

**THE FRONTIER IN
AMERICAN
HISTORY. [1921]**

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The Frontier in American History. [1921] by Frederick Jackson Turner

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BY
FREDERICK JACKSON TURNER



NEW YORK
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1921

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1921

TO
CAROLINE M. TURNER
MY WIFE

PREFACE

In republishing these essays in collected form, it has seemed best to issue them as they were originally printed, with the exception of a few slight corrections of slips in the text and with the omission of occasional duplication of language in the different essays. A considerable part of whatever value they may possess arises from the fact that they are commentaries in different periods on the central theme of the influence of the frontier in American history. Consequently they may have some historical significance as contemporaneous attempts of a student of American history, at successive transitions in our development during the past quarter century to interpret the relations of the present to the past. Grateful acknowledgment is made to the various societies and periodicals which have given permission to reprint the essays.

Various essays dealing with the connection of diplomatic history and the frontier and others stressing the significance of the section, or geographic province, in American history, are not included in the present collection. Neither the French nor the Spanish frontier is within the scope of the volume.

The future alone can disclose how far these interpretations are correct for the age of colonization which came gradually to an end with the disappearance of the frontier and free land. It alone can reveal how much of the courageous, creative American spirit, and how large a part of the historic American ideals are to be carried over into that new age which is replacing the era of free lands and of measurable isolation by consolidated and complex industrial development and by increas-

PREFACE

ing resemblances and connections between the New World and the Old.

But the larger part of what has been distinctive and valuable in America's contribution to the history of the human spirit has been due to this nation's peculiar experience in extending its type of frontier into new regions; and in creating peaceful societies with new ideals in the successive vast and differing geographic provinces which together make up the United States. Directly or indirectly these experiences shaped the life of the Eastern as well as the Western States, and even reacted upon the Old World and influenced the direction of its thought and its progress. This experience has been fundamental in the economic, political and social characteristics of the American people and in their conceptions of their destiny.

Writing at the close of 1796, the French minister to the United States, M. Adet, reported to his government that Jefferson could not be relied on to be devoted to French interests, and he added: "Jefferson, I say, is American, and as such he cannot be sincerely our friend. An American is the born enemy of all European peoples." Obviously erroneous as are these words, there was an element of truth in them. If we would understand this element of truth, we must study the transforming influence of the American wilderness, remote from Europe, and by its resources and its free opportunities affording the conditions under which a new people, with new social and political types and ideals, could arise to play its own part in the world, and to influence Europe.

FREDERICK J. TURNER.

HARVARD UNIVERSITY, March, 1920.

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I

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FRONTIER IN AMERICAN HISTORY¹

In a recent bulletin of the Superintendent of the Census for 1890 appear these significant words: "Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line. In the discussion of its extent, its westward movement, etc., it can not, therefore, any longer have a place in the census reports." This brief official statement marks the closing of a great historic movement. Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.

¹A paper read at the meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago, July 12, 1893. It first appeared in the Proceedings of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, December 14, 1893, with the following note: "The foundation of this paper is my article entitled 'Problems in American History,' which appeared in *The Ægis*, a publication of the students of the University of Wisconsin, November 4, 1892. . . . It is gratifying to find that Professor Woodrow Wilson — whose volume on 'Division and Reunion' in the Epochs of American History Series, has an appreciative estimate of the importance of the West as a factor in American history — accepts some of the views set forth in the papers above mentioned, and enhances their value by his lucid and suggestive treatment of them in his article in *The Forum*, December, 1893, reviewing Goldwin Smith's 'History of the United States.'" The present text is that of the *Report of the American Historical Association for 1893*, 199-227. It was printed with additions in the *Fifth Year Book of the National Herbart Society*, and in various other publications.