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Composing Pioneers:  
Personal Writing and the Making of Frontier Opportunity in Nineteenth-Century America

by

William Edward Wagner

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University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor David M. Henkin, Chair

Professor Waldo E. Martin Jr.

Professor Samuel Otter

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## Abstract

### Composing Pioneers: Personal Writing and the Making of Frontier Opportunity in Nineteenth-Century America

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William Edward Wagner

Doctor of Philosophy in History

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Few slogans occupy a more prominent place in popular mythology about the frontier than the exhortation, “Go west, young man, and grow up with the country.” Despite its enduring popularity, surprisingly little scholarly attention has been devoted to probing the constellation of ideas about movement, place, masculinity, and social mobility that is captured in this short phrase. This dissertation explores how, in the decades between the War of 1812 and the Civil War, Americans began to think and write about the possibilities for “growing up” with new cities, towns, and agricultural communities on the frontier. Although politicians, newspaper editors, booster theorists, and popular authors figure prominently in this story, no group did more to construct and promote this masculine, entrepreneurial, and place-centered vision of the frontier than young men from middle-class backgrounds who migrated to new states and territories in the trans-Appalachian West during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. In their diaries, letters, travel narratives, and pioneer memoirs, these migrants generated an unprecedented volume of writing about the possibilities for financial, social, and professional mobility in a new country. Their writing not only shaped popular perceptions of frontier opportunity in their own time; it also left an indelible mark on historical memory of westward expansion in nineteenth-century America.

This study begins by examining how aspiring merchants, lawyers, farmers, land speculators, and other young men used personal writing to survey the geography of opportunity in the trans-Appalachian West. As they searched for valuable real estate or an advantageous place to settle, many began their reconnaissance by writing letters to peers, relatives, and business associates, requesting personalized intelligence about conditions in particular frontier settlements. Not content to rely on second-hand reportage, some set out on prospecting journeys, traveling great distances to purchase land or investigate opportunities in the many new towns and villages springing up throughout the nation’s interior. During their journeys, prospectors used travel diaries and letters to collect and synthesize geographical intelligence, and to relay their findings to family members or business partners who were implicated in their decisions about relocation or speculation. All of this evaluative writing helped usher in a new conception of the frontier as a landscape of discrete places—cities, towns, and counties—whose

relative advantages and future prospects could be assessed and compared with great precision.

In the months or years after they settled down in emerging towns or agricultural districts, young migrants used a variety of novel writing practices to assert their commitment to their adopted homes, and to fashion themselves as community builders. Some composed boosterish letters to family and friends, speculating about their own prospects and the prospects of their chosen abode. Others produced elaborate narratives of their migration experiences, chronicling the meandering westward journeys that led them to their new place of residence. In the late nineteenth century, many of these antebellum migrants also produced pioneer memoirs, a new type of personal narrative that wove together the story of their own financial, social, and professional striving with the history of their towns, counties, and states. Through their letters, migration narratives, and reminiscences, they constructed and popularized a new image of the pioneer as a young man who moved west, found a permanent home, and grew up with the country. As the later chapters of this dissertation will show, this vision of pioneer masculinity exaggerated some aspects of their experiences and obscured many others. Nevertheless, it became a central part of frontier mythology for many generations to come.

*For my parents,  
Bill and Millie Wagner*



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In writing this dissertation, it was hard to ignore the parallels between my own journey and those of the nineteenth-century migrants I was studying. Like them, I had set off on one of the great adventures of my life, full of naïve enthusiasm, with only a dim sense of the challenges that lay ahead. And like so many of their migration experiences, my road to completing this dissertation included dead ends and wrong turns that sometimes left me despairing of ever reaching my destination. Fortunately, my will to continue traveling was sustained by an immensely supportive network of family, friends, advisers, and fellow travelers. It is unlikely that I could have completed this project without them, and if I had, the journey certainly would have been far less rewarding and fun.

First and foremost, I wish to thank the members of my dissertation committee for their supreme attentiveness, constant encouragement, and incisive criticism. Professor David Henkin was all that I could have asked for in a dissertation chair. At every stage of the process, he offered precisely the right mix of intellectual freedom, astute feedback, and firm guidance. It has been an incredible privilege to learn the historian's craft from such a brilliant scholar and wonderful human being. I am similarly grateful to Professor Waldo Martin, who played a crucial role in my initial decision to study at U.C. Berkeley, and who provided sage advice throughout my graduate career. I will always look back with great fondness on our many lunchtime meetings, where we would inevitably blend substantive, academic discussion with intricate analysis of the latest Duke basketball game. Finally, Professor Samuel Otter read this dissertation with great care and provided a wealth of insights and suggestions. His comments on my first chapter draft were especially helpful in clarifying my sense of the project's scope, structure, and significance.

My research was facilitated by generous financial support from the American Antiquarian Society, the Bancroft Library, the William L. Clements Library, the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, the Newberry Library, and the Winterthur Library. In addition to supplying funding, these institutions offered me access to librarians, curators, and administrators who shared their ideas and expertise, directing me to a wealth of relevant archival documents and secondary literature. I am especially grateful to Jim Grossman, Thomas Knoles, Richard McKinstry, Ted O'Reilly, Caroline Sloat, and Susan Snyder, all of whom offered invaluable research leads and provided a sense of community during the many months that I spent on the road, gathering source material for this dissertation.

A number of fellow graduate students at U.C. Berkeley and elsewhere helped refine my ideas and offered camaraderie throughout the writing process. In the History Department at Berkeley, Chris Agee, Cory Brooks, Candace Chen, Bill Goldman, Radhika Natarajan, Paddy Riley, and Teddy Varno proved to be not only talented and supportive colleagues, but also outstanding friends. As members of the Antebellum History Dissertation Group, Michelle Branch, Kathryn Eigen, Amy Lippert, MacKenzie Moore, and Ariel Ron read chapters of this dissertation and provided feedback that greatly improved the final product. On the research trail, I had the good fortune to



befriend Ken Cohen, a gifted historian who quickly became my sounding board for new ideas. Our late-night debates about a wide range of historical subjects never failed to remind me of what I find so exciting about the discipline.

During my time away from this project, close friends in the Bay Area, New York, and Washington D.C. kept me laughing, active, and well fed. Justin Tomljanovic and Jessica Ulmer were the closest thing I had to family in San Francisco. It would be hard to overstate how much our weekly dinners, camping trips, and adventures around the city contributed to the completion of this project. When I first arrived in Berkeley, my housemates, Taylor Perron, Becky Rosen, and Ken Haig, went to great lengths to help me get acclimated to graduate school, and to life in the Bay Area more generally. During my various research trips to the East Coast, Brian Berger, Laura Silberman, and Mathew Milner offered housing, diversion, and a sense of perspective that can only come from such old and dear friends.

My deepest debt of gratitude is to my family. Throughout graduate school, my mother and father were unflagging in their support and encouragement, and it is to them that I lovingly dedicate this dissertation. Lisa Sandhaus, Nancy Ludwig, and Kristy Wagner contributed to my research and writing in more ways than they know, and I feel profoundly fortunate to have such kind, generous, and supportive sisters. My aunt, Peggy Conboy, listened intently to all my new ideas, and her enthusiasm and optimism always left me feeling energized about my work. Although my grandmothers, Mary Wagner and Santa Gandolfo, and my great aunt, Mary Sapienza, passed away before I completed this project, their strength and wisdom were a constant source of inspiration.

Finally, I wish to thank Tess Hand-Bender, who has lived with this dissertation for the past three years. I am ineffably grateful for the boundless patience and love that she has offered throughout the writing process. As exhilarating as it is to reach the end of this journey, I am still more excited for all the new adventures we will share in the years to come.

## INTRODUCTION

Standing before a gathering of the Michigan Pioneer Society in 1873, William C. Hoyt recalled the fateful day, some thirty-seven years earlier, when he decided to leave behind his boyhood home in central New York and seek his fortune in the West. In taking this momentous step, he had acted on the advice of an elderly neighbor, who urged him, “young man, go west!” This “gray-haired savant” pointed out that, while their own community was fast becoming a “place for old men,” newer settlements on the frontier offered far better opportunities for young men attempting to make their start in the world. “You go and find a good location, settle down, attend to your business, grow up with the place, and in a few years you may be a member of Congress, or of the Legislature of your adopted State,” the old man explained. These words fired Hoyt’s youthful imagination, igniting fantasies of future prosperity and professional success. Shortly thereafter, he bid farewell to friends and family, and set out to try his luck in the newly organized territory of Michigan.<sup>1</sup>

Hoyt evidently had two motives for sharing this anecdote with his fellow members of the Michigan Pioneer Society. First and foremost, he wished to show how prophetic the old man had been. After all, in the years since his migration to the town of Milford, he had established himself as one of the leading attorneys in Michigan, and had gone on to serve as both a judge and representative to the state legislature. Hoyt’s other reason for relating the story was to correct a popular misconception about the origins of the phrase, “go west, young man.” This “trite saying,” he acknowledged, was widely attributed to Horace Greeley, the famed editor of the *New York Tribune*. Beginning in the 1830s, Greeley had been an outspoken advocate for westward migration, viewing it as a solution to the problems of unemployment, low wages, and deepening class divisions in eastern cities like New York. Although it is unclear whether he coined or even used the phrases “go west, young man” and “grow up with the country,” he did publish a number of editorials imploring ambitious and able-bodied youth to seek a new home in the West. Contrary to popular belief, Hoyt assured his audience, it was the “gray-haired savant” from his village, not Horace Greeley, who had first uttered this famous exhortation.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William C. Hoyt, “Early Recollections,” *Pioneer Collections: Report of the Pioneer Society of the State of Michigan* 5 (1884): 61. Hoyt originally delivered the address at a Pioneer Society meeting in Detroit on June 7, 1873.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* Although it appears that Greeley never used the phrase “go west, young man” in any of his *Tribune* editorials, he did issue very similar exhortations. In an 1838 editorial, for example, he wrote, “If any young man is about to commence the world we say to him, publicly and privately, Go to the West; there your capabilities are sure to be appreciated, and your energy and industry rewarded.” Quoted in Robert Williams, *Horace Greeley: Champion of American Freedom* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 43. The most thorough and persuasive analysis of the controversy surrounding the origins of the phrase “go west, young man” appears in Fred R. Shapiro, *The Yale Book of Quotations* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 322-323. Some scholars have erroneously claimed that John B. Soule, editor of the *Terra Haute Express*, used the phrase as early as 1851. For a persuasive debunking of this claim, see

Even on the face of it, Hoyt's tale seems too quaint to be true. What makes it all the more dubious, however, is that countless other men of his generation told variations of the same story in their autobiographies and oral reminiscences. One such memoirist was A.M. Beardsley, a farmer and miller in southern Michigan, who penned his autobiography at the age of eighty-one. Writing of his departure from New York in 1835—a year before William Hoyt's journey—Beardsley remembered the encouraging words of an uncle, who had instructed him to “go west and grow up with the country.” This advice, he insisted, was issued “in advance of the lamented Horace Greeley.” Edward Percy Reed, who migrated from New York to California during the Gold Rush, recounted a similar story in 1901. Reed claimed that, as a young man, he had sought career advice from Senator Sam Houston of Texas, who urged him to “go west into some new country, and grow up with it.” In yet another pioneer memoir, Iowa judge Francis Springer made the paradoxical claim that he had taken Horace Greeley's famous advice *before* Greeley himself had issued it. Springer recalled his “desire to adopt in advance the advice of Mr. Greeley, ‘Go west, young man, and grow up with the country.’” Whether or not these stories are true, they make one thing abundantly clear: for a generation of men who moved west in roughly the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the notion of “growing up with the country” had powerful resonance. As they reflected on their experiences and accomplishments from the vantage point of old age, this timeworn expression provided a powerful organizing metaphor for their stories of migration, frontier living, community building, and social mobility.<sup>3</sup>

Even today, the phrase, “Go west young man, and grow up with the country,” continues to occupy a central place in popular mythology about the West. From an early age, Americans encounter these words in a seemingly endless variety of texts, from history textbooks and scholarly monographs, to children's books and travelogues. Over the years, they have been featured in the titles of plays and Hollywood films, and incorporated into song lyrics, album titles, and the names of musical groups. More than any other slogan, these have become shorthand for the pioneering spirit and rugged individualism that many still perceive to be essential elements of America's national character. To be sure, decades of historical scholarship have made Americans increasingly conscious of the fact that this romanticized image of the frontier glosses over the violent conquest of the continent, and obscures the experiences of women, Native Americans, and countless others who shaped the course of western history. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that it continues to maintain a hold on the popular imagination.<sup>4</sup>

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Thomas Fuller, “Go West, young man!”—An Elusive Slogan,” *Indiana Magazine of History* September 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Beardsley, “Reminiscences and Scenes of Backwoods and Pioneer Life,” *Historical Collections: Collections and Researches Made by the Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society* 28 (1900): 137; Reed, “Autobiography and Reminiscence of Edward Percy Reed, San Jose,” 1901, Archives of the Society of California Pioneers; Springer, “Recollections of Judge Francis Springer,” *Annals of Iowa* 3<sup>rd</sup> Ser., 2, no. 8 (1897): 572. Another pioneer who claimed to have followed Greeley's advice before he issued it was Nelson Olin, who established himself as a construction worker in Milwaukee during the 1830s. In his pioneer memoir, Olin identified himself as one of many young men who “took Greeley's advice, of later date, ‘Go West, boys.’”

<sup>4</sup> Book titles that make use of these phrases include Coy F. Cross, *Go West, Young Man! Horace Greeley's Vision for America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995); and Elliott West, *Growing Up with the Country: Childhood on the Far-Western Frontier* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989). Examples of their use in popular culture include the 1936 Hollywood film, *Go West, Young Man*;

Perhaps because of its familiarity and deceptive simplicity, surprisingly little scholarly attention has been devoted to probing the meaning of the famous exhortation that William Hoyt, A.M. Beardsley, Edward Percy Reed, and Francis Springer cited in their memoirs. Consequently, a number of important questions remain unanswered: When did Americans begin to conceive of the West as an especially advantageous field for ambitious young men seeking to work their way up in the world? What social, cultural, and economic developments encouraged them to think about the frontier in this way? How did this conception of the West inform the way ordinary men and women made decisions about migration and settlement? How did it shape the way they understood their relationship to the places where they settled? In answering these questions, it is useful to begin by inquiring what, precisely, nineteenth-century Americans had in mind when they spoke and wrote of “growing up with the country.” As we start to unpack this hackneyed phrase, what emerges is a complex, yet coherent, set of ideas about frontier opportunity and pioneer masculinity—ideas with an interesting, important, and largely unexplored history.

### **Growing Up with the Country**

For William Hoyt’s generation, “growing up with the country” was a simultaneous process of physical maturation and upward social mobility. Distinctly masculine and entrepreneurial in nature, this vision of frontier opportunity was built around a notion of success that involved improving one’s financial circumstances, establishing a profitable farm, business, or professional practice, and achieving middle-class respectability in public life. What made the frontier so conducive to this type of mobility, the phrase implied, was its dynamism. At least in theory, as a new country became more densely populated, as it gave rise to new urban centers and flourishing agricultural hinterlands, early settlers would prosper in tandem with the surrounding countryside. The value of their land would increase, their farms or businesses would become more profitable, and they would be presented with a range of opportunities to serve as community leaders. More than cheap land, unexploited resources, or a high demand for labor, it was this unique relationship between self and landscape that antebellum migrants like William Hoyt saw as the key to personal opportunity in the West. Their outlook on the frontier was fundamentally speculative, since it focused on the future development of the land even more than its present condition.

The notion of growing up with the country also involved thinking about the frontier as a landscape of discrete places rather than a vacant wilderness. This aspect of the phrase is less obvious to contemporary readers because, nowadays, the word “country” is most often used as a synonym for nation state or as a designation for a rural area. In the nineteenth century, however, country generally connoted a relatively circumscribed region, such as the agricultural lands along a particular stretch of river or the backcountry surrounding a city or town.<sup>5</sup> Thus, growing up with the country entailed hitching one’s fortunes to a particular locality, be it an emerging agricultural district or a

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the 1980s rock band, Go West; a song titled “Go West” by recording artist Liz Phair (New York: Matador, 1994); and an album titled, *Go West Young Man*, by recording artist Michael W. Smith (Nashville: Reunion Records, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> A more extensive discussion of the evolving meaning of the word country will follow in Chapter 1.

burgeoning city or town. The importance of choosing one region or place and establishing a long-term commitment is subtly apparent in Edward Percy Reed's memoir, which quotes Sam Houston as saying, "go west into *some* new country, and grow up with it." It is clearer still in William Hoyt's account of his encounter with the "gray-haired savant" from his hometown. Rather than advising him to grow up with the country, the old man counseled Hoyt to "find a good location, settle down" and "grow up with the place." As these quotes suggest, the model of mobility captured in Hoyt and Reed's pioneer narratives entailed a sustained and mutually beneficial relationship between an individual and his chosen home.<sup>6</sup>

The present study chronicles the emergence of this masculine, place-centered, and speculative way of imagining the possibilities for personal advancement in a new country. Although it begins in the late eighteenth century and concludes at the close of the nineteenth century, the core of this story takes place in the four and a half decades between the War of 1812 and the Civil War. It was in these years that Americans began to describe the frontier as a place where ambitious young men could grow up with newly minted towns and rapidly settling agricultural regions. To be sure, this way of thinking about self and place did not fully displace earlier myths and conceptions of the frontier. Furthermore, although it was broadly influential, its greatest appeal and resonance was among white, American-born men. Nevertheless, it did have transformative effects on the way many antebellum Americans made decisions about whether to move west and where to settle. It also encouraged westering men to see themselves as place-makers, committed to building up new communities on the frontier. By the end of the antebellum period, this line of thinking would blossom into a new ideal of pioneer masculinity.

Scholarly inquiries into the cultural construction of frontier opportunity have tended to focus on widely published and broadly influential figures, including newspaper editors like Horace Greeley, booster theorists, politicians, and authors of popular fiction, travelogues, exploration narratives, and geographical texts. Although all of these individuals had a profound impact on the beliefs, expectations, and fantasies of westward migrants, this study foregrounds a different group of Americans who played an even greater role in the invention, elaboration, and dissemination of new ideas about place and social mobility in the West: the countless young men who came of age in the second quarter of the nineteenth century and who set out to begin their adult lives in a new country. Although they were overwhelmingly white, highly literate, and roughly middle-class in origin, these transients hailed from a variety of backgrounds, and their migration experiences and subsequent lives in the West followed many different trajectories. Like William Hoyt, a disproportionate number of them were raised in rural villages in New York and New England. However, they also included southerners and residents of older western states like Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, and Tennessee. While a majority planned to settle in towns and pursue careers as merchants, tradesmen, lawyers, doctors, or public officials, a significant number aimed to make a living from the land, either as small farmers or, less commonly, as planters. Compared to the general population of westward migrants, these men were far more likely to move west alone, although some were accompanied by wives and children. They were also less likely to follow well-established patterns of chain migration, and partly for this reason, many relocated multiple times before settling down for a prolonged period of time.

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<sup>6</sup> Reed, "Autobiography and Reminiscence," (emphasis mine); Hoyt, "Early Recollections," 61.

Above all, what these men had in common was that they reached adulthood at a time when dramatic social, economic, and political changes were transforming everyday life in the United States with dizzying rapidity. Between the War of 1812 and the Civil War, Americans' basic sensibilities about distance, place, and space were profoundly altered by innovations in transportation and communication, and by the emergence of a mass print culture that spit forth an unprecedented volume of geographical information. At the same time, a rapidly expanding market economy was fostering new ways of thinking about masculine virtue, success and failure, and the proper relationship between individual and community. All of these developments informed the way men like William Hoyt thought about the frontier as a field for personal advancement. Rather than passively internalizing new ideas about movement, place, and opportunity, these transients processed, interpreted, combined, and reworked them, generating novel understandings about the possibilities for social and economic mobility in a "new country."<sup>7</sup>

Young migrants formulated and disseminated ideas about frontier opportunity by participating in a variety of novel cultural practices. They pored over maps and geographical literature in an effort to discern the relative advantages of distant locales; they set out on prospecting journeys to evaluate possible sites for land speculation, farming, professional endeavors, or business ventures; and they developed new social protocols for discussing places and opportunities with friends, business associates, and strangers. Most importantly, however, they wrote. In diaries, letters, travel narratives, and pioneer memoirs, men like William Hoyt, A.M. Beardsley, Edward Percy Reed, and Francis Springer produced a body of writing about the western landscape that far exceeded that of any previous wave of migrants, as well as any other group of their contemporaries. Much of their composition took place during and shortly after their migration experiences, as they narrated periods of transience and corresponded with distant relatives and acquaintances, apprising them of conditions in far-flung regions of the West. In many cases, however, they continued to write about their westward journeys long after they settled down, revising, retelling, circulating, publishing, and preserving stories about how they came to reside in their adopted homes and how they subsequently grew up with the country.

Throughout their personal writing, men like Hoyt, Beardsley, Reed, and Springer frequently offered candid assessments of frontier living, sincere assertions of fealty to their adopted homes, and unvarnished accounts how they achieved personal success while working to promote the interests of new communities in the West. Yet their writing was also informed by personal desires, fantasies, and anxieties, and it was often crafted with a variety of social and financial objectives in mind. Most importantly, the letters, diaries, travelogues, and memoirs they produced were often calculated to resolve challenges and tensions that emerged from their mobility, especially the challenge of establishing, asserting, and maintaining a connection to one place in the face of unprecedented opportunities, incentives, and imperatives for transience. In responding to

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<sup>7</sup> For a compelling synthesis of recent scholarship on the economic, social, political, and cultural transformations that took place during the antebellum period, see Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). See also Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

such challenges, they created and popularized ideas about frontier opportunity that obscured some aspects of their experiences and exaggerated others, but that nevertheless remained influential, both during their lifetime and beyond.

### **Place and Frontier Opportunity in Antebellum America**

Antebellum migrants like William Hoyt were not, of course, the first Americans to imagine that new lands to the west, on the periphery of Euro-American settlement, afforded a faster and more open route to prosperity than older settlements to the east. Indeed, this basic belief had been a driving force behind both transatlantic migration and westward expansion since the dawn of the colonial period. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, reports from the British colonies routinely touted the New World as “the best poor man’s country,” where an industrious and modestly situated individual could acquire wealth and independence much quicker and with less labor and capital than in the Old World. After the Revolution, promotional literature and personal letters from the Ohio Valley made virtually the same claim about the possibilities for self-betterment in that region. Yet, even though exceptional opportunity had always been central to the very definition of a “new country,” William Hoyt and his contemporaries construed that opportunity in a way that was markedly different from earlier groups of westward migrants. In order to grasp the novelty of their place-centered and speculative outlook, it is necessary to look briefly at other currents of thought about the frontier that prevailed in earlier eras, and that remained influential throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup>

Over the past half-century, historians and literary critics have generated an immense body of literature exploring the frontier as a cultural construct, as a powerful and enduring myth that facilitated and justified the Euro-American conquest of North America. Their research has focused overwhelmingly on one particular image of the frontier: that of a primordial wilderness. Inquiries into the origins and implications of this myth have been fueled by a desire to correct the romanticized depiction of the frontier put forward by Wisconsin historian Frederick Jackson Turner in the 1890s. In his essay, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” Turner famously described the frontier as an area of “free land,” where the advance guard of a westering Anglo-Saxon civilization confronted both untamed nature and savagery. Blending scientific and poetic language, Turner argued that the struggle between man and wilderness, carried out continuously as the frontier receded westward, had been the source of American individualism and the foundation for the nation’s democratic institutions. Among the first scholars to deconstruct Turner’s formulation of the frontier, and to trace its long intellectual and literary roots, was Henry Nash Smith. In his path-breaking 1950 study, *Virgin Land*, Smith demonstrated the persistent power of the myth of a “vacant continent” from the colonial period to the twentieth century, and offered a rich account of the role of policymakers, poets, geographers, explorers, novelists,

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<sup>8</sup> For colonial-era characterizations of the New World as the “best poor man’s country,” see Barbara DeWolfe and Bernard Bailyn, *Discoveries of America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1997), 14; and James T. Lemon, *The Best Poor Man's Country: A Geographical Study of Early Southeastern Pennsylvania* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1972). For the application of this phrase to Kentucky during the early national era, see Stephen Aron, *How the West Was Lost: The Transformation of Kentucky from Daniel Boone to Henry Clay* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 83.

newspapermen, entertainers, and historians in its production and dissemination. In subsequent years, Richard Slotkin, Annette Kolodny, William Cronon, and numerous other scholars have further explored the invention of a naturalized and dehistoricized frontier, devoting careful attention to the complex interplay between myth and reality throughout western history. In doing so, they have exposed how the conception of the frontier as “free land” was mobilized by government officials, capitalists, and ordinary settlers as they worked to expropriate Native American lands and exploit the natural wealth of each successive West, from the colonial backcountry to the Great Plains.<sup>9</sup>

In exploring the image of the frontier as virgin land, scholars have identified two complementary fantasies that took shape during the seventeenth century, and that continued to saturate American literature, art, and political discourse at the time of William Hoyt’s migration. The first was the pastoral ideal, which characterized the frontier as a place of harmonious interaction between man and nature. At the outset of the colonial period, as British migration to North America got underway, depictions of the New World as a veritable Garden of Eden quickly became a mainstay of promotional literature, exploration narratives, and travelogues. Using gendered and often sexualized language, colonial authors described a nurturing, maternal landscape, waiting to be exploited. Although Native Americans posed a fundamental challenge to this fantasy, they were generally depicted as part of the natural world, as savages who, like wild animals, inhabited the land without rightfully possessing it. In the early national era, this pastoral fantasy blossomed into a broader agrarian ideology, articulated most elegantly and famously by Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson envisioned the vast North American interior as a refuge for yeoman farmers. Their ability to obtain land in the West, he suggested, would serve to limit the growth and corrupting influence of urban centers, and establish the basis for a stable republic for generations to come. Over the next century, Jefferson’s pastoral vision became central to federal policies regarding the acquisition of new territories, Indian removal, and land management. Its impact is evident in a wide array of legislation, from the Land Ordinance of 1785, which established a grid survey for western lands, to the Homestead Act of 1862.<sup>10</sup>

A second and equally powerful fantasy about the West was the wilderness ideal, which cast the frontier as a site of inevitable conflict between civilization and savagery. As the boundary of white settlement edged westward, this fantasy suggested, ongoing warfare between whites and Native Americans would have a continuous regenerative

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<sup>9</sup> Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” in *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: The Significance of the Frontier in American History, and Other Essays*, ed. John Mack Faragher (New York, N.Y.: H. Holt, 1994), 31-60; Smith, *Virgin Land; The American West As Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950); Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor As Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975); Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence; The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 1973); Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998). For an overview of the American Studies turn in the field of western history, see Kerwin Lee Klein, *Frontiers of Historical Imagination Narrating the European Conquest of Native America, 1890-1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 213-245.

<sup>10</sup> Studies of pastoral fantasies about the West include Smith, *Virgin Land*; Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land*; and Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford university press, 1964).



effect on Anglo-American society. The wilderness ideal was first expressed in colonial captivity narratives and accounts of early Indian wars. In these tales, whites found themselves immersed in the wilderness, where they regressed to a primitive state, and engaged in violent struggle with their Indian adversaries. In victory, they emerged as redeemed heroes of Christian civilization. Like the pastoral myth, this fantasy was elaborated in the decades after the Revolution. Literary works such as John Filson's popular autobiography of Daniel Boone and James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* chronicled the adventures of solitary, buckskin-clad frontiersmen, who were ennobled by their communion with nature and their battles with Indian rivals. As literary critic Richard Slotkin has persuasively argued, such historical romances performed important ideological work for an industrializing society, since they directed attention away from internal social divisions and toward the conflict on the frontier between a unified, white citizenry and a savage other. The wilderness ideal remained pervasive in American popular culture throughout the nineteenth century and it was prominently featured in the autobiographies of backwoodsmen such as David Crockett and Kit Carson, in the growing number of dime novels that appeared in the 1850s, and in the western shows of entertainers like Buffalo Bill.<sup>11</sup>

While it is clear that representations of the frontier as a primordial wilderness were widespread and influential from the colonial era through the antebellum period, it is equally apparent that early Americans who consumed these images also held more subtle, sophisticated, and realistic notions about the western country. Even in the eighteenth century, when migration into the Ohio Valley was still in its earliest stages, prospective migrants had access to sources of intelligence that offered a less literary and more nuanced picture of the natural and human geography of the region. Emigrant letters, geographical textbooks, maps, and oral testimony described a western landscape that, however foreign and untamed, also had clear territorial divisions, well-defined tracts of land, established systems of commerce, numerous settlements and military outposts, a varied topography, and complex social relations among various groups of European and Native American inhabitants. Although even the most scientific and geographically precise accounts were frequently exaggerated and romanticized, they put forward an image of the frontier that was far from an undifferentiated wilderness or a pastoral paradise. At times, literary fantasy and mundane geographical description intersected and comingled in the same texts. One especially poignant illustration of this phenomenon is John Filson's widely read promotional tract, *The Discovery, Settlement and Present State of Kentucke* (1784). Filson's work regaled readers with a heroic account of Daniel Boone's exploits as a backwoods scout and Indian fighter. At the same time, however, he devoted nearly half the text to a description of the boundaries, topography, economy, and population of Kentucky that read like a geography primer.

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<sup>11</sup> Slotkin, *Fatal Environment*, 51-68, 81-106. On popular narratives about solitary backwoodsman like Daniel Boone, see Daniel J. Herman, "The Other Daniel Boone: The Nascence of a Middle-Class Hunter Hero, 1784-1860," in *Journal of the Early Republic* 18, no. 3 (Autumn, 1998): 429-457; and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "Davey Crockett as Trickster: Pornography, Liminality and Symbolic Inversion in Victorian America" in *Journal of Contemporary History* 17, no. 2 (Apr., 1982): 325-350. Michael Denning explores the popularity of western dime novels among working-class Americans during the nineteenth century in *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (London: Verso, 1987), 157-66. On Buffalo Bill Cody, see Joy S. Kasson, *Buffalo Bill's Wild West: Celebrity, Memory, and Popular History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000).

Filson's text highlights the distinct yet complementary roles of literary fantasy and geographical description in facilitating the process of westward movement. The former spurred deep-seated desires for new lands and provided psychological and ideological justifications for expansion; the latter supplied migrants with the practical knowledge necessary to find their way west, secure land, and survive in a new country.<sup>12</sup>

Although frontier fantasies were always tempered by more nuanced geographical thinking, it was during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that popular perceptions of the North American interior most closely approximated the literary ideal of a vacant, primeval, and placeless wilderness. In this period, which spanned from the beginnings of British colonization to the first major wave of trans-Appalachian migration, several conditions encouraged ordinary Americans to view the territory beyond the western fringe of Anglo-American settlement as a distant, little-known, and mysterious region. The first condition was the relatively limited scale and scope of westward migration. Although significant pockets of settlement were already forming in the Appalachian backcountry and the Ohio Valley by the coming of the Revolution, British restrictions on trans-Appalachian migration served to dampen the drive for western lands. Even in the early national era, when settlement of Kentucky, Ohio, and several other territories began in earnest, bloody Indian wars and the difficulty of overland travel kept rates of westward migration relatively limited, at least in comparison to nineteenth-century standards. Furthermore, because of the considerable time, effort, and resources required to move people, goods, and information from the Atlantic Seaboard to early settlements on the Appalachian frontier, inhabitants of coastal settlements generally perceived this region and the territory further west to be remote and isolated. This perception was reinforced by the relatively limited supply of geographical information about the West available to the general public. As previously noted, eighteenth-century Americans did encounter a variety of printed texts, personal correspondence, maps, and oral testimony about the trans-Appalachian West, especially in post-Revolutionary years. Yet the absence of a truly mass print culture, and the fact that vast areas of the continental interior had yet to be fully explored and mapped, meant that the great majority of eighteenth-century Americans had only vague notions about the territory west of the Appalachians. Consequently, they tended to imagine the frontier as a relatively stark, linear boundary, separating wilderness from civilization, known from unknown, undifferentiated space from a landscape of places, regions, and states. In other words, their views about the process of westward movement and about the western landscape itself closely resembled the mythical frontier described by Frederick Jackson Turner.<sup>13</sup>

Perceptions began to change in the aftermath of the War of 1812, as a growing number of Americans began to adopt the place-centered and speculative vision of the West captured in the memoir of William Hoyt. Even in newly organized western

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<sup>12</sup> For an insightful discussion of the intersection of literary myth and geographical reality in Filson's work see Ann Fabian, "History for the Masses: Commercializing the Western Past," in *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past*, ed. William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), 223-238.

<sup>13</sup> On trans-Appalachian migration prior to the antebellum period, see Malcolm J. Rohrbough, *The Trans-Appalachian Frontier: People, Societies, and Institutions, 1775-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 15-156; Aron, *How the West Was Lost*; and Patrick Griffin, *American Leviathan: Empire, Nation, and Revolutionary Frontier* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007).

territories where white settlers were few, prospective migrants and speculators began to envision a geography of nascent cities, towns, counties, and agricultural regions, connected to one another by emerging arteries of transportation and commerce. Each of these places seemed to possess a distinct capacity for development that could be read in the landscape and compared with great precision. Although this outlook emphasized the growth of cities and towns as a central component of frontier development, it was not simply an urban vision, relevant only to those intending to settle or invest in new towns and cities. Even planters and farmers began to evaluate possible sites for settlement by speculating about the development of the surrounding countryside and the evolution of regional and national markets. It is worth restating that this way of thinking did not supplant images of the frontier as virgin land. Pastoral and wilderness fantasies remained very much alive in American literary and visual culture throughout the antebellum period and they continued to inform the desires and expectations of many migrants. It is also important to underscore that this conception of the landscape was no less fictive, no less a cultural construct, than the vision of a vacant continent. Not only did it involve imagining a landscape devoid of Native Americans and other prior inhabitants, it also entailed picturing thriving communities and busy networks of transportation even before they had begun to materialize. Nevertheless, this vision represented a significant departure from the more Turnerian conception of the frontier that dominated popular thought in earlier periods.<sup>14</sup>

A number of major economic, demographic, political, and technological developments laid the foundation for this new vision and each one will be discussed at greater length in the early chapters of this dissertation. Perhaps the most fundamental was the remarkable geographic mobility of the antebellum years. Following the War of 1812, the completion of major canal-building projects, the expansion of the nation's road networks, the proliferation of modern hotels, and the introduction of the steamboat and railroad made travel within the United States much faster and more affordable than in earlier periods. At the same time, territorial expansion, rapid urbanization, the elaboration of market capitalism, and events such as the California Gold Rush set Americans in motion as never before. Much of this transience consisted of intraregional migration, such as the flow of young men and women from declining rural areas of the Northeast to nearby commercial centers like New York City or factory towns like Lowell and Waltham. Yet the antebellum period also witnessed a marked increase in westward migration. In New England and upstate New York, a growing number of migrants set out for older western states like Ohio, or pushed further west into new territories like Michigan, Illinois, and Wisconsin. In the South, unprecedented numbers of planters abandoned their worn-out land, relocating their family members and slaves to newer cotton lands in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. By midcentury, 40 percent of all native-born South Carolinians, 30 percent of North Carolinians, and 25 percent of Georgians lived beyond the borders of their home state. While inhabitants of the eastern

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<sup>14</sup> The one study that most directly and thoroughly explores this image of the frontier as a landscape of rapidly emerging places is William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991). See especially Cronon's examination of nineteenth-century western boosters' theories about the process of urban growth on the frontier; pp. 23-54. This dissertation builds on Cronon's work by examining how ordinary Americans, and especially young westward migrants like William Hoyt, transformed prevailing ideas about the development of cities, towns, and agricultural regions into a broader ideology about social mobility in a new country.

states watched their neighbors depart for the West, residents of the western states observed even greater transience in their communities, as recently settled families pulled up stakes and moved further west. Whereas 50 to 60 percent of households in a typical New England community stayed put from one decade to the next, decennial persistence rates in frontier settlements were often 30 percent or less. All of this movement, along with the transportation innovations that facilitated it, had dramatic effects on popular sensibilities about space and place. For easterners and westerners alike, parts of the continent that once seemed almost inconceivably remote began to appear more proximate and accessible. Moreover, as the steamboat and railroad ushered in a more point-to-point style of mobility, shuttling travelers from one transportation hub to the next, Americans began to imagine the interior of North America as a network of places rather than a continuous landscape.<sup>15</sup>

Closely linked to increased mobility was another development that altered the way Americans thought about distant locales: the rapid proliferation of geographical literature. This process commenced in the early national period, as the United States began to experience what literary critic Martin Brückner has aptly termed a “geographic revolution.” Seeking to bolster nationalist sentiment in the young republic, pedagogues and authors such as Jedidiah Morse generated an unprecedented volume of geographical primers, maps, and atlases. Incorporated into school curricula and purchased for personal use, these texts familiarized the reading public with basic geographical concepts and map-reading skills. After the War of 1812, the accelerating pace of migration generated even greater demand for information about the West. The result was an outpouring of geographical texts offering detailed profiles of recently organized territories and newly established frontier settlements. In addition to well-established literary forms such as textbooks, travelogues, and exploration narratives, newer genres such as the guidebook and gazetteer made it easier than ever for migrants and speculators to begin comparing the advantages of particular counties, towns, and tracts of land, even before they began their westward journeys.<sup>16</sup>

Changing patterns of western land speculation also gave antebellum Americans new reason to envision the frontier as a dynamic landscape of places. Although the quest for profitable real estate investments had long been a driving force behind westward expansion, a far greater number of modestly situated Americans took part in land speculation during the antebellum period. This shift was partly a result of gradual changes in federal land policies between 1800 and 1820, which lowered the price of government land to \$1.25 per acre, and reduced the minimum quantity available for purchase to 80 acres. As land grabbing became increasingly frenzied in the 1820s and

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<sup>15</sup> Billington, *Westward Expansion*, 305. Daniel Walker Howe offers a succinct account of the antebellum transportation revolution in *What Hath God Wrought*, 203-242. On the impact of the railroad on perceptions of distance and space, see Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 33-44.

<sup>16</sup> On geographical literature in the early nineteenth century, see Martin Brückner, *The Geographic Revolution in Early America: Maps, Literacy, and National Identity* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture by University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Martin Brückner and Hsuan L. Hsu, eds., *American Literary Geographies: Spatial Practice and Cultural Production, 1500-1900* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007); and Anne Baker, *Heartless Immensity: Literature, Culture, and Geography in Antebellum America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006).

'30s, migrants and middle-class speculators scoured and scrutinized newly surveyed lands as never before, comparing subtle differences between tracts of land in the hopes of finding the most profitable investments. Changing land policies also spurred another type of real estate speculation: the planning and promotion of new urban centers. The explosive development of some these towns and the abject failure of others encouraged Americans to devote increased attention to discerning the prospects of places before making decisions about where to settle or purchase land.<sup>17</sup>

It was through personal writing that William Hoyt and his contemporaries processed all of these perceptual changes, transforming their geographical thinking into a broader ideology about frontier opportunity. As they explored possibilities for settlement, employment, business ventures, or real estate investments, men like Hoyt gathered and communicated geographical information and advice using a variety of new or newly popular writing practices. For those just beginning to contemplate migration or land speculation, the first stage of the reconnaissance process often involved writing letters to relatives and other acquaintances who resided in particular areas of interest. Although personal letters had facilitated westward movement in earlier periods, there was little precedent for the epistolary exchange of geographical information that took place during the antebellum period. Capitalizing on an increasingly efficient and expansive postal system, prospective migrants were often able to obtain current, geographically detailed, and individualized intelligence from a number of informants before deciding whether to relocate and where to move. Once their westward journeys were underway, young migrants and speculators continued to use their personal writing to survey the geography of opportunity. Some used travel diaries as a mnemonic tool, filling their entries with details about available tracts of land or conditions in various frontier communities. Others composed letters during and after their westward journey, keeping family members and peers apprised of their investigative activities and their decisions about land purchases and settlement.

Through their travel diaries and letters, transients gradually worked out novel conventions of geographical writing. Perhaps most importantly, they appropriated and modified an old Enlightenment protocol for evaluating places, using it to assess and compare the relative advantages of new towns and rural communities in the West. They also used speculative writing to project the future development of the landscape. Often, this involved intricate and highly imaginative predictions about how the natural features of the landscape would impact the growth of new urban centers and the development of regional hinterlands. Such speculative analysis borrowed heavily from the language and theories used by urban and regional boosters in a growing body of promotional texts. It also drew upon an emerging discourse about personal success and failure that was becoming popular among members of the emerging middle class. By combining ideas about personal prospects and the prospects of places, and by circulating their evaluative writing in a variety of forms, migrants ushered in a vision of the West as a unique field of

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<sup>17</sup> On the evolution of federal land policies, see Malcolm J. Rohrbough, *The Land Office Business: The Settlement and Administration of American Public Lands, 1789-1837* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 71-136. On the rise of townsites speculation, see John W. Reps, *The Making of Urban America; A History of City Planning in the United States* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1965), 349-352; and David Hamer, *New Towns in the New World: Images and Perceptions of the Nineteenth-Century Urban Frontier* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1990).

opportunity, where young men like themselves could achieve success and respectability by attaching themselves to rapidly developing frontier settlements.

### **Restlessness, Persistence, and the Reinvention of Pioneer Masculinity**

In addition to formulating new ways of writing about place, men like William Hoyt also developed new ways of writing about themselves, their mobility, and their relationship to the towns, counties, and states where they ultimately settled. In the same travel diaries they used to evaluate the landscape, and in the same letters they composed to communicate geographical intelligence to relatives and peers, these transients also spent a great deal of time narrating their decisions about movement and settlement. Some continued to write about their migration experiences for many decades after their westward journeys were over, revising and retelling their stories in elaborate travel narratives or pioneer memoirs. All of this writing about personal prospects, about geographic and social mobility, and about selecting a permanent place of residence further contributed to the place-centered conception of frontier opportunity that emerged during the nineteenth century. In order to understand why this cohort of migrants devoted such energy to narrating their westward journeys, it is necessary to examine a long-running debate over the cultural meaning and social consequences of intense demographic mobility that was heating up at the time William Hoyt made his way from New York to Michigan.

The assertion that Americans shared a singular and innate penchant for transience was already a commonplace by the opening of the antebellum period. Even before the Revolution, government officials and other social commentators had remarked on this supposed character trait and speculated about its implications. In 1774, Lord Dunmore, the last royal governor of Virginia, wrote with evident frustration about the “restlessness” exhibited by many colonists. They “acquire no attachment to a place, but wandering about seems engrafted in their nature, and it is a weakness incident to it that they should forever imagine that the lands further off are still better than those upon which they are already settled.” Like Dunmore, many observers saw this migratory tendency as a significant impediment to the refinement of American society and institutions. Without sufficient commitment to place, they argued, Americans would be loath to invest the time, resources, and labor necessary to improve their land and dwellings, and build stable, enlightened, and morally upright communities. Instead, they would tend to perpetually uproot themselves in search of ever more fertile lands or more prosperous settlements further west. In the post-Revolutionary decades, as the pace of westward movement quickened, the frontier became a locus for anxieties about the deleterious effects of excessive mobility on community life. Numerous authors expressed their disdain for backwoods settlers who elected to remain one step ahead of civilization, only settling down long enough to build a rude log cabin, clear the land, and begin cultivation. Because they chose to live in the wilderness, “remote from the power of example, and check of shame,” J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur wrote in 1782, inhabitants of the frontier tended to “exhibit the most hideous parts of our society.” Unsurprisingly, this critique of emigration was most frequently espoused by wealthy landholders and employers in eastern communities who watched with concern as their laborers and

tenants set off for destinations like western New York or Pennsylvania, or for points further west in the Ohio Valley.<sup>18</sup>

Although it had a precedent in earlier eras, debate over the social consequences of American restlessness escalated dramatically in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, as demographic mobility in general, and westward movement specifically, began to accelerate. In these years, the nation's wanderlust became the subject of endless commentary among aristocratic foreigners who visited the United States and published their observations in widely read travelogues. Undoubtedly the most famous was the young French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville. "In the United States," Tocqueville wrote in 1835, "a man builds a house in which to spend his old age, and he sells it before the roof is on; he plants a garden, and lets it just as the trees are coming into bearing; he brings a field into tillage, and leaves other men to gather the crops; he embraces a profession, and gives it up; he settles in a place, which he soon afterwards leaves, to carry his changeable longings elsewhere." A more light-hearted analysis of the nation's itinerant disposition came from the Argentine educator and statesman Domingo Sarmiento. As he toured the United States in 1847, Sarmiento was shocked by the behavior of Americans who, while lounging in hotel parlors and other public places, propped their legs up on tables and chairs, or pulled off their boots and began massaging their feet. Ultimately he concluded that this national foot fetish was yet another expression of the country's proclivity for migration and travel. "Among a people who advance their frontier a hundred leagues each year, set up states in six months, transport themselves from one end of the Union to the other in a matter of hours, and emigrate to Oregon," he remarked, "the feet would naturally enjoy the same esteemed position as the head among those who think and the chest among those who sing."<sup>19</sup>

While many antebellum Americans embraced the rage for westward migration, seeing it as a necessary step toward the fulfillment of the nation's manifest destiny, others were not so sanguine. As in earlier decades, the most vocal critics of excessive mobility

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<sup>18</sup> Dunmore to Lord Dartmouth, December 24, 1774, excerpted in Reuben Thwaites and Louise Phelps Kellogg, *Documentary History of Dunmore's War, 1774* (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1905), 371; Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, ed. Susan A. Manning (Oxford: Oxford university press, 1998) 47. Another author who commented on American restlessness during the early national period was Washington Irving. In 1809, Irving penned a humorous description of the "rambling Propensity" of New Englanders who left behind their native lands to settle in the backwoods of upstate New York. Their innate shiftlessness "continually goads them on, to shift their residence from place to place, so that a Yankee farmer is in a constant state of migration; tarrying occasionally here and there; clearing lands for other people to enjoy, building houses for others to inhabit, and in a manner may be considered the wandering Arab of America." See Irving, *Knickerbocker's History of New York* (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1904), 140.

<sup>19</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Thomas Bender (New York: Modern Library, 1981), 431; Sarmiento, *Sarmiento's Travels in the United States in 1847*, ed. Michael Aaron Rockland (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 149. German-American political scientist Francis Lieber wrote of the "migratory disposition of the American" in 1833, and Horace Greeley referred to the "nomadic tendency." See Lieber, *The Stranger in America, or, Letters to a Gentleman in Germany Comprising Sketches of the Manners, Society, and National Peculiarities of the United States* (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea & Blanchard, 1835), 287; and the *New York Tribune*, February 28, 1857. Visiting the United States in 1835, Michel Chevalier wrote, "If movement and the quick succession of sensations and ideas constitute life, here one lives a hundred fold more than elsewhere; all is here circulation, motion, and boiling agitation." See Chevalier, *Society Manners and Politics in the United States; Being a Series of Letters on North America* (Boston: Weeks, Jordan and Co, 1839), 309.

were entrenched elites from the eastern states, including planters, manufacturers, politicians, and religious leaders, who viewed emigration as a threat to the existing social order. In newspaper editorials, political speeches, anti-emigration tracts, and agricultural reform journals, they argued that the mass exodus for the West was sapping talent, wealth, labor, and political power from their states. It was also taking a very visible toll on the landscape, since farmers and planters were increasingly choosing to pull up stakes and abandon their exhausted soil rather than engaging in more sustainable agricultural practices. In 1841, one South Carolina planter railed against the devastating effects of emigration of both land and society in that state. “What impoverishment, what ruin, what desolation has the spirit of emigration produced in South Carolina?...Look at the South-west and see there the outpouring of her citizens and her treasure! Look throughout the State and see their deserted fields and waste habitations!...No one expects his children to live where he does, to inhabit the house he does, or cultivate the soil which he is improving.” As had been the case in the early national era, eastern critics of emigration suggested that a lack of commitment to place and community was hindering the improvement of America’s legal, moral, and educational institutions. “We are a restless people, prone to encroachment, impatient of the ordinary laws of progress, less anxious to consolidate and perfect than to extend our institutions, more ambitious of spreading ourselves over a wide space, than of diffusing beauty and fruitfulness over a narrower field,” the Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing wrote in an 1837 letter to Henry Clay expressing his opposition to the annexation of Texas. “Perhaps there is no people on the face of the earth on whom the ties of local attachment sit so loosely,” Channing concluded.<sup>20</sup>

By the 1820s and ‘30s, easterners like Channing were not the only ones voicing concerns about shiftlessness. Because frontier settlements frequently experienced rates of population turnover that were far greater than those of eastern communities, many westerners began to make similar arguments about the dangers of excessive transience. Even as they urged easterners to pull up stakes and start over in a new country, western authors, editors, and politicians increasingly condemned migrants who refused to settle down permanently and dedicate themselves to the task of building thriving communities. Without stable community life, they feared, many burgeoning towns and agricultural villages would fail to reach their full capacity for economic and moral development.<sup>21</sup>

What made geographic mobility such a contested issue in antebellum America was not simply the unprecedented number of individuals on the move; it was also the fact that all of this transience was taking place at a time when many Americans were beginning to reevaluate longstanding and deeply held beliefs about masculinity, social

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<sup>20</sup> “Extracts from an Address, delivered before the Greenville Agricultural Society, August 1841,” *Southern Agriculturist*, n.s., 2 (Jan. 1842); Channing to Henry Clay, August 1, 1837, excerpted in Thomas Brothers, *The United States of North America As They Are Not As They Are Generously Described* (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green & Longmans, 1840), 207. For a rich and compelling account of anti-emigration sentiment and its links to the agricultural reform movement in antebellum America, see Steven Stoll, *Larding the Lean Earth: Soil and Society in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002).

<sup>21</sup> The prominent western booster and missionary Timothy Flint, for example, decried the “instability of connexions” that characterized many frontier communities; see Flint, *Recollections of the Last Ten Years Passed in Occasional Residences and Journeyings in the Valley of the Mississippi* (Boston: Cummings, Hilliard, and Co., 1970), 76.



mobility, and the proper relationship between individual and community. Since the colonial period, popular notions about masculine virtue had been derived primarily from the political ideology of republicanism. The ideal of republican manhood attempted to strike a delicate balance between the pursuit of self-interest and the spirit of mutual obligation. On the one hand, it stressed the importance of individualism, independence, and the right to accumulate property as cornerstones of a stable political and social order. On the other hand, it suggested that a virtuous citizen was one who proved willing and able to sacrifice his own interests for the common good. In the decades following the War of 1812, this republican model of masculinity was shaken by a variety of developments, including the elaboration of market capitalism, the expansion of political democracy, the rise of evangelical Christianity, and, not least of all, the new incentives and opportunities for travel and migration. All of these changes contributed to a new entrepreneurial ethos that glorified unfettered individualism and relentless striving. By the 1830s—the decade when William Hoyt left New York for Michigan—these values were beginning to crystallize into a new paradigm of masculinity: the self-made man.<sup>22</sup>

Propounded by conduct-of-life manuals and autobiographical narratives, the ideal of self-made masculinity invested geographic mobility with novel cultural significance. For men who aspired to this ideal, leaving home and striking out on one's own became an assertion of masculine individualism and self-reliance. Throughout the antebellum period, western politicians, editors, and other boosters who sought to encourage westward migration increasingly framed their arguments using the language of self-made masculinity. The openness and dynamism of frontier society, they argued, made it an ideal field of opportunity for young men with the drive, pluck, and enterprising spirit necessary to succeed. "If any young man is about to commence the world," Horace Greeley wrote in 1838, "we say to him, publicly and privately, Go to the West; there your capabilities are sure to be appreciated, and your energy and industry rewarded." In the aftermath of the devastating financial panic of 1837, as economic conditions deteriorated in the East, some proponents of emigration went so far as to assert that those who did not seek their fortune in the west simply lacked the enterprising spirit of the self-made man. In 1837, a correspondent for the *Newark Daily Advertiser* made this argument as he called on all "the young and enterprising" to make a new start in Iowa. "That so many should continue to struggle with want, and contend with scarcity, until the energies of soul or body are exhausted, in our Atlantic towns, while such a field as this is spread out invitingly before them, is proof, either of a lazy disposition, or a depraved taste." Also in these years, eastern publishers churned out adventure-packed narratives about perpetually mobile western hunters and backwoodsmen like David Crockett, who epitomized the values of self-made masculinity.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> On the erosion of republican manhood and the rise of self-made masculinity in nineteenth-century America, see Michael S. Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 13-42; E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: BasicBooks, 1993), 18-30; John G. Cawelti, *Apostles of the Self-Made Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965); and Scott A. Sandage, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 2005).

<sup>23</sup> Greeley quoted in Robert Williams, *Horace Greeley: Champion of American Freedom* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 43; Letter to the *Newark Daily Advertiser* excerpted in John Plumbe, *Sketches of Iowa and Wisconsin*, reprint (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1948), 80. On the importance of geographical mobility to the paradigm of self-made masculinity, see Kimmel, *Manhood in*

At the same time, opponents of emigration formulated a critique of transience based largely on the model of republican manhood. Drawing on the same language about civic virtue and self-control that they used to condemn gambling, masturbation, and speculation, moralists cast restless mobility as yet another manifestation of the scourge of excessive individualism that was plaguing the nation. In sermons, speeches, religious tracts, and other literature, authors told of rational and upstanding men who became caught up in speculative fantasies about the possibilities for rapid upward mobility in the West. Invariably, these men were duped by deceitful speculators who sold them worthless real estate, and induced them to uproot their families and trade in their comfortable homes for a life of isolation and hardship in the western wilderness. Similar stories were told about naïve young men who left behind rural communities for the counting houses of New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. Cut loose from the moral influence of family and community, these fictional protagonists quickly fell victim to confidence men, prostitutes, and other urban predators. Through these moralistic tales, as well as a variety of other literature, opponents of excessive mobility extolled an ethic of persistence, calling upon ambitious young men to commit themselves to steady achievement within the context of stable community life.<sup>24</sup>

The nineteenth century did not witness a steady erosion of older values of place and community, as countless contemporary observers and some modern scholars of the period have suggested. Instead, the new entrepreneurial ethos that celebrated mobility emerged simultaneously with an unprecedented concern for connection to place. By the 1830s, young men who contemplated striking out for a new country were increasingly torn between these two outlooks on movement and settlement. On the one hand, leaving home frequently entailed abandoning basic obligations to family and community that had

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*America*, 13. Historian Daniel J. Herman makes a compelling case that the transient, solitary lifestyles of backwoodsmen like Boone and Crockett made them ideal heroes for young, middle-class men who left home to pursue career ambitions in urban centers of the East; see Herman, "The Other Daniel Boone," 432.

<sup>24</sup> Despite the vast body of historical scholarship on moral reform and the culture of self-control in antebellum America, little attention has been devoted to concerns about accelerating westward movement as a manifestation of excessive individualism. Studies of antebellum anxieties about young men who left home to seek employment in urban centers include Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); Allan Stanley Horlick, *Country Boys and Merchant Princes: The Social Control of Young Men in New York* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1975); Stuart M. Blumin, introduction to *New York by Gas-Light and Other Urban Sketches*, by George G. Foster, reprint (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); and Bruce Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women: Gender in the Antebellum City* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002). On the culture of self-control and the anti-gambling movement, see Ann Fabian, *Card Sharps, Dream Books, & Bucket Shops: Gambling in 19th-Century America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); and T. J. Jackson Lears, *Something for Nothing: Luck in America* (New York: Viking, 2003), 57-62. On the control of sexual desire and other bodily impulses, see David Greven, *Men Beyond Desire: Manhood, Sex, and Violation in American Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Stephen Nissenbaum, *Sex, Diet, and Debility in Jacksonian America: Sylvester Graham and Health Reform* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980); John F. Kasson, *Rudeness & Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990); and Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Rereading Sex: Battles Over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Knopf, 2002). On self-control and the temperance movement, see Graham Warder, "Temperance Nostalgia, Market Anxiety, and the Reintegration of Community in T.S. Arthur's Ten Nights in a Bar-Room" in *Cultural Change and the Market Revolution in America, 1789-1860*, ed. Scott C. Martin (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 217-245.

been essential to republican manhood. It could also be perceived as evidence of insufficient industry, perseverance, and determination. On the other hand, young men who stayed put despite the possibility of more rapid upward mobility in the West opened themselves to the charge that they lacked enterprise and go-ahead spirit. William Claytor, a twenty-nine-year-old aspiring physician from Maryland, summed up this dilemma poignantly as he contemplated relocation to Minnesota in 1856. It was bad enough that moving west entailed “abandoning” his mother “to the dependence upon her own exertions,” he lamented in his diary, but it also involved admitting that he was unable to establish a medical practice in his home state. “I hate so to ‘give up the ship,’ to abandon my determination to succeed in practice here,” he confessed. “To remain here, condemns me to a mere living for the rest of my life; to go west subjects me to many privations, and to a grand risk.”<sup>25</sup>

The opposing, yet interrelated ethics of mobility and persistence can also be seen in the way young migrants made decisions about where to settle and how long to remain. More than any previous group of migrants, these transients were acutely attuned to the potential benefits of selecting an advantageous place of residence and “growing up” with it. Accordingly, they expended an unprecedented amount of effort soliciting letters of advice, studying geographical texts, and traveling the frontier in search of the optimal site for a homestead or the ideal town to establish a professional practice or business venture. Although this diligent research was rooted in economic self-interest, for many young men, it also reflected an earnest desire to establish a meaningful and enduring connection to one community. By the same token, however, their unrivaled preoccupation with being well-located often compelled these transients to relocate multiple times throughout their lives, uprooting again and again in the hopes of finding a still more promising spot in which to make a permanent home.

Personal writing offered William Hoyt and others like him a critically important way to navigate the competing ethics of mobility and persistence. It is largely for this reason that they spent so much time narrating and re-narrating their decisions about movement or settlement. Some began the narrative process even before they left home, purchasing travel diaries and penning elaborate prologues that announced their reasons for moving west. Once their travels were underway, many used travel diaries to give shape and coherence and to their improvised mobility. Some exceptionally transient men continued to add to the same travel diary for years, stringing together intermittent periods of transience into one continuous journey. As they narrated their time on the road, migrants fashioned their travels as an act of entrepreneurial striving rather than a restless quest for an easier path to wealth and respectability.

If narrating movement had important social significance, explaining decisions about settlement was equally crucial. Once they made up their mind to put down roots in a particular locale, migrants frequently announced their decision by penning boosterish letters, filled with speculation about their personal prospects and the prospects of their new home. Although such communications were often intended to persuade friends or family to join them, they also presented another opportunity for self-fashioning. Many transients used their correspondence to assert their long-term commitment to their new place of residence. In addition to writing letters, some newly settled migrants revised and

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<sup>25</sup> William Quesenbury Claytor, diary, entry for September 3, 1856, in *Diary of William Claytor, 1849-1896* (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street Press, 2002), 1: 186.

expanded the travel diaries they had kept as they moved west. Some composed elaborate manuscript narratives, explaining how and why they had chosen their new homes, wherein young men could fashion themselves as founding fathers of their communities. Others commemorated their decision to settle down by composing pioneer memoirs, a new genre of autobiographical writing that began to take shape in the 1850s. Like boosterish letters, these migration narratives and pioneer memoirs often served a variety of purposes. In frontier communities that experienced rapid growth and high rates of population turnover, these texts offered a way to secure their place as leading citizens. Yet, having left home at a time of growing concerns about excessive transience and new ideas about the importance of establishing a lasting connection to one place, these writing practices also offered transients a way to demonstrate an ethic of persistence and a commitment to their new homes.

As they composed, revised, and circulated accounts of how they came to settle in emerging frontier communities, migrants like William Hoyt began to articulate a new conception of pioneer masculinity. Whereas the word pioneer had long been applied to perpetually transient individuals who remained outside the bounds of civilization, the masculine ideal that they constructed in their personal writing was that of an ambitious youth who made a lasting commitment to one frontier community, and who acquired wealth, success, and respectability while working to build and promote his new place of residence. This notion of pioneering, which emerged out of their speculative outlook on the western landscape, attempted to reconcile their competing values of transience and settlement. Like the paradigm of self-made masculinity, it extolled the willingness to pull up stakes and move west as an expression of self-reliance and go-ahead spirit. Like the older paradigm of republican masculinity, it also emphasized the importance of establishing a fixed abode and keeping self-interest subordinate to the interests of the community. As the later chapters of this study will demonstrate, few antebellum migrants conformed perfectly to this ideal, and many of those who identified with it most zealously remained remarkably mobile throughout their adult lives. Even when this was the case, however, personal writing offered these transients an opportunity to fashion themselves into a pioneer who selected a new home and “grew up with the country.” In doing so, these transients constructed a mythology about frontier opportunity that, despite its distortions, oversimplifications, and inaccuracies, remained pervasive for generations to come.

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Each of the chapters that follow explores a different writing practice that became popular among young men who migrated or traveled west from roughly the 1820s through the 1850s. The first half of the study focuses primarily on the uses of personal writing in evaluating, comparing, and speculating about places. Chapter 1 examines the role of emigrant letters in disseminating advice about westward migration and intelligence about frontier settlements. The basic conventions of the emigrant letter first emerged in the colonial period, as residents of Britain’s North American colonies worked to describe conditions in the New World for the benefit of those who remained behind. In the aftermath of the Revolution, migrants to the Ohio Valley appropriated these familiar conventions, composing emigrant letters that closely resembled those of

eighteenth-century transatlantic voyagers. In the antebellum period, however, the epistolary culture of westward movement began to change as a result of accelerating mobility, expanding literacy, improved communications, and most of all, the emergence of a more place-centered conception of the frontier. Bent on selecting precisely the right town or tract of land, prospective migrants and speculators increasingly sought letters of advice about a variety of western locales, and then compared these reports with information in guidebooks and other printed texts. Accordingly, residents of frontier communities began to fill their correspondence with more personalized advice and a more place-centered brand of intelligence, analyzing the advantages of their new homes with respect to other settlements and regions. These new epistolary practices both reflected and promoted a vision of the West as a landscape of nascent towns, cities, and agricultural regions, all tied together by emerging networks of transportation and commerce.

Rather than relying exclusively on emigrant letters or other second-hand reports, a growing number of antebellum Americans chose to assess conditions in the trans-Appalachian West with their own eyes. The rise of the prospecting journey, a distinctly masculine travel experience that became popular in the 1820s, is the subject of Chapter 2. Whether they were farmers, tradesmen, professionals, businessmen, or speculators, men who undertook these journeys found travel writing to be an invaluable tool for gathering geographical information and comparing opportunities for employment, agriculture, or real estate investments. Because their decisions often implicated family members, friends, or business associates, keeping a record of the reconnaissance process also became an important social performance. At a time when American print culture was saturated with cautionary tales about victims of “western fever,” whose disastrous decisions about migration or speculation brought ruin on themselves and others, travel diaries and letters enabled prospectors to demonstrate that their actions were dictated by thorough investigation and careful calculation rather than delusions of rapid and effortless gain.

Chapter 3 represents a transitional point in this study, as the focus begins to shift from writing about the western landscape to writing about the self. It begins by examining how real estate investors and booster theorists used speculative writing to plan and promote new urban centers throughout the Ohio and Mississippi valleys. At every stage of their work, from the search for an advantageous site to the marketing of town lots, these individuals used the written word to project the future development of frontier communities. The chapter then turns to the speculative writing of young migrants who relocated to newly established towns and villages during the second quarter of the century. In their letters to family members and peers, these transients engaged in a new and decidedly personal form of literary boosterism, one that focused as much on their own prospects as it did on the prospects of their chosen abode. By envisioning how the growth of their adopted homes would facilitate their own upward mobility, they began to transform speculative theories about frontier development into a broader ideology about place and social mobility on the frontier. In doing so, they also began to fashion a new model of pioneer masculinity, which celebrated their own willingness to settle down and build up new communities.

The final two chapters of this dissertation examine narrative forms of writing, probing how transient men used them to fashion or refashion the meaning of their

westward journeys. Chapter 4 analyzes travel narratives composed by young men who set out alone for the frontier and who often remained transient for months or years before deciding whether to settle permanently or return home. In the face of growing concerns about excessive transience, many of these wayfarers turned to travel diaries as a way to transform their false starts, dead ends, and repeated relocations into one coherent journey. Those who ultimately succeeded in purchasing land or securing gainful employment often continued to produce written narratives of their migration experiences in the years after they settled down. Some revised their original travel diaries into far more elaborate and literary travelogues; others started from scratch, composing retrospective accounts of their relocation for circulation in print or manuscript form. By simplifying prolonged periods of transience into one continuous search for a new home, and by emphasizing their forethought in choosing their adopted community, these men turned their narratives into performances of pioneer masculinity.

Later in their lives, men who had moved west during the 1830s, '40s, and '50s began to recount their earlier decisions about movement and settlement using a new form of personal narrative: the pioneer memoir. In these texts, authors wove together an account of their own geographical and social mobility with the story of their adopted communities. As a blend of autobiography and local history, this new genre was the clearest textual expression of the model of pioneer masculinity that emerged during the antebellum period. Chapter 5 traces the evolution of this narrative form, which took shape in the 1850s and became broadly popular in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Although men like William Hoyt, A.M. Beardsley, Edward Percy Reed, and Francis Springer had a variety of immediate social and financial motives for composing pioneer memoirs, their writing also represented the final step in a long-term process of using the personal writing to give meaning to their transience, and to assert and commemorate their connection to one frontier community.

## **SPIES IN THE LAND OF CANAAN: LETTERS OF ADVICE ABOUT EMIGRATION**

When Calvin Stevens wrote his first letter from Wisconsin in the winter of 1840, he knew precisely what sort of report his family and friends in Enosburgh, Vermont, desired. Eager to gratify them, he omitted the details of his long westward journey and said little of his efforts to secure shelter and employment in the village of Southport. Whatever interest his readers might find in these matters, Stevens was certain they would much prefer to learn about his new place of residence. “You are probably aware of this, that I am in Wisconsin, and you will naturally expect me to give you a minute description of the country,” he acknowledged. Before relaying his impressions, however, he began by issuing a request to all who might peruse his letter: “I must first ask you, not to say of me as was said of the 12 spies who were sent from the Camp of Israel to spy out the land of Canaan.” Unlike the biblical scouts who failed to recognize the many virtues of the Promised Land, Stevens assured his readers that he did not intend to “slander” his new home. Instead, he pledged to “tell the truth without exaggeration,” paying due attention to both the opportunities and hardships confronting settlers on the prairies of southeastern Wisconsin.<sup>26</sup>

Stevens offered this reassurance because he knew that his acquaintances in Enosburgh were relying on his testimony in determining whether to follow him to Wisconsin. To facilitate their decision-making, he proceeded to compare the conditions and opportunities in Southport to those in his home state. With regard to the profitability of agriculture, he found that land was both cheaper and more fertile in Wisconsin, but markets for produce were far less accessible than in Vermont. He went on to contrast the rough-hewn cabins in Southport with the sturdy dwellings and barns of his hometown, remarking that Wisconsin farmers were “suffering under many privations, and doing without many luxuries which the good people of New England would hardly consent to dispense with.” Lest his readers be discouraged, however, he assured them that the “rapid advances” taking place in the area would soon change the equation, rendering Southport a more advantageous place to live and work. “[I]n process of time,” he predicted, the area was “destined to become the richest part of the Union.”<sup>27</sup>

In sending his appraisal of Southport to prospective migrants in Vermont, Calvin Stevens was participating in an epistolary practice as old as European settlement in North America. Since the early seventeenth century, when British colonization of the Atlantic Seaboard began in earnest, emigrant letters offering geographical information and advice to readers back home had played a vital role in facilitating both transatlantic migration and movement into the American interior. On each successive frontier of Euro-American settlement, from Ohio Valley in the 1790s to the Upper Midwest and Deep South in the

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<sup>26</sup> Calvin Stevens to Samuel Stevens, November 20, 1840, Wisconsin Territorial Letters 1837-1852, Wisconsin Historical Society.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

1830s, newcomers had written letters that resembled Stevens's report. As one of the oldest forms of personal writing about the advantages of moving to a "new country," emigrant letters figured prominently in the cultural construction of the frontier as a unique field for economic advancement and social mobility.

Despite their long and venerable history, emigrant letters acquired novel significance for antebellum Americans like Calvin Stevens, who participated in an unprecedented surge of westward migration between the War of 1812 and the Civil War. Throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the emigrant letter was primarily a tool for speculators, boosters, and other individuals hoping to shape public opinion about the West. Even ordinary migrants generally expected their letters to circulate widely and they tended to fill them with generic advice and sweeping generalizations about the Eastern States and the Western Country. All this began to change during the second quarter of the nineteenth century, however, as far greater numbers of westering Americans used letters to convey geographical intelligence to distant friends and relatives. Sending and soliciting letters of advice about emigration became especially popular among young men who headed west to begin their adult lives in a "new country." For this class of emigrants, using the post to obtain personalized intelligence about specific frontier communities became a vital and symbolically important step in deciding whether to emigrate and where to settle.

Accelerating westward movement, expanding literacy, and improving communications networks contributed to the veritable explosion of emigrant letters that took place during the antebellum period. Yet popular enthusiasm for transmitting information about distant locales was also indicative of a pronounced shift in the way Americans thought about the frontier as a field for economic, social, and professional advancement. In the early republic, the prevailing image of the territory west of the Appalachians was that of a remote wilderness, composed of vast territories rather than discrete places. By the second quarter of the nineteenth century, however, this way of thinking began to give way to a more place-centered conception of frontier opportunity. Increasingly, prospective migrants envisioned even the most thinly settled regions of the trans-Appalachian West as landscapes of nascent towns, counties, and agricultural districts, each possessing particular advantages and disadvantages that could be evaluated with considerable precision. The rapid proliferation of emigrant letters during was both a cause and a consequence of this burgeoning obsession with calculating and comparing the relative advantages of new settlements and tracts of land.

This chapter explores the role of emigrant letters in ushering in new sensibilities about place and opportunity in the trans-Appalachian West. It begins by examining the epistolary habits of westward migrants from the Revolution to the opening decade of the antebellum era. Although the volume of emigrant correspondence increased steadily over this period, personal letters remained a relatively scarce and highly prized source of intelligence about the West. The second half of the chapter traces the growing popularity of emigrant letters during the second quarter of the century, as they became a vehicle for the exchange of more individualized advice about particular locales. For prospective migrants—and especially for young men preparing to leave home—selecting a new place of residence increasingly involved gathering and comparing reports from a number of informants in order to discern the best possible destination.



## A Correct Estimate of the Western Country

Emigrant letters assessing conditions on the trans-Appalachian frontier appeared with increasing regularity in Eastern communities in the decades following the Revolution. It was during this period that the first major wave of migration into the Ohio Valley got underway. With the end of British restrictions on westward expansion, a stream of planters and backcountry farmers from the Southern and Mid-Atlantic States headed west along the Wilderness Road, funneling through the Cumberland Gap, and then fanning out into Kentucky and other areas to the southwest. Migration to the Northwest Territory proceeded more slowly at first, as a powerful coalition of Native American tribes fought back against encroaching white settlers. The pace of settlement accelerated, however, following the Treaty of Greenville in 1795, which brought about a temporary cessation of Indian wars in the territory. Spurred by the promotional efforts of land companies like the Ohio Company of Associates and the Connecticut Land Company, caravans of families from New England, New York, and Pennsylvania made their way to Ohio and Indiana. Between 1795 and 1810, the population of white settlers beyond the Appalachians rose from roughly 150,000 to more than one million. These years represented a formative time in the development of an epistolary culture of westward movement. As land speculators, boosters, and migrants worked to apprise Eastern readers of the benefits and drawbacks of settling in the Ohio Valley, they began to appropriate many of the conventions of geographical description and advice-giving that had been used by trans-Atlantic migrants during the colonial period. Although the emigrant letter had yet to become a broadly popular form of personal writing, it played an increasingly important role in facilitating westward movement during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>28</sup>

Throughout the early national era, the vast majority of emigrant letters that Americans encountered were published in newspapers, promotional literature, and other printed texts. Although they appeared in the form of personal communications, most were self-consciously public texts, written to persuade a broad audience of the advantages or disadvantages of life in the West. In 1790, for example, the *Pennsylvania Packet* published a letter from a resident of Marietta, Ohio, purporting to offer disinterested advice to a friend back east. The letter was almost certainly authored by an agent of the Ohio Company of Associates, a land company that had founded the settlement two years earlier. In an obvious attempt to allay concerns about escalating violence between white settlers and Native Americans, the correspondent opened by noting that Indian relations had been “very peaceable” in recent months. He went on to survey the numerous advantages of life in Ohio, urging his friend to join him in the West. “You ask me my opinion about your moving here—I advise you to do it most seriously,” he concluded, “for with the same exertions that you make in New England you would raise produce to double the amount you do there, and have no taxes for several years.” In addition to promoting migration, one dispatch published by the *Commercial Register* of

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<sup>28</sup> Malcolm J. Rohrbough, *The Trans-Appalachian Frontier: People, Societies, and Institutions, 1775-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 89. On trans-Appalachian migration during the early national period, see also Roscoe Carlyle Buley, *The Old Northwest* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 1: 464-474; and R. Douglas Hurt, *The Ohio Frontier: Crucible of the Old Northwest, 1720-1830* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

Norfolk, Virginia, in 1802 also aimed to shape public opinion on political matters in the West. Written by “a gentleman” in Illinois to “his friend” in Virginia, the text began like any other emigrant letter, reporting on the state of society, agriculture, and commerce in the Kaskaskia region. It concluded, however, with a more polemical passage, calling upon the federal government to extinguish Indian land claims in Illinois and repeal the territorial ban on slavery. As these texts suggest, conventions of the emigrant letter offered speculators and boosters a means of lending credibility to their reports, since they gave the appearance of a sincere, intimate connection between sender and recipient.<sup>29</sup>

Although emigrant letters abounded in print, epistolary communication between trans-Appalachian migrants and their acquaintances in the East remained limited until the opening of the antebellum period. Despite rapid improvements in the nation’s postal system following the establishment of the Post Office in 1792, only the most accessible and densely settled areas of the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys enjoyed regular mail service during the early national era. Conditions began to improve in the decade after the War of 1812, as road networks in the region expanded. Between 1816 and 1822, the total mileage of post roads in Ohio increased from 2,778 to 6,428. The completion of the National Road between Washington D.C. and Wheeling in 1817 also expedited the conveyance of letters into and out of the Ohio Valley. By the 1820s, settlers in more populous states such as Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, and Tennessee could generally expect their letters to reach recipients on the Eastern Seaboard in under a month. When Elias T. Fisher wrote to his family for the first time after relocating to Xenia, Ohio, in 1817, his missive arrived at the post office in Worcester, Massachusetts, in just under three weeks. Notwithstanding these improvements, however, vast stretches of the trans-Appalachian West remained outside the postal grid in the early years of the antebellum period. In Illinois, a territory that settled rapidly following the War of 1812, only 53 post offices were operating as of 1825. Facilities for mail delivery were similarly underdeveloped in many other western states and territories.<sup>30</sup>

Another impediment to trans-Appalachian correspondence was the cost of postage. Because the Post Office initially relied on revenue from personal letters to subsidize the delivery of newspapers and other printed texts, postage rates remained exorbitant until the mid-nineteenth century. Like all single lettersheets traveling more than 400 miles between 1816 and 1845, the report that Elias Fisher sent to his family in Massachusetts cost twenty-five cents in postage, paid by his family upon receipt. This was no trivial fee, since it amounted to between one-quarter and one-third of the average daily wage for nonfarm laborers. Despite the expense of postage, the limited reach of the postal network, and the slow pace of mail delivery, however, literate migrants who settled in the trans-Appalachian West during the opening years of the antebellum period

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<sup>29</sup> “Extract of a Letter, dated Marietta (Ohio River), March 10,” *Pennsylvania Packet* (Philadelphia), May 12, 1790; “Extract of a Letter from a Gentleman in the Illinois Country (Indiana Territory) to His Friend in This City, Dated in September 1802,” *Commercial Register* (Norfolk, Virginia), November 24, 1802.

<sup>30</sup> William D. Overman, “Early Ohio Postal Routes,” *Ohio Archaeological and Historical Quarterly*, 55, 1 (January-March 1946): 21-29; Elias T. Fisher to parents, December 28, 1817 in “A Letter from Greene County, Ohio,” *The Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Quarterly*, 51 (1941): 341-342; Frank William Scott and Edmund James, *Newspapers and Periodicals of Illinois, 1814-1879* (Chicago: The Lakeside Press, 1910), xxix-xxx. For an overview of the development of the postal infrastructure in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, see Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

generally managed to maintain at least occasional epistolary contact with those they left behind. Nevertheless, all of these obstacles significantly circumscribed the possibilities for sending and receiving current, personalized intelligence about the advantages of emigration.<sup>31</sup>

Because they remained a scarce and highly coveted source of intelligence, emigrant letters written to friends and family often circulated widely. Some were read aloud in taverns or post offices, others were passed from hand to hand among relatives or neighbors, while still others were reproduced and disseminated in print or manuscript form. As a result of these processes, a few highly prolific or well-connected individuals often supplied intelligence to readers in multiple communities or states. When Yale graduate and aspiring lawyer Nathaniel Dike sent intelligence about Ohio to his hometown in Haverhill, Massachusetts, in 1816, his eight letters traveled far beyond their initial destination. Although Dike almost certainly composed his reports for a general readership, he addressed them to his brother, who had asked him to “treasure up and communicate” any intelligence that would be helpful in “forming a correct estimate of the Western country.” Upon receiving them, his brother evidently transcribed and bound the letters, sending the manuscript to a clergyman in Bath, Maine, more than a hundred miles away. Another avid letter-writer who became an informant for prospective migrants in several different states was Gershom Flagg. Flagg emigrated from Richmond, Vermont, to Ohio in 1816, and then removed again to Illinois in 1818. As a surveyor who had explored the region extensively, he was well situated to supply information about conditions in the West. After settling in Illinois, he spent so much time corresponding with curious relatives and friends in Vermont, Ohio, and New York, that he soon wearied of his epistolary obligations. “I am placed in such a situation that I have to write more letters than I receive,” he complained in one communication to his family. “I have to write to several in the state of Ohio respecting this country for altho’ you say the Ohio fever is abated in Vermont—the Missouri & Illinois fever Rages greatly in Ohio, Kentucky & Tennessee and carries off thousand[s].” The intense demand for Flagg’s reportage among readers in three different states underscores the basic point that, during the first decade of the antebellum period, personal letters from the trans-Appalachian frontier were both highly valued and hard to come by.<sup>32</sup>

Knowing that their letters were bound to circulate, informants like Gershom Flagg generally filled their correspondence with an impersonal form of advice about the benefits and drawbacks of migration. Most formulated their recommendations in masculine terms, assessing the chances for men of various ages, occupations, and financial circumstances to improve their condition by starting over in the West. In one of his first letters from Ohio, for example, Flagg offered his opinion about the advantages of emigration for a typical farmer from his home state. “I am as yet at a loss to know whether it is better for a man that has a farm in Vermont to sell and come here,” he

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<sup>31</sup> David M. Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 17-20. Henkin notes that, as late as 1843, it cost 50 percent more to post a letter from New York City to Troy than to ship a barrel of flour between the two cities.

<sup>32</sup> Nathaniel Dike to John Dike, April 14, 1817, Wheeling, in “Nine Letters of Nathaniel Dike On the Western Country, 1816-1818,” *The Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Quarterly*, 67 (July 1958): 341-342; Gershom Flagg to Ebenezer Flagg, February 1, 1818, St. Louis, in Flagg, *Pioneer Letters of Gershom Flagg*, ed. Solon J. Buck (Springfield, Illinois: Illinois State journal Co., 1912), 19.

confessed, “But I would advise every man who wished to buy a farm especially if he has no family to come here although many things are very inconvenient here.” Flagg offered similarly generic advice for manual laborers. “Mechanics of all kinds have a good chance to make money here as Mechanical labour is most intolerable high but a young man to work on a farm will not make one cent more than enough to clothe himself as well as people dress in Vermont.” Although Elias Fisher addressed his letter from Ohio to his parents, he, too, discussed the opportunities for farmers and mechanics in general terms. Citing the low prices for agricultural produce and the difficulty of obtaining cash for crops, Fisher concluded that “a farmer would not do as well as a mecanick” by relocating to the Western Country. Besides assessing the conditions for men of various backgrounds and occupations, some informants offered similarly generic advice about the personal qualities required to be successful in the West. “The first question I would desire an emigrant to put [to] himself before he examines the merits of any country,” James Noble explained in an 1819 letter from St. Louis, “would be whether allowing for the worst that might befall him, he had sufficient stock of resolution fortitude and perseverance to meet that event.” To be sure, correspondents like Flagg, Fisher, and Noble did, at times, use their correspondence to counsel particular relatives or friends who were contemplating relocation. Nevertheless, the impersonal advice contained in their texts reflected the role of the emigrant letter as a vehicle for disseminating information throughout broad networks of kinship and acquaintance.<sup>33</sup>

At the opening of the antebellum period, letters from the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys also tended to supply readers with general descriptions of “this country” that offered few particulars about the advantages of specific towns, counties, or tracts of land. To the extent that informants addressed particular places at all, their discussion usually focused on entire states or territories. In one of his dispatches from Ohio, Nathaniel Dike asked rhetorically, “What then are the inducements to the people of the Eastern States to emigrate to this country?” Dike answered this question by weighing the advantages and disadvantages of the entire state of Ohio with respect to the entire Atlantic Seaboard. Five years later, another correspondent, Joseph B. Meetch offered a similarly broad assessment of conditions in Illinois as he corresponded with his family in Pennsylvania. Although his description included vague references to “this country,” Meetch made it clear that he was referring to the state as a whole. “The advantages this state holds forth to the industrious, and enterprising is great,” he opined at one point. Even when correspondents focused primarily on conditions in their immediate vicinity, their assessments of the advantages of emigration were seldom based on explicit analysis of the growth and development of particular towns, counties, or rural communities.<sup>34</sup>

In offering generalized descriptions of states, territories, or the Western Country as a whole, migrants like Meetch typically adhered to a basic protocol for organizing geographical information that had been around since the Enlightenment. This system was familiar to many Americans because it was widely used in popular geographical

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<sup>33</sup> Gershom Flagg to Artemas Flagg, January 8, 1817, Springfield, Ohio, in “Pioneer Letters,” 9; Elias T. Fisher to parents, December 28, 1817 in “A Letter from Greene County, Ohio”; James Noble to James Noble, April 10, 1819, St. Louis, Western Americana Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

<sup>34</sup> Nathaniel Dike to John Dike, February, 1818, Zanesville, Ohio, in “Nine Letters,” 217; Joseph B. Meetch to parents, September 30, 1821, Franklin County, Illinois, Western Americana Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

literature, such as Jedidiah Morse's didactic text, *The American Geography*. It began with details about the landscape, including the topography, varieties of timber, natural vegetation, wild game, and access to water for drinking and hydraulic power. This portion of the protocol also encompassed intelligence about agriculture, such as the quality of soil, the conditions and typical yield for various types of crops, and the possibilities for maintaining domesticated animals. Meetch touched on all of these factors in his evaluation of Illinois. In describing the "three qualities or classes of land" in the state, he judged that the prairies and hazel barrens were "equal if not superior" to the best land in his home state, while the timbered areas were generally less fertile. The only topographical disadvantage he discerned was a lack of sufficient waterpower for milling. The second part of the protocol pertained to the vitality of local markets and access to national commercial centers. Addressing this aspect of life in Illinois, Meetch noted that New Orleans was "the emporium of commerce...for this western country." Although he acknowledged that prices were depressed at the moment, he noted the Illinois farmers could easily transport produce to market via flatboats. The third set of considerations that emigrant letters addressed pertained to the composition of society, and the state of religious institutions, schools, and voluntary organizations. Revealing his ethnic and nationalistic prejudices, Meetch lamented the number of French-speaking residents in the "old settled parts" of the state, but he observed that virtually all newcomers spoke English. Noting the abundance of schools and churches, he opined that Illinois was making "great progress in civilization." A final set of geographical factors that most emigrant letters assessed related to the "health" of the country. According to the prevailing medical theories, all places were characterized by a distinctive alignment of environmental factors that rendered them healthy or sickly. Commenting on the "general health of the state," Meetch informed his family that "some parts of it is sickly and some parts is healthy as an other country." In addition to reporting on the salubrity of the country, correspondents often noted the prevalence of lowlands and swamps, both of which were thought to breed diseases like the dreaded "fever and ague."<sup>35</sup>

Even when they focused on one state or territory, emigrant letters composed during the early nineteenth century frequently summed up the benefits and drawbacks of migration by making broad, binary comparisons between East and West. In this regard, too, they reflected and cultivated an image of the western territories as undifferentiated spaces. Nathaniel Dike's dispatches from Ohio abounded with comparative analysis of the "Western Country" versus the "Eastern States." In an 1818 letter apprising his brother of the depressed economic conditions in his new place of residence, he remarked that there was "as much distress at present in the Western country as there ever was in any of the old states." Writing at roughly the same time, Sam Berrian, a land speculator involved in planning a new town in Illinois, drew even broader comparisons between the eastern and western sections of the country. Informing an acquaintance in New York of

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid. For a compelling account of popular thought regarding the geographical determinants of health and disease in the nineteenth-century West, see *The Health of the Country: How American Settlers Understood Themselves and Their Land* (New York: Basic Books, 2002). On Jedidiah Morse's role in the cultivation of geographic literacy, see Martin Brückner, *The Geographic Revolution in Early America: Maps, Literacy, and National Identity*, (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture by University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

the advantages of westward migration, he wrote, “I have explored the western wilds in almost every direction and am fully convinced, from the uncommon luxuriance of its soil, the great navigable waters with which it abounds and a genial climate which, whilst it fructifies the earth, exhilarates the spirits and animates the industry of man, that it will ere long rival the Atlantic States in literature, the liberal arts, and all the refined amusements, which add a zest to 'social life and far surpass it in wealth and population.”<sup>36</sup>

The prevalence of pointed binary comparisons between x and y was linked to several important features of trans-Appalachian migration during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. First, by characterizing emigration as a choice between East and West, correspondents were registering a debate over the social consequences of accelerating westward movement that had been growing increasingly contentious since the late eighteenth century. As migration intensified, politicians, employers, and landholders from the upper echelon of Eastern society became increasingly alarmed over the growing exodus for the Western Country. Emigration, they feared, was destabilizing the traditional social order in their communities and draining labor, capital, and political power from their states. In the North, opinions about emigration often split along class lines. As urban craftsmen and laborers left their jobs and headed west, manufacturers and other employers in Northern cities and towns launched vigorous campaigns to stem the tide of emigration. A similar process played out in agricultural communities from Maine to Pennsylvania, where genteel landholders, concerned not only about the loss of laborers or tenants, began to condemn the many small farmers who set out for the Ohio Valley. Opposition to emigration also intensified in the South, as planters left behind their exhausted soil for new lands in the East. In the first decade after the War of 1812, as the pace of westward movement increased markedly, opponents of emigration published a barrage of newspaper editorials, pamphlets, and monographs urging readers to remain loyal to their native states and communities.<sup>37</sup>

Whereas western boosters used the form of the emigrant letter to encourage migration, their opponents used it to convince Easterners to stay put. In 1817, for example, the *Salem Gazette* published a series of discouraging letters from a “Gentleman in Ohio to his friend in Massachusetts” that were evidently intended to stem the exodus of local mechanics. Engaging in a sort of reverse boosterism, the author noted that, aside from its rich soil, the “Western Country” had no real advantages over New England. “We have no better laws than you have,” he averred, “no better opportunities for acquiring science, or cherishing our religion; no better neighborhoods and societies; no better means of intercourse between remote parts of the States; no better markets for our produce; but in most of these points we are far, very far, behind you.” These reports provoked a counter-attack from James Kimball, a member of the Salem Charitable Mechanic Association, who saw the departure of workers as a natural and positive response to the low wages and poor treatment they received at home. Kimball circulated a travel diary that he allegedly wrote during a journey to the Ohio, offering a far more

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<sup>36</sup> Nathaniel Dike to John Dike, February, 1818, Zanesville, Ohio, in “Nine Letters,” 215; Sam Berrian to Dr. I.M. Francis, March 26, 1818 in “Letter of Sam G. Berrian, St. Louis, to Dr. I.M. Francis, New York,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 2, no. 1 (April 1918): 62-63.

<sup>37</sup> Steven Stoll examines the rise of anti-emigration sentiment in his study of nineteenth-century agricultural reform, *Larding the Lean Earth: Soil and Society in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 69-169.

positive account of conditions in the region. In one passage, he directly addressed the letters published in the *Gazette*, arguing that they were the work of greedy employers who “do not pay mechanics as they should do.” Two years later, another set of anti-emigration letters were published in a pamphlet titled, *Letters from the West, or, A Caution to Emigrants*, which was directed at farmers in upstate New York. The author, John Stillman Wright, claimed to be “a plain practical farmer,” who had traveled to Ohio to assess the advantages of emigration. His correspondence painted a bleak picture of life beyond the Appalachians. “I have no hesitation in saying, that I would rather have a conveniently situated farm in one of the New-England states, or in New-York, than almost any that could be offered in the south western country.” Because emigration was such a polarizing issue, the letters of authors on both sides of the debate tended to rely on binary comparisons between the Western Country and the Eastern States.<sup>38</sup>

The debate over emigration had clear and profound effects on the epistolary culture of westward movement throughout the early nineteenth century. Aware that their letters would influence large numbers of prospective migrants, correspondents who reported back from the trans-Appalachian West often saw themselves as participants in a contentious public dialog taking place in their native states. Accordingly, many felt compelled to state their general opinion, either for or against emigration, and to draw broad contrasts between their new world and the world they left behind. Moreover, because emigrant letters often circulated far beyond the author’s own community, it was sometimes difficult for Eastern readers to discern authentic personal communications from the writings of pro- or anti-emigration polemicists. Several passages in Nathaniel Dike’s letters suggest that they may have been composed for the express purpose of squelching out-migration from New England. At the conclusion of his final letter, Dike lamented the “spirit of emigration,” which had “loosened the foundations of society, severed the ties of kindred, and set mankind afloat as it were, upon a tumultuous sea, without any settled destination.”<sup>39</sup>

The comparisons between East and West that pervaded early emigrant letters also reflected prevailing sensibilities about distance, place, and space. Throughout the early nineteenth century, travel into and within the trans-Appalachian West was slow and arduous. In 1800, for example, an overland journey from New York City to Cincinnati took approximately three weeks. By contrast, the dramatic improvements in transportation that took place during the antebellum period would reduce travel time between these cities to one week in 1830, and roughly two days in 1857. The time, effort, and expense required for travelers from the East to reach destinations in the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys fostered a perception of the region as remote and separate from the Eastern states. This sensibility was reinforced by the dearth of geographical information about the region during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Although the early national period saw a marked increase in the quantity of maps, atlases, and geographical literature published in the United States, few texts offered in-depth and

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<sup>38</sup> “Extracts from a Letter from a Gentleman in Ohio to his Friend in Massachusetts,” *Salem Gazette* (Salem, Massachusetts), July 29, 1817; James Kimball diary published in “A Journey to the West in 1817,” *Historical Collections of the Essex Institute* 8, no. 4 (December 1866): 235; John Stillman Wright, *Letters from the West, or, A Caution to Emigrants Being Facts and Observations Respecting the States of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Some Parts of New-York, Pennsylvania, and Kentucky*, (Salem, N.Y.: Dodd & Stevenson, 1819), 64.

<sup>39</sup> Nathaniel Dike to John Dike, February, 1818, Zanesville, Ohio, in “Nine Letters,” 219.

current intelligence about western territories other than Kentucky and Ohio. This encouraged ordinary Americans to think and write about the trans-Appalachian West as a world apart. In an 1818 letter from St. Louis, Sam Berrian characterized the Appalachian Mountains as a stark dividing line between East and West. “The people of the Atlantic States have no conception of the extreme fertility of the land West of the Mts. and the facilities of amassing immense wealth with moderate means,” he explained. Because correspondents like Berrian tended to conceive of trans-Appalachian migration as a choice between two worlds, it made sense for them to fill their letters with broad statements about the advantages and disadvantages of the Western Country.<sup>40</sup>

### **Dispatches from a Frontier in Motion**

Although many of the basic conventions of the emigrant letter persisted throughout the nineteenth century, the antebellum period witnessed significant changes in the epistolary practices of westward migrants. Some changes pertained to the way transient Americans wrote about place and opportunity on the frontier; others to the social practices surrounding the exchange of information and advice. All were closely related to one central development: the emergence of the emigrant letter as a more popular genre of personal writing. The second quarter of the century saw not only a substantial increase in the volume of these communications, but also a gradual democratization of the practice. Whereas speculators, boosters, anti-emigration partisans, and a few highly prolific correspondents like Gershom Flagg and Nathaniel Dike had supplied the lion’s share of available intelligence about the West throughout the early national period, a far greater number of Americans took part in sending and soliciting advice about emigration as the antebellum period wore on.

Driving the proliferation of emigrant letters was a rush of migration into and within the trans-Appalachian West beginning in the mid-1820s. The acceleration of westward movement was due, in part, to a vigorous campaign to extinguish Native American land titles east of the Mississippi. The expropriation of Indian land had been gathering steam since the conclusion of the War of 1812, as federal agents coerced tribe after tribe into ceding their traditional domains. During the presidency of Andrew Jackson, the process entered a new phase, as more aggressive and wholesale removal programs got underway. Between 1832 and 1837, 190,879,937 acres of Indian land were secured in the states of the Old Northwest.<sup>41</sup> To the south, the dispossession and deportation of the Five Civilized Tribes following the Indian Removal Act of 1830 added broad swaths of territory from Georgia to Mississippi to the public domain. Economic, technological, and infrastructural developments also paved the way for increased migration. For white settlers, the lure of inexpensive government land was greatly enhanced by rising prices for cotton and other produce as the nation recovered from the Panic of 1819. The introduction of steamboats on the western waters and the completion of major internal improvement projects, most notably the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825, rendered commercial agriculture more profitable and facilitated the flow of settlers

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<sup>40</sup> Sam Berrian to Dr. I.M. Francis, March 26, 1818 in “Letter of Sam G. Berrian, St. Louis, to Dr. I.M. Francis, New York,” 62-63.

<sup>41</sup> Ray Allen Billington, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1974), 289.



into the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys. Collectively, these developments transformed the trans-Appalachian frontier into a crucible of demographic mobility.<sup>42</sup>

As older and more populous western states continued to fill rapidly, emigrants began to spill into previously remote areas of the trans-Appalachian frontier. While Ohio and Indiana remained popular destinations for emigrants from the Northeast, farmers from New England and western New York began to shift their attention toward Illinois, southern Michigan, and southeastern Wisconsin. In Virginia and the Carolinas, planters departed with their slaves, some bound for the Black Belt of Mississippi and Alabama, others for more distant destinations in Arkansas and Texas. As one newspaper correspondent from Montgomery, Alabama, put it, “It would seem as if North and South Carolina were pouring forth their population in swarms.” Indeed, the exodus from South Carolina grew so intense that the state’s delegation to the House of Representatives actually declined from nine representatives in 1840, to seven in 1850, and then six in 1860. Population turnover was even higher in many areas of the trans-Appalachian West, as newcomers who had only recently cleared and improved their farms sold out and removed once again. In addition to internal migration, German immigrants began to funnel into to Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Iowa, especially following the political tumult of 1848. Substantial numbers of Irish, Scandinavian, Swiss, and Dutch immigrants also arrived in the Old Northwest during these years. To be sure, not all participants in this rush of westward movement used personal letters to communicate advice and information to readers back home. Still, all of this dislocation created a variety of novel opportunities and incentives for the exchange of emigrant letters.<sup>43</sup>

As mobility heightened the demand for geographical intelligence, expanding literacy enabled more transient Americans to serve as informants for those who remained behind. By the 1820s, writing was rapidly becoming a skill of basic literacy, taught simultaneously with reading in primary schools nationwide. As pedagogical attention to the subject increased, an array of new composition textbooks and instructional literature appeared on the American literary market. Besides familiarizing students with the conventions of epistolary writing, composition manuals frequently imparted basic techniques for describing urban, pastoral, and wilderness landscapes.<sup>44</sup> A typical exercise

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<sup>42</sup> Rohrbough, *The Trans-Appalachian Frontier*, 157-218.

<sup>43</sup> Dispatch from Montgomery, Alabama, reprinted in *Niles Weekly Register*, 4<sup>th</sup> ser., 8 (March-September, 1833): 222. On antebellum migration to the Deep South, see Joan E. Cashin, *A Family Venture: Men and Women on the Southern Frontier* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); and James David Miller, *South by Southwest: Planter Emigration and Identity in the Slave South* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002). On the decline in South Carolina’s congressional delegation, see Stoll, *Larding the Lean Earth*, 71. John Mack Faragher discusses the high rates of population turnover in Sangamon County, Illinois in *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 50. For an overview of immigrant colonies in the Old Northwest, see Rohrbough, *Trans-Appalachian Frontier*, 321-332.

<sup>44</sup> On the history of composition in nineteenth-century America, see Michael S. Halloran, “From Rhetoric to Composition: The Teaching of Writing in America to 1900,” in *A Short History of Writing Instruction from Ancient Greece to Twentieth-Century America*, ed. James Murphy (Davis, Calif: Hermagoras Press, 1990); Lucille M. Schultz, *The Young Composers: Composition’s Beginnings in Nineteenth-Century Schools* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999); and Thomas Augst, *The Clerk’s Tale: Young Men and Moral Life in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 66-71. On the teaching of epistolary writing, see Lucille M. Schultz, “Letter-Writing Instruction in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Schools,” in *Letter Writing As a Social Practice*, ed. David Barton and Nigel Hall (Philadelphia:

in Charles Morley's *A Practical Guide to Composition* (1838) required students to write a letter to a sibling from Albany describing the city's institutions, churches, schools, societies, and the occupations of the people. Such assignments fostered literate thinking about place and provided young writers with guidelines for organizing spatial information.<sup>45</sup>

One fictional letter written by fourteen-year-old Charles Chase in 1848 illustrates how such composition exercises prepared antebellum students to evaluate even the most exotic of landscapes. While attending school in Worcester, Massachusetts, Chase composed a highly imaginative dispatch from the moon, detailing its topography and climate; the bizarre customs of the inhabitants; and a monarchical system of government, headed by the Man in the Moon. Despite his creative choice of setting, Chase's missive included a passage about the lunar landscape that would not have been out of place in an emigrant letter from Illinois:

The soil is very fertile being almost entirely level, and you can see large fields of nearly a hundred acres covered with grain, and not a fence or a single undulation to mar the view. The principal productions are corn, wheat, and potatoes. These are sold in a large market, nearly a mile in length where all business is transacted.

Chase's assignment highlights the decline of an older conception of composition as the study of belles lettres. In contrast to the Romantic mode of writing taught to genteel scholars in earlier periods, antebellum students were exposed to a more utilitarian form of geographical writing that was ideal for an increasingly mobile American populace. As a result of this transition, a growing number of young men and women left home well equipped to record and communicate the features of the western landscape.<sup>46</sup>

One consequence of the spread of writing instruction was an increase in the number of women who took part in sending and soliciting intelligence about the West. Although men continued to write the vast majority of emigrant letters, and although the practice took on new meaning as a masculine ritual (as will be discussed shortly), women became far more active as frontier informants during the second quarter of the century. Orpha Ranney, whose writing abilities evidently surpassed those of her new husband, handled the reporting duties upon their relocation to Wisconsin in 1847. "I have been trying to have Edward fill this page and tell you about Wisconsin," she wrote to her sister in Connecticut, "but he says he cant write nor compose well enough to write [and] I shall

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John Benjamins Pub, 2000), 109-130; David M. Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2006), 115-118; Tamara Plakins Thornton, *Handwriting in America: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); and Susan Miller, *Assuming the Positions Cultural Pedagogy and the Politics of Commonplace Writing* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998).

<sup>45</sup> Charles Morley, *A Practical Guide to Composition: With Progressive Exercises in Prose and Poetry* (Hartford: Published by R. White, 1838). One example of such an exercise in epistolary writing is a fictional letter from New York City composed by ten-year-old Mary Ware Allen-Johnson while attending a private academy in Bookline Massachusetts. See Mary Ware Allen-Johnson, school composition, September, 1829, Allen-Johnson Family Papers, Box 23, Folder 4, American Antiquarian Society.

<sup>46</sup> Charles A. Chase, composition assignment, March 16, 1848, Chase Family Papers, Box 5, Folder 5, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts. On the transition from belles lettres to a more utilitarian form of writing instruction, see Halloran, "From Rhetoric to Composition"; and Jean Ferguson Carr, Stephen L. Carr, and Lucille M. Schultz, *Archives of Instruction: Nineteenth-Century Rhetorics, Readers, and Composition Books in the United States* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005).

not wait any longer but tell you what I think about it.” Women like Ranney usually directed their advice about emigration toward family members, and their letters played an important role in facilitating chain migration within networks of kin. In lobbying her siblings to join her in the West, Ranney acknowledged that there were “a great many bug bears raised if anyone talks of going to Wisconsin,” but she insisted that none of her relations could “know any thing about it till they try.” After her arrival in Ohio in 1834, Mary Mills wrote to her brother in New England, counseling him about the possibilities for upward mobility in the state. “[H]ad I a good farm pleasantly situated and paid for in VT I should not be at the trouble to sell and move here,” she confessed. Nevertheless, she urged her brother to come to Ohio, concluding, “I can but think you would be better off.”<sup>47</sup>

A final development that facilitated the circulation of emigrant letters was the continued expansion and improvement of the nation’s postal network. As regular stagecoach lines began to replace post riders during the 1820s, the conveyance of mail within the Ohio and Mississippi valleys grew much more efficient. The first stagecoach line in Illinois linked Kaskaskia and St. Louis in 1819, and stage service began in Indiana the following year when a route was established between Vincennes and Louisville. Within two decades, mail stages were traversing all but the most remote of areas east of the Mississippi. Although the erratic nature of steamboat travel on the western rivers rendered these vessels unsuitable for the conveyance of mail in the interior, they had a dramatic impact on communication in the Great Lakes Region. In Detroit, delivery of the eastern mail shifted from a weekly schedule in 1823 to a daily schedule in little more than a decade. The impact of these improvements is evident in the letter-writing habits of Joseph V. Quarles, a lawyer from Ossipee, New Hampshire, who relocated to Southport, Wisconsin, in 1837. Although the Wisconsin Territory was still in the early stages of settlement at the time of Quarles’s arrival, the newly established village of Southport enjoyed regular and highly efficient communication with the East. Steamboats plying between Chicago and Buffalo carried mail to and from the village every few days, and Quarles often timed his letters to coincide with their departure. In a lengthy postscript to one missive, he informed his readers, “a steam boat has just past but I was too late or might have saved 2 weeks time in transmission.” When delivery went smoothly, his letters made their way to Ossipee in as few as fifteen days. The relative ease of communication evidently reinforced Quarles’s zeal for extolling the virtues of Wisconsin. Over a span of ten months beginning in the summer of 1838, he posted at least seven enthusiastic letters to his former neighbors.<sup>48</sup>

Whereas the high price of postage encouraged informants like Quarles to address multiple readers at once, a series of rate reductions later in the antebellum period made it far more feasible to supply individual relatives and friends with personalized advice. In 1845, postage for letters traveling farther than three hundred miles was reduced from

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<sup>47</sup> Orpha Ranney to Adah Holcomb, November 21, 1847, Sun Prairie, Orpha Ranney Papers, 1847-1898, 1914, 1934, Wisconsin Historical Society; Mary L. to Philo Mills, August 31st 1834, Garrettsville, American Travel Collection, Clements Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>48</sup> Joseph V. Quarles to Isaac Thurston, August 28, 1838, in “Letters of Joseph V. Quarles,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 16, no. 3 (1932-1933): 301. On improvements in mail delivery in the trans-Appalachian West during the antebellum period, see Buley, *The Old Northwest*, 1:464-474. Buley notes that, as of 1833, regular mail that left Washington, D.C., at 7pm reached Wheeling in 55 hours and arrived in Cincinnati 48 hours after that.

twenty-five cents to ten cents per half ounce. A subsequent adjustment in 1851 lowered domestic rates to five cents for all half-ounce letters traveling up to three thousand miles, and offered correspondents a 40 percent discount for prepaid postage. The decade following the 1845 reduction saw a more than threefold increase in the volume of letters carried by the United States Post Office. The novel popularity of the emigrant letter was therefore part of a broader communications revolution that was unfolding during the antebellum decades.<sup>49</sup>

Although increased mobility, expanded literacy, and improved communications contributed to the proliferation of emigrant letters, these developments do not in themselves account for the sudden, widespread enthusiasm for sending and soliciting intelligence about new settlements on the frontier. In order to fully explain the changing epistolary practices of westward migrants, it is necessary to consider how all three of these developments altered the way prospective migrants imagined the western landscape and made decisions about whether to relocate and where to settle. As improvements in transportation rendered remote areas of the frontier more accessible, and as detailed information about distant locales became more abundant, the binary approach to emigration that prevailed in earlier eras began to give way to a new type of strategic thinking about movement and place. Increasingly, ordinary Americans imagined even the most far-flung and sparsely settled areas of the trans-Appalachian frontier as a landscape of discrete places—emerging towns, cities, and agricultural hinterlands. Instead of weighing the benefits and drawbacks of westward movement in general terms, prospective migrants increasingly approached emigration as a choice between a variety of possible destinations. Accordingly, their decisions involved ever more complex and geographically precise calculations about the relative advantages of particular towns, rural districts, and tracts of wilderness land.

The transition toward a place-centered outlook on the frontier was gradual and never complete. The persistence of older ways of thinking is illustrated by the fact that binary comparisons between East and West remained common in emigrant correspondence long after the Civil War. Furthermore, not all Americans experienced this shift in sensibilities to the same extent or in the same way. Because more affluent or well-connected migrants generally enjoyed greater access to intelligence from personal acquaintances and printed texts, their geographical thinking about frontier opportunity was often more nuanced than that of more modestly situated transients. The impulse to assess and compare the advantages of various frontier settlements was also far less pronounced among European immigrants and early migrants to more remote destinations like Oregon and California. For both groups, distance and the relative scarcity of information continued to impede precise thinking about place and opportunity. Nevertheless, by the 1830s and '40s, Americans who set out for even the most sparsely settled areas the trans-Appalachian West generally carried with them a far more sophisticated understanding of the geography of opportunity than was possible in earlier periods.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Henkin, *The Postal Age*, 31.

<sup>50</sup> On the epistolary practices of antebellum immigrant groups in the trans-Appalachian West, see Theodore Christian Blegen, *Land of Their Choice: The Immigrants Write Home* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955); Charlotte Erickson, *Invisible Immigrants; The Adaptation of English and Scottish Immigrants in Nineteenth-Century America* (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1972); David A.

The increased attention that antebellum migrants devoted to selecting precisely the right place of residence is poignantly illustrated by the reinvention and widespread use of an old word: location. In eighteenth-century America, the verb, to *locate*, meant to establish the place or boundaries of something—a tract of real estate, a building, or a road. By the turn of the century, however, a semantic shift was getting underway, as Americans began to use the verb to describe the act of purchasing or settling on a tract of land. In an 1817, for example, Gershom Flagg informed his brother, “I have located 264 acres of Land in the Illinois Territory.” One of the many European observers to comment on this Americanism was Scottish-born author and social reformer Francis Wright. In 1819, Wright observed that Dutch and German immigrants in upstate New York “locate themselves, as the phrase is here, with wonderful sagacity.” Several decades later, author Charles Fenno Hoffman noted the expression’s particular association with the frontier. Location, he explained, was “a sound American word, and as indispensable in the vocabulary of a western man as are an axe and a rifle among his household furniture.”<sup>51</sup>

Eventually, as antebellum Americans began to conflate the act of purchasing land with the decision to settle in a particular spot, location became shorthand for the larger process of selecting a place of residence. Although this usage was largely confined to farmers at first, it soon became more general. By the 1830s, merchants, professionals, and laborers who migrated to western towns and cities routinely referred to the act of settlement as location. In 1836, for example, a young lawyer named Samuel Hempstead commented on the great demand for his professional services in Little Rock, Arkansas, by remarking, “it gives me every reason to be satisfied with the location I have made.” Writing in the same year as Hempstead, a young man from New York used the word in much the same way as he evaluated conditions in St. Louis. Judging the city to be “mean and dirty,” he concluded, “This may be a pleasant place to live in but with my present feelings I would be far from desiring to locate here.” When used in this way, location conveyed the careful calculation involved in finding an optimal place of residence. The fact that the expression suddenly became ubiquitous in the writings of westward migrants during the second quarter of the century illustrates the growing preoccupation with the advantages and prospects of places.<sup>52</sup>

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Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives: The Personal Correspondence of British Immigrants to North America in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Walter D. Kamphoefner, Wolfgang Johannes Helbich, and Ulrike Sommer, eds., *News from the Land of Freedom: German Immigrants Write Home* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); and Johannes Stellingwerff and Robert P. Swierenga, *Iowa Letters: Dutch Immigrants on the American Frontier* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2004).

<sup>51</sup> Gershom Flagg to Azariah Flagg, December 7, 1817, St. Louis, *Pioneer Letters*, 18; Wright, *Views of Society and Manners in America* (New York: E. Bliss and E. White, 1821), 128; Charles Fenno Hoffman, *A Winter in the Far West* (London: Richard Bentley, 1835), 192. As early as 1797, the English astronomer Francis Baily took note of the fact the Americans used the verb, to locate, to describe the act of surveying and laying claim to a plot of land. “To locate,” he explained, “means to particularize and describe correctly the place which is intended to be reserved for the sole use and possession of the claimant.” Baily, *Journal of a Tour to the Unsettled Parts of North America in 1796 and 1797* (London: Baily Brothers, 1856), 242. For several additional examples of the various uses of this word in nineteenth-century literature, see Richard H. Thornton, *An American Glossary: Being an Attempt to Illustrate Certain Americanisms upon Historical Principles* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1912), 550.

<sup>52</sup> Samuel Hempstead to William Hempstead, July 12, 1836, Samuel Hempstead Letters, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; “Memorandums on the Road: Journal of a Trip from Baltimore to Illinois and Missouri and Return,” entry for September 6, 1836, Illinois State

The emergence of a more place-centered conception of frontier opportunity was directly related to the proliferation of emigrant letters in antebellum America. In fact, the two developments were mutually reinforcing. As settlers throughout the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys became more prolific correspondents, supplying friends and relatives with detailed reports about their surroundings, their letters fostered the belief that it was possible—indeed, imperative—to precisely calculate and compare the advantages of various towns, counties, and tracts of land before deciding on a new place of residence. In turn, this strategic thinking about place and opportunity heightened the demand for emigrant letters. Determined to find an optimal destination, prospective migrants became ever more diligent in seeking guidance from those who had gone ahead.

In addition to emigrant letters, an ever-expanding supply of maps and geographical literature also encouraged Americans to imagine the frontier as a landscape of towns, counties, and well-defined parcels of land. The antebellum period saw a marked increase in geographical texts devoted entirely to particular western territories or to the trans-Appalachian West as whole. Some, like Timothy Flint's *The History and Geography of the Mississippi Valley* (1833), were sprawling compendia of information, formatted much like the geographies of Jedidah Morse. In 1835, Richard Emerson Ela, a twenty-two-year-old printer's apprentice from Lebanon, New Hampshire, pored over Flint's two-volume work, using it to determine "the best spot or section...to settle at the west." Overwhelmed by the details about various frontier settlements, he concluded, "a person may read Flint's geography till he is blind and then he must have an uncommonly grasping mind in order to combine all the circumstances of every place and compare them so as to make a selection." By the 1830s, migrants like Ela could also turn to several other genres of geographical literature that were much more conducive to this type of comparative analysis. Gazetteers, which first appeared in the 1790s, provided quantitative profiles of towns, cities, and states, rendering them comparable at a glance. A typical volume included data about population, commerce, industry, occupations, and civil and religious institutions. In 1827, twenty-two-year-old John Folck purchased a gazetteer during a brief stop in Wheeling as he journeyed west along the Cumberland Road to Ohio. Writing of this purchase in his travel diary, Folck exhibited the type of strategic geographical thinking that was becoming pervasive at the time of his journey. "I had a great desire to become acquainted with the geography of [Ohio] in order that I might judge for myself as to local advantages," he explained. The 1820s witnessed the rise of a new genre, the emigrant's guide, which was designed specifically to facilitate the search for a new place of residence in the West. Among the most popular was John Mason Peck's *A Guide for Emigrants* (1831). In a review of the volume, one editor recommended Peck's work "to any persons who may be seeking a new 'location,' as the phrase is, as [it is] calculated to assist their search for a farm, and containing good advice relative to the cultivation of the land, and their intercourse with the people." Emigrant's guides were ideal texts for a populace that was less interested in following well-

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Historical Society. Another young attorney who used the verb in this way was Ferris Forman. In a letter from St. Louis in 1836, Forman, informed a friend in New York, "I have not yet determined where I shall locate myself." Forman to Clark Hyatt, March 8, 1836, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, University of Missouri, Columbia.

established patterns of chain migration and more intent on selecting the optimal place of residence from a bevy of possible destinations.<sup>53</sup>

Far from replacing emigrant letters as a source of intelligence, guidebooks and gazetteers only enhanced their popularity and significance. By drawing attention to subtle differences between distant regions and settlements, these works encouraged readers to go to even greater lengths to acquire reports about specific locales from relatives and acquaintances in the West. For a growing number of Americans, choosing a location became a distinctly literate endeavor that involved researching a number of possible destinations using a wide variety of sources. Personal letters, geographical literature, and maps all figured prominently in this reconnaissance process.

### **Location, Location, Location**

No group of antebellum Americans demonstrated greater enthusiasm for supplying and soliciting advice about emigration than young men whose financial circumstances, entrepreneurial values, and notions about social respectability identified them as members of the emerging middle class. As industrialization, the rise of market capitalism, improvements in transportation, and a variety of other developments created new incentives for demographic mobility, migration became an increasingly common step for young men making the transition from adolescent dependency to mature manhood. This was especially true in declining agricultural communities of the East, where soil exhaustion and a relative scarcity of land induced many young adults to leave behind their native villages and seek opportunity elsewhere. Some set their sights on new towns and agricultural communities on the frontier, while others sought employment in commercial centers or factory towns closer to home. Whatever their destination, this group of transients was acutely aware of the importance of being well-located.

For men who came of age during the second quarter of the nineteenth century, deciding where to begin their careers came to seem every bit as important as selecting a trade or profession. Richard Emerson Ela reflected on the difficulty of choosing a location as he prepared to depart for the West in 1834. "I believe it is some like choosing ones business when they start out into the world," he wrote in a letter to his brother, "it is very difficult to bring the mind to be satisfied which is best and when that is done we are very likely to find in the end that we were mistaken." Ela was not the only antebellum American to suggest that choosing a place of residence and selecting an occupation were similarly crucial and momentous rites of passage. One of the most iconic figures of the era, the showman P.T. Barnum, also made this point in his guide to success, "The Art of Money Getting." If the most important task in a young man's life was finding the one occupation "best suited to his peculiar genius," the second most important was selecting

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<sup>53</sup> Flint, Timothy. *The History and Geography of the Mississippi Valley* (Cincinnati: E.H. Flint and L.R. Lincoln, 1832); Richard E. Ela to George Ela, August 19, 1834, in "Letters of Richard Emerson Ela," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 19, no. 4 (June 1936): 434; John Folck, "A Diary Kept by John Folck Jr. Containing A Journal of his Travels Through the Western Part of the United States," 1831, Western Americana Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University; "A Guide for Emigrants," *The New-England Magazine* 2 (Boston: J.T.E. Buckingham, 1832), 86; John Mason Peck, *A New Guide for Emigrants to the West* (Boston: Gould, Kendall & Lincoln, 1836). On the rise of the gazetteer in the early republic, see Patricia Cline Cohen, *A Calculating People: The Spread of Numeracy in Early America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 152.

“the right location.” In urging his readers to relocate as many times as necessary in order to find an advantageous home, Barnum took aim at the old proverb, “Three removes are as bad as a fire.” “[W]hen a man is in the fire,” he concluded, “it matters but little how soon or how often he removes.” Both Ela and Barnum’s remarks underscore the novel cultural significance of choosing a location, which became an increasingly important masculine ritual.<sup>54</sup>

Besides the momentous nature their journeys, there were other reasons why young men like Richard Ela became so active in both requesting and supplying letters of advice about emigration. First and most basically, many of these transients intended to work in commercial or professional occupations that required advanced writing skills. Consequently, they were well equipped to exchange intelligence about conditions and opportunities in emerging frontier settlements. Perhaps more importantly, compared to the general population of antebellum migrants, this group of wayfarers was much less constrained by familial networks of chain migration. This was due in part to the fact that many moved west alone or in small family groups that included their wives and young children. Consequently, they generally had more freedom to choose from a wide array of possible destinations, and many would relocate multiple times before settling down. All of these factors encouraged young men to seek out and compare letters from informants in multiple towns or regions, both at the time of their initial departure from home, and later in their lives as they continued to search for a location better suited to their financial, social, and occupational ambitions. Although other antebellum Americans also engaged in this type of long-distance reconnaissance, the prolific correspondence of young westward migrants played an especially crucial role in the rise of new epistolary practices for communicating information and advice about emigration.

Whereas emigrant letters from earlier periods were almost always intended for general circulation, young men who contemplated moving west during the antebellum decades frequently used the post to obtain personalized advice from peers, relatives, or business connections. Often this involved writing to a number of informants, requesting information about the quality of land in specific areas or the demand for a certain business or professional service in particular towns. In 1845, a young physician named Thomas Russell contacted an old acquaintance in Huntsville, Alabama, to inquire about the need for a doctor in that area. “I am doing tolerably well in St. Louis,” he explained, “but it is a poor place to make money.” Russell’s letter included a variety of questions about conditions in the vicinity of Huntsville. “Is it expensive living in Huntsville[?],” he asked, “Is there any rich girls in your country[?]-They are few and far between in Mo. I assure you.” Another young doctor, William Claytor, made similar inquiries a decade later. Unable to establish a steady medical practice in Maryland, Claytor began a diligent search for a new place of residence. “I am seeking information from every quarter I can,” he noted in his diary, “I must succeed in entering the house of fortune if I have to force an

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<sup>54</sup> Richard Emerson Ela to George Ela, August 19, 1834, in “Letters of Richard Emerson Ela,” 434; P.T. Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs, or, Forty Years' Recollections of P. T. Barnum* (New York: American News Co, 1871), 472. On migration as an increasingly common step for antebellum youth making the transition from adolescence to adulthood, see Joseph F. Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America, 1790 to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 30-31; Augst, *The Clerk's Tale*, 19-20; Harvey Graff, *Conflicting Paths: Growing Up in America* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995), 67-185; and Allan Stanley Horlick, *Country Boys and Merchant Princes; The Social Control of Young Men in New York* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1975).



entry.” As part of his investigation, Claytor posted several letters to acquaintances in the Minnesota Territory. “I wrote this afternoon to J McMahon Holland Esq of Shakapee, Scott County, Minnesota Territory, making inquiries, about the advantages of an emigration to the west and especially to the place of his residence,” he explained in one diary entry. Upon receiving Holland’s reply twenty-five days later, he deemed it “a very full and satisfactory letter which will aid me considerably in making up my mind with regard to emigration.” The ability to obtain multiple letters of advice in a relatively timely fashion, from a territory more than a thousand miles away, would have been unthinkable for most Americans just a few decades earlier. By mid-century, however, such reconnaissance was standard practice for young men like Claytor as they began hunting for a better location in the West.<sup>55</sup>

While some prospective migrants sought intelligence from relatives and friends, others went so far as to contact informants they had never met. In the absence of any personal contacts, resourceful correspondents like Peregrine D. Foster looked to friends or business associates to put them in touch with individuals who resided in specific places of interest. Foster was a young businessman from Lancaster, Ohio, who found himself “taken with the prevailing western fever” in the mid-1840s. While “meditating” on possible destinations, he had a serendipitous encounter with an old business associate, James Crosby, who was returning to Philadelphia after a tour of the West. Crosby offered a glowing report about Keokuk, Iowa, and gave Foster a letter of introduction to a young resident of the town named James E. Ainsworth. Foster forward this letter to Ainsworth along with his own request for information. The reply he received was so favorable that Foster immediately decided to settle his affairs in Lancaster and beat a path to Keokuk.<sup>56</sup>

To be sure, the more personal culture of advice-giving that emerged during the antebellum period did not entirely supplant the older practice of composing emigrant letters for a broader audience. Indeed, many informants continued to conceive of their communications as public texts, meant to be shared or read aloud in public places. Unlike the more generic and impersonal advice that prevailed in earlier periods, however, antebellum migrants who wrote for a wider readership often filled their letters with more individualized intelligence, directed at particular family members or neighbors. Although Joseph Quarles addressed his letters to Isaac Thurston, the postmaster in his hometown of Ossipee, New Hampshire, his reports about Wisconsin included advice for several different friends. In one passage, he instructed Thurston to “say to J.H.Y. that there is one tailor in this place and he has 10\$ for making a coat.” He then added, “Say to T.G. his business is good here or if he choose it he can farm it for a livelihood if he could forward me 200\$ I could make him a claim of 160 acres.” Quarles’ offer to purchase land for a friend—a common proposition in emigrant letters by this time—reveals the complex postal transactions that were becoming possible by the 1830s.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Thomas Russell to John Huey, Oct. 20, 1845, Booneville, Missouri, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, University of Missouri, Columbia; William Quesenbury Claytor, *Diary of William Claytor, 1849-1896*, vol. 1. (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street Press, 2002), 184-185.

<sup>56</sup> See Peregrine D. Foster’s autobiographical sketch in volume 6, Caleb Forbes Davis Scrapbooks, 1882-1897, Iowa State Historical Society.

<sup>57</sup> Quarles to Thurston, October 11, 1838, “Letters of Joseph V. Quarles,” 305.

The letters of young men like Quarles were also more interactive than emigrant correspondence of the early nineteenth century. Rather than posting a one-time request for information, prospective migrants increasingly expected to sustain a conversation with their informants. In 1842, for example, Thomas Lawrence received a letter from Anthony Turnbull, a friend from New York who desired information about Illinois. After inquiring about the advantages of emigration, Turnbull added, “This I hope will be the commencement of a correspondence which will only be interrupted when our proximity shall render it unnecessary.” Joseph Quarles’s correspondence also illustrates the more interactive nature of emigrant letters during the second quarter of the century. Rather than simply reporting to his former neighbors, Quarles maintained a dialogue with them, often going to great lengths to address their questions and concerns about Wisconsin. “In your former letter,” he wrote to postmaster Isaac Thurston, “you say you think this is no place for a poor man — I think it better than east — it is true that it costs more to live here now than at the east...but labour of all kinds is in proportion.” Upon learning that a friend’s wife doubted the accuracy of his reports, he insisted, “I have stated nothing but truth and I think not so strong as the country will bear.” Frustrated that his reports were met with skepticism, Quarles quipped that the land in New Hampshire was “so poor & hard that if a man should cease laboring long enough for an idea in relation to emigration to shoot across his brain his whole family would perish with hunger.” While few correspondents were as fervent as Quarles in trumpeting the virtues of their adopted homes, this dialogic mode of correspondence became common as mail delivery grew more efficient and reliable.<sup>58</sup>

Over the course of the antebellum period, emigrant letters also engaged in more explicit and elaborate analysis of the relative advantages of particular regions, towns, or tracts of land. One indicator of this change was a growing reliance on the names of towns, counties, rivers, roads, and other relatively minute features of the landscape. William Meteer, a twenty-one-year-old who removed from the Shenandoah Valley to Missouri in 1827, exemplified this tendency in a letter to his cousin in Virginia. Noting that there could be “no good entrys of land made in this neighborhood,” Meteer offered his cousin a highly specific suggestion about the best spot for a homestead. “There can be a great settlement made about six miles from Henderson on the headwaters of Avaux River,” he explained. “There is no settlement within several miles so a man may situate himself just as he sees proper.” Meteer evidently assumed that his cousin either knew the location of the relatively obscure Avaux River, or, if not, that he would be able to acquire this information from maps and geographical literature. Such geographical specificity signaled a shift in the purpose of emigrant letters. Rather than focusing on the general question of whether or not to emigrate, informants like Meteer were much more concerned with the question of where, precisely, their readers should settle.<sup>59</sup>

A much subtler manifestation of the trend toward place-centered and geographically precise reportage was a shift in the way informants used the word *country*. Whereas earlier migrants had often applied the term to entire states, or to the Western

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<sup>58</sup> Anthony Turnbull to Thomas Lawrence, 1843, White Plains, Lawrence Family Papers, New-York Historical Society; Quarles to Thurston, November 7, 1837 and May 19, 1839, “Letters of Joseph V. Quarles,” 298, 315.

<sup>59</sup> William Meteer to John McClure, December 20 1827, Calaway County, Missouri, Western Historical Manuscripts Collection, University of Missouri, Columbia.

Country as a whole, antebellum correspondents tended to use it to describe much smaller areas of territory, such as the backcountry surrounding a town or rural village. Calvin Stevens, whose letter was cited in the introduction to this chapter, evidently had this meaning in mind when he proposed to give his acquaintances in Vermont a “minute description of the country.” In enumerating the benefits and drawbacks of relocation to Wisconsin, he explicitly focused on conditions in and around the village of Southport. “With regard to their manners of living,” he wrote of the local inhabitants, “it is even better than I expected to see it, in so new a country—I speak of the country immediately around Southport but I do not suppose it will do to take this as a fair sample of western life.” When Ohio native Solomon Eby wrote to his relatives shortly after his arrival in Booneville, Missouri, in 1847, he used the term in much the same way. In comparing his present location to the nearby village of Lexington, he explained, “I am told that there is a much better country there than there is about Booneville.” Such subtle analysis of the differences between particular frontier communities represented a significant departure from the geographically broad comparisons between “this country” and “that country” that prevailed in emigrant letters during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>60</sup>

Whereas some informants continued to use the geographically vague term country, many others filled their letters with intricate analysis of the advantages of their particular town or rural village. In addition to speculating that southeastern Wisconsin was “destined to become the richest part of the Union,” Calvin Stevens detailed the advantages and prospects of his new home of Southport. “This is very flourishing village beautifully situated on the west bank of Lake Michigan 55 miles from Chicago,” he explained. Noting the “many good buildings” and the “unexampled rapidity” of the town’s growth, he concluded, “We only want an appropriation for a harbor, to make a business city of it at once—or what is called such in this country.” A letter written by a young migrant named Edward Brimblecom in 1851 contained a similarly place-centered analysis of his new home in Illinois. In urging his brothers to join him in Ogle County, Brimblecom wrote, “Of the West give me *Illinois*. And of Illinois give *Rock River Valley*, this I saw from all that I have been able to learn thus far, *this is the place*.” The boosterish tone of Stevens and Brimblecom’s reports offers an especially stark illustration of the growing concern for and fascination with the advantages and prospects of places.<sup>61</sup>

Even when their geographical focus was much broader, migrants writing in the 1830s, ‘40s, and ‘50s tended to engage in explicit discussion of the relative advantages of their new states with respect to other locales. In 1843, as Samuel Ralson urged his brother-in-law to join him in Missouri, he compared the state to “poor ‘let well enough alone’ North Carolina.” In his next sentence, however, he extolled the virtues of Missouri in broader geographical terms, boasting that it offered “more inducements for emigration than any state in the Union, more particularly to the agricultural class.” In expatiating on the many virtues of the state, he boasted, “We have here the best climate

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<sup>60</sup> Calvin Stevens to Samuel Stevens, November 20, 1840; Solomon Eby to David Eby, May 23, 1847, Booneville, Missouri, folder 550, Missouri Collection, Western Historical Manuscripts Collection, University of Missouri, Columbia.

<sup>61</sup> Calvin Stevens to Samuel Stevens, November 20, 1840; Edward Brimblecom to family, March 22, 1850, Brimblecom Family Papers, Box 1, Folder 9. Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

and soil for the culture of hemp, that can be found in the U. S.” Whereas earlier emigrant letters had used the Enlightenment protocol to offer generic geographical profiles of states, later correspondents analyzed how the various attributes shaped its outlook for growth and its ability to compete with other states. In addition to promoting their own states, some informants offered opinions about other possible destinations. Upon learning that his cousin was contemplating removal to Texas, one recent transplant to Wisconsin wrote to dissuade him. “My advice is that you postpone going to Texas until you have committed some crime for which you will be obliged to quit the country in order that your character may agree with the majority of the inhabitants of that country.” As they engaged in boosterism and discussed the comparative advantages of various locations, frontier informants implicitly acknowledged that their readers were likely considering an array of possible destinations. It was this sense of choice, at bottom, that defined the new approach to emigration in antebellum America.<sup>62</sup>

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Even as their writing about local advantages grew more intricate and elaborate, antebellum emigrants increasingly urged readers not to rely solely on their letters. Instead, many closed their reports by exhorting relatives and friends to come west and assess the country with their own eyes before determining whether to relocate. After penning an ambivalent account of conditions in Madison County, Arkansas, one young man informed his parents, “I will just say to people that want to move to this contrey to come and see first...I would wright from know til next weak before I would have any of my friends or neighbors to come so far and not bee satisfied.” B.R. Perkins was far more enthusiastic about his new home in Wisconsin, yet he offered similar advice to his brother in Columbus, Ohio. “Think you had better take a trip out here when navigation opens and see our country,” he wrote from Racine in 1843, “Perhaps you will make up your mind to stop.”<sup>63</sup>

Like the place-centered conception of frontier opportunity that emerged during the antebellum period, this feature of emigrant correspondence reflected new possibilities for geographic mobility. As dramatic improvements in transportation rendered previously remote regions of the North American interior more accessible, it became possible for ordinary Americans to imagine traveling vast distances in order to purchase land or find a promising new town in which to settle. Although Joseph Quarles clearly exaggerated the ease of westward travel when he suggested that his friends in New Hampshire “come & see” Wisconsin, his invitation reveals significant changes in popular sensibilities about distance. “It is no great journey,” he assured his readers, “I do not consider traveling from here to N.H. as any thing.” In the second quarter of the century, a growing number of prospective migrants acted on the advice of informants like Quarles. Having gleaned all they could from emigrant letters, guidebooks, and gazetteers, they

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<sup>62</sup> Samuel Ralston to D.W. Jordan, April 2, 1843, in “A Southern Family on the Missouri Frontier: Letters from Independence,” ed. W. Darrell Overdyke, *The Journal of Southern History* 17, no. 2 (May, 1951): 218; E. Cary to Luther Cary, March 12, 1843, Janesville, Wisconsin Territorial Letters, Wis Mss MY Box 1 Folder 7, University of Wisconsin Library.

<sup>63</sup> Anonymous to Parents, March 1, 1837, American Travel Collection, Box 2, Clements Library, University of Michigan; B.R. Perkins to Barnabas Perkins, March 12, 1843, Wisconsin Territorial Letters, Wis Mss MY Box 1 Folder 7, Wisconsin Historical Society.

packed their bags and set out to get a firsthand look at conditions in distant areas of the trans-Appalachian frontier.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Quarles to Isaac Thurston, February 14, 1839, "Letters of Joseph V. Quarles," 311.

## **TAKING A VIEW OF THE COUNTRY: PROSPECTING JOURNEYS IN THE TRANS-APPALACHIAN WEST**

On a winter night in 1831, John Roberts found himself encamped along a wilderness road in Missouri, over a thousand miles from his home near Albany, New York. Having endured many privations during his four-month journey to this sparsely settled region of the frontier, Roberts was by now a thoroughly seasoned traveler. Still, as he passed the evening with several others in a wagon that afforded little shelter from the elements, he was unable to stave off feelings of homesickness. In his travel diary, he mused about “home sweet home,” where his parents were “reposing on feather beds” while their son lay awake “in a far distant country” with “nothing to cover him but the canvass of heaven.” To firm up his resolve at this trying moment, Roberts might have reminded himself of the important stakes of his western tour. In anticipation of his marriage to Mary Woods Burhans, a young woman from a neighboring family, he had set out to assess the advantages of relocating to the Mississippi Valley. If his findings were favorable, he intended to establish a homestead with Mary, his parents, and his brother’s family. Because their future health and prosperity depended on his good judgment, Roberts was determined to conduct a thorough investigation. Toward this end, he would ultimately spend nearly a month in the vicinity of St. Louis, exploring the rich bottomlands along the Missouri and Illinois rivers.<sup>65</sup>

Throughout his travels, Roberts recorded his experiences and observations in two pocket-sized blank books. His careful notes about soil quality, climate, and land prices suggest that these records were useful in comparing possible sites for settlement. But subtle clues throughout the diary indicate that it also served as a report to his family. Having initially written in pencil, Roberts carefully inked over his original entries, enhancing their legibility and rendering them more permanent. In doing so, he erased several passages that conveyed feelings of despair during the most harrowing portions of the journey. In one such passage—still barely legible—he confessed to feeling “disappointed, dejected, confused, and almost inconsolable.” Although these omissions were likely intended to conceal moments of personal weakness, they also obscured some of the hardships that his family would endure during their relocation. Whatever his motives in editing the volume, Roberts’s report was evidently effective in convincing its readers of the advantages of life on the frontier. Within two months of his return, he and his family loaded their possessions onto a wagon and headed west, settling on a 360 acre plot near Groveland, Illinois.<sup>66</sup>

John Roberts’s prospecting journey epitomized a new westward travel experience that, like the emigrant letter, became especially popular among young men who reached adulthood during the antebellum decades. Some were prospective migrants, scouting

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<sup>65</sup> John M. Roberts, diary, entry for December 16, 1830, Edward E. Ayer Manuscript Collection, Newberry Library.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, entry for September 14, 1830.

agricultural land or assessing the quality of life in frontier towns before deciding whether to uproot themselves and their families. Others were speculators, bent on profiting from the vast quantities of cheap government land coming to market. Many combined both of these motives. The popularity of prospecting journeys was another manifestation of the place-centered conception of frontier opportunity that became pervasive during the antebellum decades. Much like the proliferation of emigrant letters, these expeditions reflected a sense that it was possible to precisely assess and compare the advantages of particular towns, counties, or tracts of land prior to making decisions about relocation or speculation.

For young men who embarked on land-hunting journeys and other types of evaluative tours, travel writing was often an integral part of the reconnaissance process. Some kept written records for mnemonic purposes, using their notes to keep track of intelligence about available land or conditions in various frontier communities. Others used travel diaries or letters to relay intelligence to their wives, parents, business partners, or other individuals who had a significant personal stake in the outcome of their journeys. Whatever form their writing took, and whatever practical purposes it served, however, the accounts that prospectors composed also represented an important literary performance for readers back home. Beyond simply describing possible sites for speculation or settlement, travelers used personal writing to document their assiduous research, clear-minded judgment, and rational decision-making. In this respect, their writing said as much about their own character, credibility, and expertise as it did about the opportunities for social and economic mobility in the West.

This chapter probes the practical functions and cultural stakes of travel writing for young prospectors like John Roberts. It begins by tracing the rise of the prospecting tour and examining the rituals of observation and inquiry that became central to this new travel experience. It then scrutinizes the writing practices of prospectors, following their letters and diaries from the byways of the trans-Appalachian frontier to the hands of family members, neighbors, and business associates. Finally, it examines their diaries and letters within the context of rising concerns about accelerating westward migration and feverish land speculation. In doing so, it seeks to demonstrate that travel writing was not only an indispensable tool for evaluating the landscape and communicating geographical information; it was also a means of demonstrating that momentous and venturesome decisions about relocation or real estate investments were the product of thorough investigation rather than runaway ambitions and unchecked desires.

### **The Rise of the Prospecting Tour**

Only three decades before John Roberts set out on his tour, such an expedition would have been highly impractical—if not completely unfeasible—for a young man of modest means, traveling alone, and lacking extensive knowledge of the western landscape. At that time, travel in the interior of North America remained physically taxing, time-intensive, and often dangerous. Consequently, Easterners who were contemplating migration to the Ohio Valley during the early national period had little choice but to rely on second-hand intelligence from letters and printed texts. Similar conditions prevailed among speculators. At the opening of the nineteenth century, speculation in government land was dominated by land companies and wealthy investors,

both of whom relied heavily on scouts, surveyors, and backwoodsmen in securing desirable real estate. Only rarely did individual speculators from the Atlantic states expend the considerable time and resources necessary for a land-hunting expedition beyond the Appalachians.<sup>67</sup>

The possibilities for westward travel began to expand during the opening decades of the antebellum period, largely because of the technological and infrastructural improvements that historian George Rogers Taylor famously termed “the transportation revolution.” John Roberts’s journey provides a vivid illustration of the transformative effects of these developments as well as their considerable limitations. On the first leg of his tour, a journey on horseback from central New York to the Allegheny River, his experiences were not radically different from those of colonial travelers. Along this route, he generally breakfasted and took shelter in taverns, a form of lodging that had become ubiquitous along the Atlantic seaboard in the eighteenth century. Often doubling as domestic residences, taverns were typically small and congested, and Roberts likely shared space, meals, and even beds with the proprietor’s family and other guests. Travel became even more arduous during the next segment of his tour, a flatboat journey down the Allegheny and Ohio rivers. Flatboats, too, were a holdover from the colonial period, although they remained a popular mode of conveyance on the western rivers well into the nineteenth century. Roberts constructed his crude vessel with the help of an emigrant family from Syracuse, afterwards joining them on the passage downriver to Cincinnati. After six weeks of strenuous rowing that left his hands “black and hard as a common labourer,” he reached the Queen City, where he spent several weeks recuperating before resuming his journey.<sup>68</sup>

It was at this point, nearly two months into his tour, that Roberts first reaped the benefits of the dramatic improvements in transportation and accommodation that had taken place in the previous two decades. He departed Cincinnati aboard the *Banner*, one of an army of steamboats that had been proliferating on the Ohio-Mississippi river network since the second decade of the nineteenth century. The seminal moment for steam travel on the western waters arrived in 1817, when a vessel named the *Washington* completed a roundtrip passage from Louisville to New Orleans in forty-one days. Over the next three years, the number of steamboats on the Ohio and Mississippi jumped from seventeen to sixty-nine, and routes were promptly extended onto the major tributaries of these rivers. On the Great Lakes, the *Walk-in-the-Water* completed the first journey from Buffalo to Detroit in 1818, and just two years later, the same vessel carried two hundred passengers as far west as Green Bay. This new mode of transport afforded Roberts a

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<sup>67</sup> For examples of land-hunting expeditions prior to the antebellum period, see Joseph Gibbons, “The Travel Notes of Joseph Gibbons, 1804,” ed. Joseph E. Walker, *Ohio History*, 92 (1983): 96-146; Nathaniel W. Little, journal, 1802, Clements Library, University of Michigan; and James Smith, “Tours into Kentucky and the Northwest Territory: Three Journals by the Rev. James Smith of Powhatan County, Va., 1783-1794-1797,” ed. Josiah Morrow, *Ohio Archeological and Historical Quarterly*, 16 (1907): 348-401.

<sup>68</sup> George Rogers Taylor, *The Transportation Revolution, 1815-1860* (New York: Rinehart, 1951); Roberts, diary, entry for October 28, 1830. On taverns in early America see, Kym Rice, *Early American Taverns: for the Entertainment of Friends and Strangers* (Chicago: Regnery Gateway, 1983); and Peter Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution: Taverngoing & Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999). On westward travel by road and flatboat, see R. Carlyle Buley, *The Old Northwest: Pioneer Period, 1815-1840* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1951) 1: 410-416, 444-481.



relatively swift and inexpensive passage from Cincinnati to St. Louis, and it would later enable him to accomplish the 750-mile journey from St. Louis to New Orleans in only four days.<sup>69</sup>

At both Cincinnati and St. Louis, Roberts also availed himself of a new and more lavish form of lodging: the modern hotel. Having first emerged in eastern cities during the early national period, these establishments began to appear along major arteries of travel in the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys during the antebellum period. At Cincinnati, Roberts boarded for two weeks at the City Hotel, one of ten such establishments operating in the city as of 1831.<sup>70</sup> While lodging in these hostelrys, he experienced a form of hospitality that was much more refined and impersonal than that of the tavern. Most hotels contained a variety of specialized public spaces, including parlors, smoking lounges, drawing rooms, reading rooms, barrooms, and gaming rooms. Along with the steamboat, these establishments facilitated Roberts's highly improvised movement across vast distances of the trans-Appalachian frontier.<sup>71</sup>

Several other transportation innovations were also crucial to the emergence of the evaluative tour as a popular travel experience. Foremost among them was the Erie Canal, which became a primary artery of western travel upon its completion in 1825. Over the next decade, several other major canal projects were completed, including the Main Line Canal from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh and the Ohio Canal from Akron to the Ohio River. The 1820s also witnessed the rapid expansion of road networks in the West, a development that was followed by the establishment of stagecoach lines throughout the region. Even before the rise of the railroad in the 1840s and '50s, these new arteries of transportation dramatically expanded the possibilities for western travel. As they did, a growing number of men like John Roberts set out to personally investigate the conditions for settlement or speculation in the trans-Appalachian West.<sup>72</sup>

The vast majority of evaluative travelers who took to the road during the second quarter of the century were seeking land, either in the form of wilderness lots, improved farmland, or real estate in recently platted towns. The growing popularity of land-hunting expeditions reflected not only improvements in transportation, but also changes in federal land policies. The Land Ordinance of 1785, which first established the procedures for the disposal of public lands, had been designed to facilitate the sale of large swaths of territory to land companies and investors with substantial capital. Thus, throughout much of the early national period, the number of individual investors who purchased land directly from the federal government remained limited. This began to change between 1800 and 1820, however, as a series of laws gradually lowered the price of government land from \$2.00 to \$1.25 per acre, and reduced the minimum quantity allotted for single purchases from 640 to 80 acres. The Land Act of 1800 also simplified the process of entering land, providing for the establishment of additional land offices.

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<sup>69</sup> Louis C. Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers: An Economic and Technological History* (New York: Octagon Books, 1969), 3-60; Buley, *The Old Northwest*, 1: 416-432.

<sup>70</sup> Charles Theodore Greve, *Centennial history of Cincinnati and representative citizens*, v.1 (Chicago: Biographical Publishing Co., 1904), 548. Roberts lodged in several different hotels in St. Louis, including the Greenton Hotel; Roberts, diary.

<sup>71</sup> For a compelling account of the rise of the modern hotel in nineteenth-century America, see A. K. Sandoval-Strausz, *Hotel: An American History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

<sup>72</sup> On the construction of roads, canals, and railroad lines in the trans-Appalachian West during the second quarter of the century, see Buley, *The Old Northwest*, 1: 444-518.

Whenever new tracts came to market, these offices held public auctions for a period of three weeks, at which time unentered tracts were sold at the minimum government price. These procedural changes laid the foundation for much broader participation in land grabbing during the antebellum years.<sup>73</sup>

The largest land boom in American history took place between 1830 and 1837, with sales for these years exceeding fifty-three million acres from the Appalachians to the Mississippi. The frenzy was fueled by President Andrew Jackson's transfer of federal deposits to state banks, which made credit readily available to land hunters of more modest means. During these flush times, the byways of the trans-Appalachian frontier teemed with men seeking land for speculation, settlement, or both. In the Northwest, they funneled into Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin; while in the Southwest, their primary destinations were Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas. In one of her widely read accounts of life on the Michigan frontier, author Caroline Kirkland recalled the diverse array of individuals who set out in search of real estate: "The tradesman forsook his shop; the farmer his plough; the merchant his counter; the lawyer his office; nay, the minister his desk, to join the general chase." Residents of both eastern and western states participated in land-hunting expeditions with equal vigor. After spending three years as a manufacturer of agricultural implements in Illinois, for example, Richard Emerson Ela decided to "take a tramp" to southern Wisconsin in 1838 in order to inspect a tract of land that was about to come to market. In a letter to his family in New Hampshire informing them of his upcoming expedition, he cited a desire to find "some place...better suited to my notions for future life than this portion of the country." Such restlessness was common among residents of frontier communities, and their proximity to newly surveyed areas of government land made evaluative tours all the more feasible.<sup>74</sup>

Land hunters were not the only travelers who embarked on prospecting journeys during the antebellum decades. Merchants, lawyers, physicians, teachers, and other urbanites often traveled considerable distances in order to ascertain the demand for their services in new towns or established cities in the trans-Appalachian West. Hoping to begin a career as an attorney, Virtulon Rich left Vermont in 1832, embarking on a "tour of observation" for the purpose of "judging of the western peoples, the soil, and the climate." Twenty-three years old at the time, Rich spent several months investigating conditions in Indiana, Illinois, and Ohio before deciding to relocate. Another young attorney, Niles Searls, undertook a similar journey in 1848. Dissatisfied with his prospects in New York, Searls traveled to Missouri and spent a winter assessing professional opportunities in that state. In a letter to his future wife, he suggested that this tour would enable him to "form some opinion with regard to the advantages and

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<sup>73</sup> On the evolution of federal land policies, see Malcolm J. Rohrbough, *The Land Office Business: The Settlement and Administration of American Public Lands, 1789-1837* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 71-136; A. M. Sakolski, *The Great American Land Bubble: The Amazing Story of Land-Grabbing, Speculations, and Booms from Colonial Days to the Present Time* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1932); and Buley, *The Old Northwest*, 1: 94-137.

<sup>74</sup> Rohrbough, *The Land Office Business*, 271-294; Kirkland, *Western Clearings* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1845), 4; Richard E. Ela, "Letters of Richard Emerson Ela," *Wisconsin Magazine Of History* 19, no. 4 (June 1936): 451.

disadvantages of N. York State and the western world that will lead me to a final decision in the matter of location.”<sup>75</sup>

Like John Roberts, Virtulon Rich, and Niles Searls, most prospectors were young men in their twenties, who saw migration or real estate ventures as a faster route to financial independence or professional advancement. As one encounter recorded by an aspiring merchant named James Sharpe suggests, however, even elderly men at times embarked on land hunting expeditions or other types of evaluative tours. Traveling through Missouri by stagecoach in 1843, Sharpe conversed with a sexagenarian who was bound for Burlington, Iowa, in order to “see what prospect that place might afford him.” Observing that his companion had been employed as a teacher in Missouri for sixteen years before deciding that it was “not a good place for his business,” Sharpe quipped, “if it requires him as long a time to make up his mind in regard to Burlington...he will be getting somewhat aged before he concludes to settle down for life.” Far fewer women undertook prospecting journeys, and those who did were generally accompanied by husbands or other male escorts. En route to examine land in the Deep South in 1836, New York merchant Andrew Lester encountered a wealthy widow from Frederick, Maryland, who was contemplating an evaluative tour to Tennessee. “She thinks she will come with one of her sons and see the country,” he wrote in his diary, “and if she is pleased with it will come and settle with her family.” Even when they remained at home, however, women frequently played an integral role in prospecting journeys. Convinced of the advantages of relocation, some women urged their husbands or fathers to scout possible sites for settlement. In 1855, as Missourian Barnett Cornwell explained his plans for a land hunting expedition, he noted that his wife had implored him to “go look at the Nebraska country.” When men like Cornwell did travel west on behalf of their families, women provided vital support in a variety of ways, from handling childrearing and domestic responsibilities, to assuming control of family finances, to overseeing farms or businesses. Thus, although the prospecting tour itself was a decidedly masculine travel experience, it was generally part of a larger decision-making process in which women were critical agents.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Virtulon Rich, “A Sketch of a Journey to the West in the Spring and Summer of 1832,” entry for July 6, 1832, Edward E. Ayer Manuscript Collection, Newberry Library; Niles Searls to Mary Mary Niles, 1848, in *The Diary of a Pioneer and other Papers* (San Francisco, Pernau-Walsh Printing Co., 1940), 71. Much like Niles Searls, twenty-five-year-old William Campbell traveled through Missouri in 1830 in order to evaluate opportunities for establishing a law practice. In a diary of this tour, he expressed his desire to “see the country” and “enquire whether it would suit my profession.” See “Diary of William M. Campbell,” *Glimpses of the Past*, 3 (1936): 138.

<sup>76</sup> James M. Sharpe, Private Journal, entry for October 25, 1844, Western Americana Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University; Andrew Lester, diary, entry for August 1, 1836, MSS Collections, New-York Historical Society; Barnett Cornwell to William Cornwell, 1855, Missouri Collection, f471, Western Historical Manuscripts Collection, University of Missouri, Columbia. On gender and westward travel, see Susan Imbarrato, *Traveling Women: Narrative Visions of Early America* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006). In his autobiography, Illinois manufacturer Charles W. Marsh explained how his mother took the initiative in securing land for the family in the West. In 1843, when his father converted to Millerism and devoted himself to evangelizing, Marsh’s mother became the sole provider for the household. Judging that the family would be better off by leaving New York and moving west, she entrusted funds to her brother-in-law, who was preparing to embark a land-hunting expedition in Illinois. Having purchased a quarter-section of land, she then prevailed on her husband to abandon his preaching and relocate. See Charles W. Marsh, *Recollections, 1837-1910* (Chicago: Farm Implement News Company, 1910), 23-37.

By the late 1830s, land hunters and other evaluative travelers were so pervasive on the byways of the trans-Appalachian West that they constituted a distinct masculine subculture. Along major arteries of travel, they were a constant presence in the lobbies of hotels and the cabins of steamboats and canal packets. In regions where new tracts of government land were coming to market, they frequently outnumbered locals in tavern barrooms and other public spaces. Because prospectors were so numerous, and because most were traveling alone, they often dined and socialized together throughout their journeys. While traveling by steamboat down the Mississippi in 1839, for example, one New Yorker who had been examining land in Illinois and Iowa passed the time by swapping observations and impressions with three “fat men” from Pennsylvania “who had been out west to see [and were] now returning satisfied to stay home.” William Fairfax Gray of Fredericksburg, Virginia, had similar conversations with fellow travelers during his 1835 land-hunting excursion to Texas. At one point, he exchanged intelligence with an old acquaintance named Henry Brooke, who was returning to Richmond, Virginia, after scouting conditions in Illinois and Indiana. “Brooke in fine spirits,” Gray noted in his travel diary, “speaks extravagantly of the land of Illinois and Indiana, but badly of the people—population vile.” Such interactions offered not only companionship, but also valuable leads about real estate, commercial openings, or business opportunities.<sup>77</sup>

Besides sharing intelligence, some travelers banded together to investigate land or explore towns along their route. Forming traveling parties enabled prospectors to pool resources and information, and it offered a modicum of protection in remote areas of wilderness. In the summer of 1838, a young man from Massachusetts traveling along the Rock River in western Illinois formed an ad hoc traveling party with five other young men from New England, all of whom had come to “take a view of the country.” Writing of their initial meeting, he explained, “It may readily be imagined that so many Yankees together were not without ‘notions’ and among other things it was proposed that we should take a tour down the River.” Members of the party contributed funds for the purchase a small skiff, styling themselves “‘stockholders’ in the proprietorship of the boat.” As they wended their way downriver, stopping to inspect the many new villages in their path, the young men took turns acting as “president and director” of the venture. After four days of traveling, the group reached the Mississippi, at which point their fictive company “dissolved.” Although few travelers cloaked their reconnaissance in such elaborate fantasies, this encounter highlights the significance of the prospecting tour as a masculine social ritual.<sup>78</sup>

In caricaturing travelers like the six young men from New England, one fictional narrative published in the 1840s described a steamboat teeming with “keen-eyed, thin-visaged, anxious-looking gentlemen...bound to the land of promise.” Wandering the deck and cabin of the vessel, the narrator found that “all were discussing the flattering prospects of the ‘great West,’” filling the air with “the sound of ‘dollars—dollars,’” in

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<sup>77</sup> “Overland Journey to the Midwest,” 1839, Chicago Historical Society; William Fairfax Gray, *The Diary of William Fairfax Gray from Virginia to Texas, 1835-1837*, ed. Paul Lack (Dallas: De Golyer Library & William P. Clements Center for Southwest Studies, 1997), 7-8.

<sup>78</sup> “Slight Reminiscences,” 1838, Western Americana Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University. For a similar story, see Frederick Starin, “Diary of a Journey to Wisconsin in 1840,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 6 (1922-1923), 73-94, 207-32.

thousands.” However exaggerated, this description captured an important truth: land hunters and other evaluative travelers could often be identified by their public conversations about the advantages and prospects of places. They were also conspicuous in their observational strolls through frontier towns, as well as their tendency to interrogate locals about social and economic conditions. Less visible, but equally distinctive, were their habits of travel writing. For many wayfarers, composing letters and travel diaries was not only a practical necessity, but also a symbolically important aspect of the reconnaissance process.<sup>79</sup>

### **Mapping the Landscape of Opportunity**

Whether they were scouting real estate investments or hunting for a place to settle, prospectors often kept copious written records of their experiences and findings. Although their travel writing served a variety of purposes, one of its most basic and vital functions was that of a personal mnemonic tool. As they rushed to secure the most current and accurate intelligence about land, business openings, or professional opportunities, prospectors had to retain, process, and recall a volume of geographical details that could overwhelm even the sharpest and most photographic memory. For this reason, many travelers came to rely on memorandum books or pocket diaries, using them to collect, compare, and synthesize an assortment of firsthand and secondhand information. When it came time to purchase land or choose a new place of residence, reviewing these accounts became a crucial step in the decision-making process.

Even before they left home, some novice land hunters began using travel diaries to familiarize themselves with a western landscape that was often foreign and challenging. Among them was a young Baltimore lawyer and banker named John Gordon. Eager to join in the frenzy of speculation taking place at the time, Gordon decided to undertake an expedition to Michigan in the fall of 1836. To equip himself with useful information prior to his journey, he purchased a blank volume and began using it as a commonplace book, filling its pages with information about the geography of the Great Lakes region and the procedures for purchasing government land. “As I shall keep a journal, and have as yet not much particular information about that country,” he explained in his first entry, “I shall begin to make a collection of the statistics of the state, to prepare myself for the most profitable observation and shall add to it all that I see and learn from my own personal inspection.” Among his first entries was a sixteen-page synopsis of a recent publication, *Historical and Scientific Sketches of Michigan*, which contained lectures by several prominent residents of the state, including Lewis Cass and Henry Schoolcraft. In subsequent installments, he recorded notes and excerpts from printed texts, personal correspondence, and conversations with fellow speculators. Distilling information in this way was not only an effective strategy for self-instruction; it also generated a portable compendium of facts that he could consult throughout his journey. Although the Yale-educated Gordon surpassed most of his fellow land hunters in both literary skill and dedication to his research, many other travelers used their diaries to record useful information as they scoured the trans-Appalachian frontier in search of desirable real estate. At the back of John Roberts’s diary, for example, he sketched a generic township grid, likely as a reminder of the orientation of section numbers. Six

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<sup>79</sup> “My First Speculation,” *The American Review: A Whig Journal* 2, no. 4 (October 1845): 351.

years later, a traveler from Baltimore recorded a simple tip for identifying fertile farmland in Missouri: “Buckeye and spice wood a sign of good land.” Even these hasty memoranda could prove immensely valuable for men with little experience evaluating western lands.<sup>80</sup>

As they tramped through remote regions of the trans-Appalachian West, even veteran land hunters found diaries to be necessary adjuncts to maps and compasses. Diary keeping was especially handy for locating available tracts of government land, a task that became ever more challenging as the scramble for real estate intensified in the 1830s. Although many visited land offices in order to inspect maps of existing claims, the rapidity of sales meant that any information gleaned from these records soon became inaccurate. The presence of squatters further complicated this process, because their informal claims were seldom reflected in any official records. As they worked to garner more accurate information from locals and fellow travelers, many prospectors came to rely on their diaries, using them to note the coordinates of unentered land and keep track of offers for private sale. As William Fairfax Gray inspected land in Arkansas, for example, he recorded a tip from one local resident with intimate knowledge of the terrain: “An old raftsman who had his camp on Bogue Phaliah thinks there is some excellent land in T. 17 R. 6 W. Scott thinks the sections are 14, 15, 22, 23, 26, 27.” In conjunction with the maps he sketched at land offices along his route, Gray’s records of section, township, and row numbers guided his search for choice real estate. This common form of note-taking was documented by Caroline Kirkland as she described the incompetence of inexperienced land hunters from eastern cities. “Section-corners and quarter-stakes, eighties, and forties, and fractions...*seem* plain enough to the new man—on paper,” she explained, “But when he finds himself in the woods, with his maps and his copious memoranda, he is completely at sea, with no guide but the compass.”<sup>81</sup>

Having identified areas of interest, speculators and prospective migrants found yet another use for personal writing: surveying and comparing the advantages of particular tracts. Many kept copious notes throughout their daily rides, putting down their impressions about soil quality, access to transportation and markets, the availability of timber, facilities for milling, and myriad other features of the landscape. As John Gordon traveled on horseback through southern Michigan, he settled into a rhythm of observation and writing that was typical among land hunters. “I carry my journal in my saddle bags, wrapped up in an oil silk cover, with a pen and screw ink stand which I have out in an instant at alighting and put down the impressions and observations of each ride at the end of it,” he explained in one of his characteristically lengthy entries. Approximately a decade later, twenty-seven-year-old Martin Gauldin of Missouri followed the same basic routine as he traversed the rolling prairies of northeastern Texas. Although he was far pithier than Gordon, Gauldin’s daily entries captured an impressive array of geographical

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<sup>80</sup> John M. Gordon, “Michigan Journal, 1836,” ed. Douglas H. Gordon and George S. May, *Michigan History*, 43 (1959): 10; Roberts, diary; “Memorandums on the Road: Journal of a trip from Baltimore to Illinois and Missouri and Return,” 1836, Illinois State Historical Society.

<sup>81</sup> Gray, *The Diary of William Fairfax Gray*, 26; Kirkland, *Western Clearings*, 2. In 1847, John Roods of Newark, Ohio, scrawled similar records in a pocket-sized blank book as he examined land in Wisconsin. Having received a lead on a plot of improved farmland in Illinois, he noted, “A Farm for Sale Oct. 22 In McHenry Co. Ills. 3 miles from Woodstock on the Chicago road containing 370 Acres and all under good fence 100 Acres of good timber and can be bought for \$11 dollars an acre Patrick Claesay is the Owner.” see Roods, diary, 1847, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library.

information. In one passage, written near the border of present-day Oklahoma, he observed:

Today we traveled through the prairie all day and past but 2 or 3 houses. The prairie which we traveled over was very rich. The soil is black and about eight feet deep there seems to be a bed of lime stone at the bottom of the soil. The soil is mixed with marl. The timber is very good on the creeks. The people look very healthy.

Such records became invaluable resources for men like Gordon and Gauldin as they prepared to purchase land. Scanning the pages of their diaries, they could efficiently review and compare the features of various tracts of real estate, and thereby determine the most advantageous site for a homestead or the most desirable land for investment.<sup>82</sup>

Diaries were similarly useful for men evaluating opportunities in towns and cities of the urban frontier. Like land hunters, they frequently used blank books and pocket diaries to store a variety of intelligence gleaned during observational strolls and conversations. In 1839, for example, one young New Yorker traveling by steamboat on the Mississippi made use of each stop along his route to inspect the many new settlements lining the river. Upon reaching Quincy, Illinois, he hurried ashore to explore the town, wandering its streets for several minutes until the sound of a bell summoned him back to the steamboat. As he resumed his passage downriver, he entered his findings in his diary, penning a highly efficient profile of the town's topographical situation, layout, and built environment:

I proceeded up one of the various paved avenues leading a 1/4 miles to the Town—which is prettily located on a level—all the streets at right angles—neatly built of brick—and in good taste—the centre is a perfect square facing which are some of the finest and most all the public buildings—among the number is the Quincy Hotel 100 ft x 50—3 stories high and well built of brick —walk'd round—was much pleased and saw many fine blocks of buildings should like to live here if any place on River.

This young man's routine of exploring each major town along his route and then evaluating it in his diary was common among travelers contemplating relocation to one of the many urban centers springing up throughout the trans-Appalachian frontier. Their brief geographical sketches enabled them to keep track of opportunities for employment or commercial ventures, and to assess and compare the more general advantages and prospects of each town.<sup>83</sup>

Besides using travel writing as a mnemonic aid, prospectors also kept written records of their journeys as a means of informing other stakeholders of their findings and decisions. In the case of speculators, travel diaries often served as official reports to fellow investors or business associates. Such was the case for William Fairfax Gray, who penned his copious entries at the behest of Thomas Green and Albert Burnley, the Virginia attorneys who funded his land-hunting expedition to Texas. A brief memorandum scrawled inside one of the pocket-sized blank books he carried highlights the role of both diary keeping and letter writing as means of communicating his findings:

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<sup>82</sup> Gordon, "Michigan Journal," 270; Martin A. Gauldin, diary, entry for December 18, 1845, Travel and Description Collection, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, University of Missouri, Columbia.

<sup>83</sup> "Overland Journey to the Midwest," entry for November 2, 1839.

MEMO. GIVEN BY T. GREEN. -- At Nacogdoches get all the information about Texas lands, in what grants the titles are best, and where are the most desirable lands....Do not be in too great a hurry, but examine well, and be very particular....Keep a diary. Write T. G. frequently, with a particular description of each tract of land, both before and after a purchase, with the field notes.

Because Green and Brunley had authorized Gray with to purchase land on their behalf, he evidently felt obliged to keep meticulous notes. By the conclusion of his journey, his account filled ten small volumes, providing his employers with an exhaustive record of his investigation.<sup>84</sup>

Prospective migrants, too, used travel diaries to communicate their findings. In addition to reporting on conditions in the West, their records often informed family members, neighbors, or friends of important decisions regarding migration or land purchases. It was likely for this reason that Aaron Miller of Loudon, Virginia, composed a diary of his journey on horseback to southern Ohio in the spring of 1832. Miller recorded his tour in a flimsy, cardboard-bound volume, filling its pages with remarks about the cultivation of wheat, the conditions for raising livestock, and the state of society in the region. He also detailed his efforts to secure a farm for his family, even providing a blow-by-blow account of his successful negotiation for a 252-acre lot of improved farmland. Writing of his final exchange with the seller, he recalled, "I then askt him what was the lowest he would take...and he said he would take \$1600 dollars cash for the whole, I then told him I would give him 1500 cash...and that he might now take his chois for I would not give aney more." In addition to supplying his family with information about their new home, Miller's diary demonstrated the shrewd bargaining involved in securing it. Given that the family ultimately made the trek to Ohio with Miller's four brothers and four neighboring families, the account may also have helped to persuade additional parties to join in the endeavor.<sup>85</sup>

Rather than keeping a diary, many prospectors preferred to communicate their findings via the post, especially when their expeditions had important implications for their relations at home. As the nation's postal network grew more efficient and extensive during the antebellum period, western travelers had increasingly frequent opportunities for both sending and receiving letters, even in sparsely populated regions of the frontier. Many sent updates from each town and city along their routes, enabling family members or business partners to track the progress of their journeys. Isaac Miller Wetmore, a young farmer from upstate New York, went to considerable trouble to mail four letters to his wife as he searched for land in northwestern Illinois in 1836. In one dispatch, composed in a tavern while his three traveling companions carried on a boisterous conversation, he complained, "The rest of the Boys are at the table a making Maps of the tounship and constantly enquiring about the business and the lots which keeps my mind all the time in commotion for I have not rote a line hardly with out stoping and talking about the mapps." Wetmore's wife, who was caring for their infant daughter at home,

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<sup>84</sup> Gray, *The Diary of William Fairfax Gray*, 28. For another example of a speculator who kept a diary as a means of reporting to his fellow investors, see David Berdan, "Journal of a Tour Performed by a Committee of the New York Emigration Society in the years 1819 and 1820," Clements Library, University of Michigan

<sup>85</sup> Aaron Miller, "Diary of Aaron Miller, Written While in Quest of Ohio Wheat Lands," *Ohio Archeological and Historical Quarterly* 33 (1924): 77.



was undoubtedly eager to receive even these hastily written updates, as her husband's expedition was intended to lay the groundwork for their removal to Illinois in the coming year. Although the frenetic pace of land grabbing generally required men like Wetmore to act quickly in making purchases, some travelers managed to use letters to solicit the consent of family members or request additional funds prior to investing in land.<sup>86</sup>

For men who were merely scouting rather than purchasing land, travel writing often contributed to a collective decision-making process that involved wives, parents, neighbors, or other interested parties. When families made decisions about emigration or real estate investments in a democratic fashion, diaries and letters furnished readers with vital information that could be discussed and debated prior to settling upon a course of action. Some prospectors also used their reports as tools of persuasion. During his visit to Independence, Missouri, in 1843, D. W. Jordan penned a lengthy letter to his wife, Emily, in North Carolina that read like a promotional brochure for the area. "Since my arrival here I have not had time to write to you having been very busy in collecting all the information about the country that I could," he explained, "and now what I have received will communicate as near and as truthfully as I can." After instructing his wife to locate the town of Independence on a map, Jordan proceeded to describe its many advantages, devoting particular attention to its location at the head of the California, Oregon, and Santa Fe trails. He also praised the region's rich soil, pure water, healthy climate, and well-constructed roads. "Oh how delighted you would be my dear Emily to see the country," he concluded, "I never see a pretty farm...but what I think of you and say how happy we could live here." Although few prospectors were as transparent in their pandering and persuasion, many used travel writing to convince their wives or other family members of the wisdom of relocation.<sup>87</sup>

The diaries and letters of men like John Gordon, William Fairfax Gray, Aaron Miller, and D.W. Jordan must therefore be understood as multifaceted tools for decision-making. Through their writing, prospectors collected, evaluated, and synthesized information, and relayed it to readers who were implicated in their decisions about real estate purchases or relocation. As important as these practical functions were, however, they only begin to explain why so many men kept detailed written records as they explored opportunities in agricultural areas and burgeoning towns throughout the trans-Appalachian frontier. For most prospectors, travel writing also had deeper and more implicit meanings that become apparent when we consider how they wrote about the reconnaissance process itself.

### **Steps toward the Formation of an Opinion**

Although many prospectors frequently professed a desire to get a firsthand look at conditions in the trans-Appalachian West, only a fraction of their travel writing was devoted to observations about the landscape. As land hunters traversed the region in search of valuable real estate, they often spent less time recording details about soil,

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<sup>86</sup> Isaac Miller Wetmore to wife, June 15, 1836, in "Land Hunting in 1836," ed. James Harvey Young, *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 45 (1952): 249.

<sup>87</sup> D.W. Jordan to Emily Tuttle Jordan, August 29, 1843, in "A Southern Family on the Missouri Frontier: Letters from Independence, 1843-1855," ed. W. Darrell Overdyke, *Journal of Southern History*, 17, no. 2 (May, 1951): 219-222.

vegetation, and climate than they did recounting their encounters on the road, in tavern barrooms, and at wilderness camps. Similarly, men contemplating relocation to western towns and cities often filled their diaries and letters with lengthy accounts of their strolls through city streets and experiences in hotel lobbies, steamboat cabins, and canal packets. Although these records of daily activities conveyed geographical information in passing, they often revealed more about the reconnaissance process itself than about the benefits of emigration or the profitability of speculation.

Of all the investigative activities that travelers wrote about, none consumed more of their diary entries and letters than the process of soliciting intelligence from fellow travelers and local informants. Often known as “making inquiries,” this process furnished prospectors with a wealth of advice, opinions, rumors, and factual information that could not be gleaned through observation. In rural areas, speculators and prospective emigrants queried farmers and innkeepers about the going price of land, the average yield of various crops, the ease of transporting produce to market, and the health of the country. In towns and cities, on the other hand, travelers accosted residents with questions about the history of the community, the moral character of its inhabitants, the cost of living, and the prevailing wages for various types of labor. Even as land hunters and prospective emigrants insisted that their journeys were “tours of observation,” it was this non-visual reconnaissance that constituted the primary subject matter of their diaries and letters.

In one sense, it is unsurprising that travelers devoted so much travel writing to recounting their interactions with informants: making inquiries was not only a means of gathering information, it was also the primary social activity for most prospectors. Throughout his journey to Michigan, the vast majority of John Gordon’s conversations centered on the subject of real estate speculation. Traveling by steamboat from Buffalo to Detroit, he spent hours interrogating emigrants and fellow speculators about the risks and rewards of investing in government land. “Today I have conversed with many of the passengers, who appear to be conversant with the country, on the subject of Land speculations in Michigan,” he wrote, adding optimistically, “there is but one opinion of their safety and certainly of a large profit.” Gordon was especially thorough in recording the comments of one successful speculator who assured him that well-located lots purchased at the government minimum of \$1.25 per acre could fetch as much as \$75 per acre on the open market. His inquiries grew even more frequent as he pushed into the interior of Michigan, riding through thinly populated regions and lodging in private dwellings and cramped taverns. Keeping his diary constantly on hand, he tapped into the local knowledge of farmers and villagers, and received a variety of useful tips from fellow land hunters, surveyors, and government officials. For Gordon, this process of making inquiries provided a protocol for sociability as he navigated a world of strangers.<sup>88</sup>

Rather than simply recording the intelligence collected through their inquiries, travelers like Gordon went to great lengths to document the precise setting and circumstances in which they acquired new information. In profiling the town of Jacksonville, Michigan, for example, Gordon began by noting his discussions with local residents. “It is Sunday morning and the bar room in which I write is crowded with tavern frequenters. I am writing and conversing with them at the same time, putting

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<sup>88</sup> Gordon, “Michigan Journal, 1836,” 134.

down such answers to my questions as shew the state and progress of the country.” Besides situating new intelligence within its social context, Gordon also expounded on his techniques for procuring reliable information from strangers. He explained that while lodging in taverns, he often sought out local doctors, whom he found to be “the most communicative and intelligent” inhabitants of small towns. “They lounge in the Bar rooms to converse with travellers, are familiar with all the concerns of the [county] from their practice, and are thoroughly conversant with its growth and development.” He justified this somewhat cynical tactic on the grounds that these exchanges were always reciprocal. “Being sociable and in want of the society of persons better educated than their patients usually are,” he explained, “they seize upon an intelligent traveller and ask as many questions as they are called on to answer.” Gordon’s preoccupation with documenting and explicating his investigative practices suggests that this information was neither extraneous nor merely contextual, but central to the social and cultural work of his travel writing.<sup>89</sup>

Although recounting interactions with informants was at times simply a means of introducing new intelligence, it could also be an end in itself. In fact, some travelers described their conversations and inquiries in considerable detail without noting the particular subject matter of these exchanges. This was the case for David Berdan, a New York businessman who traveled west in 1819 to select a site for a new town. As a shareholder in the New York Emigration Society, Berdan kept an elaborate journal of his travels in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois as a report for his fellow investors. Like many well-connected travelers, he carried letters of introduction that enabled him to access a wide variety of knowledgeable informants. He conversed with government officials, military officers, surveyors, and even such notable figures as William Henry Harrison and Delaware Indian chief Captain William Anderson. Although Berdan frequently commented on the value of these interactions, he rarely discussed the intelligence he had obtained. After an interview with General James Dill, a lawyer and militia officer in Indiana, he simply remarked that the General had “imparted to us considerable information concerning the late purchases; his knowledge of that part of the country being pretty extensive as he was secretary to the Commissioners (Mr. Cass and two others) employed in making those purchases.” For members of the New York Emigration Society who ultimately perused his journal, such descriptions offered few insights about the possibilities for establishing a new town. What they provided instead was evidence that Berdan was marshalling all his resources to acquire current information from highly credible and authoritative sources.<sup>90</sup>

In part, this emphasis on the reconnaissance process must be understood as a response to pervasive concerns about misinformation and duplicity on the byways of the trans-Appalachian frontier. As they worked to gather information from strangers, travelers were forced to grapple with the fact that their informants had a variety of incentives for leading them astray. One of the more benign forms of misinformation they encountered was the tendency of inhabitants in frontier towns to exaggerate the growth and prosperity of their adopted homes. Traveling by steamboat on the Ohio River in 1839, one Massachusetts merchant found it “quite amusing to go on shore at the little

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<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 268-270.

<sup>90</sup> Berdan, “Journal of a Tour,” see especially entries for November, 1819, Berdan Family Papers, Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

villages that are daily springing up...and hear the proprietors expatiate on the astonishing advantages which their particular spot possesses over all other places for the rapid growth of a great city.” As locals often had a financial stake in promoting settlement, travelers treated their testimony cautiously as they assessed opportunities for employment or real estate investments. Gathering accurate information was equally challenging in rural areas, where disdain for absentee speculators was intense. John Gordon found that even the act of diary keeping antagonized locals, who immediately recognized him as a speculator. During one especially tense episode, he wrote, “A drunken Irish Taylor is making a most disagreeable growling while I write and talking at Clem and me whom he takes for speculators, a race particularly odious to emigrants.” Stories about locals intentionally misleading land hunters with inaccurate directions or other erroneous information were so common that some travelers were hesitant to rely on what they heard in taverns and private residences.<sup>91</sup>

The inherently competitive nature of land hunting presented yet another challenge for prospectors as they made inquiries about the landscape. Because locals and fellow travelers were often caught up in the search for fertile and well-located government land, they were frequently reluctant to share potentially valuable intelligence. In a diary of his 1836 land-hunting journey, one traveler visiting St. Louis expressed his frustration with tight-lipped locals, exclaiming, “Indeed! I find it a difficult matter to draw information from those that might be supposed the most capable of giving it.” He blamed this evasiveness on a “spirit of speculation” which seemed to prevail “to so great an extent that all—the farmer, the merchant, the physician, the labourer, in the tradesman, all—are at it.” Under these conditions, it was difficult for prospective emigrants and speculators to decide whom to trust.<sup>92</sup>

Further stoking these concerns were countless stories of deception that circulated in periodicals and popular fiction. By the 1830s, American print culture abounded with cautionary tales of confidence men who used elaborate lithographic maps and boosterish hyperbole to peddle worthless real estate. One widely read iteration of this plot was in Charles Dickens’s serialized novel, *The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843). Having recently emigrated from England, the novel’s protagonist sets out for the frontier in the hopes of establishing himself as an architect and surveyor. Along the way, he encounters a haughty general who purports to be a shareholder in the Eden Land Corporation. Having extolled the virtues of Eden, the General leads Chuzzlewit to a shifty real estate agent who presents a detailed plan of the village, replete with banks, cathedrals, factories, hotels, an exchange, and a theatre. After purchasing a fifty acre lot, Chuzzlewit proceeds to the village, only to find that it consists of “a score of cabins in the whole; half of these appeared untenanted; all were rotten and decayed.” A similar, though ultimately less successful ruse was featured in Herman Melville’s satire, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857). Set aboard a steamboat bound for New Orleans, the novel recounts the exploits of a quick-change artist who uses a variety of confidence games to swindle his fellow passengers. In one episode, the trickster entices a young collegian to purchase fraudulent stock in the Black Rapids Coal Company. Emboldened by this success, he then offers to sell the young man real estate in a “new

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<sup>91</sup>John Gates Thurston, *A journal of a trip to Illinois in 1836* (Mount Pleasant: John Cumming, 1971), 53; Gordon, “Michigan Journal, 1836,” 452.

<sup>92</sup>“Memorandums on the Road,” entry for September 6, 1836.

and thriving city” called New Jerusalem. As in Dickens’s tale, the trickster uses a map to illustrate the progress and advantages of the city. The scholar’s immediate skepticism toward this offer is telling, as it seems to suggest that such schemes had become so notorious during the antebellum period that even a credulous young traveler eager for a speculation would recognize their danger.<sup>93</sup>

Speculators and prospective migrants registered their concerns about deceit and misinformation as they documented their investigative activities in diaries and letters. When forced to rely on strangers for information, prospectors often penned careful assessments of the credibility of their informants, citing any facts or opinions that corroborated or contradicted their testimony. During William Fairfax Gray’s land-hunting tour, he devoted the vast majority of his diary entries to recording conversations with speculators, surveyors, settlers, military officials, and others who offered insight into the opportunities for land speculation in Texas. Gray treated their testimony with great caution, in part because the possibility of a rebellion in Texas rendered the future of land titles uncertain and generated a swirl of rumors and false information. Thus, when he recounted a discussion with a fellow steamboat passenger, Col. Jeremiah Strode, who offered to sell a tract of over 1,000 acres for \$500, Gray supplemented his account with a variety of personal information about Strode that demonstrated the legitimacy of his offer. He noted, for example, that the Colonel was a surveyor and resident of Texas; that he had an uncle in Culpeper, Virginia; and that he had served under William Henry Harrison during the War of 1812. Gray even noted that two fellow travelers had vouched for the Colonel and his land titles: “Major Miller recognized him. Mr. Pearce read his papers, and says that his title to the one-fourth league is clear.” In lieu of personal details and other substantiating information, Gray at times relied on his readings of the moral character of his informants. Writing about his conversation with a doctor in New Orleans who offered information about conditions in San Antonio, he described the man as “intelligent, communicative, and unpretending.” By scrutinizing the moral cast of their informants, prospectors like Gray demonstrated that they had been duly cautious about confidence men, and meticulous in their efforts to obtain reliable intelligence.<sup>94</sup>

Concerns about misinformation were not, however, the only reason prospective emigrants and speculators filled their letters and diaries with details about their information-gathering activities. This feature of their writing also reflected a more basic desire to establish their own credibility as investigators, informants, and decision-makers. In order to understand the meaning of this literary performance, it is necessary to consider why even intimate acquaintances such as family members or business associates might have had concerns about their ability to conduct a detached and clear-minded investigation.

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<sup>93</sup> Dickens, *The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit* (New York: New York Society, 1908), 394; Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, 1857), 63-70. For a discussion of this scene in the *Confidence-Man* see Yvonne Elizabeth Pelletier, “False Promises and Real Estate: Land Speculation and Millennial Maps in Herman Melville’s *Confidence-Man*,” in *American Literary Geographies: Spatial Practice and Cultural Production, 1500-1900*, ed. Martin Bruckner and Hsuan L. Hsu (Newark : University of Delaware Press, 2007), 191-205.

<sup>94</sup> *The Diary of William Fairfax Gray*, 19-20, 68. On the growing preoccupation with confidence men in antebellum America, see Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982). A more extensive discussion of middle-class notions about moral character will follow in Chapter 3.

Since the early national period, critics of emigration had been arguing that westward movement was fueled by irrational desires and unchecked ambition rather than careful calculation and sober judgment. This critique was succinctly captured by the phrase “western fever” and its many derivatives, from Ohio fever to California fever. As one 1840 article in the *New England Farmer* put it, “This dreadful disease has prevailed as an epidemic for several years, throughout New England, and to some extent in the Middle States, and has often proved fatal, if not to the lives, at least to the happiness of those who have had the misfortune to be attacked with it.” The contagion manifested itself in delusional fantasies of effortless gain, which caused the afflicted to discount the risks involved in relocating to the frontier. “When first attacked,” the article continued, “the patient become excited with wonder and admiration, dreams of unlimited wealth, in the possession of countless acres in the far west, waving with golden wheat, and corn produced almost without labor.” Those suffering from western fever also tended to treat reports about the frontier uncritically, parsing them selectively for favorable information:

At length the excitement begins to subside, and he says to himself, ‘I will not be led away by idle tales; I will obtain correct information and deliberate calmly upon the subject, and will be governed by the dictates of sober judgment’-and straightway he reads an extravagant account of the happy land, written perhaps by some speculator in western lands, and is persuaded that his dream is in fact the picture of the real situation which awaits him there.

Like many other satirical accounts of western fever, this article conveyed a clear message: it was not the exaggerated descriptions of boosters or the dishonest tactics of confidence men that led so many men to make poor decisions about emigration; rather, it was their own ambitions and desires. Antebellum moralists employed the same critique in warning of the dangers of land speculation.<sup>95</sup>

Antebellum Americans undoubtedly read cautionary tales about western fever with as much skepticism as they did the glowing reports of western boosters. Nevertheless, such stories captured basic and widely shared concerns about the individual and social consequences of accelerating westward movement and feverish land grabbing. In light of these concerns, it becomes clear that the diaries and letters of prospectors were important performances of rational decision-making. By chronicling their inquiries and evaluating the character of their informants, travelers fashioned themselves as skeptical observers, immune to the effects of western fever. Their careful records of reconnaissance enabled readers at home to see that their conclusions about emigration or speculation were founded on shrewd observation, careful calculation, and sober judgment. Thus, their texts were not only geographical reports on conditions in the trans-Appalachian West, but also narratives of investigation.

The narrative quality of their writing is most apparent in the case of diaries, which provided a clear temporal framework for recounting the investigative process. As they composed their diaries, travelers captured their investigation as it unfolded, each

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<sup>95</sup> J. Gould, “Wanderings in the West in 1839,” *Indiana Magazine of History*, 30, no. 1 (March, 1934): 71-103. For an overview of the anti-emigration movement on the Eastern Seaboard during the antebellum period, see Steven Stoll, *Larding the Lean Earth: Soil and Society in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002). Cautionary tales about western fever were closely related to critiques of gambling and speculation put forward by antebellum reformers. See T. J. Jackson Lears, *Something for Nothing: Luck in America* (New York: Viking, 2003); and Ann Fabian, *Card Sharps and Bucket Shops: Gambling in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

successive entry noting precisely when, where, and how they acquired new intelligence. This characteristic allowed readers to retrace the diarist's changing understanding of the geography of opportunity. John Gordon imagined that his land-hunting journal would be read in precisely this way. In a preface explaining his reasons for writing, he described the volume as "a connected narrative of the successive steps toward the formation of an opinion." That many other diarists placed similar emphasis on the reconnaissance process suggests that they too conceived of their accounts in this way. In fact, the inherently narrative nature of the travel diary may explain why so many speculators and prospective emigrants preferred this practice to other forms of record keeping.<sup>96</sup>

Having documented each step of the reconnaissance process, some prospectors closed their diaries with lengthy conclusions that reviewed their findings and explained their decisions about relocation or land purchases. Upon completion of his tour through Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, for example, Virtulon Rich neatly recopied his journal in a marble notebook, likely using it as a report to his relations in Vermont. In the final entry, he reflected on his findings and announced his decision to remain in Ohio, at least temporarily. "I will freely own that after the opportunity I had had of judging of the western peoples the soil, and the climate, I preferred my own native soil and its inhabitants," he confessed in this passage. Yet, after spending forty days searching for an advantageous site to begin his legal career, Rich concluded that his tour had been "too short to afford a competent chance for me to satisfy my judgment." For this reason, he decided to remain in the town Zanesville for six months in order to gather additional information and continue his studies of "Old Coke and Blackstone." For Rich's family members in Vermont, his reasoning on the matter of emigration likely held as much interest as the geographical information contained in his daily entries.<sup>97</sup>

Like the entries of a travel diary, the letters that prospectors composed at various points throughout their investigation also constituted a record of their "steps toward the formation of an opinion." Touring the West in 1846, William Wallace posted seven letters to his wife, Mary, apprising her of his evolving opinion on the matter of emigration. Wallace had set out from his home in Warrenton, Virginia, to inspect family landholdings in Mississippi and Texas, intending to either sell these claims or resettle his family on one of them. In a state of financial distress at the time, he was clearly enthusiastic about the prospect of starting over in the West. His letters suggest, however, that Mary was far more ambivalent about the move, and that her husband's previous financial indiscretions may have given her reason to doubt his judgment. At several points, Wallace felt compelled to remind her that his support for emigration was not a foregone conclusion, and that he would not make any rash decisions. "But you my dear wife, to whom I am indebted for all the happiness I have had in this life," he reassured her, "you who never rebuked me for the cares in which I involved you and our children, be assured you shall be consulted in all I may resolve to do." His correspondence lent credence to this assertion by providing a step-by-step account of his inquiries.<sup>98</sup>

To emphasize that his letters constituted an ongoing narrative of investigation rather than a conclusive report, Wallace repeatedly qualified his opinions about

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<sup>96</sup> Gordon, "Michigan Journal, 1836," 10.

<sup>97</sup> Rich, "A Sketch of a Journey to the West," entry for July 6, 1832.

<sup>98</sup> William W. Wallace to Mary E. Wallace, December 31, 1846, William W. Wallace Correspondence, 1846-1866, Western Americana Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

conditions in the West by noting that they were only provisional and subject to further inquiry. After inspecting his landholdings near Jackson, Mississippi, he postulated that relocating to that area would be advantageous for the family, but hastened to add, "I shall compare the advantages of such a residence with the advantages of living in Texas, and decide accordingly." He followed through on this promise upon reaching his brother's residence in San Augustine, posting two letters that compared conditions in Mississippi and Texas. In the first, he opined that the latter state would be a more favorable place for establishing a cotton plantation, but insisted, "I have...come to no conclusion as to what I shall do, as I have not seen much of Texas and cannot ascertain what my lands are worth, or what my professional prospects." When he wrote again a week later, he chronicled his long rides through the surrounding area, detailing his observations about its soil and salubrity. Now firmer in his conviction about the superior advantages of the region, he wrote, "I am greatly pleased with all I have seen and may safely pronounce Texas one of the finest countries on our continent." By rehearsing his investigative process and underscoring the empirical basis for his decision, Wallace made a compelling case that his views on emigration were rational and carefully considered, not the result of an escapist fantasy brought on by his financial woes.<sup>99</sup>

As Wallace's epistolary practices make clear, the writing that took place on prospecting tours was often part of a complex negotiation between the traveler and his readers over decisions about emigration or speculation. In some cases, these negotiations were fraught with tension and conflict, especially when husbands and wives disagreed about the best course of action. At times, travelers found that their personal ambitions for social, professional, or economic advancement did not comport well with the interests and desires of their family members. This tension is evident throughout William Wallace's letters. In one communication, he framed the advantages of relocation in personal terms, remarking, "I think it to my interest not to remain in Virginia, when a better field presents itself in the West and South." Perhaps hoping to reassure Mary that his calculation factored in the welfare of the entire family, he added, "No man who has to labor for the support of his family ought to remain satisfied because he can keep soul and body together and stronger is the inducement when a fine estate in lands awaits us." Even as men like Wallace attempted to reconcile their personal interests, aspirations, and desires with those of their wives and children, however, one basic truth was unavoidable: the decision to seek a new home on the frontier or speculate on western land almost always exposed family members to significant risks, whether they be physical, financial, or both.<sup>100</sup>

Anti-emigration narratives often played on the conflict between family members over decisions about relocation, heaping condemnation on husbands and fathers who put their families at risk by moving west. Although some moralistic tales suggested that women and children too could be stricken with western fever, they often characterized the disease as a distinctly masculine affliction. Husbands, fathers, and young men were typically the first to contract the contagion, and they almost always experienced its effects most acutely. This gender dynamic is clearly illustrated by John Trumbull's cautionary tale, *Western Emigration* (c.1817). Trumbull's text takes the form of a dialogue between Dr. Jeremiah Simpleton, who had recently returned from Ohio, and Mr.

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<sup>99</sup> Wallace to Mary Wallace, December 31, 1846; January 18, 1847; and January 30, 1847.

<sup>100</sup> Wallace to Mary Wallace, December 31, 1846.



Scruple, a young man preparing to depart for the West. In counseling Scruple against emigration, Simpleton recalls his own disastrous decision to abandon his farm in Maine and strike out for the frontier. In part, he blames this misstep on a dishonest speculator, who duped him into purchasing land in Ohio by portraying the state as an earthly paradise. Yet Simpleton also blames his own ambitions for wealth and public office, which blinded him to the risks and privations of frontier living. As a result, his family had suffered three years of hardships in the West, enduring infertile land, insufficient food and shelter, and dangerous encounters with wild animals. Ultimately, Simpleton's wife and children prevailed on him to return to New England, rebuking him for putting his ambitions ahead of their welfare. "Reproach upon reproach was now heaped upon me by the whole family for quitting a peaceable home where all the necessaries of life could easily be obtained, and for removing like a tomfool to Ohio for an office!" Such attempts to portray westward migration as a dangerous abdication of patriarchal responsibility were ubiquitous in anti-emigration fiction throughout the antebellum period.<sup>101</sup>

In the context of this critique, travel diaries and letters offered prospective migrants an opportunity to demonstrate their concern for the interests of their dependents. William Wallace, for example, devoted much of his correspondence to assessing the potential health implications of relocation for his wife and children. His preoccupation with this matter was rooted in a popular belief that the climate of the Deep South posed significant dangers to newcomers, who often experienced a seasoning period marked by severe illness. In an early letter enumerating the possible advantages of settling in Jackson, Mississippi, Wallace underscored the importance of this consideration. "[W]ith great delight I could resolve to pitch my tent in [this area]," he explained, "if I could safely risk my family in a southern latitude." In writing home from various locations in Mississippi and Texas, Wallace frequently commented on features of the landscape that he believed to be indicators of the relative health of the country. After exploring conditions in the vicinity of San Augustine, he concluded that the area was "one of the healthiest portions of the South," adding, "The air is pure, water good, and the trees immediately in the red land portion of the country do not droop with the long hanging moss which exists in Mississippi and Louisiana in such abundance." He supplemented this observation with the testimony of local doctors, noting, "I am told by physicians that fevers do prevail to some extent, though they are becoming every year less frequent and more manageable." Beyond simply persuading Mary that the benefits of emigration outweighed the potential health risks, Wallace's account of his assiduous investigation also made a more implicit argument that his financial and professional interests did not outweigh his concern for the family's physical well-being.<sup>102</sup>

John Roberts almost certainly conceived of his diligent travel writing as a means of expressing his commitment to conducting a meticulous, unbiased investigation before subjecting his family to the physical, emotional, and financial trials of migration. Although he likely shared his travel diary with other family members, several passages suggest that it was primarily written for his future wife, Mary. Only eighteen at the time of their marriage, Mary was clearly ambivalent about relocating to Illinois, especially since the move required her to leave behind an ailing brother. In a journal that she

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<sup>101</sup> Henry Trumbull. *Western Emigration Journal of Doctor Jeremiah Simpleton's [I.E. Simpleton's] Tour to Ohio* (Boston: S. Sewall, 1817).

<sup>102</sup> Wallace to Mary Wallace, December 31, 1846; and January 18, 1847.

commenced when the family left New York for the West, she reflected on the difficulty of departing the place of her youth, noting, “how painful the idea years must elapse if I live before I can see this place again.” Her journal also reveals that she had consented to emigration largely out of her sense of conjugal duty and devotion to her new husband. “[S]urely I must have the strongest affection for my companion to consent to settle so far from all my friends for his sake may I be blessed with a contented and a happy mind when I arrive that I may not make him unhappy,” she wrote in one early entry. Given her ambivalence about the endeavor, Roberts’s prospecting journey itself, and his written account of the reconnaissance process, must be understood as reciprocal displays of devotion to Mary’s safety and contentment. In fact, he often supplemented his daily records of investigative activities with heartfelt expressions of affection for her. In one passage, he mused:

[A]s I am writing my mind returns back to my dear family which I have left behind and the dear girl that I love above all others...and could I but hear her sweet voice how happy should I feel but I trust she is better situated than her lover who feels himself alone among strangers in a distant land fastened to a trunk of a tree on the Allegany river several miles from any human habitation.

As if to reaffirm his commitment to Mary’s welfare, he concluded this passage by stoically asserting, “But I have undertaken the journey and I must proceed through every danger and fatigue.” For all his efforts to select an optimal site for their homestead, Roberts was ultimately unable to safeguard his family against the hardships of life on the Illinois frontier. Within weeks of their arrival, Mary and two other members of the party began to shake with severe chills—a telltale sign of the form of malarial fever that antebellum Americans referred to as the ague. Although they would ultimately recover from the affliction, their experiences are a poignant reminder that even the most diligent investigation and rational decision-making could not eliminate the risks of emigration.<sup>103</sup>

For speculators, whose real estate investments tied up family resources and jeopardized the financial security of relatives and business associates, travel diaries and letters served similarly as records of due diligence and clear-minded judgment. As John Gordon prepared to risk a large sum of his family fortune on investments in Michigan land, he speculated that his “narrative of the successive steps toward the formation of an opinion” would be of great interest not only to his wife and children, but also to future decedents. In his first entry, he suggested that the two-volume journal would “shew to my posterity the lights I acted under, whether successful or unsuccessful in any Land purchases.” Gordon’s explanation for his prolific travel writing not only registered the long-term financial consequences of his actions; it also implied that his journal would serve two different purposes depending on the outcome of his investments. If his real estate purchases proved profitable, the account would commemorate his astute observation, business acumen, and daring enterprise. If, on the other hand, he lost a fortune on the transaction, his writing would reveal that his decisions were the product of painstaking research rather than reckless acquisitiveness or overheated ambition.<sup>104</sup>

Through their literary displays of prudence, skepticism, and foresight, prospectors like Gordon and Roberts aimed to allay concerns about not only the risks of speculation

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<sup>103</sup> Mary Woods Burhans, diary, entries for May 13-14, 1831, filed with the diaries of John M. Roberts, Ayer Collection, Newberry Library; Roberts, diary, entry for September 26, 1830.

<sup>104</sup> Gordon, “Michigan Journal, 1836,” 10.

or migration, but also their personal character and judgment. Although many travelers undoubtedly had an earnest desire to keep family members or business associates apprised of conditions and opportunities in the West, their diaries and letters always had the implicit effect of reaffirming their own expertise, credibility, and authority over the decision-making process. It was for this reason, as much as any other, that travel writing became such a vital component of the emerging ritual of the prospecting journey.

**CASTLES IN THE AIR:  
SPECULATING ABOUT PERSONAL PROSPECTS  
AND THE PROSPECTS OF PLACES**

In the fall of 1839, as the nation struggled to recover from a devastating financial panic that had taken place two years earlier, land hunters continued to funnel into the Rock River Valley of Illinois, seeking valuable real estate for settlement or investment. Among the visitors who crowded into taverns and steamboats to get a look at the country was a young man from New York who had journeyed nearly a thousand miles in order to “satisfy curiosity” about the region. Although the young traveler managed to resist the temptation to purchase real estate, he did engage in a type of speculation during his western tour. In the pages of his travel diary, as he commented on each of the “numberless small villages” cropping up in the area, he filled his entries with *literary* speculation about their future growth and development. Impressed by the “handsome location” of Bloomingville, for example, he conjectured that once the Rock River was opened to steamboat navigation, the town would be “quite a stirring spot.” He was equally optimistic about Stevenson, a “flourishing” village near the junction of the Mississippi and Rock Rivers. “Well located” and buzzing with “much activity,” the town seemed destined to thrive despite competition from Davenport, a new rival located across the Mississippi River in Iowa. If these descriptions had a boosterish ring to them, others were not so sanguine. Although Grand Detour was “mapd for a large place,” the traveler surmised that it “cannot be much more than a village.” He also opined that periodic floods in Rockingham, Iowa, would “operate against its advancement.” Summing up the fate of the new towns along his route, the young man concluded soberly, “so many in bud and but few may blossom.”<sup>105</sup>

The budding urban centers that this young diarist encountered were products of a wave of townsite speculation that swept through the trans-Appalachian frontier following the War of 1812. Spurred by the expansion of steamboat travel and the completion of internal improvement projects, speculators rushed to purchase land and plat new villages at strategic points along the region’s roads and waterways. Although all varieties of land speculation contributed to the growing concern for being well-located, the planning and promotion of new towns played an especially crucial role in fostering a perception of the frontier as a landscape of emergent and prospective places. As travelers like the anonymous New Yorker attempted to discern why some settlements prospered and others failed, they became increasingly attuned to the way various geographical factors fostered or hindered the development of each locale. This made them all the more inclined to calculate and compare the relative advantages of towns or agricultural areas before deciding where to settle down.

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<sup>105</sup> “Overland Journey to the Midwest,” see entries for October, 1839, Chicago Historical Society.

Townsite speculation did more than foster precise thinking about the advantages of places, however. It also fundamentally altered the way antebellum Americans thought about the frontier as a field for economic advancement and social mobility. By dramatically illustrating the dynamism of the western landscape, the rise and fall of aspiring urban centers encouraged migrants and travelers to see all places as improving or declining, but never stable. French aristocrat Michel Chevalier captured this perceptual change when he observed that the “unparalleled growth of some new towns has turned the heads of the nation,” fostering a popular delusion that “before ten years, three or four Londons, as many Parises, and a dozen Liverpools, were about to display their streets and edifices...in the American wilderness.” The rapid pace of settlement and development meant that it was no longer adequate to simply compare the present condition of towns, cities, and agricultural hinterlands. Whether they were purchasing real estate or simply choosing a town in which to pursue a trade or profession, westering Americans now had to imagine how frontier settlements would grow or decline in the years to come. In this sense, the prodigious development of new urban centers turned all migrants into speculators.<sup>106</sup>

This chapter examines speculation as both a financial activity and a literate practice. It begins by exploring how individuals involved in the founding of new towns used speculative writing to plan and promote their real estate ventures. It then analyzes how antebellum migrants and travelers appropriated and modified the theories and writing practices of townsite speculators, using them to evaluate possible sites for settlement. Finally, it looks at a distinctive type of literary speculation that became popular among young men who set out to launch their careers on the urban frontier during the second quarter of the century. As young migrants wrote about their decision to take up residence in a particular community, they wove together predictions about their own prospects with analysis of the prospects of their adopted homes. By circulating their speculative writing in letters and diaries, they promoted an image of the frontier as a unique field of opportunity, where an individual could achieve rapid upward mobility by growing up with a promising town or village. This model of personal advancement, which emphasized the simultaneous and interrelated improvement of people and places, provided the germ for a new conception of pioneer masculinity that many migrants would embrace and elaborate in the years after their relocation.

### **A Speculative Science**

Real estate ventures involving the planning and promotion of new towns first became popular in the United States in the aftermath of the Revolution. In western New York, an early hotbed of townsite speculation, wealthy landholders staked out numerous new villages, situating them at strategic points along major arteries of transportation. Typical of these settlements was the village of Bath, established by a company of English investors in 1793. Bath’s development was entrusted to Captain Charles Williamson, who anticipated that it would become the central metropolis for the company’s vast landholdings. To convey the appearance of a thriving urban center, Williamson initiated construction of a theater, hotel, and racetrack in the village. He also worked to drum up

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<sup>106</sup> Michel Chevalier, *Society, Manners and Politics in the United States: Being a Series of Letters on North America* (Boston: Weeks, Jordan, and Company, 1839), 305.

interest among prospective settlers by advertising extensively and holding a series of elaborate fairs. Although the town never grew into the flourishing metropolis that Williamson envisioned, many of his promotional techniques became standard practice among later generations of speculators.<sup>107</sup>

If New York was a proving ground for townsite speculation, the practice was perfected on the rivers, lakes, and roads of the trans-Appalachian frontier. In the late eighteenth century, clusters of villages began to spring up at important junctions along the region's river networks. In the 1780s, for example, Louisville and Clarksville were both platted at a point on the Ohio River where a waterfall impeded river traffic, necessitating the trans-shipment of goods. Over the next two decades, plans for a canal that would bypass the falls spurred the development of additional competitors, including Jeffersonville, Shippingsport, Portland, and New Albany. By the outbreak of the War of 1812, well-traveled stretches of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers were cluttered with new villages, each one vying for dominance over nearby rivals. But these early ventures were a mere prelude to the rampant townside speculation that took place in the region during the antebellum period. Whereas the establishment of new urban centers had previously been dominated by land companies, the antebellum period saw growing numbers of modestly situated speculators join in the hunt for eligible townsites. Whenever new tracts of government land were surveyed and readied for sale, land hunters rushed to purchase real estate at locales that appeared advantageously situated with respect to transportation networks and fertile agricultural country. Having secured the land, speculators promptly drew up plans for a town and began marketing lots to potential settlers. This practice reached its peak during the land boom of the 1830s, as thousands of villages were platted throughout the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys. Between 1835 and 1837, upwards of 500 new towns were established in Illinois alone.<sup>108</sup>

Underlying this frenzy of town planning was the widely shared assumption that it was possible to accurately predict the sites of future cities, even in areas where Anglo-American settlement was still in its infancy. Although this assumption was not new, the rapid settlement of the trans-Appalachian frontier fostered an unprecedented effort to discern the complex factors that shaped and facilitated urban development. Touring the United States in the 1840s, Argentine intellectual Domingo Faustino Sarmiento noted a widespread fascination with forecasting the growth of new cities and towns. "The Yankee, an inventor of cities, professes a speculative science which leads him by deduction to the divination of a site where a future city must flourish." In illuminating

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<sup>107</sup> On townsite speculation in western New York, see Aaron M. Sakolski, *The Great American Land Bubble: The Amazing Story of Land-Grabbing, Speculations, and Booms from Colonial Days to the Present Time*. (New York: Johnson Reprint Corp, 1966), 73-98; and John W. Reps, *The Making of Urban America: A History of City Planning in the United States* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1965), 349-352.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 352-371. On town planning in Illinois during the 1830s, see William V. Pooley, *The Settlement of Illinois from 1830 to 1850* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1908), 278. For comprehensive accounts of the planning and promotion of new towns in antebellum America, see Reps, *Town Planning in Frontier America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969); and Reps, *The Forgotten Frontier: Urban Planning in the American West Before 1890* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1981). See also David Hamer, *New Towns in the New World: Images and Perceptions of the Nineteenth-Century Urban Frontier* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1990), 18-39.

the basic principles of this science, Sarmiento described the workings of a typical townsite speculator:

With the map extended in the shade of the forests, his sharp eye measures distances of time and space. He intuits the course which the public road will later have to take and he finds on his map the intersections which it will be necessary to make. He anticipates the invading march of the population which is advancing through the wilderness and calculates how much time both the people coming from the north and those coming from the south will take to draw near to the point at the confluence of two navigable rivers that he has chosen for study. Then, with a sure hand, he traces the route of the railroads which will link the commercial system of the lakes with his presumed metropolis, the canals which can be fed by rivers and arroyos that are at hand, and the thousands of leagues of waterways which go out in all directions like radii from the city he imagines. If, after settling these matters, he finds a shelf of coal or iron mines, he draws up a city plan, gives the city a name, and returns to the settlements to announce by means of the thousand echoes of journalism the discovery he has made of the site of a famous city of the future, the crossing point of one hundred commercial routes.

Sarmiento was impressed by the effectiveness of this speculative science, which yielded thousands of thriving towns and cities throughout the trans-Appalachian West. Evidently overlooking the countless paper cities that failed to live up to the grandiose visions of their proprietors, he concluded that “almost all” of these burgeoning urban centers “justify by their astonishing progress the certainty and the profundity of the economic and social studies which served as their genesis.”<sup>109</sup>

By the time Sarmiento made these remarks, local boosters in several western cities had begun publishing books and articles that attempted to codify the speculative science of town planning. Beginning in the 1840s, St. Louis newspaper editor William Gilpin articulated a theory that linked patterns of urbanization to global climactic forces. Arguing that the great metropolitan centers of the world had all emerged within an Isothermal Zodiac, Gilpin predicted that major western cities would develop along a narrow band marked by average temperatures of fifty-two degrees Fahrenheit. He further conjectured that a dominant city, Centropolis, would ultimately arise in the vicinity of modern-day Kansas City. Toledo booster Jesup W. Scott reached a very different conclusion. Based on his studies of the westward drift of the American population, he reasoned that a dominant city would appear in the Great Lakes region, serving as a central marketplace for the nation. S.H. Goodin propounded yet another theory of urban development, which anticipated the model of Central Place Theory that emerged nearly a century later. Goodin posited that urban growth in the North American interior was shaped by a “law of gravitation.” According to the law, agricultural districts tended to cluster around villages, which in turn clustered around cities. Over time, he argued, these cities would become satellites of one central metropolis. Unsurprisingly, Goodin named his hometown of Cincinnati as the most likely candidate.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, *Sarmiento's Travels in the United States in 1847*, ed. Michael Rockland (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 166-168.

<sup>110</sup> William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), 31-46. Other studies of the promotional efforts of urban boosters in nineteenth-century American West include Jeffrey S. Adler, *Yankee Merchants and the Making of the Urban West: The Rise and Fall of*

Although the writings of booster theorists never amounted to a coherent science, townsite speculators were generally guided by several basic principles of urban development. In divining the locations of future towns and cities, they relied on a market-centered analysis of the landscape that involved identifying advantageous points within regional and national commercial networks. In order for a new town to flourish, it had to serve as both a local emporium for its agricultural hinterlands as well as a gateway to larger markets such as New Orleans, New York, or even London. Because of their focus on the commercial ties that bound all cities, towns, and agricultural areas together, speculators also tended to see urban development as a fundamentally competitive process. Predicting how a proposed town would fare in the competition for markets and hinterlands unusually involved evaluating two types of features: natural and artificial advantages. Natural advantages, the seemingly innate features of a townsite, included the fertility of the surrounding countryside, the “health” of the area, the facilities for hydraulic power, the availability of timber and mineral resources, and the proximity to natural arteries of transportation. Artificial advantages, on the other hand, were features wrought by human agency. In assessing these characteristics, speculators usually focused on a proposed town’s location with respect to roads, canals, or railroad lines; its likelihood of becoming a seat of local government; and the rate at which new settlers were arriving in the area.

The intellectual and imaginative exercises that real estate investors and booster theorists performed in plotting the development of new towns blurred the distinction between two meanings of the word speculation: one that dated back several centuries, and another that was still relatively new during the antebellum period. Since at least the fourteenth century, speculation had been used to describe the act of philosophical contemplation or abstract reasoning. This usage remained prevalent throughout the late eighteenth century, as illustrated by a passage in Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), which refers to “philosophers or men of speculation, whose trade is not to do anything, but to observe everything.” By the time Smith’s work came to press, however, speculation was becoming a common term in economic discourse, used to describe the buying or selling of a commodity in anticipation of a change in market value. Smith also used the term in this sense, explaining, “Sudden fortunes are sometimes made...by what is called the trade of speculation.” This dual meaning informed the way antebellum Americans understood the speculative science used in the planning of new towns and cities on the frontier. Townsite speculation was always as much an intellectual exercise as a financial practice.<sup>111</sup>

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*Antebellum St. Louis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Carl Abbott, *Boosters and Businessmen: Popular Economic Thought and Urban Growth in the Antebellum Middle West* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1981); and Jocelyn Wills, *Boosters, Hustlers, and Speculators: Entrepreneurial Culture and the Rise of Minneapolis and St. Paul, 1849-1883* (St. Paul, Minn: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2005); and Timothy R. Mahoney, *Provincial Lives: Middle-Class Experience in the Antebellum Middle West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>111</sup> Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Peter Brown, 1827), 1:5, 47. Herman Melville played on this double entendre in *The Confidence-Man*. In one of his many ruses, the confidence man entices a young collegian to purchase stock in the Black Rapids Coal Company and then offers to sell him real estate in a “new and thriving city” called New Jerusalem. When the trickster feigns surprise at the scholar’s enthusiasm for speculation, the young man replies, “My speculations, sir...have been chiefly governed by the maxim of Lord Bacon; I speculate in those philosophies which come home to my business and bosom.” Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His*



For individuals involved in founding and promoting new towns, the analytical and imaginative process of envisioning future urban centers usually involved speculative writing. In the initial planning stages, as speculators set out to identify and evaluate possible townsites, they often used travel diaries and memorandum books to conjecture about how the natural and artificial advantages of a particular locale would shape and facilitate the development of a new town. One land hunter, David Berdan, used his diary in this way as he investigated townsites in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois in 1819. Traveling on behalf of a group of affluent New York businessmen who styled themselves the New York Emigration Society, Berdan kept a written record of his prospecting journey in order to report his findings to his business associates. Although his investigation was cut short by winter weather, he ultimately concluded that a certain point at the junction of the Mauvaise Terre and the Illinois River would be the most advantageous site for a town. As he evaluated the site in the pages his travel diary, Berdan praised its numerous natural advantages. “[I]t appears as if Nature intended this point as the grand outlet of this most fertile of all countries,” he wrote. He went on to speculate about how each geographical feature would contribute to the growth of a new town. Due to the site’s proximity to the Illinois River, he imagined that it would provide “a very convenient landing place where storehouses might be erected to receive the surplus produce for the market and also foreign merchandize.” He went on to speculate that a road might be constructed from the river to the fertile prairies nearby, facilitating the transport of agricultural produce. Finally, he noted the presence of good mill seats along the Mauvaise Terre, suggesting that “boats might be taken to them loaded with grain and receive flour in return.” Berdan’s literary map of the future town served as an adjunct to his detailed cartographic sketch of the area, which he affixed to the inside cover his journal.<sup>112</sup>

The field notes of land hunters like Berdan represented a first draft of the prophetic descriptions that town planners and boosters used to attract settlers to their newly minted urban centers. Having drawn up a plat for a town and staked out its streets and building lots, speculators marketed their settlement by publishing newspaper advertisements, pamphlets, and broadsides. These texts typically relied on the same type of literary speculation used in the early planning of new towns. As the authors of promotional literature informed readers of a locale’s various natural and artificial advantages, they offered confident predictions about how these features would facilitate the settlement’s growth and prosperity. In a prospectus published the same year as David Berdan’s land-hunting expedition, the proprietors of Columbia, a new village in Missouri,

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*Masquerade* (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), 56. For a related discussion of this episode, see Yvonne Elizabeth Pelletier, “False Promises and Real Estate: Land Speculation and Millennial Maps in Herman Melville’s *Confidence Man*,” in *American Literary Geographies: Spatial Practice and Cultural Production, 1500-1900*, ed. Martin Bruckner and Hsuan L. Hsu (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007), 191-205. Sarah Luria offers a compelling analysis of the link between literary and financial speculation in the planning and promotion of Washington, D.C., in *Capital Speculations: Writing and Building Washington, D.C.* (Durham, N.H.: University of New Hampshire Press, 2006).

<sup>112</sup> David Berdan, “Journal of a Tour Performed by a Committee of the New York Emigration Society in the years 1819 and 1820,” see especially the passage titled “remarks” on p. 129, Berdan family papers, 1819-1857, Clements Library, University of Michigan. For another example of a land hunter involved in townsite speculation, see William Fairfax Gray, *The Diary of William Fairfax Gray from Virginia to Texas, 1835-1837*, ed. Paul Lack (Dallas: De Golyer Library & William P. Clements Center for Southwest Studies, 1997).

boasted about the site's many favorable attributes, including its "beautiful situation," advantageous location on the Missouri River, fertile backcountry, and proximity to coal deposits and abundant timber. These features, along with the anticipated construction of a major state road passing directly through the town, would ultimately "render it one of the most public places on the Missouri." That same year, the St. Louis *Intelligencer* ran a similar advertisement for real estate in the town of Nashville. Noting the town's superior landing for vessels traveling on the Missouri, the author concluded, "It promises to enjoy a large portion of the trade on the river and from the convenience of its situation it will furnish many facilities to the transportation of the vast quantities of surplus produce of an extensive and salubrious soil."<sup>113</sup>

To be sure, literary speculation was not the only means by which townsite speculators formulated and communicated their visions of futurity. Cartographic and pictorial representations such as lithographic maps and birds-eye views also figured prominently in their marketing schemes. Nevertheless, promotional literature about new towns had especially profound effects on the way antebellum Americans thought about place and opportunity on the frontier. Beyond simply stoking interest in westward movement, the forecasts about urban growth contained in newspaper advertisements, townsite prospectuses, and other boosterish texts familiarized readers with the basic language and principles of the speculative science. Over the course of the antebellum period, westward migrants increasingly relied on this analytical framework as they worked to select a new place of residence.

### **So Many in Bud and But Few May Blossom**

Of all the dramatic changes in the western landscape—from the clearing of wilderness land for agriculture to the completion of major internal improvement projects—it was the astonishing rise of new towns and cities that most impressed upon antebellum Americans the extraordinary dynamism of the frontier. Commenting on the innumerable villages that had "sprung up like mushrooms" throughout the Mississippi Valley during the 1830s, one traveler observed that it seemed as if "a man with capital or a company of men have only to will that there shall be a city and it is done." For all this urban growth, however, even a short steamboat journey on the Ohio or Mississippi Rivers furnished numerous examples of new villages that fell far short of the lofty visions of their founders. The stunted growth of some communities and the abject failure of others offered prospective migrants frequent reminders that the dynamism of the frontier cut in both directions: it entailed rapid improvement as well as precipitous decline. In light of this fact, speculative thinking became essential for individuals searching for an auspicious place to call home.<sup>114</sup>

Whether they were in the process of migration or merely investigating conditions in the West, antebellum travelers engaged in a form of literary speculation that, in many respects, resembled the writings of town planners and booster theorists. As the previous chapter suggested, some kept records of the advantages and prospects of places in order

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<sup>113</sup> The advertisements for Columbia and Nashville are excerpted in Walter Barlow Stevens, *Centennial History of Missouri* (Chicago: S.J. Clarke Pub. Co, 1921), 93-94.

<sup>114</sup> "Memorandums on the Road: Journal of a trip from Baltimore to Illinois and Missouri and Return," entries for September 22-24, 1836, Illinois State Historical Society.

to facilitate their own decision-making with regard to relocation. Others recorded speculative analysis in travel diaries or letters for the benefit of distant relatives, friends, or business associates who were affected by their findings and decisions. Whatever their reasons for writing, prospectors and migrants who traveled the trans-Appalachian frontier during the second quarter of the century rarely assessed new towns and villages in the present tense. Instead, their evaluative writing involved forecasting the future of each new settlement they visited.

Migrants and travelers varied significantly in the complexity and imaginativeness of their speculative writing. Some simply made brief predictions about whether each town along their route would flourish or dissipate. Others engaged in more elaborate and fanciful speculation, envisioning how nascent cities would look upon reaching maturity. Having removed from Ohio to Iowa in 1839, twenty-two-year-old Cyrus Sanders took a “peep into futurity” in the pages of his diary, imagining the glorious future in store for Iowa City:

Here where I am standing in a little while will the Capitol of a mighty state rear its sculptured columns; whose walls will reverberate with the eloquence of some future Henry [Clay] which will hold entranced his admiring thousands. Yes here! Where there is nothing now to be seen but the towering oak and beautiful undulating Prairie will perhaps in some future day rise a majestic City.

Whereas Sanders envisioned a thriving metropolis, some agriculturally inclined migrants imagined the transformation of wilderness land into flourishing farms. As Vermont native Munis Kenny scouted conditions in Michigan in 1828, he used his travel diary to speculate about one especially inviting tract of land that seemed “a situation for the handsomest farm imaginable.” He began by taking inventory of the local advantages, including the fertility of the soil, the salubrity of the site, the facilities for waterpower, and the availability of timber. All of this led him to conclude that the spot “must be a valuable place and that shortly.” He then proceeded to fantasize about the homestead he might one day establish on the site. After viewing the area from a nearby hilltop, he wrote, “I stood on this summit and imagined I saw, the farmer and his wife and daughters sitting in the piasza looking down toward the river viewing the waving fields of corn and wheat, and in another meadow his sons among 20 hands making the hay.” Although he ended his literary reverie abruptly, declaring that he did not wish to build “castles in the air,” Kenny insisted that this “pleasant dream” would be a reality “within 15 years from this day.”<sup>115</sup>

Whether their analysis was terse or intricate, most transients followed the same two-step evaluative process used by townsite speculators like David Berdan. In evaluating a particular frontier community, they began by taking inventory of its natural and artificial advantages. Then, building on this assessment, they conjectured about how the settlement’s various features would either facilitate or hinder its growth. One young man who engaged in this type of analysis was Henry Weaver. In the fall of 1830, Weaver and his brother-in-law, Matthias Shirk, set out on horseback from central Pennsylvania, intending to assess the advantages of emigration to Ohio. Wending their way through the northeastern portion of the state, they encountered a landscape in the midst of a sweeping transformation as a result of the recent completion of the Ohio

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<sup>115</sup> Sanders, “Journal of Cyrus Sanders,” *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* 37 (January, 1939): 70; Munis Kenny, diary, 1828, Kenny family papers, Bentley Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

Canal. By opening up an all-water route to New York City by way of Lake Erie and the Erie Canal, the Ohio Canal gave new life to commercial agriculture in the state and spurred the rise of numerous towns along its path. As Weaver investigated conditions in these bustling communities, he filled a pocket-sized marble notebook with speculation about their future prospects. In describing Uniontown, for example, he surmised that the town's most significant advantage was its fertile hinterlands, which he deemed the "best land we have seen in Ohio." Based on this observation, as well as the commercial vitality of the town, he concluded that there was "little doubt but it will continue to increase and become a place of very considerable importance." He was even more impressed by Massillon, a "flourishing village" where he ultimately determined to settle. Citing several advantages, including the town's proximity to "a fine grain growing country" and its location at the intersection of the Ohio Canal and a major state road, he forecasted imminent prosperity. "It is destined in my opinion (founded on information received in the country) to be a place of great business[.] It will be the market for a large scope of country." In addition to evaluating particular towns, Weaver also engaged in more general speculation about the region as a whole. "My impression is that this section of Ohio is destined to become a very popular and wealthy country but this will only happen when a good part of the present holders of land are bought out and their places supplied by a different kind of inhabitants." Doubtless imagining himself among this new, more industrious class of settlers, he concluded, "A new state of things is taking place in consequence of the opening of the New York and Ohio Canals....[T]he country is beginning to assume a new appearance though better farmers are much wanted." Impressed with the economic outlook for the area, Weaver decided to purchase land before heading home to Pennsylvania.<sup>116</sup>

Although migrants like Weaver drew upon many of the same principles of urban development used in the establishment of new villages, there were several important differences between their speculative writing and that of town planners and booster theorists. First, individuals searching for a new place of residence engaged in a more critical form of speculation that involved forecasting not only growth and development, but also stagnation and decline. Traveling down the Rock River in 1838, for example, one young man from Massachusetts predicted rapid improvement for some new towns, sluggish development for many others, and outright degeneration for the remainder. In a typical diary entry written at Grand Detour, he deemed the town "flourishing" and suggested that new milling facilities would soon "render it a place of considerable business." The village of Kishwaukee, by contrast, seemed to possess "no apparent local advantages except its location on the River." Although the locals were optimistic about the future of their "splendid town," the young traveler scoffed that their "'theory' has not been reduced to practice and indeed no prospect appears for the consummation of so favorable a 'scheme.'" Instead, he suggested that a site further downstream would be "a much more desirable situation for business than the site of the present town."<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Henry C. Weaver, journal, see especially entries for November 10, 13, and 14, 1830, Ohio Historical Society.

<sup>117</sup> "Slight Reminiscences: Tour to Illinois and Iowa Territory," see passages covering June 22 to July 13, 1838, Western Americana Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University. The anonymous New Yorker cited in the introduction also forecasted stagnation or decline of a number of villages along his route. Unimpressed with the town of Burlington, Iowa, he wrote: "Burlington a thickly settled and tolerable well

Because they were speculating about existing towns rather than proposed ones, travelers could also look to a site's prior development and present condition as indicators of its future prospects. Rather than simply assessing natural and artificial advantages, many used the pace of a town's growth to gauge its outlook for improvement. En route from Ohio to Illinois in 1829, Zophar Case recorded facts about the development of Logansport, Indiana, that he had gleaned from an innkeeper in the village. The town had "just commenced only 18 months old and contains about 300 inhabitants and calculate in 18 months more will contain 1000." Whereas Case measured growth by comparing the population of Logansport to its age, others used the built environment as an indicator. During Munis Kenny's prospecting journey to Michigan, he used both systems of measurement to discern the prospects of Ann Arbor. Although the town had "been settled but 4 years," he counted "4 stores, 4 lawyers, a settled minister, 2 taverns, and a number of good homes, besides a grist and saw mill, tannery and mechanicks." Such rapid development, he concluded, was a sure sign of Ann Arbor's continued growth and prosperity.<sup>118</sup>

In writing about the development of places, travelers also tended to borrow terminology and ideas from two distinct sources: one was the language of urban development popularized by townsite speculators and booster theorists; the other was a new discourse about personal prospects and social mobility that was gaining broad currency during the antebellum period. It was this combination of ideas, above all, that set their vernacular brand of speculation apart from the speculative science used to plan and promote new towns. During the second quarter of the nineteenth century, as the lives of ordinary Americans became increasingly bound up in an expanding market economy, popular sensibilities about success and failure began to change. Dramatic fluctuations in the business cycle, especially the soaring economic boom of the early 1830s and the disastrous financial panic of 1837, fostered a perception that social and economic status was both provisional and highly tenuous. Having visited the United States during the 1830s, Michel Chevalier offered a poetic description of the speed with which fortunes were made and lost. "Riches and poverty follow on each other's traces, and each in turn occupies the place of the other," he explained. "Whilst the great men of one day dethrone those of the past, they are already half overturned themselves by those of the morrow. Fortunes last for a season; reputations, during the twinkling of an eye." While Chevalier clearly exaggerated the fluidity and openness of the social order, many antebellum Americans shared his sense that they were living in an age that presented novel possibilities for both rapid advancement and precipitous failure. Sweeping economic changes, intense urbanization, increased demographic mobility, and a variety of other related developments, fostered a new entrepreneurial ethos. Especially for members of the emerging middle class, social and economic mobility came to seem more like a competition than ever before. Abraham Lincoln summed up this competitive spirit succinctly, describing it as the "race of life."<sup>119</sup>

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built place extending some distance along the western banks on ground a little elevated—is now the seat of Government for Iowa—until new buildings are in readiness when it will be as dull as it is now lively." See "Overland Journey to the Midwest," entries for October, 1839.

<sup>118</sup> Zophar Case, diary, entry for December 26, 1829, Ohio Historical Society; Munis Kenny, diary, 1828.

<sup>119</sup> Chevalier, *Society, Manners and Politics in the United States*, 309; Abraham Lincoln quoted in Scott A. Sandage, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 221.

As antebellum business leaders, politicians, religious figures, and popular authors attempted to explain why some men excelled and others faltered in the race of life, their answers generally focused on a combination of two factors: endowed faculties and moral character. Whereas the former qualities were thought to be immutable, Lockean theories of moral and intellectual development suggested that character could be molded and improved over time. Americans who embraced this explanation for personal success and failure turned to a variety of new strategies, techniques, and technologies for discerning their own character and endowed faculties, as well as those of others. Some purchased conduct-of-life manuals and etiquette guides that offered hints for cultivating character and reading the interior qualities of strangers. Others scrutinized photographic portraits of famous Americans, attempting to glimpse outward expressions of their inner virtues or vices. Still others turned to credit reports as a means of evaluating both the financial circumstances and moral rectitude of business clients and partners. Perhaps the starkest illustration of the burgeoning interest in divining personal prospects was the rise of phrenology. Pioneered by German physician Franz Joseph Gall in the early nineteenth century, this pseudoscience was premised on the idea that mental faculties could be traced to discrete areas of the brain. Believing that the size of each area reflected the strength of its corresponding faculty, Gall argued that it was possible to profile an individual's intellectual and psychological propensities by measuring the bumps on his or her head. Phrenology spread quickly to the United States, attracting particular interest from young men who were eager to gauge their intellectual and moral capacities. All of this concern for interpreting the prospects of people had profound effects on the way westering Americans interpreted the development of places.<sup>120</sup>

Migrants and travelers evidently found that ideas about personal prospects were easily mapped onto the western landscape. Just as individual success in business or professional life seemed to require constant competition, the survival of new communities depended on their ability to overtake nearby rivals in the struggle for markets and hinterlands. Moreover, just as a man's capacity for upward mobility appeared contingent upon both innate faculties and malleable character, theories of urban development suggested that the growth of cities hinged on a combination of natural and artificial advantages. Given these obvious parallels, it is little wonder that so many transients turned to their understandings about social mobility in deciphering the outlook for towns and rural villages in the West.

One way that transients used ideas about personal prospects to interpret urban growth was by evaluating the collective moral character of frontier communities. In

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<sup>120</sup> On the middle-class notions of character, see Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); Judy Hilkey, *Character Is Capital: Success Manuals and Manhood in Gilded Age America* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Thomas Augst, *The Clerk's Tale: Young Men and Moral Life in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); and John F. Kasson, *Rudeness & Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990). Scott Sandage provides an especially illuminating discussion of the various technologies that antebellum Americans turned to in order to discern their own prospects and those of others. Specifically, he examines the simultaneous rise of phrenology, daguerreotype portrait galleries, and credit agencies during the 1840s; see *Born Losers*, 99-128. On phrenology, see also Charles Colbert, *A Measure of Perfection: Phrenology and the Fine Arts in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

predicting the development of places, travelers attached great significance to the overall moral cast and work ethic of the local population. Although there was no coherent theory about this aspect of urban growth, the character of a place was generally thought to emerge over time as the individual qualities of residents amalgamated, establishing a pervasive moral ethos. One prospective migrant evinced this understanding in a diary entry written during a land-hunting expedition to Missouri in 1836. Commenting on the many newcomers descending on the area “from all parts of the world,” the diarist judged that there was “no distinctive character fixed nor can this take place for many years to come.” Wayfarers discerned the character of towns and cities in a variety of ways. Much like their assessments of the rate of urban growth—a factor that was seen as closely related to character—many looked to the built environment for clues about the collective attributes of a local population. One such traveler was William Campbell, a young lawyer who set out to investigate career opportunities in new towns along the Missouri River. Writing of the scattered rural hamlets he encountered along the road in Montgomery County, Campbell observed, “The improvements are rather indifferent, afford very few indications of wealth industry or enterprise.” Others interpreted the moral state of new settlements by evaluating schools, religious institutions, or voluntary societies. Still others focused on intangible qualities such as the degree of activity or bustle in city streets, markets, and wharves. The young New Yorker cited earlier in this chapter routinely noted the degree of activity in each town he visited, citing it as evidence of the community’s favorable or unfavorable prospects. Impressed with conditions in Portsmouth, Ohio, he concluded, “every thing presents much activity.”<sup>121</sup>

Although men like William Campbell considered a variety of qualities in assessing the character of places, the two attributes that they discussed most often were industry and enterprise. Like the concept of character itself, these two terms were essential to the middle-class discourse about social, economic, and professional success. Descending the Ohio River aboard a flatboat in 1833, Edgar Needham judged that Madison, Indiana, was “fast improving” and he attributed its progress to “a degree of enterprise in the inhabitants that is not always met with.” Later in his journey, he found that the same quality was in short supply among the residents of Vicksburg. They evinced “none of that bloom of health nor of that mechanical industry and honest independence that characterizes the Cincinnatians.” Several years later, New York businessman John Gates Thurston evaluated the character of Alton, Illinois, using much the same language. Although he judged it to be “the rudest and most uninteresting spot” he had yet encountered, Thurston found that inhabitants of the Alton were “enterprising and seem determined that nothing shall prevent them from having a flourishing and business like place, even though it should cost them ten times more than it is worth.” Whereas Needham and Thurston commented on the degree of industry and enterprise among the *residents* of new towns, others ascribed these qualities to the towns themselves. One such traveler was R.H. Harding, a young businessman from New York who toured Michigan in 1837. Impressed by the large courthouse, hotel, and “many splendid private dwellings” under construction in the town of Marshall, Harding remarked: “This *place* shows industry and enterprise by its buildings.” Harding’s analysis underscores the basic point that migrants and prospectors tended to view the

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<sup>121</sup> “Memorandums on the Road,” entries for September 22-24, 1836; William Campbell, “Diary of William M. Campbell,” *Glimpses of the Past* 3 (1936): 139.

character of aspiring urban centers as a coherent whole rather than an aggregate of the individual qualities of local inhabitants.<sup>122</sup>

One further illustration of the application of ideas about personal success to the western landscape was the appearance of a new phrase in the speculative writing of migrants and travelers during the 1830s: the business place. In 1832, as Virtulon Rich investigated opportunities for practicing law in the Ohio Valley, he used this phrase to describe Pittsburgh. “As a business place, I think it takes the lead of any I was ever in—all is ‘go ahead.’” Several years later, another young prospector, John Roods, bestowed this title on towns in Wisconsin that exhibited the greatest promise for future growth. After strolling through Milwaukee, he declared it “the most business place I have been in...every kind of mechanism is a going on in this place from street hawking to manufacturing steam engines.” While the town of Two Rivers had “but 2 or 3 houses,” he predicted that it too would “eventually make a business place.” As Rich and Roods’s descriptions suggest, this new designation was used to convey the enterprising character and economic vitality on display in thriving villages and rising urban centers. In this sense, it was closely related to the more familiar title, business man (originally written as two words), which also entered the American lexicon during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. More than mere descriptors, both terms were expressions of approbation for entrepreneurial striving and go-ahead spirit.<sup>123</sup>

If the new discourse about success and failure provided useful metaphors for describing urban growth, this was not the only reason why men like Virtulon Rich and John Roods used it to assess budding towns in the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys. This feature of their speculative writing also reflected their sense that life on the frontier was characterized by an unusually direct link between the prospects of people and places. As they traveled from one community to the next, prospective migrants took note of the many ways that residents of flourishing towns and agricultural villages profited from the rapid growth of their communities. At the same time, however, they observed the extent to which the decline and stagnation of some settlements damaged the financial, social, or professional prospects of local residents. Descending the Mississippi River in 1839, the New York traveler cited in the introduction to this chapter encountered a ghost town named Marion City that provided an object lesson on the devastating consequences of a failed townsite speculation for local inhabitants. Although the spacious and well-built houses still standing on the site suggested a promising future, periodic flooding left the village submerged for months on end, forcing residents to abandon their new homes.

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<sup>122</sup> Edgar Needham, “A Journal kept while descending the Ohio River in a Flat Boat during parts of the years 1833 and 4,” entries for December 5, 1833 and January 6, 1844, Indiana Historical Society; John Gates Thurston, *A Journal of a Trip to Illinois in 1836* (Mount Pleasant, Michigan: Printed by John Cumming, 1971), 33; R.H. Harding, “Tour West 1837 and 8 by R.H. Harding,” see passage recounting events on December 31, 1837, Ohio Historical Society (emphasis mine). Another diarist who used similar terminology in evaluating new towns was Oren Wiley. In writing of Ohio City, located several miles west of Cleveland, Wiley observed: “There is a goodeal of ambition and enterprise among its inhabitants, but I fear some of the plans are visionary. Rents are scarce and dear.” Oren Wiley, “The Journal of a Vermont Man in Ohio, 1836-1842,” Leroy Graf ed., *Ohio Archeological and Historical Quarterly* 60 (1951): 182.

<sup>123</sup> Virtulon Rich, journal, undated entry in late May, 1832, Edward E. Ayer Manuscript Collection, Newberry Library; John Roods, diary, entries for October 9 and October 13-15, 1847, Manuscripts Division, New York Public Library. On the history of the term business man, see Sandage, *Born Losers*, 70-98.



“[I]t looks like a city of the past,” the young man noted in his diary, “it was desolate and forlorn not a soul to make it belong to time present—it was as if a city of the Dead and this is a specimen of the wild rage of speculation of 1836.” Because the fortunes of individual residents were so visibly bound up in the fate of their adopted homes, it made sense for travelers to apply the language of personal success and failure to entire frontier communities.<sup>124</sup>

The interrelationship between the prospects of people and places was especially clear in the case of farmers, whose landholdings became more valuable as the surrounding countryside became thickly populated. For some especially well-located farmers, pecuniary advancement had as much to do with rising real estate prices as it did with the time, labor, and skill invested in working the land. In 1836, one recent transplant to Illinois wrote enthusiastically about the possibility of making an “accidental” fortune by settling on valuable land. Having purchased and improved their homesteads “without once dreaming of being rich,” he explained, some farmers soon “find themselves in possession of a farm worth from \$25 to \$30 per acre.” Because many farmers who moved west during the antebellum period hoped to eventually cash in on rising real estate prices, it was often difficult to distinguish migrants from speculators. Indeed, some bought up more land than they expected to cultivate for the express purpose of speculation. Others purchased homesteads with the intention of working the land for several years and then selling out for a large profit. “It seldom happens that an American farmer settles for good upon the land which he occupies,” Alexis de Tocqueville observed, “especially in the districts of the Far West he brings land into tillage in order to sell it again, and not to farm it: he builds a farmhouse on the speculation that, as the state of the country will soon be changed by the increase of population, a good price will be gotten for it.” As Tocqueville’s remark suggests, the dynamism of the western landscape altered the way agricultural migrants thought about their relationship to the places they settled. Even when they had every intention of making a living from the land, farmers increasingly saw their decision to settle down in a particular locale as a type of financial investment.<sup>125</sup>

The explosive growth of some new urban centers had similarly direct and dramatic effects on the prospects of urban migrants. Much like agricultural migrants, early arrivals to new towns on the trans-Appalachian frontier often speculated heavily in real estate in or around their new homes. For residents of the most successful urban centers, such investments generated immense wealth. Even for those whose ambitions had little to do with speculation, however, urban growth promised to facilitate upward mobility in a variety of ways. Merchants, professionals, and tradesmen who relocated to new villages often anticipated that the influx of settlers would drive up prices for goods and services, allowing them to reap exorbitant profits. The financial windfall from such a “first rush” enabled some especially shrewd or lucky migrants to entrench themselves

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<sup>124</sup> “Overland Journey to the Midwest,” entry for November 2, 1839.

<sup>125</sup> Timothy LaSelle to brother, September 24, 1836, La Porte, Indiana, SC 957, Indiana Historical Society; Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Cirencester: The Echo Library, 2005), 440. If some farmers became accidental speculators, LaSelle explained, many other “shrewd calculating men” had amassed greater fortunes by studying the landscape and selecting particularly valuable spots. All that was needed to become wealthy was a little capital and a “thorough knowledge of certain points,” including “their location and relative situation to other points and the surrounding country” and “the actual or eventual resources in connexion with probable public improvement.”

atop local society for years to come. In the case of lawyers and other professionals who maintained political ambitions, the organization of local and county governments often presented opportunities for elected office and other types of government service. To be sure, few urban migrants experienced sudden upward mobility as a result the growth of their adopted communities. Nevertheless, prospective migrants who traveled the urban frontier during the antebellum period heard and witnessed enough success stories to convince them of the advantages of attaching themselves to a flourishing community.<sup>126</sup>

For a growing number of antebellum Americans, it was the simultaneous improvement of people and places that the most clearly distinguished the frontier as a superior field of opportunity. Although eastern cities like New York, Boston, and Philadelphia experienced remarkable demographic and economic growth during the second quarter of the century, their development did not appear to have the same immediate impact on the fortunes of ordinary residents. One prospective migrant from Halifax, Pennsylvania, captured the perceived difference between the frontier and the eastern states in a letter to an acquaintance in Missouri in 1824. “While these old States are on the retrograde or at most but stationary,” he explained, “the march to the Improvement in the Western states is accelerated to a ratio which at once astonishes their most sanguine friends.” By the 1830s, the notion that the dynamism of the frontier made it an ideal field of opportunity became common in literature about the West. In 1835, the renowned Presbyterian minister Lyman Beecher expressed this idea in a tract, titled *A Plea for the West*. “The West is a young empire of mind, and power, and wealth, and free institutions, rushing up to a giant manhood with a rapidity and power never before witnessed below the sun.” Three years later, Abner Dumont Jones published a promotional text about Illinois that discussed the possibilities for rapid financial and professional advancement stemming from the rapid social and economic progress of western communities. “A young man of enterprise and a small capital, whether in law, medicine, engineering, surveying, or in the mercantile business, stands a much fairer chance to succeed in either here, than any where east or south,” he insisted, “because not only is his field larger and competition less, but new sources of wealth and power are developed every day, and more and more.”<sup>127</sup>

The tendency of both western authors and ordinary migrants to focus on the benefits derived from the growth of places represented an important change in popular thinking about the frontier as a field of opportunity. Prior to the antebellum period, both published and vernacular writing about the possibilities for personal advancement in a new country had tended to locate opportunity in the present state of the landscape. From the colonial era through the early nineteenth century, most assessments of life on the western fringe of Anglo-American settlement identified three broad types of advantages, none of which had much to do with the development of places. The first category of

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<sup>126</sup> Timothy Mahoney discusses how merchants and professionals who relocated to frontier towns like Keokuk, Iowa, positioned themselves to profit from the “first rush” of settlers into their new community; see *Provincial Lives: Middle-Class Experience in the Antebellum Middle West* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 70.

<sup>127</sup> Letter from John Davies to Joseph Meetch, June 19, 1824, Halifax, Pennsylvania, published in *Notes and Queries: Chiefly Relating to Interior Pennsylvania* 1, no. 1 (1887): 194; Lyman Beecher, *A Plea for the West* (Cincinnati: Truman & Smith, 1835), 12; A. D. Jones, *Illinois and the West; With a Township Map, Containing the Latest Surveys and Improvements* (Boston: Weeks, Jordan and Co, 1838), 104.

advantages pertained to the abundance of unexploited resources, including agricultural land, timber, and mineral wealth. The second type had to do with the favorable conditions for agriculture, such as the fertility of the soil, the length of the growing season, and the ease of raising domesticated animals. The final class of advantages emerged from the low density of white settlers. In the case of farmers, this translated into easier access to affordable land. For craftsmen, merchants, professionals, and other urban migrants, it meant less competition and better prices for goods or services. These perceived advantages continued to influence the way antebellum Americans construed the possibilities for upward mobility in the trans-Appalachian frontier. Indeed, when Illinois author and editor James Hall summed up the benefits of life on the frontier in his work, *Letters from the West* (1828), he touched on all of these factors. “The advantages of the western country,” he explained, “consist in the great fertility of the soil, the profusion of all the products of nature, whether of the animal, vegetable, or mineral kingdom, the cheapness of lands, and the newness of the country, which affords room and opportunity for enterprise.” Despite the persistence of older ideas, however, the speculative writing of westering men revealed a clear shift in thinking about the advantages of westward migration. For a growing number of antebellum Americans, frontier opportunity seemed rooted, not in the present condition of the land, but in the prospective development of places.<sup>128</sup>

As travelers and migrants combined the discourse of urban development with the language of personal prospects, they transformed the speculative science of place-making into a broader ideology about social mobility on the frontier. Through their letters and diaries, they promoted an image of the West as a place where the dynamism of new communities, and the interrelated fortunes of people and places, presented unique possibilities for financial and social betterment. Of course, personal writing was not the only medium through which this conception of frontier opportunity was constructed and disseminated. Authors like Abner Dumont Jones and Lyman Beecher, western politicians, newspaper editors, and many others also propounded this conception of frontier opportunity in speeches and published texts. Nevertheless, as ordinary transients mapped their ideas and fantasies about success and failure onto places, and then shared their speculative writing with readers back home, they played an especially crucial role in ushering in new sensibilities about the advantages of settling in or around emerging urban centers of the trans-Appalachian West. Their assessments of the collective character, industry, and enterprise of new towns and villages suggested that a migrant could improve his personal prospects simply by attaching himself to the right place. Although this vision of place and opportunity captured the real experiences of some transplants, it also dramatically simplified the complex personal, social, and geographical factors that influenced social mobility on the urban frontier. For all its exaggerations and distortions, however, it had profound effects on the way antebellum migrants thought and wrote about their relationship to places, both during their westward journeys and long afterwards.

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<sup>128</sup> James Hall, *Letters from the West Containing Sketches of Scenery, Manners, and Customs, and Anecdotes Connected with the First Settlements of the Western Sections of the United States* (London: H. Colburn, 1828), 317.

## The Delightful Spot for my Future Action

The idea that the growth of frontier communities expedited social mobility had particular resonance for young men. By the 1830s, this class of migrants generally perceived two distinct advantages to pursuing their ambitions in emerging urban centers of the trans-Appalachian West. In the short term, they expected to encounter less competition for employment, mercantile ventures, or professional activities. This was especially significant for aspiring lawyers, doctors, and merchants, who often struggled to secure patrons in older towns and cities, where more experienced businessmen and professionals had cornered the market. Equally crucial, however, were the long-term advantages that accompanied settlement in a new country. If the dynamism of the frontier communities encouraged migrants in general to approach relocation as an investment, young men saw themselves as uniquely poised to buy low and sell high. Because they were at the outset of their careers, they had the most to gain by settling down in one town or village and reaping the various pecuniary, social, and professional rewards derived from the growth of their adopted home. This type of advancement was far from guaranteed, of course. In part, it depended on their ability to select a town that would live up to its early promise. Perhaps more importantly, it was also contingent upon their ability and willingness to remain settled in one place in the face of financial hardships, professional setbacks, and countless other challenges that might arise.

The belief that the dynamism of frontier communities made them ideal places for young men to launch their careers was captured by the phrase, “growing up with the country,” which first entered the American lexicon in the opening years of the antebellum period. Among the first authors to use the saying in print was the Missouri lawyer and journalist Henry Marie Brackenridge, whose promotional text, *Views of Louisiana*, was published in 1817. “From the firm conviction, of its future importance,” Brackenridge asserted, “generous and enterprising youth, the virtuous, unfortunate, and those of moderate patrimony, repair to [the frontier], that they may grow up with the country, and form establishments for themselves and families.” Over the next several decades, the phrase became common in the personal writing of young migrants. During a prospecting tour to Missouri in 1843, North Carolina planter Daniel W. Jordan expressed his enthusiasm for the region by informing his wife, “St Louis takes my fancy and I am anxious to commence business there and grow with the place.” In assessing the potential advantages of settling in or around the city, Jordan assured his wife that St. Louis was destined to become the great metropolis of the West. “It now contains 40,000 and in a few years it will have a 100,000. All other places in the west will be small to it in a short time,” he predicted. In a letter written roughly a decade later, another prospective migrant, James Griffing, explained that he was mulling a move to the Nebraska Territory because he wished “to begin and grow up with a new country.”<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Henry Marie Brackenridge, *Views of Louisiana: Containing Geographical, Statistical and Historical Notices of That Vast and Important Portion of America* (Baltimore: Schaeffer & Maund, 1817), 214; Daniel W. Jordan to Emily Tuttle Jordan, August 29, 1843, “A Southern Family on the Missouri Frontier: Letters from Independence, 1843-1855,” ed. W. Darrell Overdyke, *Journal of Southern History*, 17, no. 2 (May, 1951): 219-222; James Griffing to J. Augusta Goodrich, September 2, 1854, James Sayre Griffing Collection, #364, Box 1, Folder 4, Kansas State Historical Society.

For migrants who left home with the expectation of growing up with a town or village, speculative writing became an especially important step in both making and explaining decisions about where to settle. Upon selecting a new place of residence, many young transients engaged in a distinctive and decidedly personal form of literary speculation. In addition to analyzing the development of their chosen home, they also took the opportunity to conjecture about their own prospects for getting ahead in their chosen line of work. Some imagined how the local market for a specific trade or business would translate into wealth or professional success. Others predicted that the development of local government institutions would provide an entrée to public office. Still others envisioned how the construction of railroad lines or canals would augment their profits from agriculture or drive up the value of their real estate. Whatever their ambitions, expectations, or desires, young men used simultaneous speculation about self and place to lay out their particular vision for growing up with the country.

One migrant who took part in this speculative ritual was twenty-eight-year-old Alpheus Felch. In 1833, Felch abandoned his legal practice in Houlton, Maine, and set out to ply his trade in the West. His travel diary reveals that the dynamism of western towns figured prominently in his conception of frontier opportunity. In stating his reasons for leaving Maine, he cited a desire to “see the Region of improvement and facilities where the forest is giving place to civilization and cities are rising as by magic on almost every watercourse.” Although Felch initially intended to wend his way to the Southwest, a stopover in Monroe, Michigan, left him so impressed that he ultimately decided to make it his home. “This town is finely situated on the River Raisin and is a very flourishing pleasant village,” he observed in the final pages of his diary, “Second only to Detroit in the Territory.” The town’s neatly gridded streets, sturdy brick buildings, fertile backcountry, and “mild and healthy” climate all seemed to portend a bright future. “The only obstacle to the growth of Monroe,” Felch observed, “is the difficulty of entering its River, its mouth not being protected by a harbour.” Given that plans were already underway to carve a new channel for the river, he predicted that Monroe would soon become “one of the largest places in the Territory.” After speculating about the place, Felch concluded his diary by analyzing his own prospects for practicing law in the town. Operating in his favor was the fact that a retiring lawyer in the village had offered to turn over his practice to Felch and supply him with law books. “I find at Monroe some half dozen lawyers but notwithstanding I believe I can stand some chance of obtaining my share of the business,” he surmised. As the next chapter will show, Felch’s decision to close his diary with dual speculation about self and place was typical of successful migrants who managed to secure gainful employment in towns or villages on the urban frontier.<sup>130</sup>

Whereas Felch speculated about his new home in a travel diary, many of his contemporaries did so in letters to relatives and acquaintances back home. In the weeks or months after reaching their destination, recent transplants often fired off a number of boosterish letters, justifying their choice of residence by analyzing its future importance as a center of commerce, government, industry, or agriculture. Upon relocating to Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1836, twenty-two-year-old Samuel Hempstead sent a series of dispatches to his uncle that were filled with prognostication about both his new residence

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<sup>130</sup> Alpheus Felch, diary, see passage recounting events from July 12 to 14, 1833, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

and professional outlook. Having recently completed his legal studies under the tutelage of a prominent Missouri attorney, Hempstead had left St. Louis with the intention of settling in Mobile, Alabama. Although beginning his career in a strange place involved considerable risk, he benefited from the financial backing of his uncle, William, who owned a large mercantile establishment in St. Louis. Several weeks after his departure, Hempstead wrote to his benefactor to report that he had abandoned his plans to settle in Alabama, and instead made his way to Little Rock. Although the city had recently become the capital of Arkansas, it was still an obscure cow town in comparison to Mobile. To justify his surprising decision, Hempstead offered his uncle an intricate analysis of Little Rock's favorable prospects. Surveying the city's "natural advantages," he praised "the delightful nature of the climate—a medium between the cold of the north and the heat of the south" and "the numberless tributary streams running through it and emptying into the Mississippi." In light of these attributes, he concluded, Little Rock's "future importance can scarcely be calculated." Much like Alpheus Felch, Hempstead analyzed how local conditions would facilitate his professional endeavors. Because the new state government was still being assembled, he anticipated that many of the city's more established lawyers would soon receive judicial appointments or run for office. This would leave "a fine field open to the younger and industrious members of the bar." He contrasted this open field with the more competitive environment of Mobile. "Had I gone to Mobile," he opined, "my means would have been exhausted unless I had immediately got into business which I could not have reasonably expected as such fortune rarely belongs to the lot of a young professional man settling in a city like Mobile." Throughout his speculative analysis, Hempstead did his best to persuade his uncle that Little Rock's development would be instrumental to his success as an attorney.<sup>131</sup>

Migrants like Felch and Hempstead had a variety of motives for composing and circulating speculative reports about the places they settled. In some cases, their boosterish writing was intended to persuade relatives, neighbors, or peers to either join them or invest in real estate in or around their new homes. In other cases, such as that of Samuel Hempstead, migrants offered confident assertions about the imminent prosperity of their place of residence in order to reassure family members who were skeptical or concerned about their relocation. As a demonstration of rational and farsighted decision-making, speculative writing served much the same purpose as the accounts of prospecting journeys examined in the previous chapter. In addition to these motives, however, young men also engaged in simultaneous speculation about self and place in order to display and reconcile two opposing values. On the one hand, they wished to show that their decision to leave their homes and native communities was an act of entrepreneurial striving. On the other hand, they sought to impress upon readers their desire to settle down and become an active and useful member of their chosen community.

To the extent that speculative writing demonstrated individualism and social striving, it reflected a relatively new masculine ideal that, by the 1830s, was becoming known as self-made manhood. The archetypical self-made man was an individual who, through his own industry, resolve, and enterprising spirit, managed to better his material circumstances and achieve prominence and respectability in public life. Like the new

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<sup>131</sup> Samuel Hempstead to William Hempstead, July 5, 1836, Samuel H. Hempstead Letters, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

ideas about success, failure, and personal character discussed earlier, this new ideal became central to middle-class identity. Businessmen and politicians who articulated this conception of masculine virtue glorified geographic mobility as an expression of self-reliance and enterprise. As young men like Alpheus Felch and Samuel Hempstead speculated about themselves and their adopted homes, they expressed many of the defining values of the self-made man. Their forward-looking analysis conveyed a clear sense of their ambition and commitment to upward mobility. Hempstead supplemented his speculative writing with an account of his migration experience that further emphasized the entrepreneurial risk involved in leaving home. “Whether I was met with prosperity or blasted hopes was hid in futurity,” he recalled several months after his arrival. “I landed here—where every face was strange and without a single line of recommendation.” Despite these challenges, Hempstead reassured his uncle that he had the requisite character traits to succeed in his professional life. “[A]lthough mud must be waded—creeks and rivers swam and hardships suffered,” he concluded, “I flatter myself that by perseverance and industry I can at least make an honorable support.” Hempstead’s account of his vigorous efforts to improve his lot, along with his analysis of Little Rock’s prospects, constituted a poignant and unmistakable performance of self-made masculinity.<sup>132</sup>

If speculative writing demonstrated individualism and enterprise, it also showcased a competing virtue: the willingness to eschew a life of mobility and establish a connection to one community. Throughout Hempstead’s correspondence, he repeatedly characterized his settlement in Little Rock as a long-term commitment. In his first letter, as he recounted a conversation with several steamboat passengers who had persuaded him to bend his course toward Arkansas, Hempstead explained that he felt compelled to take their advice because he wished to select the best possible place for a permanent home. “[F]eeling...that my resources...were too limited to wander about in search of locations and that one ought to be selected, that should become my theatre whilst living and my resting place when dead,” he explained, “I was...disposed to pay a respectful attention to advice recommended by wisdom, and matured by experience.” In a subsequent passage, he again asserted his intention to put down roots in Little Rock. “I conceive myself peculiarly happy in having located myself in the city at this peculiar time, and sure I am that it will be my future home,” he insisted. Like many other young migrants, Hempstead’s speculative analysis of his new residence was calculated to underscore his intention to remain settled. By conjecturing about the future importance of their adopted town or city, transients implicitly signaled to readers that they would be around to reap the benefits of the community’s growth and development. Their emphasis on persistence, community, and place represented a significant departure from the unfettered individualism of self-made masculinity.

Many transients evidently shared Hempstead’s sense that it was necessary to designate one place as their “theatre whilst living.” This belief was rooted in an older masculine ideal derived from the ideology of republicanism. Although it had long

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<sup>132</sup> Samuel Hempstead to William Hempstead, December 3, 1836. On self-made masculinity, see E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: BasicBooks, 1993), 167-168; Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, 25-29; Michael S. Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); and John G. Cawelti, *Apostles of the Self-Made Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965).

historical roots, republican political ideology became broadly popular in the United States during the eighteenth century, and it remained influential throughout the antebellum period. Like self-made masculinity, it extolled the accumulation of personal property and celebrated masculine independence. At the same time, however, it emphasized the ability to transcend self-interest whenever it conflicted with the common good. Republican ideology also characterized usefulness to one's community as an essential element of civic virtue. This meant that the pursuit of personal ambition was only virtuous to the extent that it contributed to the greater good. Young men like Hemstead and Felch implicitly invoked republican ideals as they discussed their decision to settle down. Through their speculative writing, they underscored their intention to seek upward mobility while at the same time becoming useful and productive members of one community.<sup>133</sup>

Expressing a long-term commitment to one's adopted home became significant in the context of growing concerns about excessive transience. As noted in previous chapters, westward migration was already a contentious issue in many eastern states during the opening years of the antebellum period, and the backlash against it became increasingly intense in the decades leading up to the Civil War. In rural areas along the Atlantic Seaboard, farmers and planters who chose to stay put began to condemn their neighbors who departed for the West rather than improving their lands through the use of fertilizers and more sustainable agricultural practices. By organizing agricultural reform societies, delivering lectures, and publishing anti-emigration literature, these self-styled "improvers" advocated what one scholar has aptly termed an "ethic of permanence." Drawing on republican notions of civic virtue, they urged prospective movers to recommit themselves to their land and their communities. Opposition to westward migration also came from other quarters of Eastern society. In emerging manufacturing centers of the Northeast, employers continued to express their disapproval of workers who abandoned their posts and set out for the frontier. At the same time, political leaders in both North and South voiced concerns about continued population drain, which threatened to diminish the political power of their states. By the 1830s, Eastern religious leaders and moral reformers also began to weigh in on the effects of accelerating westward movement. In an 1837 letter expressing his opposition to the annexation of Texas, the prominent Unitarian minister, William Ellery Channing, lamented the widespread disregard for the "ties of local attachment." Because of their innate restlessness, he argued, Americans expended more energy in spreading themselves out across the vast continent than they did in perfecting their local communities and institutions. All of these critiques of restless mobility affected the way young men like Samuel Hempstead and Alpheus Felch thought about their decisions regarding movement and settlement.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> For a discussion of republican manhood, see Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 15-23. Anthony Rotondo offers a similar analysis of republican masculinity, although he terms it "communal manhood." See *American Manhood*, 10-18. On the republican concept of usefulness, see Scott Casper, *Constructing American Lives: Biography & Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 88. For a general examination of the impact of republican ideology in the early republic, see Joyce Oldham Appleby, *Capitalism and a New Social Order: The Republican Vision of the 1790s* (New York: New York University Press, 1984).

<sup>134</sup> On the antebellum agricultural reform movement and the "ethic of persistence," see Steven Stoll, *Larding the Lean Earth: Soil and Society in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Hill and Wang,



During the second quarter of the century, anti-emigration literature increasingly targeted young migrants who left Eastern communities for new towns and villages on the frontier. In 1845, for example, a short story published in the *American Whig Review* sought to demonstrate the folly of young migrants who dreamed of becoming the leading citizens of their adopted homes. The story is narrated by a “very verdant young gentleman,” who embarks on a steamboat journey across Lake Erie, with the intention of settling in Illinois. Much like Charles Dickens’s protagonist Martin Chuzzlewit, the young man encounters a fellow passenger who offers to sell him two lots in a promising new town called Franklin. After acquiring the lots for an exorbitant sum, the narrator fantasizes about the wealth and influence he would acquire as Franklin grew into a thriving metropolis. “In due time I was an alderman...finally, a mayor....I was the owner of blocks of buildings, stores, warehouses, and offices — had a handsome rent-roll — kept an open hall, feasted my friends, knew the finest carriage in the city as mine, and was conscious of much stock in banks.” After traveling to the supposed location of Franklin, of course, the narrator finds that the village does not exist. Having contracted a nasty case of the ague (malarial fever) during his journey, he ultimately decides to return home, “a sadder but a wiser man.” A similar speculative fantasy was featured in *Western Emigration* (1839), a fictional narrative about the travails of the Wilkey family. The story opens in Maine, where Major Wilkey, his wife, and his three sons are visited by a townsite speculator who offers to swap their modest farm for a 300-acre homestead and 20 lots in the “famous and thriving” city of Edensburgh, Illinois. Having decided to contemplate the offer, the family spends the night dreaming of their lavish lifestyle in a flourishing metropolis. The next morning, as the family members recount their dreams, Mrs. Wilkey explains that she had envisioned her sons as successful businessmen and pillars of their new community. When she encountered them on an imaginary stroll through the city, they were “garbed in the style of gentlemen, with black foxtail whiskers, just from their commercial and mercantile business!” Upon hearing this, the three boys confess that “they had not ceased to dream, night and day, asleep or awake, that they were all three destined to be great men in Edensburgh!” Carried away by these delusions of grandeur, the family makes the disastrous decision to relocate. The central message of both these stories was clear: rather than fantasizing about rapid upward mobility on the urban frontier, young men should content themselves with their present location, and rely on their own industry and perseverance to steadily improve their condition.<sup>135</sup>

Responding to anti-emigration arguments, some western authors took great pains to defend migrants against charges of excessive individualism and disregard for community. In *A New Guide for Emigrants to the West* (1836), John Mason Peck opened the volume by praising the legions of migrants who had left behind “crowded cities and densely populated neighborhoods” to seek “a permanent home” in the West. Furthermore, he expressed hope that his guidebook would encourage many more to “fix their future residence on our prairies, and in our western forests, cultivate our wild lands, aid in building up our towns and cities, and diffuse a healthful, moral and intellectual

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2002), 19; William Ellery Channing, *The Complete Works of W.E. Channing* (London: Routledge, 1870), 629.

<sup>135</sup> “My First Speculation,” *The American Review: A Whig Journal*, 2, no. 4 (October 1845): 353; “Western Emigration: Narrative of a Tour to & One Year’s Residence in Edensburgh,” reprinted in *The Magazine of History with Notes and Queries*, 7, extra no. 28 (1914): 9.

influence.” Two years later, Abner Dumont Jones offered a similar defense of the character of migrants in his work, *Illinois and the West*. Jones refuted the common perception “that the west is filled up with mere renegades and speculators—men whose fortunes have failed them in the East.” He assured readers that most new arrivals to the Western states were “young men of great enterprise and business tact, who, while they are laboring for their own emolument, are doing somewhat, and not a little, for the institutions of their adopted country, and the permanence of social virtues in the society they help to compose.” Peck and Jones’ insistence that migrants were committed to building up new towns and cities was an obvious attempt to rebut the argument that restless mobility was threatening community life and eroding the republican virtue of commitment to the common good. At the same time, however, Peck’s manifest desire to encourage readers to “fix” themselves in a “permanent home” also betrayed his awareness that, for many westering Americans, relocation was not a one-time affair.<sup>136</sup>

In reality, frontier communities were characterized by extreme transience. In Sugar Creek, Illinois, for example, roughly two-thirds of the households listed on one census no longer resided in the community a decade later. Having relocated to Illinois in the 1820s, Englishman John Woods was astonished by the itinerant lifestyle of his neighbors. “Many of the people here have been extensive travelers, and to have resided in three or four states, and several places in each state, is not uncommon,” he explained. Rather than treating relocation as a long-term investment, many migrants saw their decision to settle down as a short-term speculation. Alexis de Tocqueville made this point as he commented on the tendency of recent migrants to Ohio to abandon their new homesteads and relocate further west. “Emigration was at first necessary to them as a means of subsistence; and it soon becomes a sort of game of chance, which they pursue for the emotions it excites as much as for the gain it procures.” The speculative approach to mobility that Tocqueville described was directly linked to the popular obsession with being well-located. Acutely aware of the benefits of attaching themselves to a thriving town or village, many migrants chose to relocate repeatedly in the hopes of finding a still more promising place to call home. In 1843, English author William Oliver described how the drive to find the most advantageous location encouraged many westerners to lead lives of perpetual mobility:

Where there is such a wide and varied field to choose from, many are apt to waver, and roam about from place to place in search of an El Dorado, which is never destined to bless their eyes. There is something enticing in the dreamy visions one gets (like peeps into the realms of hope) of newer and fairer lands, whose praises come, borne along by the western winds, and which, like them, have no abiding place.

Although both Tocqueville and Oliver focused on the restlessness of agricultural migrants, young men who set out to pursue mercantile or professional endeavors on the urban frontier were among the most mobile class of westward migrants. Compared to farmers, who had purchased and improved their land, urban migrants could generally uproot themselves with greater ease. As in the cases of Alpheus Fench and Samuel

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<sup>136</sup> John Mason Peck, *A New Guide for Emigrants to the West* (Boston: Gould, Kendall & Lincoln, 1836), vi; Jones, *Illinois and the West*, 250.

Hempstead, many also moved west without wives and children. This, too, enabled them to pull up stakes quickly whenever they grew dissatisfied with their choice of location.<sup>137</sup>

In the face of all this transience, even those authors who worked to promote westward movement at times expressed sharp disapproval of shiftless migrants who relocated repeatedly rather than embracing their role as community builders. “I have spoken of the moveable part of the community, and unfortunately for the western country, it constitutes too great a proportion of the whole community,” the prominent western missionary and geographer, Timothy Flint, wrote in 1826. Much like Eastern opponents of emigration, Flint saw restless mobility as a significant impediment to the social, moral, and physical improvement of western towns and agricultural districts. The lure of unbroken, fertile, and inexpensive lands further west had a “fatal effect” on the industry of many westerners, Flint explained. Rather than dedicating themselves to establishing productive farms and building sturdy dwellings and barns, many residents of frontier communities only made “such improvements as they can leave without reluctance and without loss.” Flint also lamented the lack of stable community life in the West. “Everything shifts under your eye,” he explained, “the present occupants sell, pack, depart. Strangers replace them. Before they have gained the confidence of their neighbors, they hear of a better place, pack up, and follow their precursors.” Such “instability of connexions” made it all the more difficult for the inhabitants of western towns and villages to elevate their communities by refining local religious, educational, and governmental institutions.<sup>138</sup>

As young transients explained their decisions about movement and settlement in letters to family or friends, they often revealed a degree of self-consciousness about their restless mobility. Indeed, Samuel Hempstead’s early dispatches from Little Rock were clearly intended to allay his uncle’s concerns about his inability to decide on one place of residence. In his first letter, he pleaded innocent to “the charge of fickleness or of sailing myself before every veering wind.” Another young man who attempted to dispel his family’s anxiety about his inability to commit to one place was Edward Brimblecom. In 1849, Brimblecom bid farewell to his family in Massachusetts and made his way to Walnut Township, Ohio, where he evidently hoped to purchase land and begin farming. Within months of his arrival, however, he grew dissatisfied with his prospects for acquiring a homestead, and began to contemplate heading farther west to Illinois. In a letter to his family announcing his plans to pull up stakes yet again, Brimblecom took great pains to demonstrate his sound reasoning. “[I]t will do me no harm to see how the people in Illinois live, and get their living,” he explained. “I do not think that it would be wise fore me to decide at once that I would settle here, for there might be some place, no more than ten miles off, which would be far preferable to this.” In part, this explanation was calculated to assuage his mother’s apprehension about his desire to move even farther from his family in Massachusetts. “Illinois is in [the] world,” he assured her, “as

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<sup>137</sup> John Mack Faragher, *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 50; John Woods, *Two Years' Residence in the Settlement on the English Prairie, in the Illinois Country, United States* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1822), 231; Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Cirencester: The Echo Library, 2005), 226; William Oliver, *Eight Months in Illinois With Information to Immigrants* (Chicago: W.M. Hill, 1924), 252.

<sup>138</sup> Timothy Flint, *Recollections of the Last Ten Years, Passed in Occasional Residences and Journeys in the Valley of the Mississippi* (Boston: Cummings, Hilliard, and Co, 1826), 76, 204-206.

you may prove to yourself by looking in Mitchels School Atlas, map No 4.” A second and equally crucial goal of Brimblecom’s letter, however, was to preempt any doubts about his inability maintain a fixed abode. Indeed, he concluded his missive by insisting that he did, in fact, intend to settle down permanently, but only after he had thoroughly explored his options. “I think that it is my best way to look round a little at any rate, before I determine where to ‘stick my stake’; for when I stick it, I mean to drive it in so fast that it will be difficult to pull it up again.”<sup>139</sup>

Speculative writing provided a solution for men like Hempstead and Brimblecom, who wished to convince skeptical readers of their ability to remain satisfied with their chosen place of residence. By demonstrating a long-term vision for their new home, and by analyzing how its development would facilitate their endeavors in business or professional life, transients affirmed that they were committed to settling down. Edward Brimblecom clearly had this purpose in mind when he wrote to announce his removal to Ogle County, Illinois, where he ultimately joined his brother and sister-in-law in purchasing a 160-acre homestead. In one of several letters that he posted shortly after his relocation, he speculated about the effects of two new railroad lines, one running from Chicago to Galena, and the other from Green Bay to Rockford, Illinois. Instructing his family to trace the route of these railroad lines in *Mitchell’s School Atlas*, Brimblecom asserted that he was “very confident” that they would pass within five miles of his new home, and that a depot would likely be established in the area. “Should this be the case it will greatly augment the value and real convenience of our place as whatever brings the market a mile nearer to us, will and always must, cause our property to increase in value in a two fold ratio, as it ensures a better price for our produce, and also greater facilities for getting it to market.” This speculative analysis served two important purposes. First, it was clearly intended to convince his family to join him in Illinois. In apprising his mother of the advantages that his young brothers would derive from settling in Ogle County, he insisted, “Illinois is the place...for the young to rise in the world, here they can grow up with the country and the country is growing fast so their growth would be equally rapid.” At the same time, however, Brimblecom’s speculative writing also aimed to convince his family that his residence in Illinois would not be as short-lived as his settlement in Ohio had been. “I do not think that we could have well made a better selection of a location than we have done,” he concluded, “I am satisfied with it in every respect.” Brimblecom’s analysis of the prospects of Ogle County gave substance to this statement of contentment. By predicting how he would benefit from changes in the landscape that were still several years off, he implicitly communicated to his family that he would not be pulling up stakes again anytime soon.<sup>140</sup>

As they wove together speculation about self and place, Brimblecom, Hempstead, Felch, and others like them began to formulate a new paradigm of booster masculinity that combined elements of both self-made and republican manhood. On the one hand,

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<sup>139</sup> Samuel Hempstead to William Hempstead, July 5, 1836, Samuel H. Hempstead Letters; Edward Brimblecom to family, January 1, 1850, Brimblecom Family Papers, Box 1, Folder 8, Bancroft Library, University of California Berkeley. Brimblecom reiterated this point in a brief note to his mother appended to the above letter: “I shall find out what the difference is worth before I give over my search for a good location in which to make my home as a western farmer, I shall not be in a hurry about driving in my ‘stake,’ even after I have found a place which at first sight appears to be an acceptable spot.”

<sup>140</sup> Edward Brimblecom to family, March 22, 1850 and February 15, 1851, Brimblecom Family Papers, Box 1, Folder 9.

their letters and diaries suggested that a virtuous man was one who proved willing to pull up stakes and leave behind friends and family in pursuit of social, financial, and professional ambitions. In this regard, their conception of ideal manhood incorporated the entrepreneurial values of individualism and self-reliance. On the other hand, however, they also emphasized the critical importance of choosing a permanent abode and growing up with the place. This emphasis on persistence and community building reflected republican notions of usefulness and civic virtue. The speculative writing that young migrants like Brimblecom, Hempstead, and Felch used to explain their decisions about relocation was just the first step in the construction of booster masculinity. In the years after they settled down, as they worked to establish themselves as leading citizens of their towns, counties, or states, many of these migrants would continue to use personal writing to elaborate and propound this constellation of ideas about movement, place, and masculine virtue.

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For a few of the young men who put down roots in upstart towns and villages on the trans-Appalachian frontier, speculative dreams about career advancement, affluence, and social prominence eventually became a reality. One such success story was Samuel Hempstead, whose whimsical decision to relocate to Little Rock ultimately paid dividends. Having secured a position as clerk of the state House of Representatives shortly after his arrival, Hempstead steadily worked his way up through the state judicial branch. He became a prosecuting attorney in 1842, a United States District Attorney in 1856, and the solicitor general of Arkansas two years later. For every transient whose experiences conformed to the ideal of booster masculinity, however, there were many more who remained in their adopted homes only briefly before uprooting once again. Roughly a decade after he enthusiastically declared Ogle County, Illinois, to be the “*place of places*,” Edward Brimblecom sold out and headed to California, joining his brother, Francis, in business. If speculative writing provided young men with a means of asserting a long-term commitment to a particular locale, a different form of writing—the travelogue—became increasingly important for those, like Brimblecom, who were either unwilling or unable to remain settled for long.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Edward Brimblecom to family, March 22, 1850, Brimblecom Family Papers, Box 1, Folder 9.

## AN UNLIMITED AND UNCERTAIN JOURNEY: NARRATING TRANSIENCE AND SETTLEMENT

In 1831, John Folck commenced revising a travel diary he had written more than three years earlier as he wended his way from Cumberland, Maryland, to Bloomington, Indiana. Filled with precise dates, locations, and distances of travel, his final draft retained many of the qualities of a diary. Rather than simply transcribing the original text, however, Folck evidently edited and embellished it, producing a travelogue that was more fluid and literary. He opened the volume with a sketch of his boyhood in Cumberland, where he had spent his days working on the family farm, tending to his father's mill, and attending school during the winter months. This prologue culminated with a sentimental account of his departure for the Ohio Valley at age twenty-two. "I knew that I was leaving my native mountains [and] valleys not to return shortly [or] perhaps never," he recalled, "and as I ascended Wills Mountain a backward glance over my place of nativity extorted from my heart the briny tears." Folck assumed a less dramatic tone as he chronicled his westward journey, which took him through Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana, then down the Mississippi River by flatboat to New Orleans, and finally north again to Bloomington. Even in this portion of his text, however, he made a discernable effort to refine his diary into a narrative by filling in temporal gaps and revising his entries into continuous prose.<sup>142</sup>

Throughout his travelogue, Folck made it clear that his journey was more than a change of residence; it was also a break from his youth, an emphatic assertion of autonomy and self-reliance. The significance of this rite of passage undoubtedly informed his decision to keep a diary in the first place, and it also likely contributed to his desire for a more polished account of the experience. Yet the characteristics of his journey and the nature of his revisions suggest that Folck also had a second motive for rewriting his journal. Far from a straightforward migration experience, his travels had been meandering, open-ended, and fraught with uncertainty. This was nowhere clearer than at the end of his account, when he explained his decision to remain in Bloomington. Having accepted a position as a superintendant in a steam mill until the following spring, Folck noted that his long-term plans were still uncertain, and that he was contemplating a return to Maryland. Given the rambling and indeterminate nature of his mobility, the process of revising his travel diary into a more literary narrative enabled Folck to clarify the shape and meaning of an otherwise ambiguous period of transience.<sup>143</sup>

Folck's penchant for narrative was shared by many other young men who ventured west on their own, intending to seek employment, pursue commercial or real estate ventures, launch their professional careers, or simply indulge their restless desire

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<sup>142</sup> Folck, "A Diary Kept by John Folck Jr. Containing A Journal of his Travels Through the Western Part of the United States and Many Other Incidents of his Life Written By Himself," 1831, Western Americana Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

for novelty and adventure. Some left home with a specific destination in mind, having consulted maps and guidebooks, and solicited advice from relatives or peers who had relocated to new towns and villages of the trans-Appalachian West. Others, like Folck, planned to engage in a more improvised style of mobility, investigating opportunities in different towns or regions before deciding whether to settle down or return home. Whether their plans were firm or fluid, the fact that these men were traveling without wives or children enabled them to change course or uproot themselves whenever they saw fit. Consequently, many remained transient for long periods, relocating multiple times before finding a permanent home or heading back to their native states.

The fact that transients like Folck composed decidedly literary accounts of their journeys is not surprising given that, at the time they left home, American publishers were marketing an unprecedented quantity and variety of autobiographical works. As antebellum readers voraciously consumed the tales of frontiersmen, explorers, tourists, fugitive slaves, business tycoons, gamblers, beggars, and innumerable others, many began to imagine their own lives as coherent stories that possessed literary merit. But the diaries and narratives that wayfarers like Folck produced, both during their travels and in the months or years after they settled down, were also a response to the same tensions that prompted Samuel Hempstead and Edward Brimblecom to insist on their long-term commitment to their adopted homes. Even as young migrants characterized their decision to leave home as an act of enterprise and individualism, they often struggled to reconcile their transience with an ethic of persistence and a belief in the importance of establishing a fixed abode. Narrative writing provided a means of navigating these tensions. By framing their departure as the beginning of a coherent story, and by fashioning intermittent periods of mobility into a continuous narrative, Folck and his fellow travelers affirmed that they would not be wanderers forever, and that they intended to settle down again once their journeys were through.<sup>144</sup>

This chapter begins by examining how men who set out on open-ended journeys through the trans-Appalachian West used their travel diaries to give shape to indeterminate and improvised movement. The focus then shifts to the gold fields of California, where forty-niners engaged in similar narrative practices as they participated in a very different kind of travel experience. Finally, the chapter concludes by analyzing the revised travelogues and retrospective narratives that both returned travelers and one-way migrants composed in the aftermath of their westward journeys. For those who ultimately found a new home in the West, the revision process often continued for decades, as they reworked stories of youthful transience into performances of booster masculinity.

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<sup>144</sup> On the proliferation of published personal narratives during the antebellum period, see Ann Vincent Fabian, *The Unvarnished Truth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); and Joyce Appleby, *Recollections of the Early Republic: Selected Autobiographies* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1997). As historian Scott E. Casper has shown, the early nineteenth century also witnessed the rise of the biography as an immensely popular literary form. Casper makes a compelling case that this genre, too, played a crucial role in the development of a “biographical consciousness,” encouraging ordinary Americans to see their lives as coherent stories; see *Constructing American Lives: Biography & Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 14.

## Launching the Bark

As young migrants prepared to leave behind friends and family and pursue opportunities in towns and villages in the trans-Appalachian West, they often began their travel diaries by laying out the personal stakes and symbolic meaning of their journeys. Their opening entries made it clear that, although their final destination was uncertain, they conceived of their departure as the beginning of a coherent story of self-improvement. In 1840, as James G. DuBois set off from Catskill, New York, he framed his journey to the Southwest as the opening chapter of his adult life. Having secured a two-year position in a country store in Portland, Alabama, DuBois was evidently considering remaining in the Mississippi Valley after the term of his employment was complete. "I...bid adieu to the native place of my youthful career," he wrote, "leaving many anxious hopes and cares behind." Other transients, such as twenty-four-year-old Ammon Underwood, used nautical metaphors to capture the risk involved in striking out on their own. Underwood began his travel diary in 1834, when he left rural Massachusetts to pursue a mercantile career in Texas. "How hard it is to deny ourselves the pleasure of the society of those we love and, from the harbour of social friendship, to launch upon the changing sea of fluctuating fortune," he reflected. Four years later, twenty-one-year-old Cyrus Sanders introduced his journey in much the same way. Having bid farewell to his family in Ohio and set his course for Illinois, Sanders declared that he had "launched" his "frail bark upon the tempestuous ocean of this wide world." The distinctly literary tone that these young men struck in their opening entries gave their accounts a narrative quality that was different from the travel writing of many other wayfarers who moved west during the antebellum period.<sup>145</sup>

Migrants like Folck, Dubois, Underwood, and Sanders were by no means the first cohort of young men to use travel diaries to narrate their passage to adulthood. In fact, their writing habits were derived from genteel traditions that dated back to the rise of the European Grand Tour in the seventeenth century. The Tour had emerged as a rite of passage for young British aristocrats, enabling them to acquire firsthand knowledge of Classical and Renaissance civilization by visiting major cities and historical sites throughout Europe. This genteel ritual reflected Enlightenment ideas about the educational value of travel, articulated most clearly by John Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). Because individuals derive all knowledge from physical stimuli in their environment, Locke reasoned, travel was essential to the process of intellectual development. Responding to these ideas, young men who set out on the Grand Tour frequently composed travel diaries as a means of storing information and sharpening their faculties of observation and analysis. The traditions of genteel tourism continued to hold sway during the antebellum period, and they had a profound impact on the way young men conceived of their westward journeys as both a rite of passage and an opportunity for self-improvement.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> James G. DuBois, diary, entry for October 6, 1840, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library; Underwood, "Journal of Ammon Underwood, 1834-1838," James K. Greer ed., *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (October, 1928): 125; Sanders, "Journal of Cyrus Sanders," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* 37 (January, 1939): 52.

<sup>146</sup> On the Enlightenment ideas underpinning the Grand Tour, see Paul Fussell, "The Eighteenth Century and the Grand Tour," *The Norton Book of Travel* (New York: Norton, 1987), 129. The influence of traditions of genteel tourism in antebellum America can also be seen in the rise of the Fashionable Tour, an



In the opening pages of their diaries, migrants often invoked the Enlightenment rationale for travel, framing their departure from home as a bid for intellectual growth and character development. One diarist who emphasized these motives was twenty-four-year-old Jared Willard, a native of Connecticut who traveled to Ohio and Michigan in 1833. Although Willard headed west to distribute a religious publication, he used his travel diary to define his journey as a touristic endeavor. “Having from my earliest recollection had a strong desire to visit the far west and...having nearly completed my 24th year without ever passing the boundaries of my native state,” he explained, “I came to the fixed resolution of starting on a tour to the west...for the purpose of gaining by personal observation that information which had formerly been gained by the agency of others.” Roughly a decade later, Arthur Gordon Bennett, a twenty-four-year-old sawmill worker from Woodstock, Vermont, offered a similar explanation for his departure for the West. “I...have started to see the world,” Bennett declared, “If something new and novel presents itself to my view daily at least I shall learn something of men and of society—luxury and poverty—pain and pleasure and learn how some of the great mass of mankind live.” Other travelers expressed their desire for self-improvement in nationalistic terms, portraying their journeys as a patriotic duty to learn more about their country. John Folck, for instance, cited a desire to “become better acquainted” with his “native country.” For young transients who ascribed to Enlightenment ideals, travel diaries became both a tool for self-culture and a means of narrating their efforts at intellectual and moral refinement.<sup>147</sup>

Although their writing practices were rooted in genteel traditions, the circumstances under which men like Bennett and Folck left home endowed their travel diaries with novel significance. Most were taking to the road to improve not only their intellects, but also their pecuniary or professional prospects. Some set out with particular commercial or real estate ventures in mind. Ammon Underwood, for example, intended to purchase a stock of goods on credit and open a store in one of the many new towns springing up in Texas. Many aspiring lawyers and doctors embarked with similarly well-defined plans for advancing their careers. When Ebenezer Chamberlain of Orrington, Maine, commenced a travel diary in 1832, he explained that he was bound for Indiana, where the bar rules would enable him to begin practicing law at least two years sooner than in his home state. Others left home with more vague and fluid intentions. This was evidently the case for John Folck and Arthur Gordon Bennett, both of whom pursued a variety of employment opportunities during their westward journeys. Regardless of the specificity of their plans, most young men who set out alone for the urban frontier saw financial independence as one of the central goals of their journeys. Accordingly, many combined the Enlightenment discourse of self-improvement with the entrepreneurial language of self-made masculinity. John Folck remarked that his spirit of “enterprize

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American derivative of the Grand Tour that became popular among middle-class travelers in the 1820s. This itinerary followed the Hudson River from New York City to Albany, and then proceeded west along the Erie Canal to Niagara Falls. From the outset, diary keeping figured prominently in this touristic ritual. On the rise of the Fashionable Tour see Dona Brown, *Inventing New England: Regional Tourism in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995); and John F. Sears, *Sacred Places: American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>147</sup> Jared Willard, “A Sketch of a Tour from Connecticut through the State of N. York across Lake Erie through Several Counties of Michigan and Ohio,” 1833, Clements Library, University of Michigan; Arthur G. Bennett, diary, entry for April 13, 1845, American Antiquarian Society; Folck, diary.

stood tiptoe” as he set out for the Ohio Valley. Others emphasized their go-ahead spirit by pointing out that they were leaving home with little capital. When Cyrus Saunders launched his “frail bark,” he asserted his “firm resolution to sink or swim—with just \$100 in my pocket.” Ebenezer Chamberlain, who almost certainly embellished his travel diary after his journey, called attention to his modest financial circumstances by explaining that he had “launched forth upon the ocean of adventure...without experience and but limited means.” By introducing their journeys in this way, diarists indicated that they were chronicling not only intellectual growth and character development, but also social and economic striving.<sup>148</sup>

Travel diaries also took on new meaning for transients like Chamberlain because of the indeterminate duration of their journeys. Unlike the genteel tourists whose writing practices they imitated, many young men traveled west without a clear itinerary or destination. Arthur Bennett made no effort to conceal the uncertainty of his long-term plans. “[W]here to go what to do I do not know,” he stated frankly, “neither do I care.” Similarly, Clark Guernsey, a young printer who left New York City and headed west in 1836, described himself as a “lonely wanderer, travelling without hardly knowing whither—ignorant of the place which would be my next abode—and with means such as few would think of starting upon an unlimited and uncertain journey.” In addition to their lack of a fixed route, many travelers saw the final outcome of their journeys as contingent upon their ability to find steady employment, establish successful businesses, purchase valuable real estate, or launch their professional careers. If their endeavors proved successful, and if they found an agreeable spot to settle down, they would remain in the West. If not, they would eventually make their way back home. Such open-ended ventures defied easy classification as round-trip tours or one-way migrations.<sup>149</sup>

Because they confronted uncertainty with regard to both their destination and their financial prospects, young migrants found that two interrelated features of their travel diaries were especially appealing and meaningful. First, composing a travel diary was an inherently finite practice, beginning at the time of departure and concluding at the time of arrival. Consequently, the simple act of commencing their accounts became an important symbolic gesture for men like John Folck. It signaled that, despite the uncertain duration of their journeys, their transience was a temporary phase rather than a perpetual state. Furthermore, because travel diaries were finite, they also had an intrinsic narrative quality that gave shape, order, and coherence to whatever disparate experiences were captured within their pages. The significance of this feature becomes clearer when contrasted with another form of personal writing that became broadly popular during the nineteenth century: the daily diary. Antebellum Americans kept daily diaries for a variety of reasons, from religious introspection, to financial accounting, to the cultivation of moral character. Although some diarists penned lengthy accounts of their experiences, most confined their records to a line or two each day, remarking on mundane subjects such as the weather, daily chores, business activities, or bodily health. Whatever their

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<sup>148</sup> Underwood, “Journal of Ammon Underwood, 1834-1838,” 125; Folck, diary; Sanders, “Journal of Cyrus Sanders,” 52; Ebenezer M. Chamberlain, “Journal of Ebenezer Mattoon Chamberlain, 1832-5,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 15 (1919): 233. When John Folck arrived in Indiana, he initially attempted to secure a teaching position. When this proved impossible, he instead earned a living by working at a steam mill and a distillery, and performing farm labor.

<sup>149</sup> Bennett, diary, entry for April 13, 1845; Clark Guernsey, journal, vol. 1, p.118, Description and Travel Collection, 1788-1871, Microfilm, Ohio Historical Society.

content, daily diaries were structured according to a linear conception of time that had no beginning or end. Like a clock, they divided time into regular increments, encouraging diarists to see their lives as a steady accumulation of experience rather than a coherent story. Although the records that young men kept during their westward journeys at times resembled daily diaries, their purpose was fundamentally different. Whereas the methodical character of the daily diary conveyed discipline, order, and steady progress, the narrative structure of the travel diary made it an ideal practice for those wishing to capture a dramatic personal transformation.<sup>150</sup>

The accounts that young men commenced as they embarked on their westward journeys were therefore much more than a means of commemorating a momentous rite of passage. They were also more than a tool for cultivating character or sharpening observational skills. Although all of these functions were important, John Folck, Cyrus Sanders, Arthur Bennett, and others like them valued their travel diaries, first and foremost, as a way to impose a narrative arc on their unlimited and uncertain journeys. However long they remained transient, and whatever wrong turns or dead ends lay ahead, travel writing gave them an opportunity to present their mobility as a coherent story with a clear beginning and end.

### **Narrating by the Wayside**

While some men began their travel diaries with dramatic accounts of their departure from home, most became more concise and less introspective once their journeys got underway. For even the most determined diarists, the rhythms and rigors of travel made sustaining an elaborate narrative exceedingly difficult. Along major arteries of transportation, those who could afford to lodge in modern hotels enjoyed access to reading rooms, parlors, or other refined spaces where they could comfortably compose their journals. In less populous areas, however, most travelers boarded in cramped taverns or private residences that offered little physical or interpersonal space for journaling. Consequently, some wayfarers found that the best opportunities for writing came during long, monotonous journeys aboard steamboats or canal packets. Here too, however, they were forced to contend with a variety of nuisances, from noisy crowds to the mechanical vibrations of steam engines. As Joseph Fawcett made his way down the Ohio River by steamboat in 1840, he had difficulty deciding whether to compose his journal “in the cabin midst of a rowdy set of children” or “in the social hall where the various voices of the male passengers keep up a curious medley of noises.” In the face of all these obstacles, most diarists managed to record only brief accounts of their experiences during their time on the road.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> On the popularity of line-a-day diary keeping in nineteenth-century America, see Molly McCarthy, “A Pocketful of Days: Pocket Diaries and Daily Record Keeping among Nineteenth-Century New England Women,” *The New England Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (June, 2000): 274-296; and Molly McCarthy, “A Page, a Day: A History of the Daily Diary in America” (PhD diss., Brandeis University, 2004). See also Suzanne L. Bunkers and Cynthia Anne Huff, *Inscribing the Daily: Critical Essays on Women's Diaries* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996).

<sup>151</sup> Joseph Fawcett, *Journal of Jos. W. Fawcett* (Chillicothe: D.K. Webb, private press, 1944), 10. When Lansing B. Swan of Rochester, New York, stopped at a hotel in Niles, Michigan, in 1841, he had little trouble finding a quiet space to update his diary. “I am now sitting in the reading room,” he noted, “writing

Although finding time and space for writing was often challenging, young migrants typically devoted far more time to their travel diaries when they were on the move than when they settled down for any length of time. In fact, most engaged in an intermittent pattern of composition, updating their journals regularly as they moved from place to place, and then setting them aside whenever they stopped to seek employment or pursue other opportunities in places along their route. One traveler whose writing habits conformed to this routine was John Folck. After keeping a regular account of his experiences throughout the first leg his journey, Folck suspended his diary as he wintered in Bloomington, Indiana. He then resumed writing the following spring as he set off down the Ohio River by flatboat, transporting a cargo of whiskey, bacon, and other goods to market in New Orleans. Arthur Bennett's travel writing was similarly episodic. While he made his way west from Vermont, passing through Illinois, Indiana, and Michigan, Bennett was diligent in writing up his journal. His entries then became much more irregular as he stopped to perform stints of manual labor in order to meet expenses. It was not until a year later, when he decided to visit his home state, that he once again began keeping a regular diary.<sup>152</sup>

One reason why Folck, Bennett, and many of their peers wrote more extensively and regularly during periods of mobility was simply that, as they moved from place to place, the novelty of their experiences, encounters, and surroundings gave them abundant material for journaling. Furthermore, many transients experienced feelings of loneliness, isolation, homesickness, or boredom as they traveled on their own, prompting them to use their diaries as a source of companionship. But these factors alone do not fully explain why so many young men returned to the same travel diary after settling down for long periods of time. Neither do they account for the fact that diarists often used a single volume to document years of sporadic mobility. Above all, the tendency of men like Folck and Bennett to resume their narratives after periods of settlement emerged from their desire to fashion successive relocations into one continuous journey.

One diarist who used travel writing to string together five years of periodic mobility was James M. Sharpe. Sharpe began keeping a journal in 1843, while working as a mercantile clerk in Indiana. His account soon became a travel diary, however, when he purchased a stock of dry goods and set off to find an advantageous market somewhere in the Mississippi Valley. Sharpe lived a remarkably nomadic life over the next five years, traveling from town to town along the Mississippi, Missouri, and Red Rivers, peddling his wares and dabbling in land speculation. Throughout his travels, he found it difficult to keep a regular journal, and his account contains numerous gaps ranging from two to fourteen months. After one long interruption, he quipped, "We arrived at Lexington but did not remain at Lexington near so long a time as my journal has." Nevertheless, Sharpe continued to update the volume periodically, doing his best to report his "principal acts and movements." Most of his updates were written during periods of movement, and several were composed as he traveled by steamboat. While descending the Red River, for example, he opened one entry by noting that he was "about 50 miles below Fulton and getting along well." Despite the long intervals between his entries, Sharpe clearly conceived of his diary as a continuous narrative. He stated as

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up [my] journal and indulging in agreeable reflections at the thought of turning my face homeward." Swan, *Journal of a Trip to Michigan in 1841* (Rochester: privately printed, 1904), 31.

<sup>152</sup> Folck, diary; Bennett, diary.

much, remarking at one point, “it is within two days of three months since I have written one word in my journal—but now to resume my narrative.” In a later entry, he explained, “I will now resume the thread of my diary where I dropped it on Nov. 22 1844.” In fact, Sharpe’s tendency to recount several months of experiences in one sitting meant that his account read more like a retrospective travelogue than a diary. By the time he settled down and began practicing law in Yellow County, Missouri, in 1848, his thick, monogrammed volume contained a coherent record of half a decade on the road.<sup>153</sup>

Westward travelers like Sharpe were not the only young men in antebellum America who used travel writing to narrate periods of mobility following their departure from home. At times, rural youth who set out for Eastern cities like New York kept diaries for much the same reason, as did clerks, shopkeepers, and craftsmen who moved from town to town along the Atlantic Seaboard.<sup>154</sup> Moreover, even those men who styled their journeys “western tours” frequently moved along many different axes, changing course, doubling back, or even returning home periodically. This often made it difficult to distinguish westward migrants from other transients. Nevertheless, young men who set their course for newer states and territories in the trans-Appalachian West were especially prone to remain transient for extended periods of time before settling down or returning home. As in the case of James Sharp, many aspiring merchants moved from one frontier community to the next, searching for an optimal market for their goods. Young lawyers, doctors, and professionals at times engaged in a similar style of mobility as they searched for a promising new town where demand for their services was high. Besides this strategic type of movement, some men simply chose to remain rootless out of a desire to explore new places. Others, less fortunate transients were compelled to relocate multiple times due to disappointments in business, outbreaks of infectious disease, or an inability to secure employment. Whatever their reasoning, the fact that young westward migrants frequently undertook multiple removes, often over the course of several years, gave them especially compelling reasons for using travel writing to give shape to their itinerancy.<sup>155</sup>

Constructing a continuous narrative out of prolonged or erratic mobility was especially important given that, over the course of the antebellum period, politicians, reformers, religious leaders, and other public figures became increasingly outspoken about the problem of shiftlessness. In their inability or unwillingness to settle down, men like James Sharpe seemingly confirmed the worst fears of anti-emigration polemicists and many western boosters, both of whom argued that excessive mobility was impeding

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<sup>153</sup> James M. Sharpe, “Private Journal,” 1843-8, Western Americana Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

<sup>154</sup> Twenty-two-year-old Henry West began keeping a travel diary in 1823 when he left Landisburg, Pennsylvania, on a “tramp to the East” in search of construction work. Over the next decade, he added to the diary sporadically as he traveled through Pennsylvania, New York, and Michigan. He finally closed the volume in 1832. Henry West, diary, 1826-1832, Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera, Winterthur Library. See also John Wight Bill, diary and account book, 1835, MSS Collection, New-York Historical Society. Bill began keeping a diary when he left his home in Lyme, Connecticut, to distribute a volumes of the *National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans* to subscribers in South Carolina and Georgia.

<sup>155</sup> On the tendency of young, urban migrants to move from one frontier community to the next in search of an opening for their particular business or professional practice, see Timothy R. Mahoney, *Provincial Lives: Middle-Class Experience in the Antebellum Middle West*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 69-70.

the establishment of stable and refined communities. To be sure, many diarists wrote candidly of their restlessness, and some unabashedly styled themselves wanderers, tramps, or sojourners. Nevertheless, their accounts reveal significant internal conflict regarding their penchant for uprooting. In one diary entry, Cyrus Sanders reflected on the difficulty of leaving the small village of Salem, Iowa, where he had resided for three months. After noting his plans to seek work as a surveyor in the northern part of the territory, he professed that he had “become very much attached to the citizens” of Salem and, consequently, his departure “seemed like leaving another home.” Later, when he visited his family in Ohio for several months, Sanders again expressed ambivalence about his transience. While preparing to depart for Iowa once again, he reflected that all of the “enjoyments of associating with relations and friends” would soon be “exchanged for exile, care, and trouble.” This, he concluded wistfully, was the “ramblers fortune.” During the two years that Clark Guernsey spent traveling the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys, he too expressed uneasiness about his constant mobility. After spending a month in Columbus, Ohio, where he worked at the state printing office, Guernsey confessed that he could not leave “without feeling much regret” about severing his connections to the place and its inhabitants. “Thus it is with me,” he lamented, “whenever I have resided in a place just long enough to begin to enjoy society [or] business...the anxiety of my mind compels me to leave, and go again among entire strangers.” Although Sanders’s desire for more profitable employment and Guernsey’s restless temperament trumped their longing for community, their remarks illustrate the internal tensions that many young men grappled with throughout their indeterminate journeys.<sup>156</sup>

By simply resuming their travel diaries each time they pulled up stakes, men like Sanders and Guernsey asserted that they were merely pressing on with their original journeys rather than changing their minds about settlement. They also affirmed that, even though they had resided in one locale for a period of months or years, they continued to think of themselves as travelers rather than settlers. This was not a trivial point, since it implied that their decision to depart was not indicative of an unwillingness to commit to one place. Clark Guernsey was explicit about his high regard for the bonds and obligations of community at several points in his diary. As he prepared to leave Shawneetown, Illinois, amidst of an outbreak of malarial fever, he explained:

Although the bilious fever and other dangerous diseases were raging here at this time...and although it might be considered imprudent for one who had heretofore resided in a more northerly climate during the summer season to stay here—These were not the only considerations which induced me to leave. No! I could not go from a people for whom I entertained such deep respect, were I to know that my services would be needed in attending to the sick!

Because the afflicted were all in the care of relatives, Guernsey concluded, he was at liberty to resume his journey. Regardless of the veracity of this statement, the fact that he penned a long entry justifying his departure highlights the fact that he valued his travel writing as a means of navigating competing impulses towards mobility and settlement.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Sanders, “Journal of Cyrus Sanders,” 65-64, 83; Guernsey, journal, vol. 2, p. 69. John Folck described his journey as a “tramp to the western country”; Folck, diary.

<sup>157</sup> Guernsey, journal, vol. 2, p. 123-124.

Some transients continued to add to their travel diaries periodically until they returned to their home states. Such was the case for James DuBois, who had relocated from New York to Portland, Alabama, in 1840. Having recorded only occasional diary entries during his two-year stint as a mercantile clerk, DuBois resumed his account in 1842, when he set off to seek employment, either at another mercantile establishment or by going into business on his own. Six months later, however, his inability to find work, as well as his deteriorating health, compelled him to return to New York. Reflecting on his unsuccessful business plans, DuBois confessed that, while “some of them appeared very plausible, notwithstanding they all failed.” He continued his diary as he traveled home by way of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers, closing the volume with little fanfare or introspection on the day he reached Catskill. DuBois’s efforts to bring closure to his long and disappointing journey by recording his return passage was typical of young men who were forced to turn back due to financial or professional failures, illness, or other misfortunes. By sustaining their narratives until their round-trip journeys were complete, these wayfarers folded any unsuccessful attempts at relocation into a continuous western tour.<sup>158</sup>

The decision to end a travel diary became a highly significant act for young men who ultimately decided to settle down in one of the frontier communities along their route. In contrast to the experience of leaving home, which entailed a decisive break from family and friends, one-way migrants frequently found that the end of their journeys was less clear. Because their decision to remain in a given locale was often contingent upon success in business, professional activities, or other enterprises, many transients did not consider themselves fully settled until long after they reached their final destinations. James Sharpe initially conceived of his residence in Yellow County, Missouri, as temporary, and he began studying law primarily as a way to pass the time until his next business venture. His plans began to change, however, when he won his first legal trial. “[S]ince that time,” he noted proudly, “there has not been a suit in the neighbourhood but I have been engaged one side and really I almost begin to think myself a very good lawyer.” As a result of his unexpected professional success, he decided to remain in Yellow County for the time being. Although Sharpe’s final entry was unceremonious, and although he never stated his intention to settle permanently, his decision to close his travel diary marked the beginning of his legal career in Missouri as the definitive end of his five-year passage to mature manhood.<sup>159</sup>

Whereas Sharpe’s diary ended fairly abruptly, one-way migrants whose financial or professional circumstances remained precarious often continued to add to their accounts occasionally in the months or years after they settled down. In doing so, they indicated that they still considered themselves men on the make, and that their geographical and pecuniary situation was provisional. Although Cyrus Sanders kept his travel diary open long after he took up residence in Iowa City, his entries grew increasingly infrequent. After a long silence, he returned to the volume on the fifth anniversary of his arrival in Iowa, reflecting on the personal changes that had taken place since his relocation. “At that time,” he recalled, “I entertained chimerical ideas of my great success in the chase of wealth and fame. I supposed that in five years, I would have obtained sufficient wealth to render me comfortably independent and gained a name

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<sup>158</sup> James G. DuBois, diary, entry for May 25, 1843.

<sup>159</sup> James M. Sharpe, “Private Journal,” entry for February 10, 1848.

among my fellow beings that would make me envied.” Instead, his relocation to Iowa had left him “in poverty and obscurity,” an “old Bachelor” at the age of twenty-six. Exactly a year later, he closed his account with a similarly grim assessment of his situation. “Yes I, who was once so much for change adventures and novelty, have lived a whole year without change enough to mark the exit of the time so with my best bow I and my journal make our exit.” That Sanders felt compelled to add this closing statement is revealing. Given that he had failed to achieve the degree of wealth and respectability that he had hoped for when he “launched” his “frail bark,” it was not at all clear that he had completed his journey. By formally ending his travel diary, he asserted that, although he not accomplished the personal transformation he desired, his story of geographical and social mobility had nevertheless reached its conclusion.<sup>160</sup>

### Gold Rush Narratives

The narrative impulse exhibited by men like James Sharpe, Cyrus Sanders, and James DuBois in the 1830s and ‘40s was even stronger among a later group of antebellum transients: the thousands of young men who participated in the California Gold Rush. Forty-niners were remarkably prolific travel writers, and their penchant for diary keeping was unparalleled. Walter Gould, a resident of Cambridge, Massachusetts, who set sail for California in 1849, observed that there were “any number of journalists” aboard his vessel. “I can count nine who keep a regular journal, and several who just put down the latitude, longitude, and state of the weather, besides making a note of all the interesting and important facts which come under their observation.” Given the abundance of time that seafaring forty-niners like Gould had on their hands during the long voyage to San Francisco, it is little wonder that they devoted so much time to narrating their experiences. What is more surprising is that, according to an estimate by literary critic Stephen Fender, diary keeping was at least as prevalent among migrants who took the overland trail to the gold regions.<sup>161</sup>

The fact that many Gold Rush participants used narrative writing in much the same way as earlier transients like Sharpe, Sanders, and DuBois is hardly surprising given that the two groups had much in common. Roughly 90 percent of the fortune-seekers who made their way to California in 1849 were men, and most were under the age of thirty. Moreover, although many forty-niners were married, the vast majority traveled west without wives or children. They were also disproportionately urban and middle class, and many had left behind jobs as clerks, shopkeepers, merchants, lawyers, or doctors. This was especially true of men who set sail from major Northeastern ports like New York and Boston. In all of these respects, forty-niners were, by and large, cut from the same mold as the young men who set out on their own to pursue commercial ventures, professional endeavors, or other opportunities in the trans-Appalachian West.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Sanders, “Journal of Cyrus Sanders,” 87-88.

<sup>161</sup> Walter Gould, journal, 1849, MSS Collection, New-York Historical Society. In commenting on the high rates of diary keeping among forty-niners, Stephen Fender has aptly characterized the Gold Rush as “an explosion of vernacular autobiography.” Fender, *Plotting the Golden West: American Literature and the Rhetoric of the California Trail* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 12, 57.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 56-57. On the middle-class character of the Gold Rush, see Brian Roberts, *American Alchemy The California Gold Rush and Middle-Class Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).



In addition to their demographic similarities, Gold Rush migrants also shared with other young transients a sense that their journeys were characterized by uncertainty and ambiguity on several different levels. Although forty-niners generally expected to return from California within a year or two, most recognized that the duration of their stay was contingent upon their success in mining or other enterprises. In addition to the financial risks they confronted, many gold-seekers were also aware that they were endangering their lives by undertaking the perilous journey to California. This added to the uncertainty surrounding their return. "I arose this morning with a heavy burden resting on my mind," twenty-two-year-old Phillip F. Castleman of Kentucky confessed in the first entry of his travel diary, "as I had been preparing for several weeks, to leave my home my parents, my friends, and all that was dear to me, for a period of two years, and probably for ever." Similarly, as James Tate set out from Missouri in 1849, he noted that he was leaving his family "perhaps for life but may be only for two years." Given the prolonged nature of their stay, as well as the undetermined date of their return, forty-niners clearly saw their journeys as an ambiguous type of mobility, somewhere in between the familiar categories of tourism and migration. In this regard, they were much like the young men who embarked on "unlimited and uncertain" journeys in the decades prior to the Gold Rush.<sup>163</sup>

As forty-niners described their indeterminate journeys in the pages of their diaries, they used many of the same terms as transients like James Sharpe, Cyrus Sanders, and James DuBois. Some, like Jacob S. Hayden of Fairmont, Virginia, characterized their departure from home as emigration. "Having come to the conclusion to emigrate to the West and try my fortune in the land of gold," Hayden wrote, "I bade adieu to my mother and sisters and friends in Fairmont." Others styled their journeys tours. Having written his diary on a stack of letter sheets bound together with twine, H.C. St. Clair of Rochester, Illinois, titled the volume, "A Journal of a Tour to California." Like young trans-Appalachian migrants, many forty-niners opted for terminology that better captured the ambiguous and open-ended nature of their travels. John Mott Smith, a twenty-five-year-old dentist who set out for the diggings in 1849, described himself as "a wanderer seeking new scenes and associates." Twenty-three-year-old William Bickham, a journalist from Cincinnati, deemed his trip a "sojourn in California." As was the case for young migrants of the 1830s and '40s, the uncertainty and shapelessness of their journeys gave forty-niners a powerful motive for narrative writing. Even as their travels were just getting underway, many began using their diaries to turn their open-ended and venturesome mobility into a finite and coherent story.<sup>164</sup>

Although the Gold Rush represented a flowering of the narrative practices that emerged earlier in the antebellum period, it is important to emphasize that the event was, in many ways, an anomaly in the history of both westward expansion and travel writing. There was little precedent for the sudden influx of migrants into California following the

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<sup>163</sup> Phillip F. Castleman, [typescript] diary, entry for May 2, 1849, Bancroft Library; James Tate, diary, entry for April 5, 1849, Bancroft Library.

<sup>164</sup> Jacob S. Hayden, [typescript] diary, entry for March 29, 1852, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; H.C. St. Clair, "A Journal of a Tour to California," 1849, Western Americana Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University; John Mott Smith, "Journal of Adventures to California," entry for March 6, 1849, Edward E. Ayer Manuscript Collection, Newberry Library; William Bickham, "Notes of Travel, incidents etc. during my sojourn in California," 1851, Bancroft Library.

discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill. An estimated 300,000 people poured into the state between 1848 and 1854, with as many as 90,000 arriving in 1849 alone. Participants included individuals from Mexico, South America, Britain, Australia, China, and many other parts of the globe. Many forty-niners evinced a clear awareness that they were participating in an event of historic proportions. When Cornelius Cox began his overland journey from Harrisburg, Texas, his sense that the Gold Rush was a momentous event compelled him to record his experience in a travel diary. "Were it not for the great interest now felt in everything connected with this distant region, together with the desire I have to preserve some memorandums of this trip with which to refresh my recollection in a few years," he remarked, "I should unhesitatingly throw aside this book." Both the historic nature of the event and the intense public curiosity about their endeavors gave gold-seekers like Cox reasons for writing that were different from other types of westward migrants.<sup>165</sup>

The peculiar social and physical experiences associated with each of the three major routes to California also engendered distinctive patterns of travel writing. Although a thorough examination of the writing habits of forty-niners is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is worth noting several ways in which their diary-keeping practices differed from other westward travelers. For those who made their way to California by sea, traveling either around Cape Horn or across the Isthmus of Panama, the need for diversion during the tedious ocean voyage made journaling an attractive pastime. Accordingly, many argonauts produced extensive manuscripts, some with decorative title pages and illustrations. Walter Gould observed that one especially prolific passenger aboard his vessel even wrote a duplicate of his journal to send to his mother and the sweetheart he left behind. "As he has written something like one hundred and fifty pages each it may be considered no fool of a job, though perhaps done by rather a foolish fellow," Gould remarked wryly. As this anecdote suggests, men who embarked for California by sea frequently saw their accounts as a substitute for postal communication. Traveling around Cape Horn in 1849, for example, Francis Ripley transcribed long passages of his journal onto letter sheets, decorating them with detailed sketches and watercolors, before mailing them to wife his wife in New York. Because their writing blurred the boundary between letters and diaries, argonauts like Ripley tended to compose accounts that were far more polished than the unembellished journals of young men who traveled to destinations in the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys.<sup>166</sup>

The travel diaries of forty-niners who took the overland route were generally more concise than those of their seafaring counterparts. The perilous journey by wagon train or pack animal posed significant challenges for even the most dedicated diarists. Although Phineas Blunt brought a portable writing desk along as he set out on the Santa Fe Trail, finding adequate time and space for writing proved a constant struggle. "I am writing this on horseback while riding," he noted in one entry, "the scenery is most magnificent." Blunt penned most of his journal while sitting on the ground, and his entries record a litany of annoyances, including severe cold, swarms of mosquitoes and

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<sup>165</sup> Statistics from Orin Starn, *Ishi's Brain: In Search of America's Last "Wild" Indian* (New York: Norton, 2004), 83; Cornelius Cox, "Notes and Memoranda of an Overland Trip from Texas to California," entry for August 14, 1848, Edward E. Ayer Manuscript Collection, Newberry Library.

<sup>166</sup> Walter Gould, journal, 1849, MSS Collection, New-York Historical Society; Francis Ripley, travel diary, 1849-1851, MSS Collection, New-York Historical Society.

gnats, and the many distracting activities taking place in his camp. In one passage, written while an Apache Indian looked over his shoulder, he complained, “this man’s head is so near my book that it almost interferes with my light.” Whereas Blunt’s account was fairly detailed and introspective, some overland travelers engaged in a more utilitarian form of record keeping, noting distances, trail conditions, the location of potable water, and other useful details. In many instances, their rudimentary accounts were intended to serve as waybills or guidebooks for friends and family who remained behind. Jacob S. Hayden evidently had this purpose in mind when he decided to keep a diary of his trek to California in 1852. “I have seen thousands of things which probably would interest the reader,” he explained, “but I have not given them in the journal as it was written more to describe the road and the country than to tickle the fancy of the reader.” Hayden’s pragmatic form of travel writing highlights the important point that not all forty-niners conceived of their accounts as personal narratives.<sup>167</sup>

Despite the novel patterns of writing that emerged en route to the diggings, Gold Rush diaries often bore a striking resemblance to the accounts that young migrants like James Sharpe composed in previous decades. Rather than simply describing scenery or recording novel experiences, many forty-niners clearly intended to narrate a personal transformation that involved not only pecuniary advancement, but also character building and intellectual development. Having bid farewell to his family in New Haven, Connecticut, Nelson Kingsley commenced his journal with an introspective passage that highlighted both the intellectual and financial goals of his journey. “It is considered by all a great and hazardous undertaking, for a green yankey,” he acknowledged, “but consoling myself with prospects of advantages, both as concerns temporal and intellectual gain, I felt that [I] could not well relinquish my designs.” Twenty-five-year-old David Jackson Staples, who left Boston for California in 1849, offered a more succinct statement of the same two motives in his overland diary. He and his companions were traveling for the purposes of “bettering our condition on money matters and seeing the country.” Whereas Kingsley and Staples placed equal emphasis on self-culture and material prosperity, twenty-four-year-old attorney Niles Searls insisted that the former was even more important than the latter. “Though we may not tell with scrupulous exactness the influence of the present trip upon our lives and characters,” he wrote, “yet we may by carefully guarding against the bad influences brought to bear upon us, come off unscathed from the blast, evade the contagion and be made wise and better by the contact.” Although few forty-niners had the dramatic flare of Kingsley and Searls, many commenced their accounts with similarly high-minded and literary assertions of their ambitions and intentions.<sup>168</sup>

Given that many gold seekers were leaving behind not only family and friends, but also carefully laid career plans, narrating their departure for the diggings was

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<sup>167</sup> Phineas Blunt, “Notes of Travel from New York to the Gold Region in California,” entries for April 24 and June 28, 1849, Bancroft Library; Jacob S. Hayden, [typescript] diary, see the postscript following the entry for August, 26 1852, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. H.C. St. Clair, who copied his overland diary on letter sheets bound together with twine, evidently loaned the volume to a friend who later mailed it back to him. See St. Clair, “A Journal of a Tour to California.”

<sup>168</sup> Nelson Kingsley, “Journal of a Voyage at Sea on the Bark Anna Reynolds, from New Haven to San Francisco,” entry for February 8, 1849, Bancroft Library; David Jackson Staples, memorandum book on the journey to California, entry for April 16, 1849, Bancroft Library; Niles Searls, diary, 1849, Bancroft Library.

especially significant. Many forty-niners embraced their travel writing as a means of both justifying their sudden change of course and defining their journey as a new chapter in their lives. One young man who used his diary in this way was John Mott Smith. At the time of his departure, Smith was practicing dentistry in Albany, New York. In recounting his decision to abandon his profession, he emphasized the significance of his journey as a transformative moment in his life. “Behold me now—no longer a Dental man—but a California operator,” he declared, “A new page opens in my history. I am Smith the Californian.” By penning his first diary entry, Smith literally commenced a new page in his autobiography. That he chose the metaphor of turning pages to introduce his journey is further illustration of the narrative thinking that compelled him and many of his fellow travelers to chronicle their experiences. When Niles Searls began his overland journey to California, he engaged in a similar, albeit less conspicuous, act of self-fashioning. In 1848, after completing his legal studies in Otsego, New York, Searls had set out on a western tour, hoping to find a place to open a law office. While visiting Missouri, however, he got word of the discovery of gold at Sutter’s Mill and promptly decided to scrap his professional ambitions and head to California. Although Searls had already been on the move for several months, it was not until he embarked for the gold regions that he began keeping a travel diary. Through the simple act of beginning a new diary, he implicitly marked his departure for California as the true starting point of his journey rather than an erratic change of direction.<sup>169</sup>

Like other westward migrants who set their diaries aside during stationary periods, forty-niners frequently stopped writing once they reached California. Some anticipated that mining or business activities would leave little time for journaling. Walter Gould, for instance, closed his diary when his ship anchored at San Francisco, anticipating that there would soon be “other business to attend to and a fortune to make.” Others stopped writing for the same reason as Alpheus Richardson, who closed his diary with the curt remark: “Here my journal ended. I got tired of it.” Those who did continue writing generally transitioned to much more concise and irregular entries once they settled down. This change was especially common among diarists who set to work in isolated mining camps, where their days were filled with highly monotonous labor. “From this time I shall only keep account of the most remarkable occurrences,” George Jewett explained, “as a regular journal would be the same thing over and over of digging gold, rain, and dry weather day after day.” Like many other miners, John Prichet’s record of his experiences in the diggings consisted primarily of a line or two each day, noting temperature and weather conditions. This type of record keeping bore little resemblance to the more introspective and literary narratives that many young men had composed en route to California.<sup>170</sup>

Even when their accounts came to resemble daily diaries, however, forty-niners who continued their journals after arrival were often emphatic about the fact that they still

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<sup>169</sup> John Mott Smith, “Journal of Adventures to California,” entry for March 6, 1849, Edward E. Ayer Manuscript Collection, Newberry Library; Searls, diary, 1849.

<sup>170</sup> Walter Gould, journal, July, 1849; Alpheus Richardson, [typescript] “Diary of...Crossing the Plains in 1852,” see closing remark added on January 31, 1856, Bancroft Library; George Enoch Jewett, journal, 1849-1850, Bancroft Library; John Prichet, [typescript] “Notes of a Trip to California,” 1849-1851, Bancroft Library. Upon reaching Stockton, California, Cornelius Cox drew his journal to a close by remarking: “And so endeth the first chapter.” See Cox, “Notes and Memoranda of an Overland Trip from Texas to California,” entry for February 6, 1850.

considered themselves travel writers. One diarist who conveyed this message frequently and in a variety of ways was Stephen Wing. Having embarked from his home in South Yarmouth, Massachusetts, in 1852, Wing, like most Gold Rush migrants, hoped to make a quick fortune and then return home. When his golden dreams proved elusive, however, he gradually extended his stay into an eight-year residence in California. Over the years, as he worked a number of mining claims and hired himself out as a carpenter, Wing continued to record regular diary entries. Throughout his account, which ultimately filled five volumes, he routinely referred to himself as a transient rather than a settler. “Little did I think, when I arrived in this Eldorado, that I should be a sojourner here for a term of eight years—and perhaps longer,” he explained in the final volume of his travel diary. On the cover of his fourth volume, he inscribed a short poem emphasizing that, despite his prolonged absence, he still considered Massachusetts to be his true abode:

In that home at South Yarmouth, contented, abiding,  
How sweetly the last scenes of life I would close,  
At peace with all men, in the future confiding,  
As a child at the sunset hour sinks to repose.  
The heart of the wanderer lonely and weary,  
There gladly would rest—I no longer would roam.  
Could I find the last bourne of my pilgrimage dreary,  
Received from the world in my old "Cape Cod" home!

Wing’s poem, as well as his more general tendency to refer to himself as a sojourner and wanderer, reveal a palpable anxiety about his tenuous connection to his home in South Yarmouth. As his time in the gold regions dragged on, the ritual of travel writing became all the more important as a means of reassuring himself, as well as anyone who might peruse his account in future years, that he remained firmly committed to his “old ‘Cape Cod’ home.”<sup>171</sup>

Forty-niners like Stephen Wing also reaffirmed the finite nature of their stay in California by repeatedly expressing hope that they would soon be able to draw their travel diaries to a close. In 1856, four years into his journey, Wing opened the third volume of his account by reflecting, “The commencement of the other two volumes found me full of hope that each before written through would be my companion on Cape Cod.” As he prepared to retire his fourth volume, which covered the year 1859, he remarked, “I hope I shall not be in California to write my diary for December 31, 1860. I am obliged to confess that I am getting heartily tired of this country—and wish myself out of it.” Joseph Warren Wood, another young forty-niner whose time in California was longer than anticipated, also mused about ending his travelogue. Upon breaking open his sixth and final volume, Wood conjectured that, if his mining endeavors continued with the same rate of success, he would “have the pleasure of finishing” the book at his father’s house in Walworth, Wisconsin.<sup>172</sup>

Whereas many forty-niners composed detailed accounts en route to California, those who bothered to document their return passage generally kept more rudimentary records of the trip. The cursory nature of their travel writing undoubtedly reflected the

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<sup>171</sup> Stephen Wing, journals, entry for December 31, 1859 and cover of vol. 4, Stephen Wing Papers, Bancroft Library.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, entry for December 31, 1859; Joseph Warren Wood, [photostat facsimile] diary, vol. 6, see entry for August 26, 1852, Edward E. Ayer Manuscript Collection, Newberry Library.

disappointment that many unsuccessful gold seekers felt as they left the diggings without having improved their financial circumstances. At times, diarists offered lengthy explanations for their decision to leave California. In one of several entries discussing his departure, Nelson Kingsley confessed that he was “sorry and a little disappointed” that he had not amassed more gold, but he concluded, “when I see so many roving about the country without a cent...I think that I am a lucky chap and had not better stop to spend what I have got trying to get more.” More commonly, however, returning forty-niners resumed their diaries abruptly, offering little or no information about the results of their labors or their reasons for breaking camp. Although twenty-two-year-old Andrew Woods recommenced his account when he boarded a steamer and left San Francisco, he made no mention of the year he spent in the mines. In contrast to his more thorough record of his overland trek to California, he mustered only a few hasty entries during his long voyage back to Jackson County, Iowa. Forty-niners were similarly terse and unreflective in closing their diaries when they arrived home once again. After filling up six volumes during his three years in California, Joseph Warren Wood offered no concluding remarks when he reached Wisconsin in 1853. Instead, he closed his diary with a few brief and decidedly mundane entries, indicating that he had slipped back into the routines of farm life. The fact that many gold seekers closed their accounts in this way suggests that even the most basic and unembellished records of their return passage represented an important means of bringing closure to their stories. Much like the travel diaries of unsuccessful trans-Appalachian migrants, the narratives of returned forty-niners presented their long residence in California as a round-trip tour that led them back to their one true home.<sup>173</sup>

For Gold Rush migrants who moved on to other destinations rather than returning home, deciding when and where to close their travel diaries was more complicated. Phillip F. Castleman made only irregular entries during his stay in California, as he tried his hand at mining, and then worked as a baker and builder in the vicinity of Sacramento. He resumed his diary in 1851, however, using it to record his journey from California to the Oregon Territory. He finally closed the volume with his decision to establish a sawmill on the Willamette River in Oregon, near the future site of Eugene. John Mott Smith ended his travel diary in similar fashion. Having kept a journal throughout his sixteen months in the gold fields, Smith stopped making regular entries in February of 1851, as he prepared to break camp and leave California. His plan at that time was to sail around the world, eventually making his way back home to New York. More than a year later, however, he added a final entry that revealed an unexpected ending to his journey. After leaving California, Smith explained, he had made his way to Hawaii, where he decided to settle down. By concluding their diaries in this way, both Castleman and Smith refashioned their quest for gold in California as part of a larger story of migration that ended when they finally found a permanent abode.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Nelson Kingsley, “Journal of a Voyage at Sea on the Bark Anna Reynolds,” entry for February, 1851; Andrew Woods, diary, see entries after August 21, 1851, Western Americana Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University; Joseph Warren Wood, diary, volume 6, see entries after March 24, 1853.

<sup>174</sup> Castleman, diary, see entries for April-May, 1851; Smith, “Journal of Adventures to California,” entry for November 13, 1851.

## Twice-Told Tales

While some men set aside their travel diaries upon completing their westward journeys, others saw them as rough drafts awaiting revision and elaboration. The practice of refining hastily written journals into polished travelogues became popular among young westward migrants in the 1830s and '40s, and it grew even more prevalent during the Gold Rush. Some individuals simply copied their diaries, producing manuscripts that were more legible and better suited for circulation or preservation. Others devoted considerable time to editing and expanding their accounts, transforming them into lengthy and highly literary narratives. Still others started from scratch, recounting their journeys from memory rather than revising earlier travel writing. That so many westward migrants felt compelled to retell their stories, sometimes many years after the fact, underscores the importance of narrative writing as a way of making meaning out of long periods of transience. Whether they reworked their original accounts or commenced new ones, most writers took the opportunity to refine the narrative arc of their journeys, and to either clarify or reframe the accomplishments of their restless mobility.

Travelers offered a variety of reasons for undertaking the laborious task of rewriting their journals or composing retrospective travelogues. Some, such as Clark Guernsey, suggested that their manuscripts were primarily personal mementos. Having divided his epic travelogue into chapters and added epigraphs, page numbers, and other embellishments, Guernsey insisted that his text was written for his own perusal in the years to come. "It may be a pleasure for me in a future period when I am alone," he explained, "to sit down and read over the scenes which I have witnessed in days that are past and mark the changes and events that have taken place since." More commonly, however, authors intended to share their narratives with friends, family, neighbors, or other readers. Composing and disseminating original manuscripts—a practice that modern scholars call social authorship—was common in antebellum America. Seeking to edify, entertain, or simply show off their penmanship, ordinary men and women circulated essays, poetry, fiction, diaries, travelogues, and a variety of other literary productions. Given the high demand for information about the frontier, westward travelers usually enjoyed a highly receptive audience for their writing. After their journeys were through, many young men capitalized on this opportunity for self-fashioning by making their accounts available to all interested parties.<sup>175</sup>

The circulation of travel narratives reached its peak during the Gold Rush. Anticipating intense interest in their stories, some returned forty-niners produced exhaustive accounts of their experiences in the diggings. In 1856, John Clark, a businessman from Portsmouth, Ohio, revised his diary of an overland journey to California into a manuscript titled, "The California Guide." Clark's text offered readers a wealth of practical information about the overland trail, including details about topography, distances, and the location of water, fuel, and grass. At the same time, he

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<sup>175</sup> Clark Guernsey, journal, vol. 1, Description and Travel Collection, 1788-1871, Microfilm, Ohio Historical Society. On social authorship, see Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, *Everyday Ideas: Socioliterary Experience Among Antebellum New Englanders* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006); Margaret Ezell, *Social Authorship and the Advent of Print* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); David D. Hall, *Ways of Writing: The Practice and Politics of Text-Making in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

also characterized the volume as a source of sensationalist entertainment. The subtitle promised readers stories of “Robberies, Murders and Hangings; Mob Rule; and the Operations of the Vigilance Committee 1853-56.” Despite his obvious efforts to attract the broadest possible readership, Clark’s narrative was largely a tale of his own striving for financial improvement. He made this clear in the volume’s preface, as he discussed his dire financial circumstances prior to his departure for the gold fields. “In consequence of a failure in business and the want of means or substantial friends to aid or brace me up again,” he explained, “I became a wanderer amidst the busy throng and old associates of the day, and for that kind of pastime or idle habits I had no relish.” Determined to “put forward in the world again as a new beginner,” he decided to seek his fortune in California, “where it was said one could enrich himself with the precious mineral of the earth without the help of others.”<sup>176</sup> Whereas Clark’s story evidently remained in manuscript form, some forty-niners managed to publish their journals. Perhaps hoping to profit from his experiences in the diggings, Riley Root submitted his travel diary to a local printer in Galesburg, Illinois. Published in 1850, his account took the form of a slender, unevenly cut pamphlet titled, *Journal of Travels from St. Josephs to Oregon, with Observations of that Country, Together with A Description of California, Its Agricultural Interests, and a Full Description of Its Gold Mines*. Still other gold seekers composed lectures about their experiences in California. Stephen Wing, for example, crafted a lecture about his eight years in the diggings, delivering it, with minor changes, from the 1860s through the 1890s.<sup>177</sup>

Both trans-Appalachian migrants and forty-niners used an array of literary, organizational, and visual strategies to make their tales of youthful transience more coherent and story-like. Like John Clark, some composed dramatic introductions or conclusions that underscored the significance of their journeys as a critical chapter in the story of their self-making. Others added continuity to their accounts by filling in temporal gaps or revising their entries into more fluid prose. In addition to textual changes, some authors enhanced the narrative quality of their manuscripts by imitating the form of published monographs. In writing up the story of his westward journey, Jared Willard divided his travelogue into chapters, added a table of contents, and titled the volume, “A Sketch of a Tour from Connecticut through the State of N. York across Lake Erie through Several Counties of Michigan and Ohio by Jared Willard in 1833 and 4 from Recollection.” In similar fashion, Richard Eccleston adorned his Gold Rush journal with a calligraphic title page that mimicked the font and formatting used in works of sensationalist fiction (See Figure 4.1). One Pennsylvania attorney who traveled west to

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<sup>176</sup> John Clark, “The California Guide,” 1852-1856, Bancroft Library. Another example of this phenomenon is William Rothwell’s manuscript travelogue, “The Californian’s Guide: A Minute Description of the Most Direct Overland Route from the States to Sacramento City in California in which all the Various Rivers, Creeks, Lakes, Springs, Wooding Places, Mountains, Deserts, Poisonous Waters, and other Notable Objects upon the Road are Mentioned, with the Distances from Point to Point, and such other Remarks and Comment as will give Useful Information to the Emigrant,” William Renfro Rothwell Papers, Western Americana Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

<sup>177</sup> Riley Root, *Journal of Travels from St. Josephs to Oregon With Observations of That Country, Together with Some Description of California, Its Agricultural Interests, and a Full Description of Its Gold Mines* (Galesburg: Gazetteer and Intelligencer Prints, 1850); Stephen Wing, MS lecture, folder 12, Wing Collection, Bancroft Library. For a discussion of the publication of Gold Rush diaries as well as the lecturing careers of forty-niners like Wing, see Roberts, *American Alchemy*, 265-270.



find a location to practice law went a step farther in order to give his diary the appearance of a published work. After completing an epic journey through Wisconsin, Iowa, Missouri, and Kansas in 1859, he extracted the pages of a *Mitchell's New Traveller's Guide* and stitched his revised travelogue inside the empty binding. All of these revisions, from the substantive to the purely cosmetic, added retrospective structure and coherence to journeys that had, in many cases, been characterized by considerable uncertainty and ambiguity.<sup>178</sup>

Two broad groups of transients took part in revising, circulating, and preserving narratives of their westward journeys. The first consisted of men who ultimately returned to their native states. Some were failed migrants, forced to retrace their steps as a result of financial setbacks, illness, or other unforeseen circumstances. Others simply chose to return home, having satisfied their desire for adventure, novelty, or financial improvement. The second group included migrants like the young lawyer Alpheus Felch, who ultimately found a permanent home in the West. As previously noted, Felch commenced a travel diary in 1833 when he left Maine and headed west to find a place to practice law. At some point after he settled in the village of Monroe, Michigan, he took the time to revise his account into a more extensive and literary travelogue. Evidence of this revision process survives in the form of two pencil-written pages from an earlier draft, which Felch preserved along with his finished manuscript (See Figure 4.2). Although returned travelers and permanent migrants produced narratives that were similar in both form and content, they generally had very different reasons for commemorating their westward journeys in the years after they settled down.<sup>179</sup>

For those who eventually returned to their home states, either by choice or necessity, travelogues were primarily a means of emphasizing the significance of their journeys as a crucial period of character development and intellectual improvement. In conveying this point, some travelers made a discernable effort to fit long periods of intermittent mobility into the paradigm of the genteel tour. As one young man from Massachusetts recounted his time away from home, he downplayed a long period of settlement in the middle of his journey. Titled, "Slight Reminiscences: Tour to Illinois and Iowa Territory," his revised travel diary began in 1838, when he left New York for Detroit, where he had some unspecified "business to transact." After his stay in Michigan, he made a brief stop in Chicago, and then set out to "take a view" of the Rock River Valley in western Illinois. Upon completing this expedition, the young traveler returned to Chicago, where he remained for nearly two years. In recounting his decision to settle down, he offered only a brief explanation that highlighted his touristic motives: "I had now become somewhat weary of travelling and was inclined to remain in Chicago at least for a short time in order to become acquainted with the place and its inhabitants." Making no further mention of his activities in the city, he resumed his narrative in 1840, when he decided to return to Massachusetts. Whether or not his explanation was sincere

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<sup>178</sup> Jared Williard, "A Sketch of a Tour," 1833, Clements Library, University of Michigan; Richard Eccleston, Views from a trip to California, 1855, Bancroft Library; "A Brief Synopsis of What I Saw from Nov. 18 1858 to Jun 6 1859 Whilst on a Northern and Western Tour," Western Americana Collection, Beinecke Library. For another example of an ornate Gold Rush narrative, see Isaac W. Baker, journals, 1849-1852, Bancroft Library. Baker embellished his two-volume manuscript with a decorative title page and paintings of various incidents from his journey.

<sup>179</sup> Alpheus Felch, diary, 1833, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

and candid, one thing is abundantly clear: there was much more to this young man's journey than the straightforward story he recorded in his reminiscences. Whatever his reasons for omitting his experiences in Chicago, his decision to do so, along with his stated desire to "become acquainted with the place," gave the impression that his journey was a conventional tour. By foregoing any discussion of his business activities, the young traveler also implied that the knowledge and experiences gained from his travels were more important than any financial or professional ventures. Even when authors forthrightly acknowledged that disappointments or misfortunes had compelled them to return home, the elaborate manuscripts they produced served as tangible evidence of the experiential value of their mobility.<sup>180</sup>

Gold Rush participants who returned from California with little to show for their mining or business activities also used their travelogues to convince relatives, friends, or other readers that they had grown rich in life experience, if not in material wealth. Stephen Wing made this point explicitly in the lecture he composed after returning to Massachusetts. "Although my purse was no heavier, I had in another direction profited greatly from the experience gained," he explained. "During this time I had been thrown altogether upon my own resources, and I think every young man, who has been for years in California, will testify that those who were not ruined by associations, which always exist in a new country, received lessons of self reliance which will ever be remembered with profit." Whereas Wing conveyed the experiential value of his journey in a lecture, William Huff did so in a voluminous manuscript. Written after his return to Richmond, Texas, in 1853, Huff's account totaled nearly 300,000 words, and its seventeen handwritten chapters filled two large ledger books. Given that he returned penniless after spending three and a half years apart from his wife and children, Huff likely conceived of his literary work as the only substantial accomplishment of his time in California.<sup>181</sup>

Travel narratives also served two additional purposes for men like Huff, whose prolonged absence from home placed a heavy financial and emotional burden on their families. First, they offered forty-niners an opportunity to persuade readers that they had given careful consideration to the risks and privations involved in their journeys. William Huff began his narrative by recounting his clear-minded decision to participate in the Gold Rush:

Operated upon, and becoming excited by the golden tales that threatened to unsettle the cool and calculating minds of men not easily wrought upon or turned from the substantial pursuits in which they were engaged, the author of this journal, after maturely reflecting over the difficulty of reaching the gold mines in safety, as well as counting upon his chances for what might turn up, and also upon his theoretical knowledge of mining, determined to leave all behind—wife, children, father, mother, friends, and home—and test the truth of the golden tales or rumors so rife everywhere in relation to California.

In addition to demonstrating the sound reasoning behind their departure, unsuccessful forty-niners also used their texts to show that, although they had returned empty handed,

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<sup>180</sup> "Slight Reminiscences: Tour to Illinois and Iowa Territory," 1838-1840, Western Americana Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

<sup>181</sup> Wing, MS lecture, folder 12, Wing Collection, Bancroft Library; William Huff, *The Gold Rush Diary of William P. Huff*, ed. William S. Coate and David Ewing Stewart (Van Vleck, Tex: Classroom Chronicles Press, 2005).

they had made every effort to improve the financial circumstances of their families. Their accounts provided abundant evidence that their inability to acquire gold or succeed in business was primarily a result of external misfortunes rather than profligacy, indolence, or other personal shortcomings.<sup>182</sup>

For young men who eventually settled down in the West, producing revised or retrospective travel narratives represented a very different type of self-fashioning. Whereas the vast majority of returned travelers could only boast of the experiential value of their journeys, migrants who put down roots in emerging frontier communities frequently achieved at least a modest degree of social and financial mobility in the years after their relocation. Indeed, in most cases, it was their success in business, professional activities, real estate investments, or agriculture that induced them to stay put rather than press on with their travels or return home. In addition to bettering their material circumstances, many transplants went on to play an active and multifaceted role in the political, economic, and social development of their towns and counties. As their lives became increasingly bound up with their communities, they often came to see their decision to settle down as a pivotal moment in their self-making. Accordingly, the process of revising old travel diaries or composing new migration narratives served as an important ritual for commemorating the serendipitous events that led them to their permanent abode. As a record of their enduring connection to particular towns, counties, or states, the polished manuscripts that migrants composed reflected the same ideal of booster masculinity that young men like Samuel Hempstead and Edward Brimblecom had articulated as they wrote to friends and family, professing their desire to grow up with their new homes.

Despite their distinctive reasons for recounting their journeys, some successful migrants produced narratives that closely resembled the accounts of returned travelers. Such was the case for Alpheus Felch and Ebenezer Chamberlain, both of whom had left the state of Maine in 1830s, hoping to advance their careers as lawyers. In an elaborate opening entry, Felch began his revised travel diary by characterizing his westward journey as an open-ended tour rather than a decisive migration. “In the present instance,” he explained, “I had made up my mind to leave for a while and perhaps forever the place of my residence and to wander into that portion of our country denominated ‘the far west.’” At the outset of Ebenezer Chamberlain’s diary, he was more specific about both his destination and professional ambitions. Narrating his departure from home in 1832, he stated his intention to travel to Indiana, where more lenient bar rules would enable him to begin practicing law much sooner than in Maine. At several points throughout his account, however, he too emphasized the uncertainty of his long-term plans, at times referring to himself as a “sojourner.” In one entry written near Cincinnati, he reflected on the indeterminate nature of his mobility. “I laughed outright repeatedly on the figure I was cutting,” he recalled, “on foot—alone—a thousand miles from home—quite out of money—pushing onward—the Lord only knew where or for what.” Both Felch and Chamberlain also acknowledged that their journeys were motivated not only by a desire for professional advancement, but also by an interest in gaining firsthand knowledge of the western states. Felch, for example, suggested that, by learning more about his country, he would become “a better patriot and a better citizen.” By forthrightly

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

discussing the inchoate nature of their plans, and by noting their touristic motives, these two migrants framed their travels in much the same way as their peers who ultimately headed back to their home states.<sup>183</sup>

Felch and Chamberlain's travelogues also recounted complex migration experiences that involved improvised mobility. In this respect, too, they were similar to the accounts of young men who remained transient for long periods of time before making their way back home. Chamberlain initially settled in Connersville, Indiana, where he began teaching school and reading law. He remained there for over a year before concluding that it was not "the most desirable location" to begin his career as an attorney. Eager to find a more advantageous place to open a law office, he decided to set out for "the new and far-famed region of St. Joseph," located near the northern border of Indiana. Explaining his decision to pull up stakes once again, Chamberlain framed his one-year residence in Connersville as a temporary respite from an ongoing journey. "Though a transient sojourner at Connersville," he wrote, "I had formed such an attachment for the place, as induced me to regret leaving it." Although he confessed that his departure was partly motivated by a restless desire for adventure, Chamberlain insisted that he was setting out "to accomplish an original purpose" of his westward journey: finding an optimal spot to pursue his professional ambitions. His explanation for leaving Connersville reveals that, in some cases, even the most successful transplants used their travel diaries to fashion false starts and intermittent mobility into a single, coherent story.<sup>184</sup>

Of course, the one feature that most clearly distinguished the accounts of permanent migrants from those of returned travelers was their ending. Rather than confidently committing to their new homes, however, both Alpheus Felch and Ebenezer Chamberlain concluded their narratives by noting that they remained ambivalent about settling down. Although Felch indicated that he had "serious thought" of opening a law office in Monroe, Michigan, he also stated his intention to investigate other possible destinations "and then determine the question." Chamberlain's diary ended on a similar note of uncertainty. After spending a month touring area along the St. Joseph River, he eventually decided to begin teaching school and practicing law in Elkhart County, Indiana. Although he would remain there until his death in 1861, Chamberlain never expressed an interest in making Elkhart County his permanent home. Instead, his last regular entry simply noted that he had "concluded to spend the winter." Felch and Chamberlain's travelogues underscore the point that many migrants remained uncommitted to their new places of residence for some time after their arrival. It was only gradually that they relinquished their identity as wanderers and sojourners and became settlers.<sup>185</sup>

Although Felch and Chamberlain, like many other transients, had initially used travel writing to give shape to their "unlimited and uncertain" journeys, their travel diaries took on very different social meanings as they became prominent members of their adopted communities. Within two years of his arrival in Michigan, Felch was

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<sup>183</sup> Felch, diary, see opening entry, June, 1833; Chamberlain, "Journal of Ebenezer Mattoon Chamberlain 1832-5," ed. Louise Fogle, *Indiana Magazine of History* 15, no. 3 (September 1919): 234, 240, 242.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>185</sup> Felch, diary, see entry for July 12-14, 1833; Chamberlain, "Journal of Ebenezer Mattoon Chamberlain," 253.

elected to the state legislature, and he went on to hold a remarkable succession of public offices. He became state bank commissioner in 1838, state Supreme Court justice in 1842, governor of Michigan in 1845, and, finally, United States senator in 1847. Chamberlain's life followed a very similar trajectory. After gaining admission to the bar and settling in Elkhart County, he too made a quick entry into politics. Elected to the Indiana House of Representatives in 1835, he went on to become state senator in 1839, state prosecutor in 1842, state circuit court judge in 1843, and United States congressman a decade later. The fact that Felch and Chamberlain became civic leaders encouraged them to see their life stories as an important part of local and state history. Consequently, the travel diaries they had written earlier in their lives came to seem less like personal records of youthful transience and more like significant historical documents that would offer future generations insights into the early growth of their towns, counties, and states. Although few migrants could compare with Felch and Chamberlain's achievements in public life, even those who made more modest contributions to the development of their local communities often exhibited a similar historical consciousness. This concern for posterity, which was closely related to the ideal of booster masculinity, gave them further motivation to compose and preserve narratives of their westward journeys.<sup>186</sup>

Because their stories acquired new meaning over time, some migrants set their original travel diaries aside for years or even decades before they commenced revising them. Although Ebenezer Chamberlain did not date his revised manuscript, his concluding remarks describe events that took place two years after his arrival, and it is possible that he completed his revisions even later than that. Minnesota politician and author Ignatius Donnelly waited a full fifteen years before revising a journal of his first visit to his adopted state. As a young Philadelphia attorney, Donnelly had undertaken a western tour in 1856 in order to assess the advantages of migration and scout possible sites for a new town along the banks of the upper Mississippi. While visiting St. Paul, he formed a partnership with a speculator named John Nininger, and the two promptly purchased land and drew up plans for a village called Nininger City. This investment proved disastrous for Donnelly. With the onset of the Panic of 1857, the value of his landholdings plummeted, and the few families who had settled in Nininger abandoned the site. His fortunes gradually rebounded, however, and he became lieutenant governor of Minnesota in 1860, and then went on to serve in the House of Representatives from 1863 to 1868. Thus, by the time he set about rewriting his travel diary in 1871, Donnelly had become a prominent public figure in Minnesota, and he displayed a clear self-consciousness about his place in history. In explaining his decision to revise his 1856 account after all these years, he speculated that the diary "might be of interest in the future," since it would offer readers an illustration of Minnesota's "wonderful growth" since the time of his arrival.<sup>187</sup>

Trans-Appalachian migrants were not the only men who composed polished travel narratives as a means of commemorating their connection to their chosen abode.

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<sup>186</sup> For a biography of Alpheus Felch, see George Irving Reed, ed., *Bench and Bar of Michigan: A Volume of History and Biography* (Chicago: Century Pub. and Engraving Co, 1897), 161-164. A brief biographical sketch of Ebenezer Chamberlain appears in *Pictorial and Biographical Memoirs of Elkhart and St. Joseph Counties, Indiana* (Chicago: Goodspeed Bros, 1893), 622-623.

<sup>187</sup> Ignatius Donnelly, "My Journal: Extracts from Various Memoranda and Journals Kept from Time to Time," 1871, Microfilm Roll 139, Ignatius Donnelly Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

Gold Rush migrants who decided to remain in California also continued to revise and rewrite accounts of their westward journeys for decades after their arrival. Charles A. Kirkpatrick, who was twenty-six years old when he took the overland route to the diggings, was one of many forty-niners who produced polished drafts of their travel diaries in later years. After a brief and disappointing stint as a miner, Kirkpatrick decided to stay in California and begin practicing medicine. By the 1870s, when he revised his overland diary, he had become a successful San Francisco doctor. Rather than simply transcribing his account, Kirkpatrick added a lengthy introduction and conclusion that made his account more literary. In one characteristically dramatic passage describing his departure for California, he recalled, "I turned my face to the west and took up my line of march toward the setting sun and the land of gold." Another gold seeker, Edward English Chever, rewrote the story of his passage to California even later in life. As he traveled by sea to gold regions in 1849, Chever documented his experiences in a travel diary. Roughly forty-one years later, when he sat down to pen a narrative of his voyage for the archives of the Society of California Pioneers, he quoted and paraphrased extensively from his original account. At one point in his narrative, Chever noted that he had kept written records of his journey "without expectation of keeping them for forty years, or of finding any one who would be interested in the narration." His remark highlights the novel meaning that travel diaries acquired for antebellum migrants in the decades following their journeys. Having initially used their accounts to narrate their youthful adventure in the gold regions, forty-niners like Chever later came to see their texts as important records of California history.<sup>188</sup>

In rewriting their travel diaries, some migrants altered their accounts in order to make them conform to the paradigm of booster masculinity. Although Ebenezer Chamberlain's original diary ended with his arrival in Elkhart County, Indiana, his revised manuscript included a brief conclusion that described his successful campaign for a seat in the state legislature two years later. "This was one of the most important sessions ever held in the state," he explained, "as during its sitting, many new and important measures were adopted, and others discussed." Chamberlain's closing remarks subtly reframed the meaning of his narrative, transforming it from an account of a meandering sojourn to a record of a young migrant who grew up with his chosen home. Alpheus Felch may have engaged in a similar act of self-fashioning. Although his revised travel diary ended with his arrival at Monroe, Michigan, this was not, in fact, the end of his journey. Rather than settling down, Felch decided to press on with his tour, heading off to investigate the possibilities for opening a law office in Vicksburg, Mississippi. Upon reaching Cincinnati, however, he was stricken with cholera and forced to abandon his travel plans. Eventually, when he recovered from his illness, he decided to return to Michigan and establish his practice in Monroe. Although it is unclear whether Felch continued to keep a travel diary in the months after his initial departure from Michigan, his decision to omit this part of his journey from his final manuscript is revealing. In doing so, he simplified his complex migration experience and underscored his foresight in selecting Monroe as his future home. This brought his story much closer

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<sup>188</sup> Charles A. Kirkpatrick, "Journal of Chas. A. Kirkpatrick, 1849," revised c.1873, Bancroft Library; Edward English Chever, [typescript] "Autobiography and Reminiscence of Edward English Chever: A Voyage from Boston, through the Straits of Magellan, to San Francisco, in 1849," 1901, p.2, Society of California Pioneers.

to the booster ideal of a young man who moved west, found a promising new home, and grew up with the place.<sup>189</sup>

Whereas Felch and Chamberlain altered their diaries in subtle ways, Ignatius Donnelly made far more radical revisions to the journal, transforming it into an unmistakable performance of booster masculinity. Donnelly's original account of his 1856 journey to Minnesota had been terse, consisting of brief remarks about his land-hunting activities and concise descriptions of the places he visited. Although he maintained the basic chronological framework of his diary when he revised it in 1871, the lengthy manuscript he produced bore little resemblance to the original volume. In the opening pages of his final draft, as he laid out the goals of his westward journey, he insisted that he was traveling not only to invest in real estate, but also to find a permanent abode. "I believe a young man...will have greater opportunities of success in a new country than he could in this crowded city," he averred. Directly invoking the ideal of booster masculinity, he stated his desire "to found a new city and thus find occupation and fortune with the growth of the country." Later, as Donnelly recounted his arrival in St. Paul, he used speculative writing to foreshadow his future role as a leading citizen of the place. He began by analyzing the city's advantages and prospects, underscoring the fact that, even at this early stage, he had recognized its bright future. "Looked at in its present it is a very small village," he remarked, "regarded however in the light of its prodigious growth and future possibilities it is a great city." In conjecturing about his future relationship to the place, he predicted that his own life story would be deeply intertwined with the story of St. Paul. "I felt strange feelings come over me as if something within intimated to me that my future life would hold some intimate relations with this place." He noted the same "peculiar sensation" while visiting the future site of Nininger City. "I have but little belief in any premonitions or super-mundane influences," he insisted, "and hence I am the more particular therefore in recording the only two occasions in my history on which I have experienced such unusual and inexplicable feelings." Donnelly's original travel diary had contained no mention of any premonitions and no boosterish predictions about the future of St. Paul. The elaborate first entry of his revised text was also entirely absent from his 1856 account. In light of his wholesale revisions, Donnelly's decision to compose his 1871 account in the form of a travel diary was clearly calculated to lend authenticity to a new and very different telling of past events.<sup>190</sup>

By transforming a hastily written travel diary into a expression of booster masculinity, Donnelly clearly aimed to secure a place in the annals of Minnesota history. But his revisions suggest that he had at least two ulterior motives for writing. The first was political. Donnelly rewrote his diary during a brief hiatus from public service, and he returned to politics just three years later, making a successful run for a seat in the Minnesota Senate. Because his political ambitions were still active, he likely conceived of his travelogue, at least in part, as a means of bolstering his credentials as a founding father of St. Paul, and Minnesota in general. By demonstrating that his efforts to

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<sup>189</sup> Chamberlain, "Journal of Ebenezer Mattoon Chamberlain," 258-259. On Felch's experiences after leaving Monroe, see Reed, *Bench and Bar of Michigan*, 161.

<sup>190</sup> Donnelly, "My Journal: Extracts from Various Memoranda and Journals Kept from Time to Time," 1871, see entries for April 12, May 7, and May 9, 1856. For Donnelly's original diary, see "Notebook of a Trip to the West," 1856, Microfilm Roll 139, Ignatius Donnelly Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

establish Nininger City were driven by an earnest desire to build a new community, Donnelly also clearly hoped to dispel any lingering suspicions that he was an unscrupulous speculator, cynically shilling worthless real estate. Throughout his narrative, he made a transparent effort to shift the blame for the town's failure onto his business partner, John Nininger. Recalling his first meeting with Nininger in St. Paul, Donnelly scornfully described him as "one of a class of men here who infest the hotels, examine the registers, get acquainted with all strangers...and fill their heads with stories of enormous fortunes made in a few weeks or months by the rise in real estate." Later, as he related their efforts to purchase land for the town, he noted parenthetically that "instead of taking...an abiding interest in the fate of a place that was to perpetuate his name," Nininger had merely used "his god-fathership as a means to sell lots, and after getting all he could out of the place, turned his back on it and contributed to its downfall." Given that the failure of Nininger City had devastating financial consequences, not only for him, but also for the settlers he managed to attract to the town, Donnelly's account of his role in the venture was almost certainly intended to clear his name of any wrongdoing.<sup>191</sup>

As Donnelly, Felch, Chamberlain, and other antebellum migrants penned revised or retrospective accounts of their westward journeys, they demonstrated that they had arrived in their adopted towns, counties, or states at a formative period. In many cases, their narratives were calculated to show that, even at this early stage, they had recognized the future importance of their new home, and had chosen to cease their open-ended travels and settle down. While some were content to commemorate their migration experiences in elaborate travelogues, others went a step farther in order to fashion themselves as exemplars of booster masculinity. Rather than simply recounting their migration experiences, they went on to document their efforts to build up their communities as they bettered their own condition. By extending their narratives in this way, and by weaving together their own story with the history of their place of residence, these authors contributed to the development of a new form of personal narrative: the pioneer memoir. The emergence of this genre is the subject of the next, and final, chapter.

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<sup>191</sup> Donnelly, "My Journal: Extracts from Various Memoranda and Journals Kept from Time to Time," 1871, see entries for May 7-10, 1856.



## GROWING UP WITH THE COUNTRY: PIONEER NARRATIVES AND HISTORICAL MEMORY

Sometime between 1846 and his death in 1879, David E. Deming authored a brief memoir of five eventful decades, from his boyhood in rural New Hampshire to his later years as a physician and farmer in Michigan. In deciding how to tell his story—in determining which aspects of his life were worthy of note and which could be omitted—Deming had to choose from an array of experiences that imbued his past with interest, meaning, and didactic value. From humble beginnings, he had built a thriving medical practice and established a profitable farm. These accomplishments alone made him a paragon of self-made masculinity. But Deming gave only passing attention to his professional activities, choosing instead to focus on a topic of more enduring significance: his role as a founding father of Cooper Township in Kalamazoo County, Michigan. He opened his narrative with a lengthy account of his migration to Michigan, characterizing his decision to settle in Kalamazoo County as the pivotal moment in his life story. The remainder of the text was as much a local history as it was an autobiography. Here, Deming chronicled his various contributions to the development of his new home, from his campaign to establish Cooper as a separate township, to his work in organizing the local Congregational church, to his service as a state senator. By interweaving his own story with the story of his adopted community, Deming made it clear that he wished to be remembered, above all, for his labors as a pioneer.<sup>192</sup>

Pioneer narratives like Deming's abound in the archival record of nineteenth-century America, and they survive in a striking variety of forms. Some have been preserved as handwritten reminiscences, others as oral dictations, while countless others can be found in newspapers, historical society journals, county histories, and published monographs. Although the earliest examples of the genre date back to the 1840s and '50s, the last quarter of the nineteenth century witnessed a veritable explosion of these texts. The authors of pioneer reminiscences included men and women, American-born migrants and immigrants, farmers and urbanites, and individuals from a wide range of economic and regional backgrounds. By far the most prolific authors, however, were men like David Deming, who had moved west as young men during the antebellum period, and who subsequently became leading citizens of their towns, counties, or states. Because such highly literate and successful men are precisely the type of individuals that historians expect to leave behind an extensive paper trail, it is easy to overlook the novelty of this widespread and self-conscious effort to shape the historical record. Never before had so many Americans recorded their stories for the express purpose of securing a place in the pages of history.

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<sup>192</sup> Deming, "Brief History of the Life of D. E. Deming in Connection with Early Settlement," Bentley Library, University of Michigan.

The authors of pioneer reminiscences shared not only an acute concern for posterity, but also a particular conception of their own historical significance. Like Deming, they considered their most enduring legacy to be the communities that they helped to establish and promote. This understanding is evident in the basic structure of the pioneer narrative, which wove together two stories of improvement. The first was the author's own upward mobility, achieved through his efforts in business, professional endeavors, agriculture, or public life. The second was the growth of his chosen place of residence, as it was transformed from a modest frontier settlement to a flourishing agricultural community, thriving city, or populous state. This combination of autobiography and local or state history is reflected in the title of David Deming's memoir: "Brief History of the Life of D. E. Deming in Connection with Early Settlement."<sup>193</sup>

Why did so many members of Deming's generation choose the pioneer narrative as a framework for recounting their experiences and accomplishments? Authors discussed an array of immediate personal, social, and financial motives in the text of their memoirs. As the preceding chapters demonstrate, however, their reminiscences were also part of a larger process of writing about movement and settlement, self and place, which began much earlier in their lives. Much like the letters, travel diaries, and retrospective narratives that this group of transients had composed as younger men, their pioneer memoirs were a means of asserting their identity as community builders, and demonstrating that, for all their restless mobility, they had succeeded in establishing a prolonged and meaningful connection to one place. For successful men like Deming who had, in fact, remained settled and grown up with one town or county, the framework of the pioneer narrative was a natural fit for their life stories. For many others, however, decades of shiftlessness, financial setbacks, or failed business or professional ventures made it necessary to revise and rework their stories in order to bring them in line with the paradigm of booster masculinity.

In tracing the emergence of the pioneer narrative as a distinct genre of autobiographical writing, this chapter begins in the final decades of the antebellum period. It was then that residents of rapidly settling western states like Wisconsin and California began composing and circulating pioneer reminiscences as they worked to promote their new homes and secure their place as civic leaders. The chapter then examines the elaboration of the genre during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, as men who had moved west during the 1830s, '40s, and '50s commenced a much more extensive campaign to record, disseminate, and archive accounts of their struggles and triumphs in building up frontier communities. As they altered and simplified their diverse life stories to fit the ideal of pioneer masculinity, this group of antebellum migrants preserved for posterity a mythology about frontier opportunity that distorted, obscured, and omitted many aspects of their own experiences. One important truth that was lost in this deluge of commemorative writing was the fact that their unparalleled concern for establishing and maintaining a mutually beneficial relationship to one community had emerged in tandem with, rather than in opposition to, a willingness to repeatedly pull up stakes in the hopes of finding a still more advantageous place of residence.

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

## Pioneers of a Genre

In the longest-settled parts of the trans-Appalachian West, efforts to collect and preserve pioneer reminiscences began as early as the 1840s. Seeking to document the early history of Anglo-American settlement in the Ohio Valley, a new generation of scholars and historical enthusiasts fanned out across the region, recording the recollections of men and women who had migrated to the frontier during the early national era. This initial effort to build an archival record of the frontier experience reflected a burgeoning historical consciousness that had been sweeping the nation since the 1820s, as Americans began to feel a sense of urgency about preserving the stories of the rapidly dwindling Revolutionary generation. Prominent scholars such as Jared Sparks, George Bancroft, and Francis Parkman also stoked popular interest in gathering, archiving, and analyzing oral histories, as well as old manuscripts and printed texts. In their widely read works of history and biography, these authors emphasized the assiduous study of primary-source documents as the basis of historical truth.<sup>194</sup>

Although some Revolutionary-era pioneers wrote their own memoirs, most of the reminiscences that appeared during the 1840s were oral histories, transcribed and edited by historians or antiquarian collectors. One of the most avid collectors of oral dictations was John Dabney Shane, a Presbyterian minister from Ohio. Around 1840, Shane began compiling old documents and conducting interviews with the intention of writing a history of Presbyterianism in the West. Over the next two decades, as the scope of his research expanded, he recorded the testimony of over three hundred individuals in Kentucky, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Illinois. At roughly the same time, another aspiring author, Lyman Copeland Draper, embarked on a similar mission. Planning to write a multivolume history of early settlement in the Ohio Valley, Draper traveled the Allegheny Region and the Deep South, copying old manuscripts and interviewing prominent military heroes, politicians, and other notables.<sup>195</sup> In addition to individual collectors like Shane and Draper, both private and state-funded historical societies also took part in archiving reminiscences of frontier life. Among the many historical societies that sprung up in the western states during these years was the Logan Historical Society of Chillicothe, Ohio. Founded in 1841, the Society endeavored to document “the unpublished history of our early and successive western settlements...much of which is fast fading from the memories of our early settlers, or sinking into the grave with those who had an active part in a series of hardships, privations and improvements which have

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<sup>194</sup> On historical consciousness and the growing interest in collecting, archiving, and studying historical documents in antebellum America, see Scott E. Casper, *Constructing American Lives: Biography & Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 135-153; Steven Conn, *History's Shadow: Native Americans and Historical Consciousness in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); and George H. Callcott, *History in the United States, 1800-1860: Its Practice and Purpose* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), 35-45.

<sup>195</sup> For an overview of John Dabney Shane's historical pursuits, see Elizabeth A. Perkins, *Border Life: Experience and Memory in the Revolutionary Ohio Valley* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 14-28. On Lyman Draper, see William Best Hesseltine, *Pioneer's Mission: The Story of Lyman Copeland Draper* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1954). For another discussion of both Draper and Shane, see Eric Hinderaker, “Liberating Contrivances: Narrative and Identity in Midwestern Histories,” in *The American Midwest: Essays on Regional History*, ed. Andrew R. L. Cayton, and Susan E. Gray (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 56-58.

no parallel.” Several of the memoirs gathered by the Society were published in its short-lived journal, *The American Pioneer*.<sup>196</sup>

The narratives of Revolutionary-era migrants addressed a host of common issues and experiences. Many offered vivid accounts of the trials of overland migration, the hardships and deprivations of frontier living, and the periodic hostilities between white settlers and Native Americans. Despite their common themes, however, early pioneer narratives were extremely diverse in both structure and content. Because most originated as oral histories, variations in subject matter and narrative structure were partly a reflection of the idiosyncratic interests and agendas of the men who recorded them. Lyman Draper, for example, typically guided his informants with questions about major military and political events, as well as inquiries about prominent figures such as Daniel Boone. By contrast, John Shane offered his subjects more freedom in relating their experiences, and as a result, the dictations in his collection tended to focus on more mundane aspects of life on the trans-Appalachian frontier. Consequently, throughout the 1840s, the pioneer narrative remained an amorphous genre, lacking well-defined formal and stylistic conventions.<sup>197</sup>

The 1850s witnessed the emergence of a new type of pioneer narrative, written by a younger generation of westward migrants. The authors of these texts were mostly residents of newer states and territories such as Wisconsin, Minnesota, and California. Most had migrated west during the opening years of the antebellum period, arriving in their adopted states ahead of the main tide of emigration. Although they included farmers, miners, soldiers, and sawmill operators, most of these self-styled pioneers were urban migrants who settled in new towns and cities. Many were merchants, lawyers, doctors, politicians, and editors, who had become prominent members of their communities in the years since their arrival. While some composed their reminiscences at the request of scholars or historical societies, this cohort needed little encouragement in documenting their experiences for posterity. Self-conscious about their place in history, they embraced written reminiscences as a way to commemorate their role as founding fathers, and legitimize their status as civic leaders.

Nowhere were leading citizens more active in composing, compiling, and publishing pioneer narratives than in Wisconsin. This was due, in part, to the efforts of Lyman Draper, who relocated to Madison in 1852, and soon became corresponding secretary of the newly chartered State Historical Society of Wisconsin. Much as he had done earlier in his career, Draper set about soliciting written narratives and recording oral dictations from longtime residents of the state. The accounts he assembled became a core component of the Society’s archive, and they were prominently featured in its annual journal, *Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin*, which was first published in 1855. In addition to Draper’s efforts, however, a number of prominent

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<sup>196</sup> “The Logan Historical Society,” *The American Pioneer; a Monthly Periodical, Devoted to the Objects of the Logan Historical Society; or, to Collecting and Publishing Sketches Relative to the Early Settlement and Successive Improvement of the Country* 1, no. 1 (January 1, 1842): 5. On the rise of local historical societies in antebellum America, see David J. Russo, *Keepers of Our Past: Local Historical Writing in the United States, 1820s-1930s* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988).

<sup>197</sup> On the differences between Draper and Shane’s methodologies, see Perkins, *Border Life*, 28. For examples of narratives recorded by Shane see John Dabney Shane, *Frontier Memories: As Taken from the Shane Interviews*, Rev. John Dabney Shane of the Draper Manuscripts, ed. Dale Payne (Fayetteville, W. Va.: D. Payne, 2002).

merchants, politicians, and military leaders took it upon themselves to record and disseminate their recollections of life during Wisconsin's territorial period. Some delivered their memoirs at public ceremonies and lyceum society meetings, while others published them in local newspapers.<sup>198</sup>

The reminiscences that appeared in the *Collections* during the 1850s conformed to two general types, and the differences between them highlight the evolving meaning of the pioneer narrative. The first were oral histories, many of which had been gathered by Draper himself. These memoirs captured a relatively diverse array of frontier experiences, including those of fur traders, soldiers, backwoodsmen, and emigrants. One such narrative was a lengthy dictation by Augustin Grignon, the patriarch of a prominent French-Canadian fur trading family. Another was an account of the War of 1812 and subsequent Indian Wars, supplied by seventy-three-year-old Colonel John Shaw. The second class of narratives consisted of those written by pioneers themselves. The authors of these accounts had much more in common than the heterogeneous collection of men who supplied oral dictations. Most had migrated to Wisconsin as young men, arriving in or around the 1820s. Some had come to pursue commercial ventures in the fur-trading depots and military outposts that existed in the area. Others were miners who came to extract lead from the mineral-rich region in what is now the southwest corner of the state. In the years after their arrival, as Wisconsin moved toward statehood, these men went on to play leading roles in organizing political institutions, establishing new towns, and expanding agriculture and lumbering. Now in their fifties and sixties, many were prominent members of their communities, and several continued to hold political office at the time they composed their narratives.<sup>199</sup>

More than the Revolutionary-era migrants who dictated their reminiscences in the 1840s, Wisconsin residents who wrote their own pioneer narratives used them to commemorate their role in the founding of communities and the development of the state's political, economic, and social institutions. In composing their memoirs, they began to construct a new narrative structure that reflected the values of booster masculinity. Their texts typically began as autobiographies, recounting their childhood experiences and relocation to Wisconsin. Much like Alpheus Felch, Ebenezer Chamberlain, and Ignatius Donnelly, whose travelogues were examined in the previous chapter, many used the story of their migration to highlight their foresight in selecting a new home. Among them was Henry S. Baird, a lawyer and politician who migrated to Green Bay as a young man in the 1820s. In recounting his decision to settle in Green Bay, Baird explained that he was "satisfied with its appearance, and from its natural advantages and eligible location, became convinced from the first moment that it must, sooner or later, become a prominent place." After detailing their westward journeys, authors like Baird went on to describe their various contributions to the development of Wisconsin during its territorial years. Some, like Baird, focused on their role in

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<sup>198</sup> For an account of Lyman Draper's work in collecting pioneer reminiscences for the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, see Hesseltine, *Pioneer's Mission*.

<sup>199</sup> Augustin Grignon, "Seventy Two Years' Recollections of Wisconsin," *Report and Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin* 3 (1857): 195-295; John Shaw, "Shaw's Narrative," *Report and Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin* 2 (1856): 197-232; Henry S. Baird, "Recollections of the Early History of Northern Wisconsin," *Report and Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin* 4 (1859): 197-221. Other men who wrote their own pioneer reminiscences include Ebenezer Childs, Daniel Parkinson, James H. Lockwood, and Dr. Moses Meeker.

establishing the territory's legal and political institutions; others detailed their efforts to establish businesses and promote the development of particular industries; still others chronicled their military service in the Black Hawk War, which raged throughout the region in 1832.<sup>200</sup>

As a hybrid of autobiography and state history, the narratives of men like Baird were calculated to show that their personal accomplishments had been inextricably linked to the progress of Wisconsin. Daniel Parkinson underscored this point in the final passage of his memoir, as he affirmed his dogged devotion to the state. "Having migrated here at an early period," he wrote, "and having been actively engaged in sanguinary conflicts, and in repelling savage invasions...and having moreover, taken some humble part in the early councils of Wisconsin, I cannot but feel a deep and abiding interest in the welfare and prosperity of the State of my adoption." In similar fashion, Henry Baird's 1859 memoir emphasized his loyalty to Wisconsin by asserting that he had "remained a firm believer in her future prosperity," despite the many "vicissitudes and alternations" he had experienced during his period of residence. "Ever true to her interest," he explained, "I have disregarded the advice of friends to change my residence, with a view to bettering my condition, and treated with contempt the sneers and scoffs of those who were her enemies." By noting the sacrifices and privations they endured in the name of their adopted state, and by emphasizing their commitment to the future prosperity of Wisconsin, authors like Baird and Parkinson turned their pioneer memoirs into expressions of booster masculinity.<sup>201</sup>

At the time Wisconsin pioneers began composing their reminiscences, new settlers continued to funnel into the state, transforming existing social relations in many communities. As new arrivals began to vie for dominance in politics and business, pioneer narratives offered older residents a means of shoring up their status as community leaders. Henry Baird's concerns about the demographic changes taking place around him in Green Bay are evident in his reminiscences. "Thirty years ago I knew every family in the settlement, and could name nearly every individual," he noted. "Now I meet in every street and at every corner, strange faces and persons with whom I am unacquainted. I sometimes think that I shall soon become 'a stranger in the land.'" Given that Baird still harbored political ambitions when he penned his pioneer narrative, the text was almost certainly intended to remind both new and old residents of Green Bay that his leadership and labors as a lawyer and judge had been instrumental to the city's development. Having originated as an address to the Green Bay Lyceum, Baird's memoir was promptly published in the *Green Bay Advocate*, and then republished in the *Collections*. This extensive publicity undoubtedly bolstered his standing within the community, and it likely contributed to his successful campaign for mayor of Green Bay in 1861.<sup>202</sup>

Besides self-promotion, Wisconsin pioneers also used their reminiscences to promote their local communities and the state as a whole. Edward D. Holton, a merchant and banker who had migrated to Wisconsin in 1840, clearly had this goal in mind when

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<sup>200</sup> Baird, "Recollections of the Early History of Northern Wisconsin," 219.

<sup>201</sup> Daniel M. Parkinson, "Pioneer Life in Wisconsin," *Report and Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin* 2 (1856): 363; Baird, "Recollections of the Early History of Northern Wisconsin," 198.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 198, 215.

he read his memoir to a large crowd at the opening of the Milwaukee Chamber of Commerce in 1858. As he recounted his decision to settle in Milwaukee, Holton extolled the city's "superior advantages" and reflected on its rapid growth. Recalling the eleven small stores in operation at the time of his arrival just eighteen years earlier, he exclaimed, "And now! I am amazed almost, when I visit either the northern or southern ends of our city, and witness the extent of business done." As promotional texts, pioneer narratives worked on two levels. First, and more obviously, by chronicling the rapid growth and progress of their chosen city, county, or state, authors advertised its present advantages as well as its promising future. Second, by emphasizing the extent to which their own upward mobility had been facilitated by the development of their adopted home, pioneers offered a dramatic illustration of the possibilities for rapid financial, professional, and social advancement in Wisconsin.<sup>203</sup>

Such stories of progress were especially significant given that, in the 1850s, Wisconsin was less than two decades removed from bloody Indian wars. By emphasizing the rapid development of Wisconsin, pioneers created a powerful justification for the decimation of Native American society in the area. After devoting much of his pioneer narrative to his role in the Black Hawk War, for example, Daniel Parkinson characterized the conflict as a pivotal moment in the transition from savagery to civilization. "Thus ended all our Indian difficulties, and from that period the progress of Wisconsin has been rapid, unexampled and astonishing; and if in future her laws shall be made and executed by wise, honest and discreet men, she must soon attain an eminence of great distinction." In much the same way, pioneers suggest that the French-Canadian fur traders who inhabited the region when they arrived were part a distant, bygone era. James H. Lockwood, a judge and sawmill operator, claimed that Prairie du Chien and other cities that originated as French trading posts had "remained stationary for many years, until the Americans emigrated to them, and took hold of them with their enterprise, when they at once improved, and most of them became places of business and importance." Through comments such as these, authors like Parkinson and Lockwood relegated Native Americans and fur traders to the pre-history of Wisconsin, and propagated the myth that Anglo American settlers like themselves had ushered in a new age of industry, improvement, and civilization.<sup>204</sup>

Although Wisconsinites were unrivaled in their enthusiasm for producing pioneer reminiscences, the inhabitants of other western states began composing similar narratives during the 1850s. In order to project an image of culture and refinement, civic leaders in new territories and states hastened to establish historical societies, even while settlement was still in its earliest stages. In 1849, for example, the first act of the Minnesota Territorial Legislature provided for the establishment of the Minnesota Historical Society.<sup>205</sup> Following the lead of the Wisconsin Historical Society, many these

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<sup>203</sup> Edward Holdton, "Commercial History of Milwaukee," *Report and Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin* 4 (1859): 279, 257.

<sup>204</sup> Parkinson, "Pioneer Life in Wisconsin," 363; James H. Lockwood, "Early Times and Events in Wisconsin," *Report and Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin* 2 (1856): 114.

<sup>205</sup> Commenting on the establishment of the Minnesota Historical Society, one New York editor concluded that it was hard to overstate the "future greatness and prosperity of a people who commence to write their history as soon as the foundations of their Commonwealth are laid." See "The Minnesota Historical Society," *Minnesota Historical Collections: Being a Republication of the Original Parts Issued in 1850-51-52-53-56* (repr., St. Paul: Ramaley, Chaney & Co., 1872), 6.

institutions made the collection of pioneer reminiscences a focal point of their preservation efforts. When the State Historical Society of Iowa was founded in 1857, one of the objectives enumerated in its charter was “to rescue from oblivion the memory of [Iowa’s] early pioneers and to obtain and preserve narratives of their exploits, perils and hardy adventures.”<sup>206</sup>

In some areas, the work of archiving and publishing the stories of old settlers was carried out by a new type of voluntary organization: the pioneer society. Like the pioneer narrative itself, these societies were most active in Western states and territories that were still receiving large numbers of migrants in the 1850s. Among the earliest and most active was the Society of California Pioneers, founded by residents of San Francisco in 1850. The Society of Wisconsin Pioneers held its first meeting in 1856, and the Old Settlers Association of Minnesota was organized a year later. Both the membership and the social meaning of pioneer societies varied from place to place. In San Francisco, for example, the Society of California Pioneers was established by American-born residents who aimed to distinguish themselves from the rising tide of gold seekers descending on the city. Accordingly, membership was initially restricted to individuals who had lived in the state for more than three years—a period of residence, which, humorously enough, qualified these men as the city’s old guard. By contrast, the Old Settlers Society of Sangamon County, Illinois, which held its first meeting in 1859, consisted primarily of the children of early settlers. As affluent merchants, professionals, and landlords, their nostalgia for the pioneer past represented a response to deepening class divisions within their community. In all cases, however, pioneer societies served to bolster the authority of early residents and their descendants. Toward this end, members engaged in a variety of public commemorative activities, including parades, speeches, and balls. Although most organizations did not begin to compile large archives of pioneer narratives until after the Civil War, many stated their intention to do so in their constitutions. One of the primary goals of the Society of California Pioneers, for example, was to “collect and preserve information connected with the early settlement and conquest of the country, and perpetuate the memory of those whose sagacity, enterprise, and love of independence induced them to settle in the wilderness and become the germ of a new state.” Clauses such as this laid the foundation for the rise of the pioneer narrative as a more popular genre during the postwar years.<sup>207</sup>

Along with parades, speeches, and other commemorative practices, the memoirs of early migrants to Wisconsin, Minnesota, California, and other western states contributed to a gradual reworking of the pioneer archetype that was just getting underway in the 1850s. Having originated as a military designation for men who cleared the path for an advancing infantry, the term pioneer was first applied to frontier settlers in the post-Revolutionary period. At that time, and throughout the early nineteenth century, the prevailing image of the pioneer was that of a shiftless backwoodsman who eschewed

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<sup>206</sup> Benjamin Shambaugh, *A Brief History of the State Historical Society of Iowa: 1854-1907* (Iowa City: State Historical Society, 1907), 11.

<sup>207</sup> The constitution of the Society of California Pioneers is quoted in Ruth Teiser, *This Sudden Empire, California: The Story of the Society of California Pioneers, 1850 to 1950* (San Francisco: Society of California Pioneers, 1950), 5. On the Society of California Pioneers, see also David Glassberg, *Sense of History: The Place of the Past in American Life* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001) 165-175. On the Old Settlers Society of Sangamon County, Illinois, see John Mack Faragher, *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 216-234.



civilization in favor of a more isolated and unrefined lifestyle in the wilderness. “In all societies there are off-casts; this impure part serves as our precursors or pioneers,” J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur wrote in his *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782). These frontiersmen were “a kind of forlorn hope, preceding by ten or twelve years the most respectable army of veterans which come after them. In that space, prosperity will polish some, vice and the law will drive off the rest, who uniting again with others like themselves will recede still farther; making room for more industrious people.” Yale clergyman Timothy Dwight painted a similar picture in 1819. The pioneer, he explained, was “impatient of the restraints of law, religion, and morality,” and “too idle, too talkative, too passionate, too prodigal, and too shiftless to acquire either property or character.” Even those commentators who celebrated the pioneer as a symbol of rugged individualism tended to agree that his perpetual transience kept him suspended in a liminal state between civilization and savagery.<sup>208</sup>

The pioneer remained a symbol of restless mobility throughout the antebellum period. Indeed, some men self-consciously invoked this characterization in their reminiscences, proudly citing their repeated migrations as evidence of their irrepressible pioneering spirit. Wisconsin resident John H. Fonda, for example, described himself as an “old backwoodsman” and boasted of his “wandering mode of life.”<sup>209</sup> Even as these older connotations persisted, however, the reminiscences of men like Henry Baird put forward an alternative vision of the archetype that reflected the values of booster masculinity. Pioneering, they suggested, had less to do with trailblazing than it did with building places—towns, cities, counties, or states. Baird underscored this point at the conclusion of his narrative, asserting that Wisconsin pioneers “should be awarded the merit of having largely contributed, by their talents and labor, to the formation and organization of the former Territory, now State, of Wisconsin.” In stark contrast to the image of the restless backwoodsman, he contended that the true pioneer was defined by his “perseverance,” “firmness,” and “fidelity” to his chosen abode. These qualities enabled him to withstand “the attacks of savages” and lay the foundation for “the introduction of civilization, education, and the arts and sciences.” Although it was far from dominant in the 1850s, this newer conception of the pioneer would become increasingly prevalent as the nineteenth century wore on.<sup>210</sup>

At the close of the antebellum period, the pioneer narrative remained a relatively obscure genre of personal writing, and its development was stunted by the outbreak of the Civil War. During the conflict and for nearly a decade after, political and military events dominated the national consciousness, eclipsing interest in state and local history. Western newspapers that once featured the recollections of old settlers were consumed with news from the battlefield, and the commemorative activities of historical and

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<sup>208</sup> Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, ed. Susan A. Manning (Oxford: Oxford university press, 1998), 47; Timothy Dwight, *Travels in New-England and New-York* (New Haven: Timothy Dwight, 1821), 2: 459.

<sup>209</sup> John H. Fonda, “Early Reminiscences of Wisconsin,” *Report and Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin* 5 (1868): 205, 214. Similarly, Henry Janes, the founder of Janesville, Wisconsin, cited his repeated migrations as evidence of his pioneering spirit. A resident of California at the time he composed his memoir, Janes noted playfully, “I have been constantly working westward till the nasty pacific has made a stop to further progress in that direction.” See Janes, “Early Reminiscences of Janesville,” *Report and Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin* 6 (1872): 434.

<sup>210</sup> Baird, “Recollections of the Early History of Northern Wisconsin,” 220.

pioneer societies waned. Even in Wisconsin, where pioneer narratives had proliferated most rapidly, interest in historical preservation temporarily subsided. After publishing four volumes of its *Collections* during a five-year span, the Wisconsin Historical Society produced no new installments from 1859 to 1868. It was not until the postwar years that significant numbers of westerners again took up their pens to record their recollections about the early development of their adopted homes.

### **Middle-Class Pioneers**

In the 1870s, as Reconstruction drew to a close and sectional tension attenuated, local and statewide movements to memorialize the labors and achievements of old settlers resumed with even greater vigor. Amidst this resurgence of nostalgia, men who had moved west during the second quarter of the nineteenth century commenced an unprecedented effort to write themselves into the historical record by documenting their role in organizing, promoting, and building western towns, counties, and states. It was through their writing that the conventions of the pioneer narrative became fully elaborated and well defined.

Historians and antiquarian collectors, working individually and under the aegis of state historical societies, continued to play a vital role in compiling pioneer memoirs during the postwar years. At the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Lyman Draper kept up a tireless campaign to gather written and oral reminiscences until his retirement in 1886. Historian Hubert Howe Bancroft carried out similar work in California. In the early 1870s, as he gathered sources for a multivolume *History of California*, Bancroft began corresponding with longtime residents of the state, urging them to share their recollections. He also dispatched agents to interview old settlers, and to transcribe and edit their stories into continuous narratives. Like Draper, Bancroft's historical interests extended beyond the experiences of American settlers. By 1884, his collection of oral dictations included testimony from roughly 80 Californios—men and women of Hispanic descent whose families had lived in the area for generations before the United States took possession of California. His primary informants, however, were American-born men, including roughly 80 individuals who had come to California prior to 1848, and about 100 migrants who arrived during the Gold Rush.<sup>211</sup>

Beginning in the 1870s, state pioneer societies also became much more active in recording the recollections of their members. The Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society was established in 1874, and the Indiana Pioneer Society was organized two years later. The latter institution offered membership to Hoosiers of at least seventy years of age who had resided in the state for forty years or more. Its inaugural meeting at the Indiana State Fair was attended by an estimated 700 men and women who met these qualifications. Throughout the final decades of the century, pioneer societies issued regular calls for written and oral narratives, and some succeeded in building substantial archives. In preparation for the fiftieth anniversary of statehood, the Society of California Pioneers stepped up its collecting efforts by issuing a mailing that urged all members to

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<sup>211</sup> Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of the Pacific States of North America, California* (San Francisco: A.L. Bancroft, 1884), 54-58. For a description of the process by which Bancroft's agents gathered and transcribed oral dictations see Rose Marie Beebe and Robert M. Senkewicz, eds., *Testimonios: Early California Through the Eyes of Women, 1815-1848* (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2006), xxii-xxxvi.

supply brief autobiographical narratives. The campaign yielded roughly 150 submissions, varying in length from a few paragraphs to more than eighty pages in length.<sup>212</sup>

Individual towns and counties also launched their own initiatives for preserving the stories of aging residents. In many cases, local commemorative efforts were led by old settlers' societies, which sprang up in countless western communities during the 1870s.<sup>213</sup> In other cases, individual historical enthusiasts took it upon themselves to begin collecting pioneer reminiscences from friends and neighbors. In 1882, for example, Caleb Forbes Davis, a prominent banker and longtime resident of Keokuk, Iowa, began corresponding with the city's oldest citizens, requesting photographic portraits, autographs, and written reminiscences. He ultimately received more than forty narratives, some of which were lengthy manuscripts with ornate, hand-drawn title pages. Davis assembled the submissions into a nine-volume scrapbook, supplementing each narrative with photographs, newspaper articles, obituaries, and other ephemera pertaining to each author. Beginning in the 1880s, western towns and counties also began memorializing the lives of pioneer settlers through a new type of publication, known as the mug book. Highly formulaic in nature, mug books consisted of a conventional local history followed by a series of biographical sketches, each one accompanied by a full-page portrait of the subject. Local residents who wished to be included in the volume paid a subscription fee, and then either composed their own biographies or dictated their stories to an agent of the publisher. Much like the pioneer memoir, mug books reflected a growing desire on the part of many westerners to commemorate their role as founders of their communities.<sup>214</sup>

As the number of pioneer reminiscences multiplied in the final decades of the nineteenth century, a broader spectrum of individuals put pen to paper, chronicling their migration experiences and detailing their contributions to the growth of rural villages, towns, and counties. Although women had served as informants for scholars like John Shane earlier in the century, it was not until the postwar period that they became active in composing their own narratives. Among the relatively few female pioneers whose

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<sup>212</sup> "State Pioneer Convention," *Annual report of the Indiana State Board of Agriculture* 20 (1878): 375-379. At a meeting of the Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society in 1893, Alpheus Felch, who was then president of the organization, urged all members in attendance to "recall and record" their experiences during the state's pioneer period. "President's Address," *Historical Collections: Collections and Researches Made by the Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society* 20 (1894): 204.

<sup>213</sup> Of the 21 countywide pioneer societies operating in Ohio as of 1873, two-thirds were less than six years old. "Notice of Historical and Pioneer Societies in Ohio," *Western Reserve Historical Society* 1, no. 27 (July 1875): 1-8.

<sup>214</sup> Caleb Forbes Davis Scrapbooks, 1882-1897, Iowa State Historical Society (hereafter cited as Davis Scrapbooks). Timothy R. Mahoney makes extensive use of the Davis scrapbooks in his illuminating study of early Keokuk, Iowa, *Provincial Lives: Middle-Class Experience in the Antebellum Middle West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); see especially pp. 64-65 for a discussion of Caleb Davis and his collection. On the rise of the mug books, see Casper, *Constructing American Lives*, 284-303. The 1870s also saw the publication of numerous county histories, which, at times, featured pioneer memoirs. See for example *History of Caldwell and Livingston Counties, Missouri: Written and Compiled from the Most Authentic Official and Private Sources, Including a History of Their Townships, Towns and Villages, Together with a Condensed History of Missouri; a Reliable and Detailed History of Caldwell and Livingston Counties--Their Pioneer Record, Resources, Biographical Sketches of Prominent Citizens; General and Local Statistics of Great Value; Incidents and Reminiscences* (St. Louis: National Historical Company, 1886).

memoirs were published in monograph form was Christiana Holmes Tillson. Tillson's account, which detailed her experiences on the Illinois frontier in the 1820s, was evidently intended to serve as a memento for her children. The volume was published posthumously in 1873, appearing under the title, *Reminiscences of Early Life in Illinois*. More commonly, women disseminated their memoirs through local newspaper and periodicals. Mary Ann Brevoort Bristol, who lived in Wisconsin in the 1820s while her father served as an Indian Agent, submitted her recollections of early Green Bay and Milwaukee to the *Milwaukee Sunday Telegraph* in 1879. Similarly, Elizabeth Therese Baird, the wife of Wisconsin pioneer Henry Baird, authored a series of brief reminiscences for a Green Bay newspaper beginning in 1886. Besides penning their own memoirs, women also contributed to the proliferation of pioneer narratives by recording the recollections of their husbands and fathers. When Nanna Smithwick Donaldson's eighty-nine-year-old father, Noah Smithwick, lost his eyesight, she undertook the laborious task of recording and editing a lengthy account of his experiences as an early American settler in Texas. Elizabeth Wolcott Perry supplied a biographical sketch of her deceased husband, Colonel Carlton Perry, for Caleb Forbes Davis's scrapbook commemorating the founders of Keokuk, Iowa.<sup>215</sup>

Immigrants, too, composed pioneer reminiscences with greater frequency during the postwar decades, although they continued to account for only a small fraction of the memoirs that appeared during these years. Due to the international character of the Gold Rush, the writings of immigrants figured prominently in the archives of the Society of California Pioneers. Of the 150 reminiscences collected by the Society around the turn of the century, 35 were written by foreign-born authors, including natives of England, Ireland, France, Italy, Spain, Germany, Prussia, Russia, Jamaica, and Chile. Historical societies in the Midwest also gathered a growing number of narratives by German, Irish, and Scandinavian immigrants. The one group of westward migrants whose stories remained conspicuously absent from the archives of historical and pioneer societies were African Americans. Alvin Aaron Coffey, a former slave from Kentucky who came to California with his master during the Gold Rush, was among the very few African Americans who produced pioneer narratives. After purchasing his own freedom and that of his family, Coffey settled on a farm in Shasta County, and later became the only black member of the Society of California Pioneers. Caleb Davis's scrapbook of Keokuk pioneers included a memoir by Samuel Red, a former slave who had worked as a domestic servant for the Davis family. Red's reminiscences had evidently been recorded and edited by Davis's daughter. With only a few exceptions, however, the pioneer narrative remained a white genre of personal writing. Indeed, by emphasizing the common frontier experiences of American-born migrants and immigrants from Northern and Western Europe, these texts contributed to the construction of a unified white identity in western communities.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> Christiana Holmes Tillson, *Reminiscences of Early Life in Illinois* (Amherst: Priv. Print, 1873); Mary Ann Brevoort Bristol, "Reminiscences of the Northwest," *Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin* 8 (1879): 293-308; Elizabeth Therese Baird, "Indian Customs and Early Recollections," *Collections* 9 (1880): 303-326; Noah Smithwick and Nanna Smithwick Donaldson, *The Evolution of a State, or, Recollections of Old Texas Days* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983); "Colonel Carlton Perry," Davis Scrapbooks.

<sup>216</sup> "Autobiography and Reminiscences of Alvin Aaron Coffey," 1901, Society of California Pioneers; "Samuel Red," Davis Scrapbooks. For an example of a pioneer memoir written by a German immigrant to

Even as a broader range of individuals recorded their recollections, by far the most prolific authors of pioneer memoirs were white, American-born men who had moved west, either alone or with their young wives and children, in the 1830s, '40s, and '50s. Some were among the most eminent and affluent members of their communities, having made a name for themselves in business, law, or politics. In most cases, however, these memoirists had achieved a middle-class level of financial success and social respectability, whether that meant owning their own farmstead or operating a small business. Among the more modestly situated pioneers who contributed to Caleb Davis's scrapbook was Robert Creel, who had made his living as a bricklayer. In an introduction to his narrative, which was delivered as an oral dictation, Davis explained that Creel, "being a man who labored hard every day with his hands, was not ready with his pen—and the writer of this, at his request and dictation, wrote the foregoing sketch on the date given." Whereas Creel had at least managed to make a living in his chosen occupation, not all pioneer reminiscences were success stories. Edward Percy Reed, a resident of San Jose and member of the Society of California Pioneers, was in dire financial straits at the time he composed his pioneer narrative. Bankrupted by imprudent investments, his house had recently been foreclosed upon. When John McDowell Burrows of Davenport, Iowa, published his pioneer narrative in 1888, he was similarly destitute. Other authors, such as Keokuk resident James Eckert, had failed in their efforts to seek public office. Summing up his three unsuccessful runs, Eckert candidly remarked, "my ventures in politics, like some of my business undertakings proved unsuccessful." The experiences of Creel, Reed, Burrows, and Eckert underscore the fact that, although the pioneer narrative was in many respects a middle-class genre of writing, the men who composed these texts had experienced a broad range of social, financial, and professional mobility in the decades since their initial migration.<sup>217</sup>

In the pages of their reminiscences, aging pioneers cited a variety of motives for writing, some mundane and others high-minded. Many authors stated a desire to pass on their stories to family members or future descendants. Lucius G. Fisher evidently had this purpose in mind when he penned an account of his migration to Beloit, Wisconsin, and his subsequent relocation to Chicago. His manuscript remained in the family for several decades before his grandson presented it to the State Historical Society of Wisconsin in 1917. Others wrote primarily for their own amusement. Eighty-nine-year-old Noah Smithwick, who had been among the earliest American settlers in Texas in the 1820s, dictated his reminiscences to his daughter in an attempt to "beguile the tedium" resulting from his loss of vision. At least a few memoirists published their stories in the hopes of turning a profit. In the introduction to his work, *Fifty Years in Iowa* (1888),

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the Midwest, see Gustav Philipp Körner, *Memoirs of Gustave Koerner, 1809-1896 Life-Sketches Written at the Suggestion of His Children* (Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Torch Press, 1909).

<sup>217</sup> "Robert Creel," Davis Scrapbooks; "Autobiography and Reminiscence of Edward Percy Reed," 1901, Society of California Pioneers; John McDowell Burrows, *Fifty Years in Iowa: Being the Personal Reminiscences of J.M.D. Burrows, Concerning the Men and Events, Social Life, Industrial Interests, Physical Development, and Commercial Progress of Davenport and Scott County During the Period from 1838 to 1888* (Davenport: Glass & company, printers, 1888); "James Eckert," Davis Scrapbooks. After settling in Davenport, Iowa, John McDowell Burrows accumulated a small fortune in the 1840s and '50s by operating a flour mill and a pork packing business, and investing his profits in an array of manufacturing, construction, and shipping ventures. He lost much of his wealth in the Panic of 1857, however, and he sustained further financial losses when his two successive milling businesses were destroyed by fires.

John McDowell Burrows noted that he had been suffering from a heart condition that prevented him from earning a living through physical labor. “Casting about, in this extremity, what I should do to gain a livelihood while life might be granted to me yet a little longer,” he explained, “it was suggested by friends that many persons would read with interest some account of men and events in Scott County, as I knew them, during the pioneer days of the early ‘40s.” By interweaving the story of Davenport with that of his own life, Burrows clearly hoped to maximize the public appeal of his text, and thereby render his literary labors profitable.<sup>218</sup>

Although their immediate motives varied, Fisher, Smithwick, Burrows, and their contemporaries also shared more deep-seated reasons for embracing and elaborating a form of autobiographical writing that linked their stories to the development of places. From the time they left their native states, this cohort of westward migrants had grown accustomed to using personal writing to imbue their decisions about movement and settlement with meaning. Some had composed diaries and letters as they set out on prospecting journeys, documenting their diligent search for agricultural land or a promising new town to call home. Others had announced their decision to settle down in a particular frontier community by composing boosterish letters that combined speculation about their own prospects with predictions about the development of their new homes. Still others had revised and circulated narratives of their migration experiences as a means of commemorating the improvised westward journeys that led them to their current place of residence. Pioneer memoirs represented the final step in this writing process. Throughout their reminiscences, self-nominated pioneers drew on many of the same conventions of writing about self and place that they had employed in travel diaries, letters, and narratives many decades earlier.

For some authors, pioneer narratives were, in effect, revised and expanded versions of the travel narratives they had written during or shortly after their westward journeys. Such was the case for California resident David Jackson Staples. At the age of twenty-four, Staples had commenced a travel diary as he left home on an overland trek from Massachusetts to the gold mines of California. Nearly thirty years later, when he provided historian Hubert Howe Bancroft with an account of his pioneer reminiscences, Staples almost certainly used the journal to refresh his memory about the his long and perilous journey. Indeed, the first third of his pioneer narrative consisted of an exhaustive account of the events described in his diary. The remaining two-thirds of the text were devoted to his residence in Stockton, California, where he played an active role in shaping the institutions of local government. In 1888, Minnesota lumber baron and legislator William Folsom published an account of pioneer life that was even more clearly rooted in his earlier personal writing. Folsom had begun recording his experiences at the age of nineteen, when he migrated from Maine to Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin. “I kept memoranda of my various changes, and of many of the events transpiring,” he noted in his preface, insisting that he initially had no intention of publishing his account. Much like his fellow Minnesotan, Ignatius Donnelly, Folsom explained that he had only gradually come to see his memoranda as a valuable historical document. “[R]eflecting that fifty years spent amidst the early and first white settlements, and continuing till the period of civilization and prosperity, itemized by an

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<sup>218</sup> Lucius G. Fisher, “Pioneer Recollections of Beloit and Southern Wisconsin,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 1 (1917-1918): 266; Smithwick, *The Evolution of a State*, 5; Burrows, *Fifty Years in Iowa*, iii.

observer and participant in the stirring scenes and incidents depicted, might furnish material for an interesting volume, valuable to those who should come after me, I concluded to gather up the items and compile them in a convenient form.” Like Staples and Folsom, many of the individuals who produced pioneer reminiscences in the late nineteenth century were not narrating their migration experiences for the first time. Rather, their pioneer narratives were the end result of a writing process that had begun many decades earlier.<sup>219</sup>

### **From Wanderers to Founders**

The pioneer narratives written by men like Staples and Folsom in the late nineteenth century followed the same basic formula developed by earlier migrants like Henry Baird in the 1850s. Although each text differed in form and content, most authors opened with an account of their early lives, then followed with a narrative of their migration experiences, and then concluded by recounting their efforts to improve their own circumstances while at the same time contributed to the growth of their new homes. Even more than their predecessors, however, this later group of memoirists used their narratives to display an ethic of persistence, and to assert their abiding loyalty and commitment to one place. Although some fashioned themselves as pioneers of entire states, most focused on their connection to a specific town or county. Because many authors had been highly mobile, having resided in multiple towns or states over the course of their lives, demonstrating their devotion to a single, fixed abode often required subtle revision and artful narration of their life stories. Consequently, as they refined and elaborated the conventions of the pioneer memoir, aging migrants developed a number of narrative strategies for downplaying transience and emphasizing their attachment to places.

Whereas many young migrants of the 1830s, ‘40s, and ‘50s had initially conceived of themselves as wanderers or sojourners, few pioneer memoirists introduced their westward journeys as open-ended ventures. Even when their destinations were uncertain, most made it clear from the outset that their initial decision to leave their native communities was motivated by a desire to find a permanent home in the West. As Dr. Enoch Chase, a native of Vermont, reminisced about the day in 1831 when he boarded a stagecoach for the “Far West,” he recalled, “The world was all before me, where to choose my future home[?]” Although E.R. Ford, a physician from Keokuk, Iowa, began his pioneer narrative with an account of a long, improvised journey through the Southwest and the Mississippi Valley, he described the expedition as an effort to gather information about “society and institutions” in the region, “with a view of locating in that sphere if it would suit me.” Some authors underscored the importance of establishing a long-term connection to one place by citing a desire to “grow up” with

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<sup>219</sup> David Jackson Staples, “Memorandum Book on the Journey to California,” 1849, Bancroft Library, U.C. Berkeley; David Jackson Staples, “Statement of Incidents and Information on California,” 1878, Bancroft Library; William Folsom, *Fifty Years in the Northwest: With an Introduction and Appendix Containing Reminiscences, Incidents and Notes* (St. Paul: Pioneer Press, 1888), v. David Deming’s narrative is another example of a pioneer memoir that was largely a travel narrative. In fact, Deming’s memoir contains a number of details about his westward journey that suggest he may have recorded the experience in a travel diary. Deming, “Brief History of the Life of D. E. Deming in Connection with Early Settlement.”

their future home. This popular cliché, which had taken root in travel writing back in the 1820s, captured the simultaneous and interconnected improvement of self and place at the heart of booster masculinity. Charles S. Bundy, an attorney who migrated from Oxford, New York, to the Chippewa Valley of Wisconsin in 1856, was among the many memoirists who used the saying. “I had just been admitted to the bar,” he recalled, “and was looking for an eligible site for a law office in the West, where I could ‘grow up with the country,’ as the saying was.” Although the phrase appeared most frequently in the reminiscences of urban migrants, some farmers used it as well. One such author was eighty-one-year-old A.M. Beardsley, a farmer and miller whose pioneer narrative was cited in the introduction. At the age of twenty, Beardsley had joined an emigrant party and removed from western New York to Michigan, where he ultimately purchased a farmstead and operated a mill. Writing of his departure, he recalled the words of an uncle, who encouraged him to “go west and grow up with the country.” That so many authors used precisely the same phrase in explaining their departure illustrates both the increasingly formulaic nature of pioneer narratives and the centrality of booster masculinity to the genre.<sup>220</sup>

Despite their professed desire for a permanent home, most pioneers went on to recount meandering westward journeys that involved repeated relocations. Even those who forthrightly acknowledged their restlessness and faithfully reported their transience often made a discernable effort to simplify their stories into more straightforward migration narratives. The most common strategy for downplaying shiftlessness was to condense long periods of transience into a few sentences or paragraphs. John Hiner, for example, offered a remarkably concise summary of his repeated relocations during the fifteen-year period between his departure from Maryland and his settlement in Keokuk, Iowa. After recounting his initial relocation from Baltimore to Louisville in 1834, Hiner explained that he:

[C]oncluded to stop there, went to work, left Louisville in the spring of 1839, came to St. Louis, went up the Missouri to the Yellowstone, returning to St. Louis, came to Keokuk in the spring 1842. Satisfied to make it my home, went into the butchering business, left Keokuk in the spring of 1852, crossed the Plains, arrived in Marysville in fall, went to Sacramento, left Sacramento & went to mining on the south fork of the Yuba. Unfortunate as a miner, returned to Sacramento, went to work for Mr. McNelty as [a] butcher. Went to San Francisco, & was there married in 1854. Kept Public House until 1855, and returned to Keokuk.

Like many members of the Society of California Pioneers, Edgar Briggs had been highly mobile in the years before his arrival in the Golden State. Born in upstate New York, Briggs left home at the age of sixteen to work as a mercantile clerk near Toronto. He then removed to Buffalo, spending three years behind the counter of a dry goods house before embarking for Havana, Cuba, where he went into business exporting cigars and fruit. After losing his fortune in a shipwreck, he made his way to New Orleans, and then

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<sup>220</sup> Enoch Chase, “Reminiscences,” 1876, Wisconsin Historical Society; “E.R. Ford,” Davis Scrapbooks; Charles S. Bundy, *Early Days in the Chippewa Valley* (Menomonie, Wisconsin: Flint-Douglas ptg. co, 1916), 3; A.M. Beardsley, “Reminiscences and Scenes of Backwoods and Pioneer Life,” *Historical Collections: Collections and Researches Made by the Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society* 28 (1900): 137.



quickly moved on to Montgomery, Alabama. He returned to New Orleans a year later, however, and it was there, while working as a cashier in a newspaper office, that he got word of the discovery of gold in California. Briggs devoted only three paragraphs of his pioneer narrative to his migrations prior to leaving for the diggings. By contrast, he spent the next seven paragraphs narrating his journey from New Orleans to San Francisco by way of the Isthmus.<sup>221</sup>

Besides simplifying their stories, pioneer memoirists also made a conspicuous effort to show that their repeated removals were driven by external circumstances rather than an innate inability to commit to one place. Not long after his migration from Vermont to Coldwater, Michigan, for example, Dr. Enoch Chase decided to abandon his new home and join his brother in Milwaukee. In explaining his decision, Chase insisted that he had every intention of settling permanently in Coldwater, but that concerns about his health compelled him to leave. "I liked Coldwater very much," he wrote, "I thought I had found the place where my life work was to be done and I was contented and happy." Although there is little reason to doubt the sincerity of his explanation, Chase's repeated assertions of his desire for a permanent home betray a clear self-consciousness about his history of mobility. Michigan attorney William C. Hoyt, whose reminiscences were discussed in the introduction, was another pioneer who attempted to explain away a false start by framing it as just another step on the road to a permanent home. Having departed New York in 1836, Hoyt initially settled in the town of Niles, Michigan, with the intention of beginning his law practice. Soon, however, "certain business matters" prompted him to retrace his steps, and he settled for several years in Buffalo. Hoyt made little mention of his time in New York, instead characterizing this move as a temporary and unforeseen interruption in his search for a new home. In recounting his subsequent return to Michigan in 1842, he suggested that his arrival in the village of Milford represented the true end point of his westward journey. "This is the place which I intended to make my home, and to follow the advice of the savant of my native village, 'grow up with the place.'"<sup>222</sup>

Whereas Chase and Hoyt subtly tweaked their stories, some authors performed more complex literary contortions in order to demonstrate a commitment to the places where they settled. Peter Hardeman Burnett's published monograph, *Recollections and Opinions of an Old Pioneer* (1880), shows the great lengths that some men went to in order to fit their stories into the mold of booster masculinity. Burnett lived a life of perpetual mobility, a fact he proudly acknowledged in the opening pages of his narrative. Invoking the older conception of the pioneer as a restless trailblazer, he remarked, "If the theory of Symmes had been proven by time to be true, and had a fine and accessible country been discovered at the north or south pole before I attained the age of sixty, I should have been strongly tempted to organize a party of emigrants for that distant region." His transience began at the age of ten, when his family moved from Nashville to a homestead in Missouri in 1817. In 1826, at the age of nineteen, he returned to Tennessee, where he worked as a clerk at several stores and hotels around Nashville, married, and eventually became the proprietor of a general store. Within two years,

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<sup>221</sup> "John Hiner," Davis Scrapbooks; Edgar Briggs, "Autobiography and Reminiscence of Edgar Briggs, San Francisco," 1904, Society of California Pioneers.

<sup>222</sup> Chase, "Reminiscences"; William C. Hoyt, "Early Recollections," *Pioneer Collections: Report of the Pioneer Society of the State of Michigan* 6 (1884): 62.

however, the failure of his store prompted Burnett and his wife to remove to Liberty County, Missouri. There, he studied law, founded a newspaper, and became active in politics. Although he managed to build a successful law practice, Burnett's business activities took a turn for the worse in the 1840s, leaving him submerged in debt. Consequently, in 1843, he decided to uproot his family once again, organizing a wagon train of 875 people and setting off on the perilous overland journey to Oregon.<sup>223</sup>

Burnett explained his removal to Oregon using the language of booster masculinity. Although he cited several motives, from a desire to extricate himself from debt to a conviction that the journey would improve his wife's deteriorating health, he made it abundantly clear that his decision was rooted in a desire to participate in the building of a new state. "I saw that a great American community would grow up, in the space of a few years, upon the shores of the distant Pacific; and I felt an ardent desire to aid in this most important enterprise." Indeed, Burnett did go on to play an active role in shaping the political institutions of Oregon. He served on the first legislative committee for the region shortly after his arrival, then became one of the first justices on the state Supreme Court in 1845, and three years later, he was elected to the territorial legislature. His political career in Oregon ended abruptly, however, when the discovery of gold in California induced him to depart for the diggings. Discussing his departure for Oregon, Burnett again invoked the values of booster masculinity. First, he underscored his long-term commitment to Oregon by asserting that, prior to the discovery of gold, he had "not the slightest idea of leaving that country." He then assured readers that, in leaving for California, he had not simply disregarded the interests of his adopted home. "Had the essential interest of a large body of my fellow men, in my judgment, required further sacrifices, I would have made them most cheerfully." On the contrary, Burnett felt that he had done his "fair proportion of the work," and that his services as a civic leader were no longer required. "[T]he foundation of a great community on this coast having been laid," he concluded, "all else would naturally follow as a matter of course, as there were others competent to continue the work." By taking such pains to justify his departure from Oregon, Burnett registered concerns about shiftlessness that were inherent in the booster paradigm.<sup>224</sup>

Whether they recounted a series of relocations or only one, pioneers almost always designated one town or county as their true home. The decision to settle down was a pivotal moment in pioneer narratives, and authors underscored its significance by offering detailed accounts of how and why they chose their new abode. Wisconsin pioneer Charles S. Bundy, for example, devoted more than half of his sixteen-page narrative to a section titled, "How I Came to Settle in Dunn County, Wisconsin." In chronicling the reconnaissance process leading up to their decision, authors like Bundy noted their diligent efforts to evaluate possible destinations by studying maps, interrogating local residents and fellow travelers, and scouting the terrain. Peregrine Dwight Foster, for example, began his pioneer memoir with an extensive narrative of his prospecting journey through Iowa and Missouri many decades earlier, noting each new piece of intelligence that led to his "final decision to locate at Keokuk." The critical moment on the journey, he explained, was a chance conversation with a fellow

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<sup>223</sup> Peter Hardeman Burnett, *Recollections and Opinions of an Old Pioneer* (New York: D. Appleton, 1880), vi.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, 97, 252-3,

stagecoach passenger named Peter Potter. “The middle seat was open and on it with a piece of chalk [Potter] mapped out the country and in his taking way showed the great advantages of [Keokuk] as a controlling business point.” Although Foster spent the next week exploring the lead regions of Missouri, he ultimately concluded that Potter’s analysis was correct, and he promptly made his way back to his “future home” in Iowa. In addition to recounting their investigative process, pioneers also described the speculative thinking involved in their decisions. Another Keokuk resident, C.A. Kellogg, recalled studying a map of Iowa and deciding that the town’s “superior geographical position” portended rapid growth and prosperity. By retracing the careful reconnaissance and speculative thinking, authors like Foster and Kellogg characterized their decision to settle down as a firm resolution rather than a provisional step.<sup>225</sup>

For California pioneers who arrived during the Gold Rush, emphasizing the strategic thinking and foresight involved in choosing a new place of residence was especially significant. Most forty-niners initially had no intention of making California their permanent home, and in this respect, their experiences diverged from the paradigm of booster masculinity. Some authors, like Francis E. Weston, finessed this point. Although Weston had come to California to make a quick fortune, he characterized himself and his fellow pioneers as “men who left home and family to cross the continent and build up another State to add to our ‘Glorious Union.’” Rather than engaging in blatant revisionism, other memoirists brought their stories in line with the ideals of booster masculinity by emphasizing their early recognition of California’s promising future. By employing this strategy, aging forty-niners demonstrated that their long-term residence in California was the result of a purposeful decision, rather than an accident of fate. In a memoir written for the Society of California Pioneers in 1889, Charles Trowbridge Ward Jr. suggested that it was foresight, above all, that separated true pioneers from those Gold Rush participants who ultimately returned home. “In early days men worked hard with the pick, shovel, rocker, and tin-pan, to make quick fortunes, with the idea of soon returning home again. The new State was considered a barren waste, unfit for cultivation. Some men there were who became attached to the exciting times and the delightful climate; many had faith in the future of the country, such as those, enterprising in character, useful to the times in which they lived.” Another member of the Society of California Pioneers, Gordon Holton Beach, drew a similar contrast between the visionary pioneer and the “doubting Thomases” who “went back to the old stamping ground of their youth without ever having seen the ‘Promised Land.’”<sup>226</sup>

Once they had finished narrating their mobility, pioneers turned to the second, equally crucial component of their reminiscences: an account of their work as community builders. For those who had been active in political affairs, this typically involved detailing their role in organizing the local government. Reviewing his activities as an early resident of Stockton, California, David Jackson Staples wrote, “During the formation of society, the voting on the Constitution of the State, and the establishment of

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<sup>225</sup> Charles S. Bundy, *Early Days in the Chippewa Valley*, 3-7; “Peregrine Dwight Foster,” Davis Scrapbooks; “C.A. Kellogg,” Davis Scrapbooks. Yet another Keokuk pioneer who offered a detailed account of the strategic thinking behind his relocation was E.R. Ford.

<sup>226</sup> “Autobiography and Reminiscence of Francis E. Weston,” 1901, Library of the Society of California Pioneers; “Autobiography and Reminiscence of Charles Trowbridge Ward Jr.,” 1901, Library of the Society of California Pioneers; “Autobiography and Reminiscence of Gordon Holton Beach,” 1901, Library of the Society of California Pioneers.

government, I took an interest in all these movements, and participated in them.” Some memoirists went so far as to transcribe portions of public documents into their narratives. As A.B. Markham recounted his role as a founder of Plymouth, Michigan, he inserted a passage from the 1827 act of the Territorial Legislature that carved the township out of Wayne County. Because many pioneers had held elected office or civil service positions, these experiences also figured prominently in their memoirs. Markham recalled being “loaded down with offices” during the early years of Plymouth Township. “I was fence viewer, road master, collector and constable,” he noted. Keokuk pioneer Curtis F. Conn reminisced about his hard-fought battles to improve roads and widen sidewalks as a member of the city council. “I have always flattered myself with the belief that to me is largely due the credit of the fine appearance of [Keokuk’s] magnificent main street,” he boasted. Other authors took similar pride in claiming responsibility for the establishment of post offices, schools, libraries, local political parties, or volunteer societies.<sup>227</sup>

Besides their activities in local and state government, pioneers also emphasized the ways in which their business or professional activities contributed to the prosperity of their towns or counties. In rural communities, farmers proudly recalled their role in introducing particular agricultural techniques or experimenting with crops that later became central to the local economy. David Jackson Staples, for example, congratulated himself on recognizing the untapped potential for agriculture in the vicinity of Stockton. “It was my impression from the beginning that this would be a valuable country for agriculture,” he explained, “I acted on that idea, and set out orchards and planted grain.” Residents of towns and cities offered similar assessments of the ways in which their careers in law, medicine, business, or other lines of work promoted the general welfare. Summing up the accomplishments of his thirty-year career as a builder in Keokuk, James Bruce concluded that he had “contributed largely to the growth and prosperity of the city, having erected thirty good business and resident buildings.” Newspaper editors, such as California pioneer Charles Dexter Cleveland, frequently focused on their efforts to attract new settlers or investors to their communities. As an early resident in Grass Valley, a mining and lumber center in Northern California, Cleveland not only published favorable reports about the town in his own newspaper; he also wrote letters to newspapers in Sacramento, San Francisco, and the Eastern states, calling attention to the many virtues of his adopted home. Whether they were well-known politicians or humble unskilled laborers, pioneer memoirists went to great length to show that their efforts to better their condition had benefited their communities as much as themselves.<sup>228</sup>

In drawing their reminiscences to a close, some authors made one final display of their commitment to their homes by reminding readers of their long and uninterrupted period of residence. “The twenty fifth anniversary of my business experience in Keokuk has passed,” Charles P. Birge observed in the final passage of his reminiscences, “and I may be pardoned for recording here that I look with pride upon the results of a long

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<sup>227</sup> Staples, “Statement of Incidents and Information on California”; Markham, “Early History of the Township of Plymouth,” *Pioneer Collections: Report of the Pioneer Society of the State of Michigan 2* (1901): 559-560; “Curtis F. Conn,” Davis Scrapbooks. David Deming quoted a portion of the 1837 act of the Michigan Legislature that carved Cooper Township out of Kalamazoo County; “Brief History of the Life of D. E. Deming.”

<sup>228</sup> Staples, “Statement of Incidents and Information on California”; “James Bruce,” Davis Scrapbooks; “Autobiography and Reminiscence of Dr. Charles Dexter Cleveland,” 1901, Library of the Society of California Pioneers.

continuous career in this city in which I have been a most active participant.” Birge’s fellow townsmen, Edward Dietz, took pride in noting that, in the decades since his arrival in Keokuk, he had “not been out of sight of the city but once.” In similar fashion, John McDowell Burrows assured his readers that, although he had lost a fortune in the Panic in 1857, and although two of his milling establishments had gone up in flames, he was still glad that he had chosen to remain in Davenport, Iowa. “I do not regret, even now—when, after fifty years of exertion, I am overtaken with old age, ill-health, and poverty—that I cast my lot and united my efforts with those brave pioneers in laying the foundation of...the beautiful City of Davenport and the banner County of the State of Iowa, ‘Old Scott!’” Although few authors made the point with as much dramatic flare as Burrows, virtually all pioneer memoirs conveyed the same moral: the willingness to hitch one’s star to a single place was a cardinal masculine virtue.<sup>229</sup>

### A Place in History

In their zeal for composing, compiling, archiving, and publishing their reminiscences, self-styled pioneers left an indelible mark on historical memory of westward movement in nineteenth-century America. The extensive paper trail they left behind skewed the archival record in favor of their particular frontier experience—one that was white, male, and middle-class. In doing so, they obscured the experiences and perspectives of women, Native Americans, slaves and free backs, Mexicans, and innumerable other actors with whom they had shared the historical stage. Furthermore, by focusing exclusively on their activities in public life, and by emphasizing their individualism and self-reliance, pioneers neglected to discuss crucial aspects of their own frontier experience. Although their narratives often sprawled on for many pages, few authors saw fit to discuss their family lives. Most offered only brief remarks about major events such as marriage, childbirth, illness, and death. Consequently, their reminiscences generally failed to acknowledge the crucial roles that their wives and family members had played in virtually every aspect of their lives. In a telling postscript to his recollections, Keokuk pioneer Thomas Gregg offered an apology that might have applied to any number of memoirs: “Throughout I have not even mentioned my ‘better half’—so prone are men to forget their wives!” It would take the better part of a century for historians to begin to seek out and recover many of the voices and experiences that had been drowned out by the flood of pioneer reminiscences that appeared in the late nineteenth century.<sup>230</sup>

In addition to these conspicuous omissions, pioneer narratives also distorted the historical record in a subtler way—one that was more central to their intended meaning. In their efforts to demonstrate a deep connection to their one true home, pioneers obscured the extent to which their own lives had been defined by restless mobility. To be sure, many had, in fact, settled down in one community for a significant portion of their lives, persevering through financial downturns, outbreaks of infectious disease, and myriad other adversities. But even the most settled pioneers had generally demonstrated

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<sup>229</sup> “Charles P. Birge,” Davis Scrapbooks; “Edward Dietz,” Davis Scrapbooks. Burrows, *Fifty Years in Iowa*, 155. James DeLaplaine, took pride in noting that he had been “a resident of Lee County for 42 years, over 33 of which have been spent in the City of Keokuk.” “James DeLaplaine,” Davis Scrapbooks.

<sup>230</sup> “Thomas Gregg,” Davis Scrapbooks.

a willingness to repeatedly uproot themselves and their families in pursuit of a more advantageous location. Most had relocated more than once before settling down, and some remained mobile for much of their adult lives. Moreover, as the travel narratives examined in the preceding chapter make clear, it was only gradually that many of these migrants had come to see their new homes as permanent. Often, their decision to stay put had less to do with an ethic of persistence than it did with their continued success in business, professional endeavors, speculation, or politics.

By recording their experiences within the framework of the pioneer narrative, and by circulating and publishing their texts, even the most restless of men could establish an enduring connection to one place. This point is poignantly illustrated by the writings of one particular class of memoirists: those who no longer lived in the places they identified and affiliated with in their reminiscences. As Caleb Forbes Davis collected the stories of Keokuk pioneers, he received a number of memoirs through the mail, sent by former residents of the city who had since moved on to other places. Some had spent most of their lives in or around Keokuk. James Bruce, for example, had worked as a builder in the city for thirty years before striking out for the Dakota Territory. Others had resided in Keokuk for much shorter periods. Attorney John Bruce (no relation to James) practiced law there for fifteen years before removing to Alabama, where he purchased a cotton plantation and became active in state politics. Keokuk's absentee pioneers also included several individuals who had relocated multiple times after leaving Iowa. Jonas Brown, who posted his pioneer narrative from Boise, had lived in California, Oregon, Washington, and Idaho in the years since he bid farewell to Keokuk. John Sullivan had been even more transient. After leaving Iowa, he spent brief stints in Kentucky and Indiana, then worked as a Federal Indian Agent in Arizona, and finally took up mining in Albuquerque, New Mexico. It was there that he wrote his pioneer narrative, which focused almost entirely on his life prior to and during his residence in Keokuk.<sup>231</sup>

Although the memoirs of absentee pioneers closely resembled those of their more settled counterparts, they employed several distinctive strategies to further emphasize their continued loyalty to their former homes. More than other authors, they staked their claim to the title of pioneer on the fact that they had resided in a particular town or county during a formative period in its development. Although Charles Dexter Cleveland's recollections were primarily concerned with his role in the development of Grass Valley in Northern California, his residence in the town was both intermittent and relatively brief. Having arrived in 1850, he sold out after only five years and headed east to reunite with his family. He then spent two years ranching in Texas and practicing medicine in Arkansas before deciding to return to Grass Valley with his wife and children. Writing of his arrival, he recalled that it was "like reaching home after a foreign sojourn." In 1866, however, he uprooted once again and relocated to San Francisco. Despite his transience, Cleveland devoted much of his 85-page manuscript to chronicling his various efforts to attract settlers to Grass Valley. In summing up his activities, he explained, "I remained at Grass Valley, arduously practicing my profession, enjoying its growth, and doing all in

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<sup>231</sup> "James Bruce," Davis Scrapbooks; "John Bruce," Davis Scrapbooks; "Jonas Brown," Davis Scrapbooks; "John Sullivan," Davis Scrapbooks. Other examples of absentee pioneers who submitted narratives to Davis's collection include Curtis F. Conn, J.H. Emerson, William Belknap, John Graham, and Samuel Miller.

my power to accelerate, and advance its prosperity, as I was one of its fathers, altogether, nearly sixteen years.”<sup>232</sup>

Because absentee pioneers like Cleveland could not boast of their sustained physical presence in one place, they tended to compensate by emphasizing their continued sentimental connection to their old homes. One author who employed this literary strategy was William Belknap, a Keokuk pioneer who came to the town as a young lawyer in 1851. After serving in the Civil War, Belknap returned to Iowa in 1865, but remained for only four years before being appointed Secretary of War and relocating to Washington D.C. Although his physical residence in Keokuk amounted to only about fifteen years, and although he chose to remain in the East after his stint as Secretary of War, Belknap’s narrative reaffirmed his loyalty and affective attachment to the place where he began his legal career. After noting that Keokuk was still his legal residence, he added, “The thoughts of my heart and the dearest memories of my life attach me to the spot where my manhood’s life began, and where I trust that all that may be left of me may lie when I am dead.” Another Keokuk pioneer, daguerreotypist J.H. Emerson, offered a less wordy but equally sentimental expression of his ongoing devotion to the town. Having moved across the Mississippi River to Illinois after his property burned in 1871, Emerson concluded his memoir by asserting that Keokuk was still his “one dear spot.”<sup>233</sup>

Perhaps the most significant way in which absentee pioneers affirmed their allegiance to their old homes was by making little or no mention of their life experiences in the years since their departure. Although Noah Smithwick wrote his reminiscences nearly forty years after he left Texas, his account ended with his decision to leave that state for California in 1861. California pioneer Charles Trowbridge Ward ended his reminiscences in much the same way. Ward had been involved in establishing the town of Hayward, California, and his narrative chronicled his various efforts to “bring the town into notice and improve it.” In 1875, however, he and his family relocated to Chile. Ward said little of his life after this point, and the final pages of his reminiscences were filled with emphatic expressions of affection and longing for California. “[M]y yearnings for a life ‘at home’ have been so fervent and strong that I have never been able to keep away from it more than a few years, and each time that I leave it, my whole body is shaken with inward grief and the mind is burdened with regrets.” Ward’s decision to omit the details of his life in Chile was not a cynical attempt to misrepresent his past experiences. Rather, it reflected his sense that the historical significance of his life stemmed primarily from his connection to the early history and the development of California. “My life in Chile has been void of interest,” he noted solemnly, “and without any incidents worthy of notice.”<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> “Autobiography and Reminiscence of Dr. Charles Dexter Cleveland, San Francisco,” 1901, Society of California Pioneers. In recounting his initial arrival in Grass Valley, Cleveland emphasized his immediate emotional connection to the place. “I never imagined a forest of such perfection, of such profuse, indescribable, gigantic, magnificence,” he recalled, “Always ruled by sentiment, I resolved at once to make my home there.”

<sup>233</sup> “William Belknap,” Davis Scrapbooks; “J.H. Emerson,” Davis Scrapbooks.

<sup>234</sup> Noah Smithwick and Nanna Smithwick Donaldson, *The Evolution of a State, or, Recollections of Old Texas Days*; “Autobiography and Reminiscence of Charles Trowbridge Ward, Chile, S.A.” 1901, Library of the Society of California Pioneers.

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Whether they wrote about a former place of residence or a current abode, pioneer memoirists strove to reconcile their previous or ongoing mobility with their unprecedented concern for selecting and maintaining a fixed abode. As the preceding chapters make clear, these men had reached adulthood and migrated west at a time when improvements in transportation, widespread townsite speculation, new sources of geographical information, and novel ideas about success and failure had made choosing a place of residence seem like a crucial rite of passage. Many had devoted considerable time, effort, and resources to studying maps and guidebooks, soliciting letters of advice about relocation, and traveling west in search of an optimal town or agricultural region to pursue their financial, professional, and social aspirations. Their sense of the benefits derived from attaching themselves to the right city, town, or county had encouraged this cohort of migrants to imagine themselves as community builders, and to ardently profess their commitment to the places they settled. Yet the same entrepreneurial ethic that fueled their preoccupation with being well-located also induced them to lead lives of remarkable mobility. Their movement began with the decision to leave behind friends and family and pursue business or professional ventures, agriculture, real estate investments, gold, or other opportunities in far-flung areas of the trans-Appalachian or trans-Mississippi frontiers. Some had remained transient for a relatively brief period of time, quickly deciding on a permanent home or returning to their native state. For the many absentee pioneers of communities like Keokuk, however, migration was a recurring process that continued into the closing decades of their lives.

It was only through writing—through carefully narrating and revising their stories—that these men could square their conflicting yet deeply interrelated values of mobility and persistence. Even if they had long since abandoned their adopted home, even if they now resided thousands of miles away, even if they had lived in numerous other frontier communities throughout their adult lives, pioneers found in their reminiscences a way to secure an enduring connection to “one dear spot.”



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