

Turning the American West in Historiography

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 frontier thesis reshaped American historiography. In his thesis, Turner argued that the existence and gradual settlement of the western frontier had fundamentally shaped American political ideals. These ideals, mainly democracy and liberty, distinguished the United States from Europe and served as a key example of the "Americanization" that the West furthered. This paper demonstrates how his thesis reflected and reinforced the principles of Manifest Destiny, the anxieties surrounding the 1890 "closing" of the frontier, and the rise of American imperialism. Through analysis of primary sources from Turner's era as well as of multiple papers on American historiography both before and after Turner's speech, this paper considers the shifting perceptions of the role of the West in American development and links them to Turner's claims about expansion and national development. This paper further explores how Turner's thesis displaced an earlier racially-based historiographical model, the Germanic germ theory, by emphasizing the origins of American democracy as being from the conditions of the frontier rather than genetically inherited traits. Finally, this paper considers Turner's enduring influence on twentieth-century historians, showcasing how even critiques of Turner's speech still utilized his frontier-centric framework of American development. Ultimately, this paper argues that Turner's frontier thesis permanently altered American historiography in making the frontier central to the development of America and its political ideals.

INTRODUCTION

"The Significance of the Frontier in American History" was an influential paper first delivered by Frederick Jackson Turner as a speech at an annual meeting of the American Historical Association (AHA).¹ The meeting had been held in conjunction with the 1893 World Fair in Chicago, and at the time, Turner was a professor at the University of Wisconsin.² Within the paper, Turner reflected on the final stages of White American settlement in the West and the closing of the frontier. Turner's "frontier thesis,"

¹ Gregory H. Nobles, "Hayes Historical Journal: Frederick Jackson Turner: Deposed King of the Wild Frontier," *Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Library & Museums*, 1992, <https://www.rbhayes.org/research/hayes-historical-journal-frederick-jackson-turner-deposed-king-of-the-wild-frontier/>

² Nobles, "Hayes Historical Journal."

which he posited in his essay, was that the settlement of the American frontier was what shaped American democracy and made the political concepts of the United States' fundamentally different from their European counterparts.³

Turner's frontier thesis paralleled several major ideologies and anxieties of the late nineteenth century. It echoed the longstanding ideology of Manifest Destiny, which held that the United States was divinely predestined to conquer and civilize all of North America.⁴ Additionally, Turner proclaimed that since the West had been almost fully settled—a development that resulted directly from Manifest Destiny—the opportunities for societal and economic advancement that it possessed had been exhausted.⁵ America, he claimed, would have to advance beyond the land immediately surrounding it.⁶ Turner's emphasis on the need for further expansion beyond American borders paralleled the idea of a growing sentiment at the time, American imperialism, which was the extension of American power beyond its borders, often through territorial acquisition.⁷ The frontier thesis' widespread influence was evident in the fact that it was the prevailing view of the frontier until almost a century after its publication. Its prevalence changed the trajectory of American historiography by emphasizing the idea that American development and democracy had been, first and foremost, driven by the West. In doing so, Turner created opportunities for new frontier-centric interpretations of American political concepts and national character to emerge. By declaring the frontier the vanished engine of American democracy, Turner reflected late-nineteenth century beliefs in the closure of the frontier, the legitimacy of Manifest Destiny, and paralleled growing support for imperialism, thereby permanently shaping American historiography by shifting it towards a frontier-focused lens. Ultimately, this paper contributes to the existing corpus of research on American historiography by showing how Turner's thesis, in reflecting widespread beliefs of his era, reshaped how later researchers interpreted the history of how America and its political ideals were seen to have been developed.

ON RHETORIC

Turner's rhetoric throughout "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" consistently defined the frontier as both a historical process and a formative force in national character. In the essay, he wrote, "The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development," explicitly grounding national growth in spatial expansion

³ Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," transcript of speech delivered at the World's Congress Auxiliary Building (now the Art Institute of Chicago Building), Chicago, July 12, 1893, <https://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/gilded/empire/text1/turner.pdf>.

⁴"About Westward Expansion," US House of Representatives: History, Art & Archives, accessed May 21, 2026, <https://history.house.gov/Education/Primary-Sources/Primary-Source-Sets/Westward-Expansion/About-Westward-Expansion/>.

⁵ Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier."

⁶ Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier."

⁷ Robert Zevin, "An Interpretation of American Imperialism," *The Journal of Economic History* 32, no. 1 (1972): 316-60, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2117191>.

rather than previous Eurocentric models.⁸ For Turner, the frontier was “the outer edge of the wave—the meeting point between savagery and civilization,” phrasing which framed expansion as an ongoing cultural transformation rather than the question of a fixed boundary.⁹ He further emphasized that, “American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier,”¹⁰ and in doing so, described the cyclic nature with which American society and political systems are consistently recreated in the West. This, he ultimately argued, was why “The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization,”¹¹ by which he meant the development of American character, as well as of democracy and liberty. His wording here also emphasized the idea that the American identity itself was produced and rebuilt through constant confrontation with and absorption of the wilderness present within the frontier. Moreover, Turner’s repetition of words such as “advance” throughout his essay reflects his choice to frame westward expansion as a form of “Americanization” and societal evolution. Therefore, through his language, Turner fused geography with ideology, presenting westward expansion as the crucible through which democracy, individualism, and national character were continually remade—and thus, providing a space in which interpretations of such concepts could be reconsidered.

MANIFEST DESTINY

Turner’s frontier thesis hinged on a prior century of expansion that normalized land as opportunity. During the mid to late nineteenth century, three major events furthered American individualism and western expansion through Manifest Destiny. First, the California Gold Rush of 1848 ignited mass migration westward in pursuit of gold and riches.¹² Most who struck it rich, however, were merchants.¹³ This included Levi Strauss, founder of his namesake denim brand, who sold miners sturdy canvas pants, and Henry Wells and William Fargo, founders of the premier American bank Wells & Fargo, who provided protection for the miners’ wealth through their banking.¹⁴ Their success reinforced the belief that ordinary Americans could achieve success through determination and labor. The pervasiveness of such a belief is clearly demonstrated by the estimated 140,000 settlers who moved to California during the Gold rush through the California Trail, which was only one route of many leading to the state.¹⁵

Second, Congress passed the 1862 Homestead Act, granting any American citizen 160 acres of western land provided they farmed it for a minimum of five years.¹⁶ The act incentivized many Americans

⁸ Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier.”

⁹ Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier.”

¹⁰ Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier.”

¹¹ Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier.”

¹² “The California Gold Rush,” Public Broadcasting Service, accessed May 21, 2026, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/goldrush-california/>.

¹³ Camilla Van Vooren, “Nevada City,” WAAC, May 2000, <https://cool.culturalheritage.org/waac/wn/wn22/wn22-2/wn22-202.html>.

¹⁴ Van Vooren, “Nevada City.”

¹⁵ “The California Gold Rush,” National Park Service, accessed July 10, 2026, <https://www.nps.gov/cali/learn/historyculture/california-gold-rush.htm>.

¹⁶ “Homestead Act (1862),” National Archives, accessed May 21, 2026, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/homestead-act>.

to move westward in pursuit of wealth and success.¹⁷ By allowing individuals access to land—and, in turn, its cultivation—without high financial barriers, the Homestead Act transformed western settlement into a tangible path toward economic independence for many. The prevalence of this idea can be seen in the estimated 4 million migrants who made claims under the Act.¹⁸ In providing land that could be utilized to increase one's own personal wealth through labor, the Act strengthened the connection between western expansion and American individualism. The Act thus created a key link between the idea of land equaling wealth—or if not, great possibilities of it.

Third, workers from both the Union Pacific Railroad and the Central Pacific Railroad completed the Transcontinental Railroad in 1869, allowing travelers to reach the West in a matter of days rather than earlier month-long journeys.¹⁹ This dramatic reduction in travel time triggered a massive influx of settlers.²⁰ In allowing easier migration to the west and connecting the two markets, the railroads opened financial opportunities for many, such as that of owning land through the aforementioned Homestead Act. This in turn further reinforced the belief that determination and initiative could lead to upward mobility, a belief which, judging by the thousands of people who utilized the railroad to move westward, was widespread.²¹ It is clear, then, that the main driving factor for migrants during all these events was the core ethos behind the United States itself—that of American individualism, or the idea that anyone, from any background, could achieve upward mobility by means of their own hard work.²²

Horace Greeley's 1871 letter, "Go West," showcased how American individualism was furthered through Manifest Destiny by emphasizing the idea that the West was synonymous with opportunity. The letter, published in Greeley's newspaper the *New York Tribune*, was in response to R.L. Sanderson, a reader who had requested career advice.²³ In it, Greeley espoused the widespread conviction of the possibilities the West held, saying, "Of course, I say to all who are in want of work, Go West!"²⁴ Greeley's belief that one should move west was predicated on Manifest Destiny, which emphasized the right of American citizens to claim and civilize the frontier. The enthusiasm in the phrase, "Go West!" emphasized Greeley's view of the West being a motivational symbol of economic renewal and social mobility, reinforcing the broader idea of American individualism: success through hard work and merit. This focus on the positive effects of westward expansion reflected the ideals of Manifest Destiny, which likewise promoted the necessity and benefits of continued expansion. Manifest Destiny, therefore, furthered American individualism. In

¹⁷ "Homestead Act (1862)."

¹⁸ "Homesteading by the Numbers," National Park Service, accessed July 10, 2026, <https://www.nps.gov/teachers/classrooms/homesteading-by-the-numbers.htm>.

¹⁹ Jason G. Gauthier, "History and the Census: The Transcontinental Railroad," *United States Census Bureau*, May 1, 2023, <https://www.census.gov/about/history/stories/monthly/2023/may-2023.html>.

²⁰ Gauthier, "History and the Census."

²¹ Gauthier, "History and the Census."

²² Gabriel R. Sanchez and David A. Lopez Amaya, "Eroding the American Dream through federal policy shifts," *Brookings*, March 30, 2026, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/eroding-the-american-dream-through-federal-policy-shifts/>.

²³ Horace Greeley: "Go West," 1871," Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, accessed May 21, 2026, <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source/horace-greeley-go-west-1871>.

²⁴ "Horace Greeley: "Go West," 1871."

turn, the historiography of America's free and individualistic political ideals, such as democracy was changed by the lens Manifest Destiny and its effects imposed upon the period. This lens supported Turner's claim that the West was a place that furthered such American ideals.

THE SHRINKING FRONTIER

The main points of "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" portray the increasing scarcity of available frontier as a yardstick for decreasing opportunities within America. Between 1870 and 1890, the American West experienced a dramatic rise and fall in labor and migration, which ultimately led to the official declaration of the frontier's closure in 1890.²⁵ Starting in 1870, Americans began buying more and larger tracts of land in the West—in total, over 200 million.²⁶ Within these new plots, farmers would often invest in technology such as reapers, threshers, stream traction engines, and more, increasing output with less labor.²⁷ As a result of this initial mass migration of settlers, the amount of available, fertile land decreased by the 1880s, forcing many homesteading hopefuls to seek lands increasingly farther west.²⁸ Many settlers, however, were unable to find or maintain their new plots, and headed back East bitterly, painting slogans such as "In God we trusted, in Kansas we busted" and "Going back to the Wife's Folks" on their dilapidated wagons.²⁹ This shift in American views towards the west was punctuated in 1890 by the U.S. Census' declaration that the west was closed: there was no longer a clear distinction between settled and unsettled land in the West as a result of the rapid expansion of previous decades.³⁰ This closing, Turner remarked in his paper, "mark[ed] the closing of a great historic movement," further noting that the frontier's existence and gradual colonization, "explain[ed] American development."³¹ Turner therefore implied that the disappearance of available land corresponded to the decline of the "great historic movement," that had long driven opportunity and American development. This development, however, had begun to decline by the late nineteenth century as the supply of available western land diminished.

The 1890 U.S. Census provided the clearest declaration of the frontier's closing—an announcement that ultimately fueled concerns over a corresponding decrease in opportunity. In its report, the Census "described the western part of the country as having so many pockets of settled area that a frontier line

²⁵ "Following the Frontier Line, 1790 to 1890," United States Census Bureau, accessed May 21, 2026, <https://www.census.gov/dataviz/visualizations/001/>.

²⁶ "The Rise of Industrial America, 1877-1900," Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, accessed May 21, 2026, <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/essays/rise-industrial-america-1877-1900>.

²⁷ "The Rise of Industrial America, 1877-1900."

²⁸ "The Rise of Industrial America, 1877-1900."

²⁹ Elizabeth M. Fowler, "In God We Trust"; Biography of an Old American Motto REPORT ON MOTTO: 'IN GOD WE TRUST' Episcopalian Discord., *New York Times*, July 28, 1956, <https://www.nytimes.com/1956/07/28/archives/in-god-we-trust-biography-of-an-old-american-motto-report-on-motto.html>.

³⁰ "Following the Frontier Line, 1790 to 1890."

³¹ Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier."

could no longer be said to exist.”³² It is clear, then, that the mass migrations towards the West in the decades leading up to 1890 had caused it to be overrun and at the time, almost fully settled.

Henry George’s 1878 lecture, “Why Work Is Scarce, Wages Low, and Labor Restless,” demonstrated how this increasing lack of opportunity in the West led to a need for the exploration of new frontiers beyond American borders. George—a political economist—presented this lecture in San Francisco to struggling residents of California only 7 years after Greeley’s letter.³³ This short timeframe reflected how rapidly popular opinion shifted towards the West as droves of migrants flocked to take advantage of its dwindling resources.³⁴ In his speech, George explained that, “...through good season and bad season wages have been gradually falling in California.”³⁵ He further claimed that wages were “falling lower and lower as the monopolization [of land] has become more perfect...that is the reason why men who cannot find employment walk our streets.”³⁶ The boom in settlers hoping to capitalize on the frontier’s many opportunities were the perpetrators of this increasing monopolization of land, which Horace Greeley had demonized so strongly in his letter. The resultant decline in wages for normal laborers, therefore, was based on the increasing exhaustion of the West, which had been heavily promoted as being a locus for success and American individualism. And if people could not expand inward, then, Turner believed, they must expand outward, to “broader field[s],” internationally.³⁷

This idea of the frontier having closed in 1890 lasted decades after its initial announcement, persisting into contemporary courses on the American West. Patricia Nelson Limerick, in her 1987 book “The Legacy of Conquest,” writes the following: “Young scholars, hired to teach Western American history, learn that their departments expect their courses to end in 1890.”³⁸ This concept that the West, and by association the opportunities it held, was disappearing was one that Turner capitalized on in his paper. A key example of how he did so is when he wrote, “four centuries from the discovery of America...the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history” — a period that, according to him, “explain[ed] American development.”³⁹ Therefore, the shifting attitude towards the shrinking frontier demonstrated fears of decreasing opportunity, and in turn, an inability to achieve American individualism and reconstruct the democracy which the West had furthered. This individualism, therefore, was key to forming the frontier-centric lens through which historians evaluated the unique history of American individualism and democracy.

SOCIAL DARWINISM AND AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

³² “Following the Frontier Line, 1790 to 1890.”

³³ Henry George, “Why Work is Scarce, Wages Low, and Labor Restless,” transcript of speech delivered at Metropolitan Temple, San Francisco, CA, March 26, 1878.

https://cooperative-individualism.org/george-henry_why-work-is-scarce-wages-low-and-labor-restless-1878-mar.pdf

³⁴ “Following the Frontier Line, 1790 to 1890.”

³⁵ George, “Why Work is Scarce.”

³⁶ George, “Why Work is Scarce.”

³⁷ Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier.”

³⁸ Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest* (W.W. Norton, 1987), 31.

³⁹ Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier.”

As industrial expansion saturated domestic markets in the late nineteenth century, Turner's frontier thesis propelled American expansion outward, reframing seemingly decreased opportunity as necessitating global imperialism. The late nineteenth century was a time of industrialization and economic transformation for the United States, and ultimately led to its expansion in the form of imperialism. By the 1880s, industrialization in the United States was so advanced that businessmen sought international markets in which to sell their goods.⁴⁰ Imperialism was also linked to two other key concepts of the era: Social Darwinism and American exceptionalism.⁴¹

Social Darwinism was the term used to describe the misapplication of Charles Darwin's "survival of the fittest" theory to broader society: that rich people and certain races were inherently superior to others.⁴² Many imperialists used this theory to claim that it was the duty of the educated white man to civilize and spread democracy and other Western political ideals to more "savage" nations.⁴³

American exceptionalism was the idea that the United States was a unique nation as a result of its commitment to ideals such as democracy and liberty.⁴⁴ Two main events linked to the rise of American imperialism occurred during the time period right before and five years after Turner's speech: the annexation of Hawaii and the Spanish-American War.

The period surrounding "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" revealed an increasingly imperialist United States, driven by waning economic opportunities in light of the closing frontier that Turner theorized would necessitate outward expansion. The first such event was the annexation of Hawaii, which began on January 16 of 1893, when the U.S. Marines invaded Hawaii and backed then-ruler Queen Liliuokalani into surrendering her throne the very next day.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ LeeAnna Keith, "Chapter 9 Introductory Essay: 1877-1898," *Bill of Rights Institute*, Accessed May 21, 2026, <https://billofrightsinstitute.org/essays/chapter-9-introductory-essay-1877-1898/>.

⁴¹ Thomas McCarthy, *Social Darwinism and White Supremacy* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 69-95.

Julian Go, "The Provinciality of American Empire: 'Liberal Exceptionalism' and U.S. Colonial Rule, 1898-1912," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 49, no. 1 (2007): 74-108, <https://www.bu.edu/sociology/files/2010/04/jgoprovinciality.pdf>.

⁴² Jennifer Kretchmar, "Social Darwinism," *EBSCO*, 2021, <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/social-sciences-and-humanities/social-darwinism>.

⁴³ Ellen Sebring, "Civilization & Barbarism: Cartoon Commentary & 'The White Man's Burden' (1898-1902)," *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 13, no. 27 (2015): <https://apjif.org/2015/13/27/ellen-sebring/4339>.

⁴⁴ Go, "The Provinciality of American Empire," 78-79.

⁴⁵ The Learning Network, "Jan. 17, 1893 | Hawaiian Monarchy Overthrown by America-Backed Businessmen," *New York Times*, January 17, 2012, <https://archive.nytimes.com/learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/01/17/jan-17-1893-hawaiian-monarchy-overthrown-by-america-backed-businessmen/>.

The official end of the annexation occurred on July 7, 1898, when it was approved by Congress, and on August 12, 1898, Hawaii was formally transferred to America.⁴⁶ Moreover, the approval of the annexation by Congress that July coincided with another international development: that of the Spanish-American War. The war itself had also been driven by imperialist interests, as it was believed that American victory would open up new markets for American goods.⁴⁷ This prediction proved accurate when, following its victory, the United States acquired territories including the Philippines and Puerto Rico.⁴⁸

The proliferation of American imperialism during this time period reflected a search for new economic opportunity, wherein American individualism could be furthered. Turner's emphasis on the fact that "American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise" reflected broader imperialist interests at the time in lands beyond the border of the United States, which furthered national economic gain.⁴⁹ As the concept of the frontier became finite, America increasingly shifted toward global expansion—a shift that Turner later codified into an expansionist framework explaining American development. This framework was then used by historians to study previous interpretations of democratic and ideological development within the United States, which Turner's thesis asserted had initially occurred through westward expansion and the frontier.

THE EVOLUTION OF HISTORIOGRAPHY

The frontier thesis influenced historiography of American political concepts, such as liberty and democracy, from Eurocentric racial theories to a frontier-focused lens. Historiography is the study of how history itself—of many things, such as political ideals—is written and interpreted. One major late nineteenth century historiographical theory regarding these American political concepts was the Germanic germ theory.⁵⁰ The concept postulated that political aptitude was inherently determined by one's race, and that Germanic and Anglo-Saxon races possessed great talent in that regard.⁵¹ In turn, the theory argued, Germanic germs were transferred over to American colonists during the process of migration, ultimately allowing for colonists of Anglo-Saxon and Germanic background to flourish politically and create institutions of democracy.⁵²

Turner relocated American character and political concepts onto geography, replacing biological determinism with environmental determinism. Just three years before Turner's speech, the Germanic

⁴⁶ "Joint Resolution to Provide for Annexing the Hawaiian Islands to the United States (1898)," National Archives, accessed May 21, 2026,

<https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/joint-resolution-for-annexing-the-hawaiian-islands>.

⁴⁷ "Hawaii Annexed to the United States," *EBSCO*, 2022,

<https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/law/hawaii-annexed-united-states>

⁴⁸ "The Spanish-American War, 1898," Office of the Historian, accessed May 21, 2026,

<https://history.state.gov/milestones/1866-1898/spanish-american-war>.

⁴⁹ Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier."

⁵⁰ Gilman M. Ostrander, "Turner and the Germ Theory," *Agricultural History* 32, no. 4 (1958): 258–61.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3740063>.

⁵¹ Ostrander, "Turner and the Germ Theory," 258–60.

⁵² Ostrander, "Turner and the Germ Theory," 258–60.

germ theory was in full swing, having been further articulated by another historian of the Far West, Hubert Howe Bancroft.⁵³ In an 1890 paper, Bancroft argued that the “tide of intelligence” had always moved from east to west, and that it was thus clear to see how such Germanic influence had naturally furthered the development of the democratic political systems of the United States.⁵⁴ Turner, however, pushed back on this concept, and instead wrote in his essay that “Too exclusive attention has been paid by institutional students to the Germanic origins, too little to the American factors. The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization.”⁵⁵ In doing so, Turner foregrounded the frontier in the development of American political ideals, creating space for new interpretations of American democracy and national character. This ultimately shifted the focus of the historiography of American democracy from European racial theories to the place in which American individualism was being directly furthered: the West.

Nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than in twentieth-century historiographical scholarship, which increasingly centered the frontier as the primary site of how democracy was interpreted while actively refuting the Germanic germ theory. One such example was the 1946 article “The Problem of the Common Man in Early Medieval Europe” by Carl Stephenson, a medieval historian, in which Stephenson disproves the germ theory. To this end, he writes, “...we should not imagine the Germanic state of the early Middle Ages to have been essentially a national union formed by a citizen soldiery of free peasants.”⁵⁶ Another example of such direct historiographical impact can be found in the 1990 essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American Historiography: A Review Essay” by Paula M. Nelson. Within it, Nelson claims that “The publication of Turner's paper launched the study of the frontier as an academic field and helped crystallize popular thinking about the importance of the frontier in American life.”⁵⁷ Nelson then goes on to look at three books published over the past decade in the field of frontier studies, and analyze how each was influenced by Turner's thesis. Moreover, Nelson describes Turner as having “established himself as the father of frontier studies”⁵⁸ through his frontier thesis. The use of Turner's frontier thesis almost a century after publication, along with his recognition as being a founding father of frontier studies—and by extension, of historiography that focuses on how the frontier was used to interpret American democracy—further underscores the enduring influence of Turner's paper on modern interpretations of America's development.

Turner's frontier thesis, in fact, along with his other work, sparked so much influence in the realm of American historiography that they remained central to historiographical debate decades after publication. In Jackson K. Putnam's 1976 article, “The Turner Thesis and the Westward Movement: A Reappraisal,” he directly notes the phenomenon, claiming, “What is surprising about Turner's ideas is that they seem

⁵³ Ostrander, “Turner and the Germ Theory,” 258.

⁵⁴ Ostrander, “Turner and the Germ Theory,” 258-59.

⁵⁵ Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier.”

⁵⁶ Carl Stephenson, “The Problem of the Common Man in Early Medieval Europe,” *The American Historical Review* 51, no. 3 (1946): 419–38. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1840107>.

⁵⁷ Paula M. Nelson, “The Significance of the Frontier in American Historiography: A Review Essay,” *The Annals of Iowa* 50 (1990): 531-540. <https://pubs.lib.uiowa.edu/annals-of-iowa/article/id/11183/>.

⁵⁸ Nelson, “A Review Essay,” 540.

largely to have escaped rather than suffered” a fate of interpretative obsolescence and be relegated “permanently to the historiographical ash heap.”⁵⁹ Putnam then goes on to claim that after Turner’s opponents had thoroughly attacked his work—especially his frontier thesis—it “became apparent that much of [Turner’s] presentation was still valid nevertheless...Probably alone of the American historians of his generation, Turner is still the leading figure in his field.”⁶⁰ It is, therefore, evident that Turner’s work, especially his frontier thesis, survived decades of historiographical analysis that ultimately marked it as being a key permanent influence in the realm of American historiography that it had disrupted.

Turner’s historiographical influence is further demonstrated in twentieth-century scholarship which actively engages with the same key nineteenth-century ideologies of Manifest Destiny, imperialism, and the frontier, as seen in Patricia Nelson Limerick’s 1995 essay “Turnerians All: The Dream of a Helpful History in an Intelligible World.” In it, Limerick cites Richard Hofstadter in his 1968 book *The Progressive Historians*, quoting his claim that Manifest Destiny was “engendered by American expansionism.”⁶¹ She then goes on to admit that, “The frontier had produced pioneer ideals, and pioneer ideals were the key to American character and democracy.”⁶² By featuring Hofstadter’s quote, Limerick underscores the relationship between westward expansion and Manifest Destiny, which she further reinforces in her claim that the frontier produced the “pioneer ideals” central to the individualism and free political ideals of the United States. Therefore, Limerick utilizes the frontier-focused lens that Manifest Destiny and the consequent imperialism had furthered in the late nineteenth century—the era that Turner’s paper was so reflective of. Turner’s frontier thesis, in directly connecting to dominant ideologies of his era, thus helped solidify a frontier-centric framework that later historians, including Limerick, used to consider previous interpretations of American democracy.

Additionally, Limerick’s paper, despite going on to criticize the continuous focus on the frontier thesis, still adopted his frontier-centered framework. As a key example, Limerick further notes in her essay, “The Frontier Thesis was fine for its time, but now the times demand the Urban/Industrial Thesis. Antiquarians can try to figure out what became of those pioneer ideals, but historians have more urgent obligations.”⁶³ In this quote, Limerick’s stance on Turner’s frontier thesis—that it was fine for its time but had become outdated—is clear. Nevertheless, her admission that historians were still attempting to research the “pioneer ideals” Turner had emphasized that the West furthered showcases the longevity of the frontier thesis’ influence on American historiography. The direct influence of the frontier thesis, then, clearly influenced historiography so much that its existence—and thus, its frontier-centric viewpoint—was mutually accepted, even over a century later by those who believed that its relevance had long elapsed. It

⁵⁹ Jackson K. Putnam, “The Turner Thesis and the Westward Movement: A Reappraisal,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 7, no. 4 (1976): 377–404. <https://doi.org/10.2307/968058>.

⁶⁰ Putnam, “A Reappraisal,” 383.

⁶¹ Patricia Nelson Limerick, “Turnerians All: The Dream of a Helpful History in an Intelligible World.” *The American Historical Review* 100, no. 3 (1995): 697–716. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2168601>.

⁶² Patricia Nelson Limerick, “Turnerians All: The Dream of a Helpful History in an Intelligible World.” *The American Historical Review* 100, no. 3 (1995): 697–716. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2168601>.

⁶³ Limerick, “Turnerians All,” 708.

can therefore be determined that “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” permanently shaped the historiography of American ideals.

CONCLUSION

Through its declaration of the closed frontier as being the driving force of American democracy, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” reflected concerns and ideologies of the era and influenced future American historiography. Turner’s paper clearly reflected many key concepts of the era, especially those of Manifest Destiny, the possibilities of westward expansion, and imperialism. His frontier thesis, which he posited in the essay, permanently shaped American historiography and remained central to the historical understanding of American individualism, democracy, and other key political concepts. In more recent years, more than a century after its publication, Turner’s paper is still so influential that papers are regularly published regarding how there are recent “identifiable trends in American historiography [bearing] more or less directly on Turner’s ‘frontier democracy’ hypothesis.”⁶⁴

Taken altogether, these historiographical influences demonstrate how Turner’s frontier thesis actively reshaped the way historians conceptualized past interpretations of democracy and national identity within the United States. By diverting the source of democracy, individualism, and American political innovation away from dominant models of European racial theory, Turner fundamentally shifted the field of American historiography toward a more internal and frontier-centric lens of democratic and ideological formation. Despite the refutations of later scholars, the framework of Turner’s frontier thesis has remained a keystone of the American historiographical field for over a century.⁶⁵ In this sense, the endurance of the frontier thesis’ influence lies not in its unconditional acceptance but in the persistence of its foundational concepts. Those concepts center around the frontier being inextricably linked to the development of American democracy, and in turn, to the way such a connection has shaped interpretations of democracy for decades.⁶⁶ Ultimately, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” remains a fundamental text in the study of American historiography because of the way it permanently altered how historians study the way in which democracy has been conceptualized. Ultimately, this paper, in identifying the areas in which Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis had a lasting impact, advances current knowledge on the development of American historiography.

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