intellectual activity. Its theatrical impresarios, musi-

15. Daniel Aaron, Cincinnati, Queen City of the West: 1819–1838 (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1992), 113, 139.
cians, and editors brought the cultural life of the East Coast directly to the New West. Cincinnatians themselves were enthusiasts for the creation of cultural institutions and made the city into an important center for the further diffusion of ideas through a regional publishing and book business. As Richard Wade showed in *The Urban Frontier*, no other western city had such solid claim to leadership in the realms of art and literature.¹⁷

Aaron’s emphasis on the penchant of Cincinnatians for organized activities places him firmly by the side of that keenly observant traveler Alexis de Tocqueville, whose journeys through the new United States at the start of the 1830s were motivated by the desire to evaluate the future of a democratic society. In Tocqueville’s famous analysis, the propensity of Americans to join together in all manner of social and civic groups provided a necessary intermediary between untrammeled individualism and the formal institutions of government. A nation of joiners was a nation in which large numbers of ordinary citizens could practice democracy firsthand and learn the rudiments of civic leadership:

Among democratic peoples associations must take the place of the powerful private persons whom equality of conditions has eliminated. As soon as several Americans have conceived a sentiment or an idea that they want to produce before the world, they seek each other out, and when found, they unite. Thenceforth they are no longer isolated individuals, but a power conspicuous from the distance whose actions serve as an example. . . . In democratic countries knowledge of how to combine is the mother of all other forms of knowledge; on its progress depends that of all the others.¹⁸

More recent studies of Cincinnati have confirmed the importance of the associational activity Aaron identified. Walter S. Glazer’s 1968 dissertation, “Cincinnati in 1840: A Community Profile,” provided a snapshot of a city on the point of transition from a consensual community to a diversified and divided metropolis. Drawing on the techniques of the new quantitative urban history, Glazer argued that Cincinnati was a city of “expansive optimism” whose widespread participation in public life was guided by a smaller elite of civic-minded activists. Far from a realm of chaotic individualism, “the new


egalitarian society was generally stable and cohesive," with opportunities for talented members of the middle and working classes to move into positions of community responsibility.19 Indeed, associational involvement and civic mobility remained open even as the chances of economic mobility were declining in an industrializing city.

Irwin Flack's 1978 dissertation, "Who Governed Cincinnati? A Comparative Analysis of Government and Social Structure in a Nineteenth Century River City," made a parallel argument. Despite the increasing inequality in the distribution of and access to wealth, the mercantile and industrial elite used local government to promote social stability. The rapid expansion of public services, especially after 1840, not only filled specific community needs but also offered opportunities for civic involvement to the middle class. As Flack concluded, "Elites used government to pull society together. . . . The means employed to achieve integration was public service—especially, but not exclusively social service."20 The formal associational activities of city government, in short, allowed participation across the isolating barriers of socioeconomic status.

Historians of other antebellum towns have come to similar conclusions about the active construction of community through civic activity. From the 1840s to the 1930s, observers of industrial urbanization in Europe and the United States had developed a standard model of social change that posited a shift from traditionally close-knit communities to social atomism. Contrary to this model, urban historians in the last two decades have emphasized the survival and reconstruction of community in the midst of rapid expansion in the scale of economic and social life. Stuart Blumin found that the people of Kingston, New York, became more rather than less community-oriented as Kingston grew from a small town to a small city within the commercial sphere of New York. Don Doyle's history of antebellum Jacksonville, Illinois, also focused explicitly on the question of community. Here on the western urban frontier, Doyle found, a network of voluntary associations tied together the members of the middle and mercantile classes and moderated potential conflicts. David Gerber's recent study of community life and politics in antebellum Buffalo found that ethnic identity and community consciousness emerged from dense networks of civic and political organizations. At the same time, a social system driven by voluntary associations created a

common public culture that tied the city together within a single system of pluralistic politics.21

When Aaron was researching and writing *Cincinnati*, the best-known model for a community study other than the work of the Chicago sociologists was Robert and Helen Lynd’s *Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture* (1929) and their follow-up work, *Middletown in Transition* (1937). The Lynds structured their research as if they were cultural anthropologists working in an isolated community (in this case, Muncie, Indiana). They presented their findings and interpretations in the style of modern journalists, making effective use of anecdotes and composites to represent typical Middletowners, and gaining thousands of readers in the process. Although the Lynds gave far more attention to the structure of formal and informal power in the second volume than in the first, they concluded that little had changed about Muncie’s basic values between their first field work in 1925 and their return visit in 1935.22

Since Aaron himself wrote that he “should have preferred this study to be analogous to the work of the Lynds, as a sort of early-nineteenth-century Middletown,” it is instructive to compare their methods. The Lynds chose Muncie, they said, because they wanted a typical American community with a rapid rate of growth, a Middle Western location, a manufacturing sector, and a substantial local artistic life. The city’s population was 35,000 when they began their field work. Aaron certainly would have been aware that every point in the list also applied to Cincinnati in the 1830s, when its population reached 30,000, its artistic life was flourishing, and its manufacturers were beginning to rival its merchants. By coincidence, the village of Muncie was just on the edge of Cincinnati’s commercial hinterland by the start of the 1840s. As Aaron commented, Cincinnati was “a good example of the urban West, a typical mercantile community . . . changing swiftly during its first fifty years from a small village to the largest and most flourishing entrepôt in the Ohio Valley. . . . No other western city could rival its cultural facilities.”23


The organizational framework for *Middletown* is borrowed from anthropology, with its concern for the patterns of everyday life: getting a living, making a home, training the young, using leisure, engaging in religious practices, and engaging in community activities. In comparison, Aaron's study placed greater emphasis on the public community rather than on private life, although he offered at least one chapter that touched on each of the Lynds' topics. Like most urban historians, he saw the formation of the community at its most basic in the expansion of its economy and in public responses to that growth, both through government and through what we would now call the non-profit sector of civic and charitable organizations. As he recognized, necessary reliance on "the expressions of the articulate classes" made it difficult in any event to interpret "the mind of the working man and woman, the mechanic and petty tradesman, the poor and the uneducated."24

What the Lynds found (presumably to no one's surprise) was that the business of Middletown was business. The "Middletown Spirit" included beliefs in progress, individual enterprise, hard work, honesty, practical schooling, and conformity to safe ideas. The future was bound to be better than the present. Progress could be measured with numbers. It was far better to be a booster than a knocker. As in George F. Babbitt's fictional Zenith, businessmen were the natural exemplars and leaders of 1920s Muncie. Although Cincinnati's intellectual elite were far more sophisticated than the Lynds' average Munsonians were willing or able to admit, there is much about the Middletown spirit that would have rung true in antebellum Cincinnati. Aaron found Cincinnati-style Americans to be optimistic, pragmatic, and work-oriented. They distrusted intellectual speculation and preferred practical knowledge. Between the depressions of 1819 and 1837, they were "a relatively prosperous, comfortable, and complacent community."25

From another perspective, Aaron offered a prototype for what political scientist Stephen Elkin calls the "commercial republic," in which consensus about the goal of economic development allows and benefits from vigorous debate about specific means and choices.26 Certainly Aaron's Cincinnati was a wholeheartedly businesslike city in which underlying agreement about the value of economic growth helped to bridge the gaps between ethnic groups and economic classes. His chapter on radicals and reformers finds that few Cincinnatians responded favorably to critics of the established order.

In placing Cincinnati within an ongoing debate about the possibility for community in growing cities, Aaron was engaging a set of questions that have largely been defined within the self-conscious social sciences. In dealing with the issue of the “American character” as manifested in the urban West, he was taking on the dominant historian of the United States during the previous generation. Frederick Jackson Turner, who retired from Harvard in 1924 and died in 1932, had looked to the American frontier to explain the unique genius of the American people. In Turner’s essays, the frontier accounted variously for prosperity, individualism, and democracy. It was the shaping force that unified Americans and made them different from the old peoples of Europe.27

The professional critique of Turner’s overarching vision began in the middle 1920s and promises to continue to spin its way into the next century. As Wirth’s essay has served as a jump-off point in urban sociology, so Turner’s quickly summarized ideas have been an essential reference point for all manner of American historians and history. By the beginning of the 1940s, however, critics had developed two major themes. Carter Goodrich, Sol Davison, and Fred Shannon attacked Turner’s specific assertion that the frontier acted as a “safety valve” for eastern workers and thereby eased the pressures of eastern industrialization. Their argument was supplemented by Clarence Danhof’s demonstration that few eastern workers could find the capital to relocate as western farmers. A more sweeping attack focused on Turner’s idea that the western frontier had shaped the nation’s democratic institutions or traits of character. Prominent in this critique were articles by Benjamin F. Wright, Jr., and by George W. Pierson, who drew from his own work on the ideas of Alexis de Tocqueville to emphasize mobility and cooperation as American traits.28

Aaron’s study is part of this second critique. He certainly found nothing


very Turnerian about the West that he examined—the streets, alleys, theaters, drawing rooms, and council chambers of booming Cincinnati. His explicitly contra-Turnerian argument was that “westerners” in the early nineteenth century—that is, Cincinnatians between 1819 and 1838—were essentially like other Americans. Their values, institutions, and behavior were typical of urban Americans everywhere and frequently reminded visitors of Boston or Philadelphia. Aaron rejected distinctions between Cincinnatians and Americans from other sections of the country as “arbitrary and capricious.”

In seeking the universals in the Cincinnati experience, Aaron was anticipating a wave of concern for the national character that climaxèd in the 1950s with the creative and highly influential work of Daniel Boorstin, David Potter, and Louis Hartz. In very different ways, each of these scholars agreed that Americans were different from Europeans, but that Americans both east and west of the Appalachians shared a common set of traits and values. During the last twenty years, however, the enterprise of tapping the national character has remained most popular among sociologists. The best-selling Habits of the Heart, for example, is essentially a conservative Tocquevillian analysis updated with the survey and interview methods and social-psychological language of the 1980s.

Historians in the United States, in contrast, have largely abandoned the search for a national character as a hopeless cause. Many try instead to capture and describe the shared values of subgroups—artisans, women, textile mill workers, southerners, shoemakers, African-Americans. Tracing their roots to the work of English historian E. P. Thompson and to efforts to transform labor history into working-class history, such studies assume a complex and divided community whose citizens give greater allegiance to groups than to the whole. Jed Dannelsbaum’s study of the Cincinnati temperance movement and Steven Ross’s study of the city’s industrial workers see the 1840s as the start of a new era of social division and conflict.

Dealing with the presumably simpler era of the 1820s and 1830s, how-

ever, Aaron was willing to make an overall assessment of the “public charac-
ter” of Cincinnati. Most importantly, he found that Cincinnatians shared the
same world of ideas with New Yorkers and Philadelphians. In effect, he pro-
vided substance for Tocqueville’s assertion that on even the farthest frontier,
the American was connected fully to civilization:

All his surroundings are primitive and wild, but he is the product of eight-
een centuries of labor and experience. He wears the clothes and talks the
language of a town; he is aware of the past, curious about the future, and
ready to argue about the present; he is a very civilized man prepared for a
time to face life in the forest, plunging into the wilderness of the new
World with his Bible, ax, and newspapers. It is hard to imagine quite how
incredibly quickly ideas circulate in these empty spaces.  

The free flow of ideas and information across the Alleghenies has become
an important topic for historical analysis. Writers like geographer Allan Pred
have explored the technology and institutional organization of information
exchange, emphasizing the shrinking of communication lags and the central-
ization of information in large cities. David Hamer has recently agreed with
Tocqueville in emphasizing the “invisible luggage” of ideas that shaped
towns in the American West and other new societies. Robert Vitz has de-
scribed the vigor of cultural life in early Cincinnati as nurtured by traveling
musicians, actors, and lecturers making the circuit of western cities. His pic-
ture is one of continual contact between East and West, with Cincinnati part
of a single information system rather than an isolated frontier outpost. Edi-
tors and writers were anxious to emulate Philadelphia, visual artists to exhibit
in the East, and German-born musicians to recreate the sounds of European
culture. To be the Paris of America, the Athens of the West, or the London
of America was to be measured by the old standards of the Atlantic world
rather than by new standards of the frontier.  

Cincinnati’s most versatile intellectual leader was Daniel Drake, a physi-
cian, scientist, city booster, and builder of civic institutions whose work
earned him election to the leading scientific societies of the nation. As Henry
Shapiro has noted, one of the goals of his intensely active career was to “re-

32. Tocqueville, Democracy in America, 303.
33. Allan Pred, Urban Growth and the Circulation of Information: The United States System of
Cities, 1790–1840 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973); David Hamer, New
Towns in the New World: Images and Perceptions of the Nineteenth Century Urban Frontier (New York:
Columbia University Press, 1990); Vitz, Queen of the Arts.
produce the civilization of the East in the West” and demonstrate “the feasibility of establishing the agencies of sophisticated life on the frontier.” Both as a scientist and city builder, he believed fervently in the future prospects of Cincinnati and in the need to develop western cities as the social and cultural anchors for the emerging region. Although he studied the natural history of the West and argued for a western literature, he judged his success by contributions to the progress of the nation rather than the region.34

Aaron’s study also pointed out the frequent interactions among Cincinnati’s commercial elite and their counterparts in the East and South. The city’s position as the chief river port made it a stopping point for easterners on their way to winter in the South and for southerners seeking respite from the steamy Gulf states in the slightly less humid spas of the Ohio Valley. The city’s “commercial aristocracy” copied the values and behaviors of the Northeast and went to church to hear the sermons of easterners like Lyman Beecher. As Richard Wade has noted, the high society of western towns by the 1820s reminded most visitors of the refined cities of the Northeast.35

In his comparative study of Cincinnati and four other Ohio Valley cities between 1790 and 1830, Wade also made the much broader point that western city-makers drew their image of the city from the metropolitan centers of the North Atlantic coast. They hoped to emulate New York, Boston, and especially Philadelphia. They copied social institutions, public services, and even their street plans and street names. In the same way that New York and Philadelphia looked to London as a model of the successful city, so the struggling towns of the Middle West sent their emissaries to consult the urban experts east of the Alleghenies. David Hamer has likewise commented on the extent to which new cities imitated and judged themselves against the old.36

Continuities between East and West are central to Earl Pomeroy’s interpretation of the American West as a socially and institutionally conservative region. Writing in the same decade as Wade, he argued that “colonials” are particularly concerned to reproduce the society of their homeland. He cited as examples the conservatism of western state constitutions and the tendency

35. Wade, Urban Frontier, 207.
for western Americans to band together to solve community problems. Because they were on the lookout for local color to enliven their accounts, most European visitors missed such bonds of culture and community—the bonds that Aaron emphasized in Cincinnati. "Conservatism, inheritance, and continuity bulked at least as large in the history of the West as radicalism and environment," wrote Pomeroy. "The Westerner has been fundamentally imitator rather than innovator."37

What final lessons did Aaron himself draw from his detailed description of a city a century in his past? There was a quick bow to Turner but a far more serious reference to Tocqueville's idea that Cincinnati epitomized the new American nation, quoting that visitor's comment that "all that is of good or of bad in American society is to be found there in such strong relief, that one would be tempted to call it one of those books printed in large letters for teaching children to read." Continuing with his own gloss on Tocqueville, Aaron wrote that "if Cincinnati was a kind of an American primer, a broad caricature of the nation (and I think this is an accurate analogy), the character of its citizens should not be delineated in terms usually reserved for western people. Geographically and culturally Cincinnati symbolized America."38

That city and that America, the study concludes, were as much refined as they were raw, settled as they were unsettled. Cincinnati offered social fluidity, but it also offered conservatism, sobriety, and reverence for established institutions. It was a city of social distinctions. Its business and professional classes were attached to conventional usages. Like Muncie a century later, it was a city whose leaders were happy with the sort of community they had under construction and determined to keep it that way. To paraphrase the author, Cincinnati was not so much a western or southern or eastern city as it was a "commercial" city that viewed economic vitality and quality of life as inextricably linked.39 A century and a half after the period that Aaron studies, that characterization still applies. Cincinnati remains an American city—boosterish but businesslike, satisfied but civic-minded.

Carl Abbott
Portland State University

38. Aaron, Cincinnati, 318.
39. Aaron, Cincinnati, 320.
Preface

It's hard to recall after a lapse of fifty years how this study of Cincinnati got started. Probably Professor Howard Mumford Jones was inadvertently responsible. I had just enrolled in the newly established American Civilization program at Harvard University and was looking around for a congenial dissertation subject, one that would invite interdisciplinary experimentation. "Alas, I know not what the formal scheme of the degree in American culture may be," Jones wrote to me in the summer of 1936, but he did suggest some questions that he felt needed answers. One of them had to do with "the study of the inter-action of indigenous seaboard and European elements in the Ohio Valley region in the 1830's and 1840's," a topic that would perforce touch on "the coming in of schools and lyceums, architecture and painting, and the introduction of religion and politics in that region."

During the next two years, I studied American history, literature, political theory, religion, and education in preparation for general examinations, and once they were behind me, I turned to the doctoral thesis. But by this time (1939), my initial plan to write a cultural history of the Ohio Valley had died aborning. I found no way to confine and order its swelling dimensions. Moreover, preliminary investigations had convinced me that in the second and third decades of the nineteenth century, all roads seemed to point to Cincinnati, the economic and cultural center of the Ohio Valley where Americans from the middle states, New England, and the South commingled with immigrants from northern Europe and the British Isles. Cincinnati had come to represent for me the flux and flow of the Ohio Valley in microcosm.

The story of its rapid exfoliation from frontier outpost to thriving commercial center was sufficient in itself, but I also had ulterior objectives. Steeped in Tocqueville's Democracy in America, my bible for the past several years, it occurred to me that a study of the values and attitudes of the Cincinnatians might offer a test of his generalizations about American character and institutions. Tocqueville had spent a few days in Cincinnati
and talked to some of its leading citizens (this I learned from *Beaumont and Tocqueville in America* by the Yale historian George W. Pierson), and I had become fascinated by the degree to which the acts and thoughts of my Cincinnatians appeared to dramatize his generalizations about American society as a whole. In fact, my dissertation to a degree might be read as a set of variations on themes of Tocqueville.

*Democracy in America* also reinforced my belief—one not emphasized at this time—that Frederick Jackson Turner’s much-debated “frontier hypothesis” failed to distinguish adequately the urban from the rural West. The national characteristics he attributed to the westward advance—“coarseness and strength, acuteness, inventiveness, restless energy, the masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends”—were exhibited, it seemed to me, by people who had come directly to Cincinnati from urban areas in the East without undergoing the rigors of the frontier experience. And given my left-of-center opinions, I suspect Turner’s random comments on the frontier and the shaping of the national consciousness did not sufficiently emphasize to my satisfaction the role of cooperation and mutual aid in the development of American institutional life.

“Knowledge for what?” That was an important question for many of us in the Depression decade when liberal academics were calling for a scholarship that illuminated current social issues. When I started on my project, I had no strong antiquarian interest in Cincinnati per se or its past. I might just as well have chosen Chicago, as Professor Jones had first suggested I do, or Louisville or St. Louis. But I had a great desire to locate in American social history the roots of a national radical tradition. Hence I found the books and articles of class-conscious progressive historians like Charles Beard and Carl Becker (I discussed my thesis plan with the latter on one memorable afternoon), and, above all, Vernon L. Parrington’s *Main Currents in American Thought*, especially apposite for my purposes. Their ideas and presuppositions are detectable in the dissertation, and so is the watered-down and hardly perceptible Marxist strain diffused in the narrative movement from the “material basis” of the society to its “superstructure.”

Gradual immersion in the story of Cincinnati and its people diluted my ideological vagaries. If I had any model, it was Robert and Helen Lynd’s *Middletown* (1929), a sociological study of Muncie, Indiana, that categorized and analyzed the values and attitudes of its citizens and described how they made their livings, organized their home lives, trained their young, used their leisure time, and engaged in religious practices and civic activities. I thought
it might be possible to do the equivalent for a community that had flourished a century earlier.

Needless to say, this was a rash assumption. The Lynds and their team of investigators had merged into the Muncie scene, made in-depth studies of families, sent out questionnaires, and conducted interviews with a sizable cross section of the population. My primary sources, on the other hand, were confined pretty much to the records of the past—chiefly newspapers, magazines, and sundry other contemporary publications together with the accounts of travelers, diarists, and letter writers. These I read intensively and out of them formulated the questions they provoked. How did the city contend with its problems? Who were its managers and opinion makers? What did the consensus seem to be on a variety of economic, political, and cultural issues? Because I lacked the skills of the social scientist—most notably a knowledge of statistics—my answers were largely based upon unsystematic samplings. For example, the attitudes of the “Cincinnatians” I kept referring to tended to be extrapolations from the written words of their alleged articulators. I did manage, however, to create at least a simulacrum of the social order by singling out nearly two hundred prominent citizens and indicating their place of origin, denominational affiliation, business, profession, or occupation, and degree of involvement in city affairs.

To gather this and other kinds of information and write the dissertation while teaching full time took me four years. I spent two very hot summers in 1939 and 1940 working in the library of the Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio (now the Cincinnati Historical Society) and the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County, neither of them air-conditioned. The librarians were enormously kind and helpful (here I offer belated thanks to Eleanor S. Wilby of the first and Alice S. Plaut of the second, both outstandingly able women), and so were a number of Cincinnati friends whose hospitality I shamelessly enjoyed. Thanks to them I survived the tropical ordeals of the Queen City and completed my research.

The finished thesis was accepted without a request for revision and without enthusiasm by my faculty readers, one of whom must have regarded it as an object lesson of what can happen when disciplinary boundaries are willfully transgressed. There is no need to list what I think in retrospect are its principal faults in substance and style, or to point out that I used terms and locutions current at the time (“he” for both sexes, references to “blacks,” “Negroes,” and “Indians”) and not as yet deemed offensive.

Still, in partial defense of my junior self, I must confess that I read the
dissertation again after a hiatus of a half-century with as much qualified pleasure as anxious attention. It is full of pertinent and lively quotations, both in the text and footnotes, and catches, I think, something of antebellum Cincinnati's bumptious vitality. In any event, I feel an affection for my first major scholarly effort despite its manifold imperfections and am not sorry that it has been disinterred.