

AMERICAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

Charles Town, West Virginia

Review: F. J. Turner essay

Historiographical Essay 3

Submitted by

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Hist501: Historiography

June 7, 2022

*The Significance of the Frontier in American History*. By Frederick Jackson Turner. Address delivered at the Forty-First Annual Meeting of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, December 14, 1893. (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 1893). 34 pp.

<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/wu.89069486553>

Turner (1861-1932), an American Historian, put forth the *Frontier* thesis in a seminal essay of American history. He earned his Ph.D. in history from Johns Hopkins University in 1890 and was Professor at Harvard for 12 years. Turner presided as the American Historical Association President in 1910 and received the Pulitzer Prize for History in 1933. His essay was presented in an address on December 14, 1893, at the 41<sup>st</sup> Annual Meeting of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, and his theory became a backbone of American History for most teachers. Likewise, Turner's essay was transposed into many books, theater, movies, and folklore. It was anthologized in Chapter 1 of his book titled *The Frontier in American History* (1921) and published the *Wisconsin Magazine of History* vol. 8, no. 3 (Mar 1925) pp. 255–280 with the same title as his essay. Although, a theory of American *civilization* by Herbert Eugene Bolton (1870-1953) later presented a challenge to the frontier concept. Can there be a combining of the *civilization* transformation processes, with Turner's work of *frontier* framework, that, in retrospect, reveals a *catalyst that facilitated the New World* concerning American history? To assert that America should dismiss its traditional culture belies much of its books, theater, movies, and folklore histories. Although having been challenged, Turner's work on "The Significance of the frontier in American History" is equally valid and complements the broader perspective for American history and its traditional culture.

Turner explains that colonization implanted the knowledge for the continued westward movement on the frontier. With the existence of open land and an abundance of natural

resources, there enabled the advancement of western settlement. Turner's Frontier perspective of American history addresses the social and societal activity of American colonists as he writes,

That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom - these are the traits of the frontier.

Herein, Turner reflects the internal mood, culture, endeavors, customs, and mannerisms. It is in this way that his frontier work is essential to the characteristics and uniqueness of American History.<sup>1</sup>

Herein lies the usefulness of Turner's historical scholarship for today. His *frontier* histories have subsequently stirred controversy, yet neither is there a consensus that discredits his premise. There is a cynical mood for Turner on the internet, as seen in a video by YouTube user The Cynical Historian, titled "The Frontier Thesis - Frederick Jackson Turner and American exceptionalism" at URL: <http://youtu.be/oa5M0B7sb5U>. To embrace the value of Turner's work in connection with newer understandings enables a comprehensive American history. While Turner had many academic accolades to speak of and provided a scholarly perspective, 20<sup>th</sup>-century academics are tending to lean in favor of Bolton's *civilization* perspective of American History. Moreover, there appears to be historical truth to both Turner's and Bolton's hypothesis. Likewise, if the frontier concept is dismissed now as being useless, not in trend, or strictly

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," address, (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 1893), 33. digitized by Google, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/wu.89069486553>

imposing a single different narrative, then those histories can be lost, just as the histories of building the Great Pyramids, Göbekli Tepe, Machu Picchu, or Baalbek. So, the critical aspect here is discerning both perspectives or how they can fit in together. The amalgamation of ideas can be accomplished by using various historiographical methods and particularly the Annaliste and more recent techniques, hence the need for *comprehensive* historiography.<sup>2</sup>

Stephen Tuck writes in *The Historical Journal* article titled *The New American Histories* concerning Bolton's civilization premise for American history, saying it is "the meeting point between savagery and civilization." Likewise, Tuck appropriately points out and sums up that "if there is a single way of characterizing what has happened in our historical writing since the 1950s, it must be, I believe, the rediscovery of complexity in American history." Considering the complexities, the civilization hypothesis in American History has a smart perspective, in as much, the frontier thesis should not be the only method at portraying American History, but neither should its significance be disparaged.<sup>3</sup>

Manifest Destiny of the 1800s was reflected by both government and religion, as seen in the mood of the people. There were economic motivation and a spirit of hope and freedom, on the individual level for opportunity and prosperity in American society. This spirit of hope and freedom, arguably rooted in 1800s American Christianity, made significant proselytization, instilling a religious association and or correlations. While driven economically and by

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<sup>2</sup> Russell M. Magnaghi, *Herbert E. Bolton and the Historiography of the Americas*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), 29, 55-57, 127, ISBN0-313-29895-5  
[https://edisciplinas.usp.br/pluginfile.php/4380049/mod\\_resource/content/1/Herbert%20Bolton%20and%20Historiography%20of%20the%20Americas.pdf](https://edisciplinas.usp.br/pluginfile.php/4380049/mod_resource/content/1/Herbert%20Bolton%20and%20Historiography%20of%20the%20Americas.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Tuck, "The New American Histories," *The Historical Journal* 48, no. 3 (09, 2005): 817, 831, <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy1.apus.edu/docview/194920451?accountid=8289>

population growth, American exceptionalism was also facilitated by the religious influence of hope and freedom in the spirit of the people. Turner points out the religious fervor that attempted to reach the west and advocated research on its missionary and evangelic influences. While much was taking place in American Christianity, known as the Great Awakenings that included frontier revivals, several religious events specifically targeted the frontier as follows:

- 1798 James McGready begins revivals in Logan County, Kentucky; Bishop Asbury begins annual circuits from Maine to Georgia and along the Western frontier
- 1804 Shakers send missionaries to frontier
- 1826 Protestant Society founded to promote Christianity in the American West- Lyman Beecher
- 1828 Lane Seminary founded in Cincinnati to provide clergy for the West
- 1847 Mormon migration to Utah

The government supplied economic motivation in the Homestead Act of 1862. However, the 1862 Homestead Act reflected what the people were already doing for 99 years. Uniquely, the American government reflects the people. As President Abraham Lincoln declared in 1863, this is a government “of the people, by the people, and for the people,” thus reflects the people. Consequently, if one looks closely at what the *ordinary people* were doing, according to the *Annaliste* principle, frontiers were the mood, and individual progress at the personal level was the motivation for migration.<sup>4</sup>

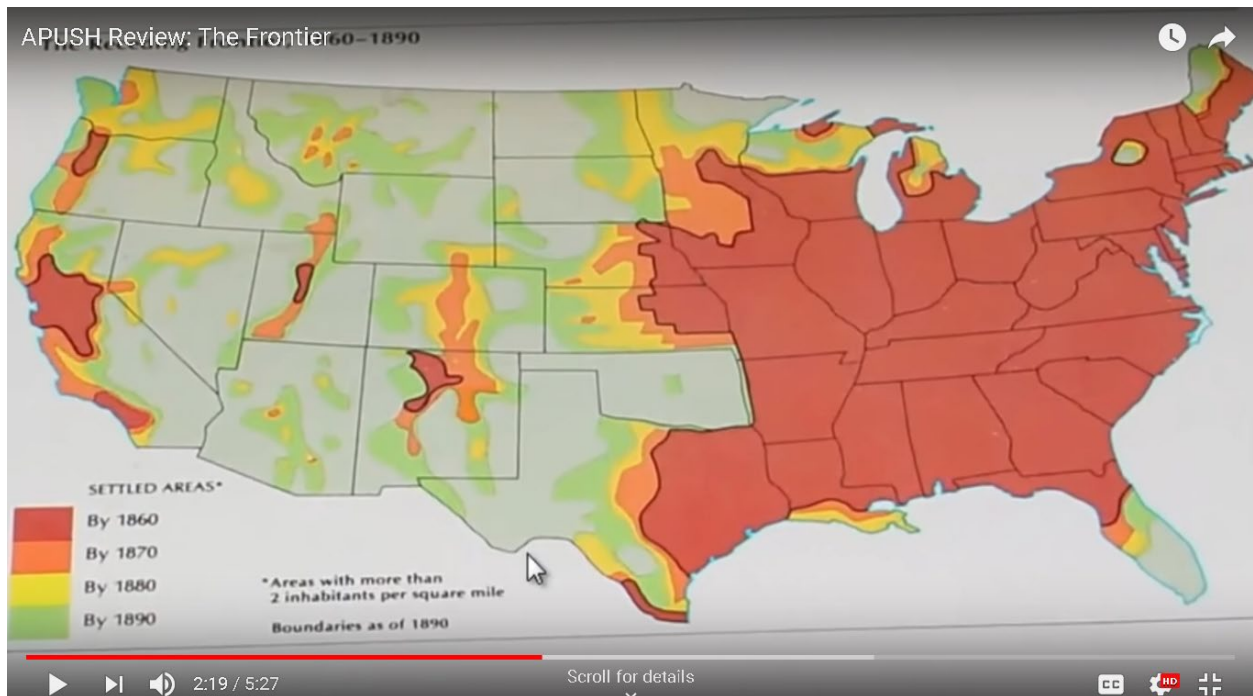
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<sup>4</sup> Ernst Breisach, *Historiography Ancient, Medieval and Modern*, 3rd ed., (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 391-94, ISBN 9780226072838, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/apus/detail.action?docID=448528>; “Homestead Act (1862),” Ourdocuments.gov, <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=31>; Michael E. Brooks, “20th Century Historiographical Trends,” Video Lecture, Bowling Green State University, retrieved from YouTube user Michael E. Brooks at <https://youtu.be/vMmKtXLBcLQ>; “The Gettysburg Address,” Cornell University, [https://rnc.library.cornell.edu/gettysburg/good\\_cause/transcript.htm](https://rnc.library.cornell.edu/gettysburg/good_cause/transcript.htm)

When considering a quantitative study and overlay census maps created in a video lecture by Adam Norris, it shows from 1763 (Appalachian line) through 1862 (Homestead Act, 99 years), in contrast to 1862 (Homestead Act) through 1890 (28 years). The Homestead Act reflected *what the people* were already doing previously and continued to do as seen in Map 1. One can see in Map 2 below that the western dark red pockets of 1860 are correlated to Gold mining in California and New Mexico along with trapping and trading in the north-west, with a Mormon influx in Utah; whereas, from 1870 to 1890 flow was advantageous for agricultural prosperity facilitated by the Homestead act. It should be noted that only *when* and *where* information is depicted; consequently, two weaknesses to these maps are that 1) they neglect to give population data, and 2) they do not make mention of birth rate impact.<sup>5</sup>



<sup>5</sup> Adam Norris, "APUSH Review: The Frontier," Video Lecture. Apushreview.com (High School teacher for Advanced Placement program created by the College Board but not endorsed by the College Board), <http://youtu.be/aq88f8qZbWs>

Map 1.<sup>6</sup>Map 2.<sup>7</sup>

Turner's correlating the first 100 years of colonization with his frontier thesis complements in overlay with Bolton's civilization theory. The development of *civilization* processes is observed along with the impact of the American industrial revolution that began in 1790. Moreover, where Map 2 supports Bolton's thesis is seen in the Los Angeles, San Diego, and California coastal regions.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the subsequent hypothesis of Bolton more appropriately is viewed as a progressive, transformative event on a national level. Whereas, the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Adam Norris, "APUSH Review: The Frontier," Video Lecture. Apushreview.com (High School teacher for Advanced Placement program created by the College Board but not endorsed by the College Board), <http://youtu.be/aq88f8qZbWs>

<sup>8</sup> Michael Ramey, "Turner's Thesis," Video Lecture, retrieved from YouTube user: Michael Ramey, <https://youtu.be/eTtfi7mHKLk>

*frontier* movement can be considered as an overlaying catalyst event that facilitated the *civilization* processes. It appears that when history is written contemporarily, there reveals more significance to the people. Bolton takes a more concrete perspective over what was fluid. However, Turner writes more as a contemporary of the Manifest Destiny period, thus, has an active or dynamic view as he writes concerning American Historiography,

it is in the midst and is itself a part of the changing currents, the complex and interacting influences of the time, deriving its significance as a fact from its relations to the deeper-seated movements of the age, movements so gradual that often only the passing years can reveal the truth about the fact and its right to a place on the historian's page.

In this quote, Turner makes several significant points, 1) the dynamic nature of history playing out, 2) the influences, and 3) the retrospective overview, all have their place in historiography.<sup>9</sup>

In conclusion, American history was not exclusively about frontiers. However, Turner's thesis played a significant role in revealing American culture and folklore; thus, it remains a considerable work worthy of study. It broadens the historical perspective on American history when combined with the more recent historiographical ideas. Accordingly, Turner's essay provides one perspective to a more comprehensive American history.

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<sup>9</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, digitally reprinted by The Project Gutenberg eBook, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1921), 332, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/22994/22994-h/22994-h.htm>



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<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/22994/22994-h/22994-h.htm>
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