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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the article's first paragraph.

When the Census Bureau declared the Frontier closed in 1890, historian Frederick Jackson Turner lamented that the arena in which American character, democracy and uniqueness had been forged was forever lost. His speech, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" cemented the popular belief espoused by Thomas Jefferson and countless others that America was rooted in agriculture and its ties to the land.
Urbanization, Suburbanization and Gentrification:
By Erin Boyce

When the Census Bureau declared the Frontier closed in 1890, historian Frederick Jackson Turner lamented that the arena in which American character, democracy and uniqueness had been forged was forever lost. His speech, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” cemented the popular belief espoused by Thomas Jefferson and countless others that America was rooted in agriculture and its ties to the land.

The closing of the frontier, in Turner’s eyes, marked the end of an era. The western migration slowed and urbanization began. Cities grew and prospered. Then in the mid-twentieth century, city dwellers left urban areas for the suburbs surrounding the cities. In the late twentieth century, a movement began to rehabilitate and reinhabit depressed urban centers. These major population migrations and cultural shifts—urbanization, suburbanization and gentrification—were perhaps as crucial to American development as was the settling of the frontier. Each is a major phase of domestic expansion.

In his thesis, Turner inextricably linked American social and cultural evolution with the migration of American peoples: “Movement has been [American life’s] dominant fact, and, unless this training has no effect upon a people, the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise” (Turner par. 17). While many historians, especially Theodore Roosevelt, took this to mean a continued westward and imperialist expansion, it seems that it can also be applied to the domestic population trends that followed the settling of the frontier. If the frontier represented “the first period of American history” (Turner par. 17) and Turner’s focus on the movement of a people is our measure of an historical period, then urbanization was the second, suburbanization the third and gentrification the fourth. It seems only fitting, then, to examine each of these movements in accordance with the relevant myth structure advanced by Turner.

Urbanization: Moving into the City

Urbanization may appear to be the movement most irreconcilable with Turner’s thesis, quite simply because it is antithetical to everything Turner believed about America. In fact, Turner chose to disregard urbanization completely in his vision of American development, and this is partly attributed to his own rural bias (see Hofstadter; Henry Nash Smith). Turner’s theory endorses the Jeffersonian perspective common to the first century of nationhood: the belief that the experiment of democracy could succeed only in a rural, agrarian economy that avoided the vices and weaknesses of civilized Europe (Bender 4-5). In his book Toward an Urban Vision: Ideas and Institutions in Nineteenth Century America, historian and humanities professor Thomas Bender clarifies, “early American agrarianism was more than a bias. It was a political philosophy and a definition of a social ideal” (4). Thus urbanization, to thinkers like Jefferson and Turner, represented the imminent downfall of American republicanism.

Though industrialization presented the most dramatic shift of people into cities, Arthur M. Schlesinger points out that American cities developed side by side with the agricultural West. Schlesinger’s article “The City in American History” opens with an acknowledgement of the Turner thesis and its revolutionary role in recasting American history and culture. He then asserts that a complete reinterpretation and dismissal of Turner is not his goal; rather he sets out to “direct attention to...the persistent interplay of town and country in the evolution of American civilization” (43).

The tension formed by the coexistence of urban and rural populations is the general lens through which Schlesinger considers the development of American cities. He addresses the fact that population centers (towns and villages) were formed by the very first settlers on the oldest American frontier—the Atlantic Coast—and along every subsequent western frontier. Additionally, in the early 1800s many outposts and settlements had names declaring them “cities”—Columbia City, Fountain City, Union City, etc. (49). And as the western migration got under way the influx to the cities was not far behind. According to Schlesinger’s statistics more people moved into the burgeoning urban centers of the East than onto the “free land” of the West (56-57).

Schlesinger traces the formation of American cities with an eye toward the transformative powers that Turner assigned to the frontier. Indeed, he claims “city life had a transforming effect on all those who came within its orbit” (46). The concentration of individuals in a bustling city gave rise to such valuable cultural forces as “civic spirit” (45), “a necessary concern with the general welfare” and an “American inventiveness” (46), all of which helped chisel out a uniquely American identity. Schlesinger saw in American cities what Kenneth T. Jackson later described as the “catalytic mixing of people that...spurs the initiative, innovation and collaboration that taken together move civilization forward” (“America’s”).

By the mid-twentieth century the defining role of industrialization could no longer be denied.
Schlesinger's use of Turner's theory as an underlying theme to analyze the growth of cities has the desired effect of adding urbanization and industrialization to the fabric of American sociohistory without completely discarding Turner's nostalgic vision of America.

A fascinating component of American urban development—one that links the conceptualization of the city with that of the frontier—is the effort of urban planners to reconcile the benefits of open spaces with the artistic, civic, economic and social advances that could not be denied in the cities. None was more adamant or successful in this pursuit than landscape architect and city planner Frederick Law Olmstead. Born in 1822 and raised in rural New England, Olmstead became enthralled with the economic, artistic and democratic processes of cities (Bender 164-169). But as a burgeoning social democrat, Olmstead sought a remedy for the drudgery, monotony, rigidity and gloom experienced by the urban worker. His approach was to designate land within cities for use as public parks (171). "Olmstead was convinced," writes Bender, "that the moral and social influences of parks were crucially important in the formation of the national character" (180).

Like Turner, Olmstead considered the natural landscape a source of spiritual renewal and also a breeding ground for the democratic character of American peoples. Olmstead alleviated the pressures and fears associated with urbanization by incorporating aspects of America's—and Turner's—agrarian past into the modern city.

Suburbanization: Moving out of the City

Just as urbanization in America occurred during and alongside Westward expansion, the movement of people out of the cities and into the suburbs transpired over time. Long before the Census Bureau declared the frontier closed, the New York City suburb of Brooklyn Heights was outpacing the city in development and population growth ("Crabgrass" 29). While suburbs grew gradually for a century, the massive population shift of suburbanization occurred in the years following World War II, and can be attributed to a booming post-war economy, the increasing availability of the automobile, frenetic construction of new houses and government policies that favored home owning over renting. Suburbanization represented a shift of power and affluence away from the cities and created a marked class division (one that would come to a head later during gentrification).

A suburb is considered an area of development on the fringe of a concentrated city, and has been a construct of human population growth since London expanded in the 1500s ("Crabgrass" 12-13). As Kenneth T. Jackson points out, however, American suburban development is a unique global phenomenon with respect to four key characteristics: low population density, home ownership, affluent residential status and a marked distance from employment in the city core (6). While peripheral settlements in other nations tended to be crowded bastions for the working class who were driven out of the city centers, American suburbs sprang up out of a common desire to leave urban congestion behind for a bucolic suburban existence (7-10).

Nowhere is this better illustrated than in Jackson's discussion of real estate and the yard. "The American dream," he asserts, "was in large part land" ("Crabgrass" 53-54). The value of land as an asset and status symbol was a vestige of European colonization, and until suburbs began their development the only green spaces in construction were specially designed urban parks or the small lawns around the large castle-like residences of the elite (54-56). The move to the suburbs, then, was about the acquisition of one's own land and personal space, where "the preferred site became a semirural homestead" (56). This bears more than a passing resemblance to Turner's conceptualization of the West as a fertile garden of agrarian values, and his "safety valve" thesis, which described the promise of open land as a source of renewal and self-made membership in a new democratic society (Henry Nash Smith 5). The free space of suburbs seemed to offer a Turnerian escape from the constraints of urban living to those who sought autonomy and land ownership.

In an intellectual approach that seamlessly ties suburbanization to the agrarian ideals of Turner, Tom Martinson bases his entire discussion of the suburban migration on the Yeoman Mythology, "the traditional description of the typical American as an honest, hardworking, resourceful and practical individual" (Martinson 8). He compares post-war government programs that promoted home-ownership with the Homestead Act of 1862: they bolstered the yeoman value of autonomy and land ownership and provided a means to relocate out of the dense, crowded cities (10). This again echoes Turner's emphasis on free land in the evolution of a distinctly American society.

Martinson assigns two underlying motivations for the post-war suburbanization boom. First, government programs and the housing construction surge—which made up for the shortage of homes constructed during the Depression and the War—made suburban living a good economic value (Martinson xiv; 54). The homes were affordable and the time was right. Martinson cites a study that found "value, price and low down payment together accounted for 71 percent of the principal reasons for buying in [the new suburban community of] Levittown" (54). The second motivation Martinson discusses is the combination of psychological comfort
and symbolic status conferred by a suburban residence (54). The ownership of one’s own space, which included a single-family dwelling and a parcel of land in the form of a yard, satisfied the fundamental need of the yeoman for autonomy and land ownership.

It is obvious that the movement of people from the cities to the suburbs was based on the value of free (i.e. open) land and self-determination in the autonomy that owning one’s own land provided. By leaving the crowded urban centers where they rented their homes, shared walls with other tenants and were cut off from the natural scenery of virgin land, Americans found, in Turner’s words, “a new field of opportunity, a gate of escape from the bondage of the past” (Turner par. 17). If we consider Turner’s view of the frontier as the demarcation line across which new societies are forged, “the line of most rapid and effective Americanization” (Turner par. 5), then the city-suburb border is itself a frontier. By moving outward, Americans continued a process of physical expansion and created a class and society of people that differ politically and socially from those within the city walls. Suburbanization can be attributed to the rise of the middle class and the changing patterns of consumption that have defined the late twentieth century.

Gentrification: Moving Back into the City

Webster’s New World Dictionary describes gentrification as the process of converting “a deteriorated or aging area of a city into a more affluent middle-class neighborhood.” But what architecture historian Joseph Rykwert benignly describes as “attempts to revivify those parts of...a city that have been degraded” (232) actually has broad socioeconomic ramifications. By building up and reinvesting in these areas, the lower classes typically fail to reap any benefit. An influx of luxury apartments and condominiums raises rents and property values, while a shift toward a white-collar job base further maligns the working class.

Begun in earnest during the 1950s, strongly accelerated during the 1980s and continuing today into the new millennium, the process of gentrification and the movement of the middle class into the inner city has created a new boundary of settlement and, as such, has been saturated with the imagery and language of the frontier. Efforts to renew urban centers and make them habitable for the middle class often result in conflict and the “conquest” of the “savages” already inhabiting the area. “Just as Turner recognized the existence of Native Americans but included them as part of his savage wilderness,” writes Neil Smith, one of the leading experts on gentrification, “contemporary urban frontier imagery treats the present inner city population as a natural element of their physical surroundings” (xiv). In the language of Turner, these urban “pioneers” are engaging in “a recurrence of the process of evolution” (Turner par. 2). The return to the harsh inner city constitutes “a return to primitive conditions...and a new development for that area” (par. 2).

Like Turner and his analysis of the Western frontier, Smith examines what he calls the “gentrification frontier” as both a physical demarcation and an arena for a process of social evolution through conquest. As a tangible and measurable boundary, Smith locates the gentrification frontier in the “line dividing areas of disinvestment from areas of reinvestment in the urban landscape” (Neil Smith 190). Slowly but surely, the injection of capital and construction visibly moves across a neighborhood, rehabilitating dilapidated housing and markets, altering the landscape into one more fit for a more civilized population.

As the locus for an evolution realized through conquest, Smith discusses practices of eviction, common to the gentrification process and implemented, for example, in New York City’s Lower East Side. In order to tear down buildings and make room for new ones, or when a building owner raises rents to an impossibly high rate, the urban poor and working class are forced out of their homes, with no assistance toward relocation (Neil Smith 26). In fact, homelessness has been one of the primary social issues associated with efforts of gentrification. Like Native Americans forced from their lands or coerced into a new way of living, the urban underclass have been the victims of this inner-city expansionism.

Smith’s application of the Turnerian framework to his investigation of gentrification serves to further exemplify the congruency between Turner’s theory of expansion with modern population shifts. Also, by scrutinizing how the language of the frontier myth has permeated discussion and analysis of gentrification, Smith demonstrates that the frontier mythology is alive and well as a cultural myth structure.

It is important to note that modern American society has used the language of the frontier myth to describe all of these population movements. In its early days, urbanization was described as a new “frontier” of development. Kenneth T. Jackson’s comprehensive analysis of suburbanization is titled Crabgrass Frontier; Neil Smith’s examination of gentrification and the conflict inherent in such attempts at “civilizing” is titled The New Urban Frontier. Such linguistic patterns give credence to the applicability of Turner’s framework to modern population trends.

These population trends represent successive frontiers of social and geographic development, but are by no means an exhaustive account of the movement of American peoples. For example, future
inquiry may be directed toward understanding the movement of people from older, colder Northeastern cities to new urban centers in the Southwest (Katz and Lang 6). Also, an interesting trend can be seen in the continued outward expansion of suburbs and rural construction. New homes are springing up in the untamed wilds, which increases homeowners’ contact and conflict with wildlife, fires and other natural phenomena. Finally, in his book Edge City: Life on the New Frontier, Joel Garreau examines a new hybrid of the city and suburb that has emerged as the next physical frontier of American civilization.

An important qualification for this kind of analysis arises from the work of Richard Slotkin. In his introduction to Gunfighter Nation and his explanation of the general myth-ideology framework, Slotkin explains the reasoning behind applying historical cultural myths to more modern cultural occurrences:

“The sources of myth-making lie in our capacity to make and use metaphors, by which we attempt to interpret a new and surprising experience or phenomenon by noting its resemblance to some remembered thing or happening. If the metaphor proves apt, we will be inclined to treat the new phenomenon as a recurrence of the old; to the extent that the new phenomenon differs from the remembered one, our sense of the possibilities of experience will be extended” (Slotkin 6-7).

Continued application of the Turnerian frontier myth structure can only lead to a better understanding of modern population movements in relation to the land and to conflict. By continuing to use Turner’s ideas we can expand the metaphors he created to encompass and better illustrate our continued domestic expansion.

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Works Cited


