One of the less-fortunate legacies of the Turner school of history has been the accumulation of a hackneyed and inexact vocabulary describing that nebulous area, "the West." Terms and phrases which perhaps for Turner had an explicit meaning have become threadbare with use. These clichés have no precise references in a semantic sense, and they also help to sustain the conception of a vague wilderness peopled by a collection of "pioneers" or "frontiersmen" responding automatically to political, social, and economic situations. These pioneers are endowed with individualism, enterprise, egalitarianism, self-confidence, and a variety of other absolutes. When they are not "carving homes out of a wilderness," they are dreaming of continental conquests, and their actions are determined by a set of "ideals."  

Actually, the most objective historian who uses such jargon exploits the exotic and romantic connotations of his readers rather than conveys any clear designations. He may be referring to a Louisville grocer and his reader will think of Daniel Boone.

Because historians tend to perpetuate this folklore, much confusion has resulted and some important distinctions have been overlooked. What, for instance, is meant precisely by the words "frontier" and "West"? The word "frontier" may mean a fringe of settlement, or it may be vaguely used in an adjectival sense as a "frontier" college or a "frontier" period. At other times it is synonymous with "distant" or "early"; it may even represent a state of

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mind. Increasingly, since Turner’s first essay, it has been applied in a metaphorical sense, as a symbol of advance or progress, the line which separates the civilized and conquered from the potentially exploitable. One reads of the “spiritual frontier,” the El Dorado lying beyond our unsolved contemporary problems, and the new frontier spirit which seems to embody efficiency, originality, and courage. A. B. Hulbert even finds this frontier spirit in Jesus Christ. With this superstructure of metaphor, it is no wonder that the poetical implications of the word have overshadowed its actual meanings.

The fact that the expression “the West” has also been habitually understood in an absolute or categorical sense partly explains why we have overlooked or minimized the immensely important differences between the rural West and the urban West and why we have usually failed to consider the westerner in terms of his locus, class, or occupation. Doubtless it would be unfair to blame Turner for this confusion. He was reacting against the Sparkes, the Parkmans, the Bancrofts, the provincialism of H. B. Adams, and he had, to be sure, his own meaning for “frontier” and “the West.” But in emphasizing sectional differences, he underestimated the complexities and stratifications of society within the section and implied a homogeneity which was nonexistent.

What sort of person was this “westerner” living, let us say, during the first forty years of the nineteenth century? Was he a farmer, a river boatman, an auctioneer, a mechanic, a doctor, a gambler, a lawyer, an editor, a minister, a horse thief, a broker, a grocer, a schoolteacher, an artist, or a patent medicine dealer? The westerner might have lived in Pittsburgh, Wheeling, or Nashville; in the rural districts of Hamilton County, Ohio; in the struggling village of Cleveland; in Louisville or Lexington. If he was a mechanic, perhaps he earned $1.25 a day. If he was an early settler of Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, or Louisville, he might have made as much as $3,000 in a single real estate transaction.

3. Such a meaning is implied in P. O. Jordan’s “Humor of the Backwoods, 1820–1840,” Mississippi Valley Historical Review XXV (June 1938): 26; and in Lucy Hazard’s The Frontier in American Literature (New York, 1927), xvii. Miss Hazard, who writes very loosely about the “frontier,” attributes the vagueness of her terminology to “the very shifting nature of the frontier.” In other words, because the “frontier” is an abstract concept, one has to be abstract in describing it.


5. For the most complete and incisive discussion of Turner’s use of these terms, see G. W. Pierson, “The Frontier and Frontiersman of Turner’s Essays,” Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography LXIV (1940): 454–65. This introduction, however, was written before the appearance of Pierson’s article.
In this period, an Ohioan could have raided a colony of Shakers, burned a Negro shanty, given an expensive ball, worshipped in a Presbyterian church, attended a corn husking, carved a statue, voted for Andrew Jackson or John Quincy Adams, and destroyed a printing press. And some of the implied differences, class and occupational, were evident in the earliest period of the state's history—even during the days when Ohio was "the West" in Turner's sense of the word. Clearly, then, easy generalizations about western society are hardly justifiable in the light of this complexity. Studies of western urban communities during the first four decades of the nineteenth century should, I think, modify many stock conclusions about the West and its culture and perhaps dispel some illusions of the romantically minded.

What are some of these suppositions which contribute to the legend of the West? One of them I should like to examine briefly has reference to western economic conditions, the other to western character.

The pre-Civil War West (and here I am referring particularly to the Ohio Valley) has frequently been pictured as a kind of paradise where the industrious could always make a living and where the material necessities, if coarse, were cheap and ample. Here the gospel of individualism, of laissez-faire, was justified by surrounding physical conditions. Here the prudent, frugal, persevering, and honest worker was certain of modest if not breath-taking success.

But while these ideal conditions unquestionably obtained to a greater degree during this era than they did after the American factory system had begun to flower, one is justified in objecting to those writers who nostalgically look back to the days before the "rise of the city" and the centralization of industry when business was truly competitive, absentee ownership negligible, and life uncomplicated. It is not my purpose to paint a grim picture of western society and to criticize frontier philosophy, a crusade first undertaken by Cotton Mather and Timothy Dwight and more recently carried on by James Truslow Adams, but it can be pointed out that the characteristics usually attributed to later industrial society were evident in the urban West as well as in most American cities before the rise of the full-blown factory system.

Steamboats, factories, cotton mills, rope walks, slaughter-houses, and brickyards fail to harmonize with the conventional picture of pioneer life in the Ohio Valley, it is true; consequently, we have relegated such unwestern-like details to the economic history books rather than forsake the cherished notion of an exclusively agrarian culture. The most common conception runs
as follows: The “Old West” is originally settled by “scattered self-sufficing individuals or families”\textsuperscript{6} living in primitive surroundings for about twenty-five years. During this time the settler sloughs off his old self, modifies the habits and attitudes of his older environment, and develops a new set of frontier qualities. As the fringe of the settlement moves westward, what was formerly “the West” reaches the second stage of its civilization. However, while the period of the “home market,” the pioneer era, is over and diversified agriculture and manufacturing become important, frontier folkways remain to color and influence the culture of the “Old West.” A section has been formed, a geographical unit composed of like-minded citizens, and these westerners are more democratic and enterprising and less terrified by innovation than their eastern countrymen.

Such a description of the westward movement, dramatic and not entirely incorrect, is certainly oversimplified. Ohio’s manufactured products were not insignificant a year before the Indians were finally removed (1794). If one turns to the early issues of \textit{Niles’ Weekly Register} (circa 1811–19) and reads prosaic articles about manufacturing west of the Alleghenies, Ohio, Illinois, and Missouri do not seem as wild or remote as they have since been considered. In 1823, a writer in the same magazine gloated that the wilderness was conquered, “the busy hum of machinery” having succeeded “the whoop of the wild inhabitants of the woods.”\textsuperscript{7} However, the “whoop” of the frontier or the West is still more audible than the hum of machinery. Forest and farm and river are the recurrent themes rather than the grocery store, auction room, or temperance meeting. The city-dweller comes into the picture at a later date, “the Second Stage,” and he is casually introduced when the historian devotes a perfunctory few pages to the rise and culture of western cities.

That the early-nineteenth-century western cities, those urban islands in a sea of wilderness, have not received such attention or study until fairly recently is not surprising. As late as 1860 the percentage of the American population living in towns of two thousand or more was still very small, and urban centers were even less evident in the West. What is important, however, is not the relatively insignificant numbers living in towns during the early decades of the nineteenth century. We must consider the town’s importance and influence (frequently far greater than its size would warrant) and recognize the fundamental difference between, let us say, the mechanic in

\textsuperscript{6} Avery Craven, in D. R. Fox, ed., \textit{Sources of Culture in the Middle West} (New York, 1934), 48.

\textsuperscript{7} \textit{Niles’ Weekly Register} XXIV (1823): 71.
Cincinnati and the farmer in the Miami Valley. Simply to view the town as a hit-or-miss phenomenon produced by a converging of “pioneers” on a strategic site, or as just another outgrowth of frontier conditions, is to misconceive profoundly the origins and significance of the “city in the wilderness.”

Carl Bridenbaugh’s 1938 study,\(^8\) while concerned with the origins and early growth of five seaboard towns, contains stimulating and provocative suggestions for the historian of the urban West. Arguing that the story of American life has usually been told as “a compound of sectional histories,” Bridenbaugh points out the necessity of differentiating between the rural and the urban Tidewater and shows how urban culture, determined by unique circumstances, produced a type of townsman contrasting sharply with his rural counterpart. Settled by city-dwellers, these seaboard towns, “primarily commercial communities seeking treasures by foreign trade,” never underwent the “frontier experience” in the Turner sense of the phrase. City ideals were never the frontier ideals, and while the city might exploit the rich hinterlands, it never adopted the frontier *Weltanschauung*. Bridenbaugh’s conclusions about the complexity of Tidewater society, the sharp dichotomy he sees between the urban community and the backcountry, should help the historian of the West. Was not the founding of Cincinnati, as that priest of rough, tough, Anglo-Saxon individualism, Theodore Roosevelt, described it, “a triumph of collectivism rather than individualism,” the settlers “marshalled in a company, instead of moving freely by themselves”? Was not this “territory granted to them by Congress, under certain conditions, and defended for them by the officers and troops of the regular army”?\(^9\) Was it not a “primarily commercial community,” exploiting the rich Miami Valley precisely in the same fashion as European and eastern capital exploited its merchants and bankers?

Only by examining a community like Cincinnati in detail can we fully come to understand the phrase “the urban West,” and thus correct the bias of those historians who have followed the nineteenth-century commentators in setting the “brawling” West against the “effete” East, and who have overlooked the close cultural and intellectual relationships between the urban centers of the seaboard and the trans-Allegheny West. These writers are no less provincial than the ebullient New England reformers, men like James

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Freeman Clark, W. H. Channing, and C. P. Cranch, who imagined the Middle West in the 1830s as a grand and fearful wilderness. Dr. Lyman Beecher, in accepting a call to Cincinnati, may have thought he was going to a frontier outpost, but we have ample evidence that his future parishioners hardly regarded their city as such. Indeed, as early as the 1820s many Cincinnati citizens resembled Philadelphians or Bostonians more closely than they did the farmers in the neighboring counties—and rejoiced in the fact. Cincinnati, bustling and gay, early attracted clever and ambitious men with its schools, theaters, art galleries, libraries, churches, reform agencies, public buildings, amusements, and social life. And yet for many years it remained a kind of oasis. “Although this flourishing city now presents many of the comforts and ornaments of refined and intelligent society,” a Cincinnatian wrote in 1823, “and the neighboring hills and plains look green with many products of industry and art—yet a few miles distant, may be discovered all the crude & rustic scenery of the most recent settlements.”

Men and women in this so-called assertive and unconventional western city had eyes cocked toward the East; aped eastern manners, culture, and ideas; and were keenly sensitive to any criticism which suggested an absence of gentility and decorum.

The cause of this inter-city “togetherness” may be discovered, first, I think, among the western urban settlers themselves, men and women from other sections who brought with them urban interests never seriously modified by the “frontier.” It was natural that people accustomed to benefit associations, singing societies, museums, and circuses should still want to enjoy them. It was not surprising that for the sake of fashion women exchanged their flannel petticoats and bombazine dresses for cambric dimities and jacoset muslins and gave up their worsted stockings for silk or cotton hose. Before Cincinnati was twenty-five years old it had taken on most of the characteristics of an important urban center and was known for its “polished” and “wealthy” inhabitants. Ministers and schoolteachers, young law school graduates, merchants dazzled by the prospects of high prices and cheap land, and mechanics fed up with the uncertainty of employment and low wages emigrated from eastern cities to Cincinnati and other western

10. Liberty Hall and Cincinnati Gazette, May 9, 1823.
11. In 1816, a discontented actor could sneer at Cincinnati’s “twenty sermons a week—Sunday evening Discourses on Theology—Private Assemblies—Stated Cotton Party—Saturday Night clubs, and Chemical lectures—which, like the ague, return every third day with distressing regularity.” LHCG, Dec. 9, 1816.
communities. This infiltration made them more heterogeneous; it lessened the differences between the citizens of Boston, Philadelphia, or Baltimore and the citizen of the western town. Meanwhile, the development of transportation facilities aided in breaking down sectional isolation.

The question of communication is an important one. Accounts of transportation in the early days of the republic usually emphasize the slowness of travel, the difficulty of transmitting news. It is easy, however, to exaggerate the effects of physical obstacles in preventing quick dissemination of information. River towns in the West like Cincinnati, which was a stopping-off place for travelers almost from its origin, were never so remote from commercial and cultural centers as was the backcountry, and with the coming of the steamboat, canals, and new road systems, intersectional travel was accelerated. By 1818, Cincinnati had a newspaper exchange (a familiar institution in commercial communities) "furnished with the most respectable news and literary Journals in the country," and with maps and European gazettes. In 1828 the Reading Room subscribed to sixty different papers from all over the country. Fads and fashions, literary gossip, books, and new ideas sooner or later reached the western town. The majority of its avid newspaper- or magazine-reading citizenry, as the perennial complaints of western editors can testify, preferred eastern periodicals to those of their own section. Indeed, the Cincinnati merchant or lawyer transplanted to Boston would have felt only slightly out of place, even less out of place in Philadelphia. His politics and his religion, his tastes and aversions were not materially different from those of his eastern countrymen.

I have chosen Cincinnati as a subject for my investigations not because of its uniqueness or its cultural pretensions (although much could be said about these things), but rather because I see Cincinnati as a good example of the urban West, a typical mercantile community, favored by its location and natural resources, changing swiftly during its first fifty years from a small village to the largest and most flourishing entrepôt in the Ohio Valley. West of the Alleghenies, only New Orleans exceeded the Queen City in size during the period under discussion (1819–38), and no other western city could rival its cultural facilities. Its citizens, to be sure, were probably no more enterprising, public-spirited, acquisitive or cultural-minded than their contemporaries in Lexington, Louisville, Pittsburgh, or Nashville. However, a combination of fortunate circumstances favored the accumulation of capital, and a strategic location made it a convenient receiver and purveyor of either
pork or culture. As a border city, Cincinnati reflected both southern and northern characteristics; and with the influx of English, Irish, and German immigrants, it soon acquired a polyglot atmosphere which drew the attention of critics who periodically praised or damned this western Eden. No other western city, then, seems to me more appropriate than Cincinnati for the kind of story I envisage.

In restricting most of my discussion of Cincinnati to the years between 1819 and 1838 I have tried to fix a period which would be long enough to give a sufficient perspective and, at the same time, remain manageable. Although Cincinnati was founded in 1788, these dates are not so arbitrary as they may at first seem to be. The year of a major economic crisis in America, a year that marks Cincinnati's incorporation as a city, 1819 may with justification be considered the eve "of a new era in the economic evolution of the United States."\(^{12}\) The next twenty years saw the expansion of the American domestic market, increased speculation in western lands, and improved forms of inter-regional communication—all of which profoundly affected the development of Cincinnati. Between 1819 and 1838, Cincinnati went through a transition stage. She emerged on her fiftieth birthday with all her basic industries and institutions firmly established. The year 1819 is also a convenient date, as we shall see, to mark the beginning of Cincinnati's cultural coming-of-age. Schools, museums, and theaters sprang to life as steamboat production got under way; in the nineteen years studied, this city of almost 10,000 people was transformed into a metropolis of some 28,000.\(^{13}\) After 1838, with the heavy immigration of Germans, the city passed into a more mature stage, economically and intellectually, and grew enormously. But this is not my concern. My story ends while Cincinnati was still the city of Mrs. Trollope, still provincial and bumptious, yet already typical of the mercantile American community.

Throughout this study, I discuss the period between 1819 and 1838, for the most part, as a unit. I make little effort to distinguish the two decades except when I am tracing the rise of a particular institution or movement.

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13. Exact population figures for every year are difficult to compile. Newspaper estimates and the data appearing in the city directories are none too accurate, and the reports of travelers are even less reliable. In 1795, the population was about 500; in 1819 about 10,000; in 1831, roughly 26,000 or 27,000, and by 1838, anywhere from 36,000 to 40,000. One can never be sure when these estimates include outlying sections within five miles of the city proper. However, the population did expand rapidly between 1838 and 1840. In the latter year, a reliable authority placed it at 46,338.
After having studied these nineteen years rather intensively, I believe that while the city was transformed in a physical sense, that is, in terms of its population and size, the general attitudes of the people and the character of their institutions changed very little. When it has been important to distinguish between the twenties and the thirties, I have always tried to do so.

Examining Cincinnati in the light of the conventional suppositions about western society, I have not attempted to deal with every event that occurred between 1819 and 1838. My method has been selective rather than exhaustive. Although irrelevant information has undoubtedly slipped in (for the temptation is great to include the curious for its own sake), I have at least tried to distinguish between the unique and the common and to recognize the similarities between Cincinnati and other localities. Recitals of names and dates, lists of schools and curricula, and short biographies of local celebrities can only have a limited appeal. I have reduced this kind of detail to a minimum. Supplementary information has been relegated to the notes. Finally, although this thesis is a study of a single community, restricted in time and space, I have gone on the assumption that the attitudes and prejudices of the Cincinnati citizens may apply equally well to Americans in general. Although I am primarily concerned about the people of the urban West, I have kept in mind that the world of the Cincinnatian was not bounded by the two Miami rivers.

My problem, then, will be to describe, analyze, and evaluate the life and thought in Cincinnati during its transition time, to study those distinctive forces in the society which determined its character. I shall begin with an examination of the material basis of the society, the economic factors responsible for its origin and growth, and then proceed to discuss the "superstructure"—the emergence of class stratification, the response to municipal problems, the nature of civic and private social activities, intersectional feelings, the function of religion and the church, attitudes toward education and the arts, and popular amusements. In concluding, as a kind of contemporary measuring stick of the society, I shall try to assemble all the dissident opinion concerning the status quo and append a few reflections of my own.

Ideally, I should have preferred this study to be analogous to the work of the Lynds, as a sort of early-nineteenth-century Middletown, but my complete reliance on written records and testimonials prevented any such possibility. Unfortunately for the local historian, his views of a society depend primarily upon the expressions of the articulate classes. He must resort to inference and deduction in interpreting the mind of the working man and
woman, the mechanic and petty tradesman, the poor and the uneducated. Cincinnati’s ruling caste, the business and professional groups with which I shall principally deal, dominated the city’s thought and expression; the lesser orders are referred to, we see them by implication in the press, but they rarely speak. In these pages, therefore, the “Cincinnatian” who participates in the cultural and intellectual life of his city will usually represent the upper middle class rather than a composite of all city types. He will be American or British rather than German or Irish. If not well-to-do, he will nevertheless have all the American middle-class aspirations.

In 1838, the year that closes this study, Benjamin Tappan addressed the Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio. He remarked:

We may also hope to see not merely the history of our steady and rapid increase in population and wealth recorded, but to see it done in the philosophic spirit such history demands; giving to future times the causes of an effect so extraordinary. Such a record will exhibit proof that (if any) this part of the valley of the Mississippi was not settled by mendicant indolence, imbecility, and ignorance; as some eastern elemosinary [sic] projectors would seem to estimate; but by men of very different characters and habits.14

While my story of the Cincinnati town-dwellers is not necessarily intended to vindicate the characters of the early city fathers (I have made no great effort to conceal my biases), I have tried to consider it in that “philosophic spirit such history demands.”