



## Frederick Jackson Turner

### from Wisconsin Authors and Their Works 1918 by Charles Rounds

Frederick J. Turner

Born in Portage, Wisconsin, in 1861, Frederick J. Turner was graduated from the State University in 1884, and six years later he received his Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins. Meantime he had spent some of the years in teaching in his Alma Mater. He was made full professor of history in 1892, which position he held until 1910, when Harvard University called him.

Few men on "The Hill" were more beloved by the students than "Freddie" Turner. His courses were crowded, and his lectures were exceedingly popular. Perhaps if his students had known that from 1885 to 1888 he served as tutor in rhetoric and oratory at Wisconsin, they would not have wondered so much at the eloquence of his lectures.

Portage 1858

Professor Turner

But eloquence was not the main feature of his lectures nor yet the quality he most desired in the recitations of his students. Woe betide the young man who had spent too little time upon the "constitutional period," and who tried to give this argus-eyed instructor the impression of deep and careful study. The bubble was sure to be pricked, and the discomfiture of the ambitious one was, while frequently laughable, always unmistakable. One never knew when he was going to be "quizzed" in "Freddie's" class. But one thing was certain: that was that he would be asked a question, and when that question came it was best, from every point of view, to be able to do good, clear, straight thinking, based on a fund of religiously acquired information. One quality that Professor Turner exacted of himself and others was that assertions must be backed up by evidence. Perhaps that is not the least important reason why the article from which a selection is here made created as profound a change in the general attitude toward American history as any single

word on that subject that has ever been spoken.

Turner's Senior History Seminar

### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FRONTIER IN AMERICAN HISTORY

From "THE ANNUAL REPORT OF THE AMERICAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION" for 1893, pp. 199-227. By Professor Frederick J. Turner, then of the University of Wisconsin.

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. 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 economical and political conditions of the frontier into the complexity of city life. Said Calhoun in 1817, "We are great, and rapidly--I was about to say fearfully--growing!" So saying, he touched the distinguishing feature of American life. All peoples show development; the germ theory of politics has been sufficiently emphasized. In the case of most nations, however, the development has occurred in a limited area; and if the nation has expanded, it has met other growing peoples whom it has conquered. But in the case of the United States we have a different phenomenon. Limiting our attention to the Atlantic Coast, we have the familiar phenomenon of the evolution of institutions in a limited area, such as the rise of representative government; the differentiation of simple colonial governments into complex organs; the progress from primitive industrial society, without division of labor, up to manufacturing civilization. But we have in addition to this a recurrence of the process of evolution in each western area reached in the process of expansion. Thus 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, has furnished 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. Even the slavery struggle, which is made so exclusive an object of attention by writers like Professor von Holst, occupies its important place in American history because of its relation to westward expansion.

In this advance, the frontier is the outer edge of the wave--the meeting point between savagery and civilization. Much has been written about the frontier from the point of view of border warfare and the chase, but as a field for the serious study of the economist and the historian it has been neglected.

The American frontier is sharply distinguished from the European frontier--a fortified boundary line running through dense populations. The most significant thing about the American frontier is, that it lies at the hither edge of free land. In the census reports it is treated as the margin of that settlement which has a density of two or more to the square mile. The term is an elastic one, and for our purposes does not need sharp definition. We shall consider the whole frontier belt, including the Indian country and outer margin of the "settled area," of the census reports. This paper will make no attempt to treat the subject exhaustively; its aim is simply to call attention to the frontier as a fertile field for investigation, and to suggest some of the problems which arise in connection with it. \* \* \*

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. ^ Top | Next Author (Charles Van Hise) >

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