Setting the Scene

That we possess all these advantages and more, I trust no man will doubt or deny. That they ought to insure us boundless prosperity and happiness, is equally clear. No nation ever had a fairer claim; never had any rulers a more glorious opportunity of producing the greatest possible sum of human happiness. If they have fallen, they must bear the undivided censure. They cannot cast the blame off their own shoulders. It now remains to prove that we do not, as a nation, enjoy that happiness—and that great distress and embarrassment generally prevail.

_Niles' Weekly Register_ (1823)

So goes the eternal wail. It began when America was a young and hopeful nation; it continues today with promises unfulfilled and the people skeptical of future glories.

Seven generations ago men wrote of the “national, moral and political advantages of the United States” with the confidence of believers; they were not required to place their faith in distant utopias, in “spiritual frontiers.” Before them lay the gigantic outlines of a continent ripe for exploitation and capable of supplying the wants of its restless and ambitious populations. Momentary crises might ruin particular sections and classes; injured parties might thunder at the politicians for hindering the march of progress, but behind the extravagancies of the optimistic and the complaints of the unsuccessful lay solid gains of an expanding nation.

Contrasted with the gloomy pronouncements of 1941, the national advantages listed by an anonymous writer in 1823 are revealing:

I. We are blest with an extensive seacoast, abundantly provided with capacious ports and harbors, admirably calculated for foreign commerce.

II. Magnificent rivers intersect our country in every direction, and afford the utmost facility for the most lucrative internal trade.
III. We have the advantage of water power to an extent probably not exceeded in the world.
IV. Our territory affords every variety of soil and climate, so as to render us independent of foreign nations as any country whatever.
V. Our stores of the all important articles of coal, iron, lead, copper and timber are inexhaustible.
VI. We have a capacity of raising cotton to supply the demand of the whole world—and actually furnish one half of all that is consumed in Europe and America.
VII. By proper encouragement we might produce wool, hides, skins and silk for our utmost wants.
VIII. Our population is active, industrious, energetic, enterprising and ingenious.
IX. Our government is the most free and liberal that ever existed.
X. The administration of affairs is as inexpensive as that of any nation in the world.
XI. Our debt is insignificant, not equal to the annual interest paid by some other nations.
XII. Taxes are so light as not to be felt.
XIII. We are free from the oppressive burden of tithes, which “grind the faces of the poor” in other nations.
XIV. We have no nobility or gentry, with enormous annual incomes, derived from labors of the mass of the community.
XV. Our farmers and planters are, in general, lords of the soil they cultivate.
XVI. Excellent lands are to be purchased here in fee simple, not only for less than the annual rent, but even for less than the tithes or poor rates paid in many parts of England.
XVII. Our citizens are unrestrained in the choice of occupation.
XVIII. We have abundant room for all the valuable superfluous population of Europe.¹

Here were the prerequisites for a golden age; here was an area set aside by God for heavenly experiments. Is it any wonder that American philosophers during the decades following 1820 saw civilization moving westward and contemplated a deteriorating Europe with mingled pity and contempt? One

¹. Niles’ Weekly Register XXV (1823): 165.
writer, noting the kind of mystical impulsion drawing the European to America, expressed it this way:

As the attraction in the material world is ever withdrawing the particles of matter from what is old and affected, and combining them into newer and more beautiful forms; so a moral influence is withdrawing their subjects from the old and worn out governments of Europe and hurrying them across the Atlantic, to participate in the renovated youth of the new republic of the west; an influence which, like that of nature, is universal, and without pause or relaxation.\(^2\)

The American's faith in progress, his utilitarianism, and his scorn for precedent were justified by economics, even if he liked to attribute his country's triumphant march to the magic of democratic institutions.

In 1820 a new era in American economic development began. During the five years following the Peace of Ghent the country had been compelled to readjust to the sudden shrinkage in world markets. The depression of 1818 and 1819 dramatically illustrated that she could no longer enjoy the commercial privileges of a neutral in a warring world. Merchants speculating in commodities were ruined while the declining price of staples, reflected in the lowered incomes of farmers, presaged the exhaustion of bank reserves and the general scarcity of specie. By 1820, however, the nation had reversed itself and faced the potential markets of the frontier. The rapid development of western lands during the next quarter of a century, with its resulting commercial prosperity, can be attributed to a confluence of events deeply affecting the course of our history.

Immigration from abroad helped to accelerate the expansion of western markets while improved communication systems encouraged trans-Appalachian migrations and the inter-sectional flow of commerce. With the prospect of greater national consumption, factories in the New England and North Atlantic states increased their output. Growing eastern populations, in turn, provided an outlet for western produce. European and eastern investors financed internal improvements, and banking resources, however inadequate, grew during this period. It must not be supposed that all these were perfectly synchronized and that national prosperity proceeded as smoothly as Henry Clay promised in presenting his economic program for America. But

2. Ibid., XXXIV (1828): 424.
the theory of the “American system” was roughly approximated during this period. If all sections were not equally satisfied and if certain classes aggrandized themselves at the expense of others, most Americans shared the elated spirit of the times, the feeling of movement and progress.

We need only look at the literature, sermons, speeches, orations, and editorial comment to recognize this sense of destiny in the American people, the awareness of being actors in some divine plan. All was in motion around them, society fluid and ever-changing. Cities burgeoned from squalid settlements in a generation; lands tripled in value as the forest melted away. *Niles’ Weekly Register*, the organ for the commercial interests during these years, printed column after column of glowing items chronicling these astonishing transformations.

The wilderness is conquered, and the busy hum of industry has succeeded the whoop of the wild inhabitants of the woods. By the power of steam, the city of New Orleans seems as if in the neighborhood of the Falls of St. Anthony, and the Saut de St. Marie is about to be within the common range of New-York! The Rocky mountains are as if in view of St. Louis, and St. Louis, that seemed as the uttermost point west, now in free communication with Baltimore, has opened a trade with the internal provinces of Mexico! A settlement at the mouth of the Columbia has been seriously advocated in congress, and will soon be made under the sanction of the government; and, in a few years, we may expect that some persons there, feeling themselves too much crowded, like “Leather Stocking” in the “Pioneers,” will seek a country more west—Japan, perhaps, if good hunting could be expected therein.13

“Even more extraordinary” was Ohio’s progress: “She has out-stripped all calculations, and stands the fourth in representative power.”4 At the time of the Constitutional Convention this territory was a forest wilderness, relieved only by a few miserable settlements. In 1811, after eight years of statehood, Ohioans manufactured two million yards of woolen, flaxen, and cotton cloth, over a million gallons of whiskey, and thousands of pounds of sugar.5 By 1829 Ohio newspapers were commenting upon the tremendous commercial and industrial expansion in the Ohio Valley, especially in the river districts. The immense consumption of foreign goods was being paid

3. Ibid., XXIV (1823): 71.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 1 (1811): 10.
for by the productive industry of the West. The manufacture of steam engines and all the related occupations connected with it furnished employment for thousands. "Indeed," wrote one westerner, "the whole business of steam boat navigation, operates more beneficially than the discovery of mines of the precious metals could possibly operate. It creates an incalculable power of production and reproduction. This creation has given a new face to all the concerns of the country, from PITTSBURGH to NEW-ORLEANS."

The steamboat, becoming commercially practicable on the eve of America's new economic age, provided a fitting symbol for the period preceding the Civil War. This was the age of steam. The steamboat seemed providentially designed for America's magnificent waterways, enabling the enterprising to tap the rich bottom lands of the West and connecting hitherto isolated sections. It captured the imaginations of the western people and colored their phrases, metaphors, and allusions. If it were "fitted up with a glaring of splendor and display, perhaps not always in the best taste," it seemed "peculiarly calculated to captivate and dazzle the youthful eye," and this was appropriate for a young materialistic people who mixed their romanticism and realism. We can understand the emotions of the western correspondent who asked that his "true love" might take after the champion then plying the Ohio waters—"true built' and modelled somewhat after the same style."

No people in America viewed the improvement of steam navigation with more "complacency and delight" than the citizens of Cincinnati. If Bostonsians enshrined the codfish in their Statehouse, Cincinnatians with equal propriety could deify the steamboat. Without it Cincinnati would not have been the stopping-off place for thousands of travelers and immigrants; she would have been deprived of one of her chief industries; she could not have claimed the title of the "Western Emporium," the "Queen City," the commercial metropolis of the Ohio Valley.

From its earliest days, according to one of its citizens, this phenomenal city had been "the subject of many descriptions and much astonishment; not,

8. Timothy Flint, *A Condensed Biography and History of the Western States, or the Mississippi Valley* (Cincinnati, 1828), 214.
indeed, without cause; for, St. Petersburgh did not rise from the marshes of the Neva, nor scarcely the gorgeous palaces of fairy land from the touch of the magician, with more rapidity, strength, or beauty than this monument of enterprise and freedom from the banks of La Belle Rivière.” Part of the original Symmes purchase, the site for Cincinnati had been bought from the proprietor in 1788 by a New Jersey land speculator who subsequently went into partnership with an Indian fighter and a schoolmaster. In January of the following year, lots were drawn by the first thirty inhabitants who then erected log cabins and two or three farm houses. Forty-three years later, some parts of the city's 640 acres originally selling for forty dollars were worth thirty dollars an inch. The population had jumped to roughly 38,000. Old pioneers recording reminiscences in the newspapers during the twenties and thirties marveled at the alterations and philosophized on the dynamic progress of the Queen City. Complacent citizens hearing Edward Everett expatiating on the significance of these developments in 1829 knew exactly what he meant:

We learn from this contrast, that the growth of your western country is not merely the progress of the citizens, in a numerical multiplication. It is civilization personified and embodied, going forth to take possession of the land. It is the PRINCIPLE of our institutions, advancing not so much with the toilsome movements of human agency, but rather like the grand operations of sovereign Providence. It seems urged along its stupendous course, as the earth itself is propelled in its orbit, silent and calm like the moving planet, with a speed we cannot measure;—yet not like that, without a moment to mark its way through the vacant regions of space, but scattering hamlets, and villages, and cities in its path—the abodes of civilized and prosperous millions.  

11. Ibid., Aug. 31, 1833.
12. Namely, Matthias Denman, the original purchaser, and Col. Robert Patterson and Robert Filson, both Kentuckians. The site of Losantiville, as it was first called, proved to be more commercially advantageous than Columbia, the earliest settlement in the Miami Purchase, and Symmes's own at North Bend. The erection of Fort Washington at Losantiville in the summer of 1799 confirmed the vision of the Kentuck speculators, who had recognized the importance of a settlement "at the cross roads of the Ohio River." For the best of the innumerable discussions of Cincinnati's origins, see R. C. Downes, Frontier Ohio, 1788–1803 (Columbus, 1935), 62–63, 79, 114–15. For the most detailed discussion, see C. T. Greve, Centennial History of Cincinnati and Representative Citizens (Chicago, 1904), I, 142–221.
13. CCLG, Jan. 7, 1832.
Thanks to travelers’ accounts, personal records, and periodicals, the miraculous changes occurring during Cincinnati’s first fifty years can be traced with considerable accuracy and detail. The settlement at first was hardly more than a beach bottom consisting of two plains or terraces. The lower plain, a marshy undergrowth fringed with sycamore, cotton trees, and water maples, jutted out into the river. Above it rose the second plain, level and dry, and crested with groves of beech, yellow poplar, and hickory. Causeways of fallen trees connected the two plains, allowing pedestrians to ascend the steep incline to the upper terrace.\textsuperscript{15} The village seemed better suited for the raccoons, opossums, and wildcats which infested it than for human habitation. Yet at the close of its formative period in the late thirties, all the primitive vestiges so lovingly recorded by the pioneer societies and the town historians had disappeared.

The easterner, mingling with the crowds in the Cincinnati streets and observing the handsome buildings, could forget “the nursery slanders about backwoods and boors.” A compactly built city stood where before had been merely another Ohio river clearing. The quay, paved with limestone and extending three hundred yards along the river, was jammed during the busy seasons of the year; drays and wagons of every kind brought passengers and freight to and from the landing where steamboats arrived and departed hourly. Overlooking the lower level of the city stood rows of rectangular blocks of houses, occasionally relieved by the gilded spires of the churches, and a few conspicuous mansions of the rich. Clouds of smoke poured from chimneys of the Queen City’s steam foundries, and behind the city rose the hills, hazy and indistinct, revealing a few houses on their wooded summits. From the Kentucky side one could watch the canal boats approaching on the Miami Canal, a line of silvery water at the bases of the hills, entering the Ohio at the junction of Deer Creek.\textsuperscript{16}

Travelers, gliding along the “rude and forest clad banks of the Ohio,”\textsuperscript{17} thrilled at the sight of the city as they emerged from the forest. After leaving Pittsburgh or Wheeling, they had passed miles of heavily wooded shore flanked by bluffs rising two to three hundred feet above the river edge. They had seen pawpaw, dogwood, buckeye, white maple, tulip, and gum trees growing on the fertile bottom lands. But save for a few scattered villages or

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., Jan. 7, 1832.
\textsuperscript{16} Cincinnati Mirror and Chronicle IV (1834): 33.
\textsuperscript{17} CCLG, Aug. 31, 1833.
cabins which occasionally presented themselves along the undulating shore line, there seemed to be nothing but wilderness. Then the view of Cincinnati suddenly broke upon them, a panorama of houses and factories and churches surrounded by an amphitheater of green hills.

Among the hundreds of visitors who stopped off at Cincinnati almost from the time of its founding to 1838, few recorded unfavorable impressions. The steamboats floating in the port, the charming setting of the hills, the evenly arranged streets, and the trim brick houses seldom failed to surprise anyone who had passed through areas in the secondary stages of cultivation and now discovered a large city flowering in the wilderness.\(^{18}\) The more sordid and less attractive sections already disfiguring the city escaped the notice of most sightseers, but the careful observer in the thirties might have seen the Negro shanties in the west end, the brickyard districts, and the tenements of the poorer folk, where inundation was most likely during the occasional flood periods and where cholera took its greatest toll. Tocqueville, visiting Cincinnati in December 1831, commented on the hugger-mugger growth of the city sprouting without any plan or system: "great buildings, thatched cottages, streets incumbered with debris, houses under construction, no names on the streets, no numbers on the houses, no outward luxury, but the image of industry and labor obvious at every step."\(^{19}\)

Such was the external appearance of Cincinnati in the middle thirties, a town "springing into importance within the memory of comparatively young men." In 1836 a western editor philosophized: "The skeleton of a regularly organized civil society, with all its strong muscles and ligaments is vigorously developed, and those parts are only wanting, which are necessary to give grace and fullness to the outline."\(^{20}\) The Queen City had weathered the calamities of fire, flood, and pestilence. She had suffered from economic depressions, political mismanagement, fraud, and violence; yet in spite of these misfortunes the city had grown and prospered.

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