

## FREDERICK JACKSON TURNER

### BACKGROUND

Historians work to keep alive the stories of people who made history and shaped our lives. Sometimes, however, a historian will make history by describing the past in a way that transforms how we view ourselves. One such historian was Frederick Jackson Turner (1861-1932).

A professor at the University of Wisconsin and at Harvard, Turner pioneered new methodologies of historical research. He urged historians to look into all aspects of history in order to gain a more accurate interpretation of the past. He thought American historians should study immigration, urbanization, diplomacy, economics, politics, and culture. He believed research in a variety of disciplines allowed historians to assemble a more complete description of the past.

In 1893 Turner delivered "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," a speech that forever changed how Americans described their nation. In the speech Turner referred to the announcement based on 1890 census findings that the government could no longer designate frontier boundaries in the United States. He used his speech to argue that the frontier was the most important force in determining the American character. The speech was largely ignored until Turner's friend Woodrow Wilson, a professor at Princeton, used the frontier thesis in his own academic research. Turner's ideas eventually became a topic of considerable discussion and debate.

Turner's frontier thesis made Americans rethink their past. Before 1900 the importance of the West was generally overlooked in U.S. history textbooks. Historians had traditionally argued that American institutions originated with early Germanic tribes, an approach known as the germ theory. Turner, however, emphasized the importance of the frontier in forming the American character rather than the influence of early Germanic tribes. His thesis became the dominant interpretation of United States history until the 1930s. Even today, historians feel compelled to address Turner's writings whether they agree or disagree with his thesis. Turner has influenced the writing of American history as much as any other historian. His ideas have even penetrated the social consciousness.

**FREDERICK JACKSON TURNER – IN HIS OWN WORDS****“The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” 1893**

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 cannot, 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.

Behind institutions, behind constitutional forms and modifications, lie the vital forces that call these organs into life, and shape them to meet changing conditions. Now, the peculiarity of American institutions is the fact that they have been compelled to adapt themselves to the changes of an expanding people—to the changes involved in crossing a continent, in winning a wilderness, and in developing at each area of this progress out of the primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier into the complexity of city life. . . . American development has exhibited not merely advance along a single line, but a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line, and a new development for that area. American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character. The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West. . . .

In the settlement of America we have to observe how European life entered the continent, and how America modified and developed that life, and reacted on Europe. Our early history is the study of European germs developing in an American environment. Too exclusive attention has been paid by institutional students to the Germanic origins, too little to the American factors. Now, the frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization. The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization, and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and the Iroquois, and runs an Indian palisade around him. . . . In short, at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish, and so he fits himself into the Indian clearings and follows the Indian trails. Little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe, not simply the development of Germanic

seems any more than the first phenomenon was a case of reversion to the primitive mark. The fact is, that here is a new product that is American. At first the frontier was the Atlantic coast. It was the frontier of Europe in a very real sense. Moving westward, the frontier became more and more American. As successive terminal moraines result from successive glaciations, so each frontier leaves its traces behind it, and when it becomes a settled area the region still partakes of the frontier characteristics. Thus the advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lines. To study this advance, the men who grew up under these conditions, and the political, economic and social results of it, is to study the really American part of our history. . . .

The most important effect of the frontier has been in the promotion of democracy here and in Europe. As has been pointed out, the frontier is productive of individualism. Complex society is precipitated by the wilderness into a kind of primitive organization based on the family. The tendency is anti-social. It produces antipathy to control, and particularly to any direct control. The tax-gatherer is viewed as a representative of oppression. . . . The frontier individualism has from the beginning promoted democracy. . . .

The democracy born of free land, strong in selfishness and individualism, intolerant of administrative experience and education, and pressing individual liberty beyond its proper bounds, has its dangers as well as its benefits. Individualism in America has allowed a laxity in regard to governmental affairs which has rendered possible the spoils system, and all the manifest evils that follow from the lack of a highly developed civic spirit. . . .

From the conditions of frontier life came intellectual traits of profound importance. The works of travelers along each frontier from colonial days onward describe for each certain common traits, and these traits have, while softening down, still persisted as survivals in the place of their origin, even when a higher social organization succeeded. The result is that to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. 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 for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier. Since the days when the fleet of Columbus sailed into the waters of the New World, America has been another name for opportunity, and the people of the United States have taken their tone from the incessant expansion which has not only been open but has even been forced upon them. He would be a rash prophet who should assert that the expansive character of American life has now entirely ceased. Movement has been its dominant fact, and, unless this training has no effect

upon a people, the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise. But never again will such gifts of free land offer themselves. For a moment at the frontier the bonds of custom are broken, and unrestraint is triumphant. There is not *tabula rasa*. The stubborn American environment is there with its imperious summons to accept its conditions; the inherited ways of doing things are also there; and yet, in spite of environment, and in spite of custom, each frontier did indeed furnish a new field of opportunity, a gate of escape from the bondage of the past; and freshness, and confidence, and scorn of older society, impatience of its restraints and its ideas, and indifference to its lessons, have accompanied the frontier. What the Mediterranean Sea was to the Greeks, breaking the bond of custom, offering new experiences, calling out new institutions and activities, that, and more, the ever retreating frontier has been to the United States directly, and to the nations of Europe more remotely. And now, four centuries from the discovery of America, at the end of a hundred years of life under the Constitution, the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history.

#### **"Contributions of the West to American Democracy," 1903**

The careful student of history must seek the explanation of the forms and changes of political institutions in the social and economic forces that determine them. To know that at any one time a nation may be called a democracy, an aristocracy, or a monarchy, is not so important as to know what are the social and economic tendencies of the state. These are the vital forces that work beneath the surface and dominate external form. It is to changes in the economic and social life of a people that we must look for the forces that ultimately create and modify organs of political action. . . .

. . . We find ourselves at the present time in an era of such profound economic and social transformation as to raise the question of the effect of these changes upon the democratic institutions of the United States. Within a decade four marked changes have occurred in our national development taken together they constitute a revolution.

First, there is the exhaustion of the supply of free land and the closing of the movement of Western advance as an effective factor in American development. The first rough conquest of the wilderness is accomplished and that great supply of free lands which year after year has served to reinforce the democratic influences in the United States is exhausted. The free lands that made the American pioneer have gone.

In the second place, contemporaneously with this there has been such a concentration of capital in the control of fundamental industries as to make a new epoch in the economic development of the United States.

A third phenomenon connected with the two just mentioned is the expansion of the United States politically and commercially into lands beyond the seas. . . . Having completed the conquest of the wilderness, and having consolidated our interests, we are beginning to consider the relations of democracy and empire.

And fourth, the political parties of the United States now tend to divide on issues that involve the question of Socialism. The rise of the Populist party in the last decade, and the acceptance of so many of its principles by the Democratic party under the leadership of Mr. Bryan, show in striking manner the birth of new political ideas, the reformation of the lines of political conflict.

It is doubtful if in any ten years of American history more significant factors in our growth have revealed themselves. . . . As a contribution to this inquiry, let us now turn to an examination of the part that the West has played in shaping our democracy.

From the beginning of the settlement of America, the frontier regions have exercised a steady influence toward democracy. . . .

If now in the way of recapitulation we try to pick out from the differences that have gone to the making of Western democracy the factors which constitute the net result of the movement, we shall have to mention at least the following:—

Most important of all has been the fact that an area of free land has continually lain on the western border of the settled area of the United States. Whenever social conditions tended to crystallize in the East, whenever capital tended to press upon labor or political restraints to impede the freedom of the mass, there was this gate of escape to the free conditions of the frontier. These free lands promoted individualism, economic equality, freedom to rise, democracy. Men would not accept inferior wages and a permanent position of social subordination when this promised land of freedom and equality was theirs for the taking. Who would rest content under oppressive legislative conditions when with a slight effort he might reach a land wherein to become a co-worker in the building of free cities and free States on the lines of his own ideal? In a word, then, free lands meant free opportunities. Their existence has differentiated the American democracy from the democracies which have preceded it, because ever, as democracy in the East took the form of highly specialized and complicated industrial society, in the West it kept in touch with primitive conditions, and by action and reaction these two forces have shaped our history.

In the next place, these free lands and this treasury of industrial resources have existed over such vast spaces that they have demanded of democracy increasing spaciousness of design and power of execution. Western democracy is contrasted with the democracy of all other times in the largeness of the tasks to which it set its hand, and in the vast achievements which it has wrought out in the control of nature and of politics. It would be difficult to over-emphasize the importance of this training upon democracy. Never before in the history of the world has a democracy existed on so vast an area and handled things in the gross with such success, with such largeness of design, and such grasp upon the means of execution. In short, democracy has learned in the West of the United States how to deal with the problem of magnitude. The old historic democracies were but little states with primitive economic conditions. . . .

The question is imperative, then, What ideals persist from this democratic experience of the West, and have they acquired sufficient momentum to sustain themselves under conditions so radically unlike those in the days of their origin? . . . The free lands are gone. The material forces that gave vitality to Western democracy are passing away. It is to the realm of the spirit, to the domain of ideals and legislation, that we must look for Western influence upon democracy in our own days.

Western democracy has been from the time of its birth idealistic. The very fact of the wilderness appealed to men as a fair, blank page on which to write a new chapter in the story of man's struggle for a higher type of society. . . . The existence of this land of opportunity has made America the goal of idealists from the days of the Pilgrim Fathers. . . .

. . . But the idealistic influence is not limited to the dreamers' conception of a new State. It gave to the pioneer farmer and city builder a restless energy, a quick capacity for judgement and action, a belief in liberty, freedom of opportunity, and a resistance to the domination of class which infused a vitality and power into the individual atoms of this democratic mass. . . .

It must also be remembered that these democratic ideals have existed at each stage of the advance of the frontier, and have left behind them deep and enduring effects on the thinking of the whole country. Long after the frontier period of a particular region of the United States has passed away, the conception of society, the ideals and aspirations which it produced, persist in the minds of the people. . . .

This, at least, is clear: American democracy is fundamentally the outcome of the experiences of the American people in dealing with the West. Western democracy through the whole of its earlier period tended to the production of a society of which the most distinctive fact was the freedom of the individual to rise under conditions of social mobility, and whose ambition was the liberty and well-being of the masses. This conception vitalized all American democracy, and has brought it into sharp contrast with the democracies of history, and with those modern efforts of Europe to create an artificial democratic order by legislation. . . .

. . . Best of all, the West gave, not only to the American, but to the world held a place where were to be found high faith in man and the will and power to furnish him the opportunity to grow to the full measure of his own capacity. Great and powerful as are the new sons of her loins, the Republic is greater than they. The paths of the pioneer have widened into broad highways. The forest clearing has expanded into affluent commonwealths. Let us see to it that the ideals of the pioneer in his log cabin shall enliven into the spiritual life of a democracy where civic power shall enliven and utilize individual achievement for the common good.

## FREDERICK JACKSON TURNER - A SIMULATED INTERVIEW

How important was Europe to the development of the United States?

- A. Historians have paid too much attention to the European roots of the United States. More attention should be given to the *American* factors that developed the character of the United States.
- B. Although Europeans migrated to America, the wilderness transformed the fundamental character of Europeans to create a uniquely American character. The ideas and traditions that Europeans brought to America were changed by the frontier experience.
- C. The continuous movement of Americans onto new frontiers marked a steady movement away from European influences. European traditions became gradually less important to the development of the American character.

What force most shaped the development of the United States?

- A. The United States was shaped primarily by the frontier conditions that existed in America for 300 years. The American character is the product of people who have been in continuous contact with primitive frontier conditions.
- B. The continuing nature of the frontier led to the constant restructuring of society. The United States is the product of new societies created as people continuously moved west.

What American characteristics are a product of the frontier?

- A. The frontier fostered a spirit of individualism. People on the frontier faced primitive conditions forcing them to rely on themselves and their family for survival.
- B. The frontier gave Americans an enthusiasm for freedom.
- C. The frontier made Americans inquisitive, inventive, materialistic, energetic, and independent.
- D. The frontier nourished a sense of social equality. Birthright did not matter on the frontier; all that mattered was what an individual could do for himself.
- E. Americans lack a sense of tradition because of the frontier. A continuous frontier meant that society was constantly reborn.

How did the frontier affect American democracy?

- A. The most important aspect of America's frontier experience was the development of democracy. American democracy is fundamentally a product of the western frontier experience.
- B. Americans built something unique in human history—they constructed a democracy that functions over a vast territory. More than any other people, Americans understand how to deal with problems on a vast scale.

- 5. How did the frontier affect American society?**
- Although people moving onto the frontier carried their social traditions with them, life on the frontier thrust them into a state of near savagery. The frontier therefore transformed social traditions into something new.
  - The frontier allowed social mobility. On the frontier an individual could improve himself through his own abilities.
  - The continuous existence of free land gave people a safety valve to escape hardship. Whenever conditions became intolerable the West served as an escape to freedom and opportunity.
- 6. How did the American frontier affect other nations?**
- The American frontier gave a vision of hope not only to Americans, but also to people of other nations. The American frontier provided people of many nations an opportunity to better their lives according to their own abilities.
  - Since the time of Columbus, America has been a land of opportunity.
  - Free land on the American frontier served as a magnet to bring people west, including people from Europe.
- 7. Should Americans be concerned about the closing of the frontier?**
- The frontier promoted qualities of individualism, equality, freedom and democracy. At the beginning of the twentieth century Americans faced the question of whether these qualities would continue when there was no frontier to nurture their growth.
  - At the beginning of the twentieth century Americans faced challenges resulting from four dramatic changes:
    - The end of the westward movement due to the absence of free land.
    - The concentration of wealth among a few fundamental industries.
    - The expansion of the United States overseas.
    - The division of political parties over the issue of socialism.
- Only time would tell if the frontier qualities of individualism, equality, freedom, and democracy would survive these dramatic changes. One could only wonder what would happen to the American character without the presence of a frontier to conquer.



STUDENT ACTIVITIES

Vocabulary

- Define the following terms before reading the lesson on Turner.
- |               |                 |                        |
|---------------|-----------------|------------------------|
| 1. antipathy  | 5. glaciation   | 9. subordination       |
| 2. buoyancy   | 6. indifference | 10. <i>tabula rasa</i> |
| 3. epoch      | 7. moraine      |                        |
| 4. exuberance | 8. precipitate  |                        |

Review

1. Turner was a professor of history at what two universities?

2. Why did Turner think historians should research in a variety of disciplines?

3. What speech given by Turner in 1893 changed how Americans described their nation?

4. What was significant about the 1890 census?

5. What was the germ theory of American history?

6. What did Turner believe should be given more attention when historians described the character of the United States?

7. What did Turner believe changed the fundamental character of Europeans when they came to America?

8. What effect did Turner think the continuing nature of the frontier had on American society?

9. In what way did Turner think the frontier fostered individualism?

10. In what way did Turner think the frontier nourished social equality?

11. Why did Turner think Americans lacked a sense of tradition?

12. What did Turner think was the most important aspect of America's frontier experience?

13. According to Turner, what did Americans build that was unique in human history?

14. In what way did Turner think the frontier was a safety valve?

15. How did Turner think the American frontier influenced people of other nations?

16. What question did Turner think Americans faced at the beginning of the twentieth century?

17. What four challenges did Turner think Americans faced at the beginning of the twentieth century?

18. Decide whether the following statements are **True** or **False** according to Frederick Jackson Turner.

- A. The frontier made Americans inventive, energetic, and independent.
- B. On the frontier people could improve themselves through their own individual abilities.
- C. The frontier served as a magnet to bring people west.
- D. A person could only guess what would happen to the United States without the frontier to nurture the American character.

**What do you think?**

On a scale of one through five, rate your opinion of the following quotations by Turner. Write a short statement explaining your rating.

**1** – You **strongly agree** with the statement *or* you feel the statement is **admirable** considering the historical circumstances surrounding it.

**5** – You **strongly disagree** with the statement *or* you feel the statement is **contemptible** considering the historical circumstances surrounding it.

- A. *Up to our own day [1893] American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West.*
- B. *This perennial rebirth [on the frontier], this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character.*
- C. *The advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lines.*
- D. *The frontier individualism has from the beginning promoted democracy.*
- E. *And now, four centuries from the discovery of America, at the end of a hundred years of life under the Constitution, the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history.*
- F. *In a word, then, free lands meant free opportunities.*
- G. *Never before in the history of the world has a democracy existed on so vast an area and handled things in the gross with such success, with such largeness of design, and such grasp upon the means of execution.*
- H. *Western democracy has been from the time of its birth idealistic.*
- I. *Best of all, the West gave, not only to the American, but to the unhappy and oppressed of all lands, a vision of hope, and assurance that the world held a place where were to be found high faith in man and the will and power to furnish him the opportunity to grow to the full measure of his own capacity.*
- J. *The result is that to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. The 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 for evil, and with all that buoyancy and exuberance which comes from freedom—these are traits of the frontier.*