The Significance of the Frontier in High School History Textbooks: Frederick Jackson Turner and Texas State Textbook Adoption

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I – Introduction

High school history textbooks are the most important works of historical writing. Each year, millions of high school students embark on a planned study of the past. They are guided by a textbook. For most of these students, high school will be their only exposure to academic history. Textbook authors know this, and they attempt to write a comprehensive narrative of the past. This narrative is supposed to counter a different type of history that Americans are exposed to throughout day-to-day life.[1] Outside-of-school "history" is presented in vignettes—neatly articulated stories usually lacking context and usually constructed to entertain or to persuade. This type of history is cherry-picked and presented as definitive: this is the way things were. Historical vignettes are used by everyone: politicians, judges, movie directors, authors, and grandparents telling stories around the dining room table. Textbooks try to present a fuller, more accurate history—in the hope that some believe accuracy is more important than entertainment. Writing a textbook is a foolish undertaking. Historians know that the totality of United States history can't be captured in a single book.[2] But writing a textbook is also a hopeful and necessary endeavor—an acknowledgement that the actions of humanity in the past are worth knowing in the present.

In 1931, Carl Becker delivered a lecture to the American Historical Association titled "Everyman His Own Historian." He argued that historians expect new interpretations of the past to emerge over time: "In the history of history a myth is a once valid but now discarded version of the human story, as our now valid versions will in due course be relegated to the category of

[1] Peter Burkholder and Dana Schaffer, "Where Do People Get Their History?" in "History, the Past, and Public Culture: Results from a National Survey" (Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association, 2021), 18–24. History books are ranked twelfth, behind fictional films, tv news, and religious document.
[2] Mia Bay et al., "Writing Textbooks: Is a Unified Narrative of Pluralistic America Possible?" (Teaching Race and Slavery in the American Classroom, Yale University, 2022), https://youtu.be/WW_DmMdkisQ.

discarded myths."[3] Historians, as chroniclers of both events and ideas, trace historiography, which is the progression of valid historical explanations to discarded myths, or the "the history of history." Programmers use version control to trace changes in computer code; historiography is version control for historians—a record of change as new information and method are introduced into scholarship. Before taking a step forward, historians analyze the historical approaches of the past. Eventually, this self-awareness leads to change.

What is true for the writing of history is not true for the writing of textbooks.[4] Often, historians believe that the historical field's consensus will end up in textbooks—trickle-down education. But textbooks are different from the academic works that historians read and write within their profession. In a textbook, definitive proclamations about the past replace the hemming-and-hawing of footnotes and academic discourse. [5] The same person can write for both academia and education, and they can have completely different standards when deciding to repeat or to discard a historical narrative. When enough textbook authors include an explanation of history in textbooks, that explanation becomes fixed in both high school curriculum and the standard narrative of American history. Historians may discard explanations to myth, but textbook authors continue to include these myths. The "standard" explanation of the past is difficult to change.

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[3] Carl Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," *The American Historical Review* 37, no. 2 (1932): 231. Becker was one of Turner's students.

[4] For commentary on historian's non-professional approach to education at the college level, see "The Amateur in the Operating Room: History and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning," *The American Historical Review*, October 2004, https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/109.4.1171.

[5] For interesting commentary on the different types of historical writing, see Camilla Townsend, "Appendix: How Scholars Study the Aztecs," in *Fifth Sun: A New History of the Aztecs* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021), 209–15. Townsend writes that textbooks pretend the present state of the historical field has always existed. Because of this, textbooks do not discuss "how we know what we know." Townsend raises important questions about the types of primary sources that contribute to a textbook's authoritative narrative.

A tenuous connection exists between the historical field and the study of textbooks. Several generations of scholars have produced work based on high school history textbooks, but the complicated role of high school textbooks remains under-researched. Other than the banal idea that textbooks are important, little consensus exists in previous scholarship. In 1980, Frances Fitzgerald, a journalist who was among the first to comparatively study textbooks, argued that multicultural history destroyed the patriotic American narrative that organized the teaching of U.S. History until the 1960s. In 2004, Joseph Moreau argued that the contents of American History textbooks have always been contentious: a consensus about national history had never existed. These two works are focused on many broad historical themes present within textbooks. In contrast, in a 2022 book, Donald Yacovone traced a single theme, white supremacy, in textbooks used between 1856 to 1964. He analyzed the ways white supremacy appeared in the contents of textbooks. Yacovone's approach shows that a single theme can be followed in textbooks through time.[6]

In these studies of textbooks, the American West has been ignored even though westward expansion is a central theme of all United States high school history.[7] In a college-level Western history textbook, the historian Richard White, wrote, "For more than a century the West has been the most strongly *imagined* section of the United States."[8] White attributed Western imagination to popular culture and folklore, but doesn't address the role that historians and textbooks played

[6] Frances FitzGerald, *America Revised: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980); Joseph Moreau, *Schoolbook Nation: Conflicts over American History Textbooks from the Civil War to the Present* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2004); Donald Yacovone, *Teaching White Supremacy: America's Democratic Ordeal and the Forging of Our National Identity* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2022).
[7] For a brief discussion of Turner and westward expansion in textbooks, see Moreau, *Schoolbook Nation*, 151–53. David Reichard argues that not even college education has properly incorporated the changing scholarship of the West into teaching. David A. Reichard, "How Do Students Understand the History of the American West?: An Argument for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (July 1, 2006): 207, https://doi.org/10.2307/25443332.
[8] Richard White, *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A New History of the American West* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 613.

in the mythic, imagined West. The non-imagined West is a tough place to find in both popular cultural and high school history textbooks.

United States History textbooks adopted in Texas between 1929–1992 demonstrate that the portrayal of the American West remained rooted in nineteenth-century historical ideas, regardless of academic historians' changing views. In the 1920s, Texas state laws mandated statewide textbook approval. This process inadvertently created a version of United States history that was used throughout the United States.

Westward expansion and Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis played a prominent role in this standard version of history, regardless of changing academic opinions throughout the twentieth century. Between 1920–1940, Turner's ideas became a foundational part of history textbooks. Between 1940–1970, changing public opinions decreased Turner's influence in textbooks, but the organizational structure of American history textbooks was still based on Turner's historical narrative. In the 1980s, historians determined Turner's explanation was a myth that didn't represent the complex American story. But in high school history textbooks, Turner's Western narrative remained a popular just-so story of American history. Frederick Jackson Turner's lasting significance is partly due to his inclusion within the high school classroom.

II – The Foundations of the Frontier Thesis in Textbooks

In 1891, Frederick Jackson Turner received his doctorate from Johns Hopkins University. He was one of the first professional historians trained in the United States, rather than in Europe.[9] This geographic rootedness showed itself throughout Turner's career. He studied the

[9] John Faragher, "Frederick Jackson Turner," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 2019).

distinct American qualities of United States history—at that time other historians believed European ideals were responsible for the success of the United States.

Turner was a member of the late nineteenth-century "New History" movement that argued historians are not in search of a fixed, objective truth.[10] Instead, present conditions—the problems, anxieties, and interests of a time—shape a generation's interpretation of the past. Turner expanded these ideas in his first essay, "The Significance of History." He wrote, "Each age writes the history of the past anew with reference to the conditions uppermost in its own time."[11] Historians, no matter how hard they try, are unable to become fully detached from present-day influences. Turner's most famous work was influenced by a large change in American life: the closing of the Western frontier.

At the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, Turner delivered a lecture, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." He later published the text of his lecture as an article. Among historians Turner's argument is known as the frontier thesis. It is the most-famous reinterpretation of American history in American history. Turner's dissertation adviser, Herbert Baxter Adams, believed that all significant American institutions had German or English foundations. Turner disagreed.[12]

In his article, Turner argued that the study of American history should focus on westward expansion. The frontier forced Americans to adapt to the environment, and this adaptation resulted in growth. Turner famously wrote, "This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion Westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of

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[10] *Ibid*.
[11] Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of 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), 18.
[12] John Faragher, "Frederick Jackson Turner."

primitive society, furnish the forces donating to American character."[13] The frontier created the traits responsible for American success including the "striking characteristics" of American intellect, which included energy, individualism, and morality.[14] For Turner, these "traits of the frontier" made American history distinct in two main ways. First, westward expansion moved Americans away from the influence of European ideas and culture. The old world represented a lack of independence. When pioneers advanced along the frontier, they became detached from European conventions and avoided the problems caused by dense, hierarchical populations. Second, the availability of free land created individual liberty and economic self-sufficiency. The American "mobility of population" provided a safety valve; the pioneer could always move toward new opportunities.[15] If the pioneer failed in the Appalachian Mountains, the Great Plains existed further west. The pioneer could become a trapper, a trader, a miner, a cowboy, or a railroad store owner. Space ensured freedom.[16]

Turner was the first historian to claim that westward movement shaped national character, but many Americans before him had acknowledged the importance of the United States frontier. Often, the frontier was portrayed as a place where agrarian Americans could solve the country's problems.[17] For example, Thomas Jefferson viewed the West as a land of opportunity, morality, and virtue—just like Turner.[18] In a 1785 letter to John Jay, Jefferson opined, "Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, & they are tied to their country & wedded to it's [sic]

[13] Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," 32.
[14] *Ibid*., 59.
[15] Greg Grandin, "The Safety Value," in *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, 2019), 63–82.
[16] Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," 38.
[17] For an early assessment of the agrarian ideal, see Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West As Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1950).
[18] John Brockmeier, "The Similarities of Western Idealism: Thomas Jefferson and Frederick Jackson Turner" (unpublished essay, Yale University, 2021), 5–13.

liberty & interests by the most lasting bonds."[19] Jefferson believed the farmer could solve all of America's problems. Thomas Robert Malthus, an English economic and political theorist, argued that no country could exist without periods of inequality and poverty because of a shortage of food. Jefferson disagreed. In letters to friends, he argued that starvation was a European problem, and the United States could always dedicate more land to farming. Jefferson even suggested that all American laborers could become farmers to feed both the United States and Europe. An abundance of land would prevent scarcity.[20]

Jefferson was a politician who predicted the future of American expansion. In 1785, he wrote, "Our confederacy must be viewed as the nest from which all America, North & South is to be peopled."[21] In 1893, the United States stretched from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. There is a bit of Jefferson in Turner's frontier thesis, and a ghostly Jefferson would have been proud of Turner's 1893 article. Agrarian idealism along the frontier connected the predictions of the founding father to the analysis of the historian.

Turner synthesized frontier idealism into American historiography. The frontier thesis was initially presented to historians—not Jefferson, politicians, or the public. Turner's article reinterpreted American History and redirected the field. Western History exists because Turner argued the most important traits of America are because of the frontier, and the frontier should be studied order to understand why these traits exist.[22] Historians listened.

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[19] Thomas Jefferson to John Jay, August 23, 1785, in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, Merrill D. Peterson, ed., (New York, N.Y: Literary Classics of the U.S., 1984), 818–820.
[20] Thomas Jefferson to Jean Baptiste Say, February 1, 1804, Ibid., 1143–1144. For Jefferson's debate with Malthus, see Drew R. McCoy, *The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1980), 190–95. For Jefferson's Western ideals and politics, see Donald Jackson, *Thomas Jefferson & the Stony Mountains: Exploring the West From Monticello* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981).
[21] Thomas Jefferson to Archibald Stuart, January 25, 1786, Ibid., pg. 843–845.
[22] Martin Ridge, "Frederick Jackson Turner, Ray Allen Billington, and American Frontier History," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 19, no. 1 (January 1988): 4, https://doi.org/10.2307/969790.

Turner's ability to tell a story is the power of the frontier thesis. Westward expansion became a story that was easy to tell, easy to write, and (because of its vagueness) easy to believe. The frontier thesis was also received well by 1890s Americans. Turner concluded his lecture: "the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history."[23] After thousands of words extolling the frontier, he seems to say: if the frontier has closed, can America ever be great again? Turner seized upon the problems, anxieties, and interests of 1890s America. Eventually, the frontier thesis became a dominant explanation of American history, partly because Turner's feel-good patriotic narrative was rhetorically broad enough to justify a century of American imperialism.[24] From 1910–1924, Turner was a professor at Harvard University, and he was at the height of his scholarly influence. Turner's frontier thesis, teaching, and professional service (he was the President of the American Historical Association in 1910) influenced a generation of colleagues and graduate students.[25]

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While Turner influenced historiography, progressivism increased the influence of state governments in public education. In Texas, this resulted in statewide textbook adoption. Textbook publishers adapted to these laws. The large quantity of textbooks needed for Texas high school students allowed publishers to treat Texas adoption as a de-facto nationwide standard.

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[23] Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," 60.
[24] For the use of Turner's ideas as justification for twentieth century actions, see Grandin, *The End of the Myth*.
[25] For an extensive account of Turner's scholarly influence and a biography of Turner, see Allan G. Bogue, "Eminence," in *Frederick Jackson Turner: Strange Roads Going Down* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 261–92. For a biography written by one of Turner's staunchest defenders, see Ray Allen Billington, *Frederick Jackson Turner: Historian, Scholar, Teacher* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973). For a look at Turner's changing influence over time, see Ridge, "Frederick Jackson Turner, Ray Allen Billington, and American Frontier History."

In 1876, Texas ratified a state constitution that mandated a public school system. Article VII, Section 1 of the Constitution reads, "it shall be the duty of the Legislature of the State to establish and make suitable provision for the support and maintenance of an efficient system of public free schools."[26] As progressive policies increased government influence and power, the Texas legislature revaluated the state's role in public education. In 1917, the legislature amended the Texas Constitution to read, "it shall be the duty of the State Board of Education to set aside a sufficient amount out of the said tax to provide free textbooks for the use of children attending the public free schools of this State."[27] The people of Texas approved this amendment on November 5, 1918. The state would pay for textbooks, but, of course, with state funding comes state requirements. Textbooks had to come from a list adopted by a state textbook commission. In 1919, the commission released the first list of textbooks adopted for use in Texas public schools.[28]

In 1925, the legislature passed the State Free Text Book Law. This law clarified the role of state bureaucracy in public education, and the law replaced the state textbook commission with a nine-member state board of education. Initially, the board had one responsibility, textbook approval. It nominally replaced the previous textbook commission, but the law acknowledged the importance of textbooks to the board's role. It reads, "The words 'the Commission' or 'Textbook Commission' appearing anywhere in this law will hereafter mean the State Board of

[26] Tex. Const. art. VII, §1.
[27] Special Tax for Maintenance of Public Schools and Furnishing Free Text Books, Texas State Leg. H.J.R No. 27, (1917).
[28] Texas State Department of Education, "Texas Adopted Textbook List 1919" (Austin, 1919), https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/25726. This list included three United States history textbooks, with retail prices ranging from $0.40 to $1.25

Education."[29] The board had absolute control over what textbooks were used in Texas public schools:

> The Commission, as herein provided for, shall adopt text books in accordance with the provisions of this Act for every public free school in this State and no public free school in this State shall use any text book unless same [textbook] has been previously adopted and approved by this Commission.[30]

The State Free Text Book Law also created a five-member textbook committee to assist the textbook commission. Members of the committee would be "experienced and active educators, engaged in teaching in the public schools."[31] The educator-staffed Committee examined textbooks and provided recommendations "relative to the teachable value of the books submitted" to the board. The board would vote whether to approve the recommended textbooks. Because the governor appointed State Board of Education members, political appointees decided what textbooks were used in Texas public schools.[32]

The 1925 State Free Textbook Law created a "uniform system" of textbooks to be used throughout the state of Texas in two ways: financially and legally. The statewide adoption of textbooks provided financial incentives for Texas. Publishers offered discounts for the large quantity of textbook purchases. Statewide approval benefitted local school districts (who didn't have to pay for textbooks) and the state budget. The legislature also added a criminal penalty for violating the textbook law: "A willful violation of any provision of this Act by any person shall be a misdemeanor punishable by fine of not less than $5.00 nor more than $100.00."[33] The Texas

[29] Texas State Department of Education, "Texas Adopted Textbook List 1929" (Austin, 1929), 7, https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/19097.
[30] Ibid., 6.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid., 4–10. Each adaptation list includes an introduction with laws relevant to textbooks. The 1929 edition includes Article VII of the Texas Constitution, the State Free Text Book Law, and revised civil statutes relation to "prescribed studies."
[33] Ibid., 24. In 2022 dollars this fine ranges from $84 to $1678. Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, "Inflation Calculator," n.d., https://www.minneapolisfed.org:443/about-us/monetary-policy/inflation-calculator.

legislature used the power of the purse and the threat of legal action to control what materials were used in schools.

From 1929 on, similarities existed between textbook lists for the rest of the twentieth century. It took ten years for this typical approval list to emerge.[34] The Textbook Commission approved a new list of history textbooks every four to six years. The Commission approved five United States History textbooks for each approval period. The approved textbooks were typically published the year before they were adopted. Authors frequently appear on successive approval lists by writing new editions of previously published textbooks. However, every textbook approval period has at least one new author represented. The approved history textbooks are listed alongside algebra, English, and chemistry materials because every textbook used in Texas public schools was approved by the State Textbook Commission. The state adoption of textbooks was a rather boring affair.

But after approval, schools used these textbooks. Teachers lectured on the textbook materials. Students read and reread chapters to study for tests. If the Textbook Commission approved a textbook, that textbook became a part of students' education. These textbooks are not esoteric academic work read by dozens of people. Instead, these approval lists allow a historian to be confident that a significant number of students, both in Texas and across the country, were exposed to a certain version of history.[35] At this point in Texas history, these approval lists weren't attempts to tightly control educational material. The 1925 Free Text Book Law was a noble goal—free textbooks for all students in the public school system. These textbooks

[34] By this time, the organization had new responsibilities and more employees. The 1929 Textbook approval document lists sixty-six employees with eight working in the Division of Textbook Administration.
[35] For state's present-day approaches to textbook selection, see Vincent Scudella, "State Textbook Adoption" (Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States, 2013), https://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/09/23/10923.pdf. Thirty states select textbooks at the local level. Twenty state select textbooks at the state level.

represent multiple generations of high school history class. One can imagine a hypothetical small-town high school curriculum—the historical knowledge of grandparents, parents, and kids—contained in these books.[36] One can also imagine these textbooks in schools across the United States.

Authors and publishers sought Texas approval because of the size of the Texas textbook market and the centralized process. A history textbook would certainly be profitable if approved in Texas. But the Commission only approved five books per list, so authors were hesitant to add new ideas. (Writing textbooks is different from scholarship. When writing textbooks, bold new historiographic ideals aren't rewarded with readers, awards, and sales.) If previously approved textbooks included certain ideas organized in a certain way, textbook authors and publishers would be cautious about deviating from those ideas. In effect, the statewide adoption process created a self-perpetuating "standard" textbook. Authors and publishers wanted to sell many books, so they wrote textbooks similar to previously adopted textbooks.

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[36] For an example of less-vetted history materials used in Texas classrooms, see John Rosenfield Jr., *Texas History Movies* (Dallas: P.L. Turner Company, 1928). From 1926 to 1928 the Dallas Morning news printed 428 comic strips about Texas History. The comics covered the period 1530–1885. The comic book creators explained: "Here the cartoons end abruptly, not because there was nothing else worth telling, but because the things that happened after that make dull pictures; albeit, fascinating reading." Allan Holtz, "Obscurity of the Day: Texas History Movies," *Stripper's Guide* (blog), April 27, 2016, http://strippersguide.blogspot.com/2016/04/obscurity-of-day-texas-history-movies.html. After daily publication of the comic ended, the Magnolia Oil Company published an abridged collection of these comics that teachers used in classrooms. The oil company donated these books to schools from 1928 until the 1960s. Teachers used the comics as a fun way to explain history. Even for their time, these comics were a simplistic and problematic portrayal of history. For example, comic No. 23, "The Missions Failed," includes a derogatory depiction of a Native American and the caption, "sickness broke out among the Indians." The role the Spanish conquest played in disease transfer is ignored, instead the comic's drawings emphasize the weakness and hostility of Native Americans. In 1974, the Texas State Historical Association reprinted a special edition of the comics. The association only reprinted 102 of the original 468 comics, because they decided the other comics were too racist and offensive.

Textbooks from early approval periods relied on Turner's frontier thesis to explain westward expansion. Whether or not Turner was mentioned by name, he influenced, through the language and organization of textbooks, the teaching of high school history.

The source of ideas can be difficult to follow in a footnote-less textbook. However, more than most historical writing, the frontier thesis includes distinct words, phrases, and ideas. These are traceable elements that clearly appear in textbooks.

Textbooks also need a narrative framework to organize the infinite facts of American history. In an essay about the legacy of Turner, the historian William Cronon argued that "the frontier thesis in effect set American space in motion and give it plot."[37] This plot is a powerful narrative. It is a story to tell about American history that has become the only story to tell about the American West (at least in textbooks). Cronon writes, "When chapters of the standard textbook of Western History move from Indian to ranchers to farmers, they do so because no other arrangement seems properly ordered."[38] Turner's plot became a foundation of American history textbooks. Textbook authors built this foundation while Turner was the most influential historian in the United States. In twentieth century history textbooks, Westward expansion couldn't be discussed without using Turner's progression.

David Muzzey, a Columbia University history professor, was the most popular textbook writer of the early twentieth century.[39] Muzzey published a textbook in 1911, but the Texas Textbook Commission first adopted his 1927 textbook, *History of the American People*, in 1929.[40] Muzzey was a controversial textbook author, because his textbooks were less patriotic

[37] William Cronon, "Revisiting the Vanishing Frontier: The Legacy of Frederick Jackson Turner," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (April 1987): 188, https://doi.org/10.2307/969581.
[38] Ibid., 167.
[39] Moreau, *Schoolbook Nation*, 89.
[40] Texas State Department of Education, "Texas Adopted Textbook List 1929."

than other textbooks at the time. Instead, Muzzey acknowledged that "not every American was noble nor everything American was pure."[41] This caused problems. In 1923, the Sons of the American Revolution critiqued Muzzey's textbook as "hopelessly wrong" and "near socialist."[42] Hearst newspapers included cartoons depicting a schoolhouse gnawed by a rat labeled "Dr. Muzzey."[43] Yet Texas approved Muzzey's book six years later. Texas's modern reputation as a bastion of reactionary textbooks wasn't true in 1929.

Muzzey doesn't quote Turner's writing or mention the historian, but Turner's plot influenced the textbook. Muzzey makes the narrative power of Turner's ideas explicit: "In spite of the danger from the savages and the toil of clearing the dense forest, Americans had pressed steadily forward into the land of promise toward the setting sun." The rest of the chapter describes Americans settling the frontier.

History of the American People's westward expansion chapter, "The Rising of the West," immediately followed the chapter on the Civil War. This pattern of organization is ubiquitous in textbooks. In reality, westward expansion occurred over a long time. (In the eighteenth-century colonists wanted to farm in the Appalachian Mountains.[44]) But in textbooks narratives, the West was *always* settled after the Civil War. After the horrors of war, textbook authors shift the reader's attention West toward, according to Muzzey, "the land of promise"—Turner's plot in action.

Muzzey also used Turner-like language to portray the transformative power of the West: "The ever-moving westward frontier has been one of the most important influences in American

[41] "Dr. David Muzzey, Historian, Is Dead," *New York Times*, April 15, 1965.
[42] "Condemn Muzzey History," *New York Times*, May 22, 1923.
[43] "Dr. David Muzzey, Historian, Is Dead."
[44] For a critique of Turner-like language still used in history about early America, see Honor Sachs, "The Unbearable Greatness of Pioneering: Storytelling in David McCullough's The Pioneers," *Journal of the Early Republic* 41, no. 2 (2021): 209–16, https://doi.org/10.1353/jer.2021.0029.

history. It bred a type of settlers who, in their struggle to subdue the wild forest and the wilder savages, became self-reliant, resourceful, and remarkably courageous."[45] He concluded that the frontier developed the "most distinctive qualities of our [American] social life." Textbooks don't include footnotes, but Turner's frontier thesis clearly provided a foundation for Muzzey's writing about westward expansion.

Other textbook authors make their admiration of Turner more apparent. In 1934, Harold Faulkner and Tyler Kepner published *America Its History and People*. Like Muzzey, this textbook has a westward expansion chapter located after the Civil War. The first pages of that chapter are organized:

- Chapter: "The Agricultural Frontier"
  - Section: "American Moves West"
    - Subheading: "The Significance of the Frontier"
    - Subheading: "The Influence of the Frontier"[46]

These headings hint at Turner's influence within the chapter's writing. The first two sentences confirm that the frontier and Turner will be central to Faulkner and Kepner's version of Western history:

> Of all of the factors which have gone into the making of America as we know it today, none has been more important than the continual movement toward the west which began with the earliest settlers and lasted for almost three centuries. One of our most brilliant historians has gone so far as to say that 'the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.'[47]

Here Turner is quoted, not by name, but as "one of our most brilliant historians." On the next page, Faulkner quotes an entire paragraph from the frontier thesis. In these textbooks, Turner is a superstar historian.

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[45] David Saville Muzzey, *History of the American People* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1927), 228.
[46] Harold Underwood Faulkner and Tyler Kepner, *America, Its History and People, A Unit Organization* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1934), 385–86.
[47] Ibid., 385.

Muzzey's and Faulkner's popularity influenced later textbook authors, as well. Muzzey and Faulkner were the two of the most successful textbook authors on Texas adoption lists. The State Textbook Commission approved Muzzey's book four times between 1929 and 1962, and Faulkner's book appears in three approval periods from 1935 to 1950.[48] No other textbook authors had three or four repeated approvals in this period. Textbooks change between editions, but the organization and historical ideology of a textbook remains mostly constant, especially without additional writers contributing to the text. Muzzey and Faulkner used Turner's ideas in different ways, but the frontier thesis served as a foundational part of these high school versions of American history. One can imagine the essay questions teachers created based on these textbooks: What is the frontier's role in American History? What American traits exist because of the frontier? Who was Frederick Jackson Turner and why was he important to American History? For thirty-three years, Muzzey and Faulkner's portrayal of westward expansion an explicit part of many Texas high school students' American History education.

Throughout the twentieth century, Americans spent more years in school than ever before. More students led to state oversight in education, and more state involvement resulted in curriculum standards. During this thirty-three-year period, Texas's version of high school U.S. history started to influence textbooks used nationwide. Textbook authors wrote textbooks so they would be approved for use in Texas. The Texas State Textbook Commission effectively

[48] For textbooks adopted during this period, see Texas State Department of Education, "Texas Adopted Textbook List 1929."; Texas State Department of Education, "Texas Adopted Textbook List 1938" (Austin, 1938), https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/19101; Texas State Department of Education, "Texas Adopted Textbook List 1940" (Austin, 1940), https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/19102; Texas State Department of Education, "Texas Adopted Textbook List 1945" (Austin, 1945), https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/19107; Texas State Department of Education, "Texas Adopted Textbook List 1961" (Austin, 1961), https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/19116; Texas State Department of Education, "Texas Adopted Textbook List 1955" (Austin, 1955), https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/19115. A textbook authored by Muzzey was not approved between 1939–1949.

approved textbooks for schools across the country.[49] Turner's idea of westward progression became a foundation of American history, and one does not renovate a foundation.

III – Native American Agency and Historicity Along the Frontier

Eventually, textbook authors wandered away from Turner. His name no longer appeared in books and the frontier thesis played a smaller role in explaining American progress. Frederick Jackson Turner is not God; no writer or historian is. Well-regarded ideas (such as Turner's frontier thesis) are like a well-lit road. Following that road and accepting the orthodox way of thinking is the easiest way to traverse an intellectual subject. For many years Turner's frontier thesis was the definitive explanation of westward expansion, but in the 1950s that explanation began to change.

Authors qualified central themes of the frontier thesis by incremental shifts in narratives. Mid-century textbooks emphasized Native American agency and historicity in ways that Turner had not. These authors deserve credit for expanding who is included as part of American history, and so does the public—some of the impetus for textbook change was changing public opinion after World War II. However, these changes to Native American history were additions, not transformations of the material already in textbooks. Early Texas approval lists had built a foundational explanation of American history. Even when textbook authors moved on from the specifics of the frontier thesis, they maintained the Turnerian plot that had been used in previous textbooks. The frontier remained significant in high school history textbooks.[50]

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[49] Gail Collins, "How Texas Inflicts Bad Textbooks on Us," June 21, 2012, https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2012/06/21/how-texas-inflicts-bad-textbooks-on-us/.

[50] For an essay about the significance of what is significant in the history of the American West, see William Deverell, "Fighting Words: The Significance of the American West in the History of the United States," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (1994): 185–206, https://doi.org/10.2307/971462.

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Turner portrayed Native Americans as part of the wilderness landscape. According to historian David Nichols, implicit in Turner's argument is that Native Americans are important only because they contribute to the "pioneer's environment." Nichols did not mince words. He writes, "[Turner's] scholarship has been significantly responsible for the unjustified neglect of the Indian in American history."[51] In the frontier thesis, Native Americans contributed to the savagery of the wilderness, and they were indistinguishable from the environmental conditions of the frontier. Americans toiled along the frontier and eventually subdued both the wilderness and Native Americans. Throughout history and historiography, Native Americans were portrayed using derogatory stereotypes. Turner, in contrast, ignored indigenous peoples' role in history. Turner argues that most signs of "Indian life" vanished before the farmer arrived—previous stages of the frontier, such as mountain men and traders, led to population decline. Native Americans had no agency worth mentioning within American history and their contributions were trivial and tangential, at best. One could write and hold these ideas only if they believed indigenous people were backward, less than human individuals.[52]

In this selection of approved textbooks, the treatment of Native Americans is varied, but always brief. In early textbooks, authors placed emphasis on Native American's dying way of life and their non-contribution to American history. Faulkner and Kepner barely mentioned Native Americans. (The index of *American Its History and People* doesn't include an entry for "Indians."[53]) Muzzey briefly mentioned Jackson's policies of Indian removal, the post-civil war Indians wars, and the dishonorable "subjugation" of Native Americans. But Muzzey, like Turner,

[51] David A. Nichols, "Civilization Over Savage: Frederick Jackson Turner and the Indian," *South Dakota History* 2, no. 4 (1972): 383.
[52] Ibid., 383–87.
[53] Harold Underwood Faulkner and Tyler Kepner, "Index," in *America, Its History and People, A Unit Organization*.

doesn't grant any agency to Native Americans. Instead, they were "wards of the nation," destined to be assimilated by soldiers and laws.[54]

Some textbook authors wrote Turner's implicit argument—indigenous irrelevance—directly onto the page. In 1937, Ralph Volley Harlow, a professor of American History at Syracuse, published *Story of America.* In the introduction, Harlow argues that the ability "to wipe out a substantial portion of the original inhabitants" and ignore Native American culture made American history distinct from European and Asian history. Americans could progress because of the continent's "emptiness." Harlow wrote, "For practical purposes the Indians might almost be ignored." Like Turner, Harlow ignored Native Americans by linking them to the wilderness landscape. Historians ignored the complex trading networks, methods of resistance, and military ambitions of Native Americans. The "Indian problem," as many textbooks refer to these sections, was not a political or human question, but an environmental inconvenience, much like a stand of trees blocking fertile soil underneath. Harlow emphasized this idea: "From one point of view the Indians were nothing but an obstacle in the way of easy occupation of the North American continent." Native Americans were the historiographic casualties of American westward expansion. They had no agency and no history.[55]

In 1943, *A History of the United States for High Schools* by Yarbrough, Bruner, and Hancox, included an entire chapter on Native American history: "Removal of the Indians."[56]

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[54] David Saville Muzzey, *History of the American People*, 429.

[55] Ralph Volney Harlow, *Story of America* (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1937), 17–21. Harlow also believed frontier women were expendable: "Marriages came early on the frontier, because a man needed a housekeeper and general assistant, while a woman needed food. In her early years a woman carried the heavier share of the load, and proved it by dying young. It was her job to raise the children, and to keep alive at least some traces of civilization. . .When the first wife found relief from this grinding labor in death, the husband, usually still going strong, would marry a second, third, or even a fourth wife. The markets in old cemeteries tell a pathetic story of this aspect of frontier life." Ibid., 251.

[56] William Henry Yarbrough, Clarence Vernon Bruner, and Herbert French Hancox, *A History of the United States for High Schools: A Modified Unit Plan* (Chicago: Laidlaw Bros., 1943), 119–28.

Yarbrough continued the tradition of the faceless and unimportant Native American. In nine pages, three indigenous people are mentioned: Pocahontas; her father, Powhatan; and Tecumseh. Five tribes are named, but four of those (Creek, Cherokee, Choctaw, and Chickasaw) are named in the same sentence. Yet sixteen other names—from Columbus to "a leading Puritan, Mason by name"—are referenced in the chapter.[57] Yarbrough concluded the chapter, "By an act of Congress in 1924, Indians were made citizens of the United States."[58] Assimilation was Yarbrough's final word on Native Americans. Of course, nominal assimilation was already a given—the textbook barely differentiated between the seventeenth century Powhatan tribe and nineteenth century Western tribes, like the Nez Percé.

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The first substantial change to Native American portrayal in textbooks occurred in the 1950s. In 1954, Henry Bragdon and Samuel McCutchen published *History of a Free People*.[59] For its time, *History of a Free People* contained a notable shift away from Turner's interpretation of the West. Turner is not referenced in the book, and when the authors use "frontier," the word describes a place, instead of the process of adaptation and exceptionalism. Bragdon's portrayal of Native Americans remained brief, but different from early textbooks in three interesting ways.

First, of the books surveyed, *History of a Free People* included the first representation of Native American agency against United States westward expansion. The authors elaborated these ideas in the section "Defeat of the Plains Indians":

> These master horsemen and skillful warriors had been, in the words of Walter P. Webb "the most effectual barrier ever set up by a Native American population against European invaders. For two and a half centuries they maintained themselves with great fortitude

[57] When counting Native American vs. white names in this chapter, the author, John by name, threw up his hands at the random Puritan name.
[58] Yarbrough, *A History of the United States*, 128.
[59] Henry W. Bragdon and Samuel McCutchen, *History of a Free People* (New York: Macmillan, 1954).

> against the Spanish, English, French, Mexican, Texas, and American invaders, withstanding missionaries, whisky, disease, gunpowder and lead."[60]

This sentence may feel insignificant. It is not. The phrase "they maintained themselves with great fortitude" portrays Native Americans as competent, interesting, and respectable actors within their own history. Instead of Turner, Webb is quoted as the authoritative historian—declaring *this* is the way things were. For Bragdon, Native American history was worthy including in textbooks.[61]

Second, Bragdon referenced specific events and characters, rather than using broad generalizations for indigenous peoples across the continent. Bragdon portrayed Native Americans with a different way of life—filled with people and events, hopes and dreams—rather than a dying way of life. The textbook explains that the construction of the railroad led to the "ruthless slaughter" of the buffalo. The plains were opened for cattle grazing. Since the Plains Indians were "almost entirely dependent on the buffalo," the slaughter of buffalo herds forced Native Americans to choose between starvation or "virtual imprisonment" in reservations. But in this section, there's a hint of historical contingency. (Contingency is what makes history worth studying—things didn't have to be this way.) The defeat of Custer at the Battle of Little Big Horn and the leadership of Chief Joseph of Nez Percé tribe represented resistance. Bragdon then included a paragraph quote from Chief Joseph. Unlike previous textbooks, Native Americans' individuality and voice exist.[62]

Third, the authors implicate federal legislation, not just military actions, in the poor treatment of Native Americans. Prior textbooks portray military actions, such as the Indian Wars, as violent, dishonorable, and cruel. But early textbook authors portrayed legislation, especially

[60] Ibid., 383.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid., 383–84.

laws encouraging assimilation to U.S. economic structures, as benevolent political acts. This was a paternalistic perspective. In contrast, Bragdon questioned the "probably mistaken assumption" that federal laws encouraging assimilation, such as the 1887 Dawes Act, were good policy. However, Bragdon believed that Federal treatment of Native Americans had entered a new era: "Although this act proved a failure, it is the beginning of a new policy—the attempt at long last to deal justly with the original occupants of the land."[63] While this idea of just treatment doesn't align with modern sovereignty movements and historiography, for its time Bragdon's 1954 textbook was an improvement over previous portrayals of Native Americans.[64]

But these improvements were limited. Within an individual section of the textbook, Native Americans had agency, but within the chapter and textbook the stubborn foundation of the frontier thesis remained. Bragdon used Manifest Destiny as a central theme in his textbook. The United States was "certain" to extend the nation's boundaries to the Pacific. History that has already occurred often feels inevitable, but historians know this isn't true. However, manifest destiny says that history is inevitable. This is a step beyond Turner's frontier thesis which emphasized the struggle between wilderness and the pioneer. Westward expansion wasn't guaranteed either to occur or to benefit the nation. Regional tensions, unregulated finances, and evils from "the lack of a highly developed civic spirit" might split the civilized nation and the frontier apart.[65] Bragdon added certainty to Turner's frontier thesis, and the textbook chapter is organized with a familiar structure:

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[63] Ibid., 384.

[64] In Bragdon's defense, these are tough historiographic questions that are still being debated by scholars. For a critique of ignored indigenous violence in reinterpretations of Native American History, see Ned Blackhawk, "A new history of Indigenous American that replicates old myths," review of *Indigenous Continent: The Epic Conquest for North America,* by Pekka Hamalainen, *Washington Post,* October 4, 2022. https://www.washingtonpost.com/books/2022/10/05/ indigenous-continent-pekka-hamalainen-review/. For a historian's justification of portraying Native American agency, see Stuart B. Schwartz, "Denounced by Lévi Strauss CLAH Luncheon Address," *The Americas* 59, no. 1 (2002): 1–8.

[65] Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," 55.

- Chapter: "The Opening of the Great West"
    - "Railroad Building"
    - "The Cattle Kingdom"
        - Includes "Defeat of the Plains Indians"
    - "The Mining Frontier"
    - "Peopling the Great Plains" (the farming section)

Like Cronon said, in Turner's plot the rancher always comes before the farmer. These sections move through the sequence of frontier settlement, just as in Turner's thesis. This progression isn't necessarily wrong. Some regions of the country went through these exact stages in this exact order. But most places did not. The railroader, the rancher, the miner, and the farmer became archetypes of westward expansion.[66] Turner seems to say, follow these people and one can follow the important parts of American history.

The frontier thesis fixed certain topics into Western history. Native Americans don't only live in the American West. Every American knows this; Thanksgiving is a federal holiday that celebrates a Puritan and Indigenous feast in the Northeast United Sates. Native American populations existed through the American continent until United State Government policies resulted in forced migrations and death. Jacksonian Indian Removal pushed tribal governments West. The fact that almost all Indian reservations are west of the Mississippi River is a lasting effect of the 1830s. Yet the average American associates Native Americans with the western history (and probably with cowboys) as if things have always been that way. Turner and textbooks are partly to blame.

Bragdon's textbook fixed Native American history to the end of the frontier. Bragdon could have emphasized indigenous economic agency during rendezvous. This would have countered Turner's progression: robust economic systems and sophisticated trading systems weren't supposed to exist among Native Americans. Instead, he writes about the mountains

[66] Cronon, "Revisiting the Vanishing Frontier," 166.

man's "dangerous business of trapping and trading in Indian country."[67] Bragdon could have emphasized the large farming centers of the Missouri River Basin, such as the Mandan villages visited by Lewis and Clark, instead of the equestrian plains people.[68] That would have countered both Turner's and Jefferson's agrarian ideal. Instead, Bragdon emphasized Native American agency and individuality only in defeat. Standing Bear is quoted for a paragraph, but the quote is about the "hopelessness of the Indian cause."[69] For Turner, Native Americans were part of the wilderness, and the end of the frontier and the conquering of the wilderness was the end of Native Americans as a meaningful part of history. The continent's original inhabitants were, at most, an antiquated concern. Bragdon acknowledged Native Americans as interesting historical characters within their specific situation, but overall the textbook reached the same conclusion as Turner: Native Americans barely factored into American history after the closing of the frontier. In Bragdon's textbook, Turner's foundations were tested, but the frontier thesis remained the dominant explanation of American history.

Understanding why Native Americans received a more prominent role in history textbooks is difficult—it wasn't due to legislative or administrative changes to high school curriculum. Even today, Texas Education Code (curriculum requirements set by the state legislature) has no requirements for Native American history during high school.[70] The Texas Education Agency, an organization that replaced the State Board of Education in 1949, prescribed curriculum requirements in administrative code: at most this required students to

[67] Bragdon, *History of a Free People*, 281.
[68] For a modern account of the Mandan that details what Lewis and Clark saw, see Elizabeth A. Fenn, *Encounters at the Heart of the World: A History of the Mandan People* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2014).
[69] Bragdon, *History of a Free People,* 383.
[70] For history curriculum required by the legislature, see 2 Tex. Edu. Code §28.002 (2022). The code states that local school districts "shall require the teaching of informed American patriotism, Texas history, and the free enterprise system."

"analyze political issues such as Indian policies" from 1877–1898.[71] Bragdon didn't write Native Americans into different periods of American History. Instead, he wrote more accurate information in the same timeframe as other textbook authors.

There is one likely explanation for increased Native American emphasis in textbooks: textbooks started paying attention to Native Americans after military service in World War II. Navajo Code talkers played an important, successful, and visible role in the war. At this time, the Navajo Reservation in Northeast Arizona had a per-capita income that was seven percent of the American average. According to historian Andrew Needham, some Americans viewed these conditions as a failed promise to Navajo veterans and evidence of poor government priorities, especially with the Marshall plan funding international development. Academic opinion—the hope of trickle-down education—isn't enough to change textbook contents, but public attention is. Of course, the Navajo Nation is not located on the plains, but differentiating between Indigenous peoples was not Turner's or any American historian's strength at that time. Textbook authors placed more emphasis on Native American history, contrary to Turner's ideas in the frontier thesis.[72]

Later textbooks make the tradeoff between military service and the inclusion of Native American history explicit. In 1969, Lewis Paul Todd and Merle Curti published *Rise of the American Nation*. While World War II led to greater emphasis of Native American history in textbooks, the authors also mention earlier military service. They write, "In 1924 partly as a

[71] For curriculum standards required by the TEA for "United States History Since 1861," see 19 Tex. Admin. Code §113.32 (1999). The author, due to the limitations of researching Texas State Law while attending school in Connecticut, was unable to access administrative code in effect before 1999, which is only available in hard copy held in individual agency archives: Texas didn't collate administrative code until 1977. However, previous textbooks (like Yarbrough) already covered the requirements of §113.32. Even if that section were to go into effect as Bragdon authored his textbook, the Code would not be able to explain the difference in Native American portrayal.

[72] Andrew Needham, *Power Lines: Phoenix and the Making of the Modern Southwest* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014), 131–32.

reward for [Native American] service in World War I, the Indian Population as a whole was given citizenship."[73] In American History the expansion of civil rights—the acknowledgement that different groups of people deserve the same rights as the majority—often occurs after a group's military service to the country. Todd and Curti also highlighted Native American service during World War II: "approximately 25,000 Indians served in the armed forces. This was more than one third of all the able-bodied Indian men who were between the ages of 18 and 50."[74] One can ask cynical questions about these facts: Did the public pay attention to Native Americans only because they assimilated into the United States military and nationalist ideals of patriotism? Perhaps. Regardless of the cause, the portrayal of Native Americans moved away from Turner's ideas. High school students, who were probably unaware of these shifts in public attention, were still exposed to a different, more accurate portrayal of Native Americans in American history.

Todd and Curti also addressed the continuation of indigenous history into the twentieth century in three ways: the failures of the Dawes Act, the Indian Reorganization Act, and threats to Tribal Sovereignty.

First, the authors wrote about the federal government's attempt to "Americanize" Native Americans (note the irony) through the 1887 Dawes Act. The act was similar to the 1862 Homestead Act. Both were examples of the agrarian ideal applied by federal policy. Native Americans could claim 160 acres of land and become a United States Citizen. This was not a benevolent policy. The 160-acre claims were allocated from land already reserved for Native American reservations, not the general public domain. Every individual that claimed land decreased the size of reservations that treaties established. Native Americans could receive land

[73] Lewis Paul Todd and Merle Curti, *Rise of the American Nation* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969), 435.
[74] Ibid.

only if they renounced tribal connections and agreed to live a more American (capitalist, commodity producing) way of life. The federal government continued to own the land for twenty-five years as an anti-speculation and enforcement measure, but this was two and a half times longer than government ownership mandated by the Homestead Act. Previous textbook authors, such as Yarbrough, portrayed the Dawes act as an "equitable division of land" that offered protection against exploitation.[75] But Todd and Curti acknowledged that the Dawes Act was disastrous for Native Americans:

> Nothing in the Indians' tradition had prepared them for the role of individual farmers, and those who did attempt to change their way of life were all too often forced to struggle with the poorest possible land. Moreover, the government-sponsored education failed to equip the Indian children for the new lives that they were expected to lead.[76]

The promise of the frontier is fertile land and the ability to farm. Todd and Curti showed that federal policies withheld those promises from Native Americans, as both a collective and as individuals. Native Americans were forced onto poor lands in strange geographies without the benefit of environmental exploitation that made the pioneer's adaptation to the land possible.[77] Instead, reservation lands "were taken from them"—the authors didn't call out the perpetrators—and Native American population declined due to infant mortality and disease. *Rise of the American Nation* brought attention to the United States Government's broken promises and poor treatment of Native Americans *after* the closing of the frontier. It only took eight decades for these effects of the Dawes Act to be represented in textbooks.

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[75] Yarbrough, *A History of the United States*, 127.
[76] Todd, *Rise of the American Nation*, 435. Section IV of this essay explains that farmers also needed credit to for to successfully farm.
[77] Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," 44. Turner understood that pioneers exploited natural resources to move West—American history is the continual altering of the environment to survive. In the frontier thesis, even the types of environmental resources use show progression. He writes, "The exploitation of the beasts took hunter and trader to the west, the exploitation of the grasses took the rancher west, and the exploitation of the virgin soil of the river valleys and prairies attracted the farmer." Turner's pioneer welcomed the wilderness because the unused and unprotected environment provided resources for growth.

Second, the authors discussed the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act. This act was "a complete reversal of older Indian policy."[78] The Indian Reorganization Act stopped the homestead-act-like policy of claiming land from reservations. (By this point, many of the original lands were held by speculators and non-tribal landowners.) According to Todd and Curti, the act returned reservation lands to tribes, educated Native Americans, and initiated the return of tribal self-governance. These successes led to "new hope in the future" for Native Americans. The next sentence implied that this hope was placed in the federal government and led to a high percentage of Native American participation in World War II.

Third, the textbook showed how fragile progress can be, especially for underrepresented groups. In a paragraph, the authors mentioned that federal policies in the 1950s almost undid the benefits of Indian Reorganization Act: "During the 1950s, however, the government, preoccupied with other concerns, revealed little interest in preserving Indian culture. Instead of encouraging the development of tribal life, it tried to get the Indians to leave the reservations and find work in the cities. As one critic put it, the government wanted the Indians to 'get lost.'"[79] Unlike the Indian Wars, violated treaties, and the Dawes Act, these polices did not explicitly cause violence or take land. However, Todd and Curti acknowledge, that through government programs and the development of roads on reservations, Native Americans were encouraged to assimilate into the lowest levels of urban American economic life.[80]

Rise of the American Nation was published forty-two years after Muzzey's *History of the American People*, so additional historical perspective is expected. Comparing textbooks across time is difficult: What could an author have known at a certain time? Even with this in mind,

[78] Todd, *Rise of the American Nation*, 435.
[79] Todd, *Rise of the American Nation*, 435.
[80] For an account of American Indian "termination" policies in the Southwest, see "Modernizing the Navajo," in Needham, *Power Lines,* 123–156.

textbook authors included Native American history at a sluggish pace. Prior textbooks discussed civil right laws such as the 13th, 14th, and 19th amendments without mentioning the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924. The power of the federal government during the New Deal is a major component of textbooks.[81] Yet, a 1969 textbook contains the first mention of the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act. The specific details of history atrophy as time goes on. The interpretation of history had to change for an event that wasn't previously in a textbook to be added.

Within this selection of textbooks, Todd and Curti are closer than other authors to moving beyond the influence of the frontier thesis. Turner's western narrative is still included, and the frontier is an important part of the textbooks. But these authors balanced this narrative with specific details that qualified the frontier thesis. Like Bragdon, the authors portray Native American history with agency and individuality. But Todd and Curti also portrayed the difficulties Native Americans faced because of government policies. *Rise of the American Nation* expands the timeline of Western history into the twentieth century. The closing of the frontier didn't mean the end of Native American history. The textbook challenged the mythic West. This is a good thing.

Millions of Texas High School students would have used this book, because *Rise of the American Nation* is the state's most frequently adopted textbook. The Texas State Textbook Commission approved an edition of Todd and Curti's book for five straight approval periods between 1962 and 1992.[82] Curti wrote both for an educational and academic audience, and he

[81] For an example of how fast history could be included in textbooks, see William A. Hamm, Henry Eldridge Bourne, and Elbert Jay Benton, *A Unit History of the United States* (D.C. Heath and Company, 1935). In the introduction, the authors write that a large second printing of the book allowed them, just one year later, to "finish" including the history of 1934.

[82] For textbooks approved during this period, see Texas State Department of Education, "Texas Adopted Textbook List 1962" (Austin, 1962), https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/19117; Texas State Department of Education, "Texas Adopted Textbook List 1970" (Austin, 1970), https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/19125; Texas State Department of Education, "Texas Adopted Textbook List 1984" (Austin, 1984),

straddled the line between these two roles, textbook writer and scholar, better than any other author included in Texas approval lists. Curti's academic work on educational history, intellectual history, and interdisciplinary scholarship prepared him to write a textbook.

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In 1935, Curti published a book on the intellectual history of schools, *The Social Ideas of American Educators.*[83] This book traced ideas about American education from the colonial period until the publication date. (The book also includes chapters on female education and African American education.) Curti concluded that current social and economic issues shaped the role that education played in students' lives at a specific moment in time. The role of education in American society was outside the control of any individual. At different points in American history, educators furthered religious, commercial, and industrial interests at the expense of social justice. Education had not lived up to its potential to create a "just social order in America."[84] In order to write this book, Curti needed deep understanding of American educational ideas. His familiarity and discontent with American education certainly factored into the writing of *Rise of the American Nation*. Curti constructed a textbook only after studying the blueprints for American education. In his textbook, Curti emphasizes education as a failed part of the Dawes Act and a successful part of the Indian Reorganization Act. Remember, ideas are difficult to trace in a footnoteless text. However, the emphasis on Native American education seems like a result of Curti's earlier work.

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https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/19722; Texas State Department of Education, "Texas Adopted Textbook List 1991" (Austin, 1991), https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/75094.

[83] Merle Curti, *The Social Ideas of American Educators.*, Report of the Commission on the Social Studies of the American Historical Association, Part X. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935).

[84] Harrison John Thornton, "Reviewed Work: The Growth of American Thought by Merle Curti," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 23, no. 1 (1936): 129, https://doi.org/10.2307/1895229.

In 1943, Curti published his best-known work, *Growth of American Thought*. This book helped to establish intellectual history as a subdiscipline of American History. Curti described his work as a "social history of American thought" and argued that all research and writing (textbooks included, presumably) required some reference previous cultural ideas.[85] In short, previous ways of thinking were going to influence writing, whether or not the author wanted it to. Curti believed that popular culture was a meaningful representation of previous ways of thinking, and so he used sources such as newspapers that those trained in European Intellectual History would have ignored.[86] Tracing American thought may have inoculated Curti from the excesses of previous national and patriotic ideas. Textbooks require some organization, like Turner's frontier thesis. To Curti, Turner's ideas about the social evolution of the frontier formed "underlying presuppositions for that generation of historians."[87] Textbooks are shaped by the stories a nation tells itself about the past. To understand these stories is a step toward a more accurate history.

After World War II, Curti also helped create the American Studies Association. At that time, American Studies combined academic disciplines to attain a fuller, more accurate understanding of American Culture—usually literature, history, and social sciences. Presumably, this type of thinking would expand the sources used to understand American Culture. History is a product of archives. The type of material that is written down creates a certain lens to look at the past. Looking at sources beyond the archives can illuminate perspectives that have historically been excluded from written records, such as Native American history.[88]

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[85] Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1943), x–xiii.
[86] Allen F. Davis, "Memorial to Merle E. Curti," American Studies Association Newsletter, 1996, https://writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/50s/curti.html.
[87] Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought*, 569.
[88] For an example of perspectives excluded from archives, see Inga Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatan, 1517-1570* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).While not a work of United States

By the time *Rise of the American Nation* was published, Curti had extensively researched the history of American education. He determined that education had not created a just America. He wrote *the* book on American intellectual history. And he helped create an association dedicated to comprehensively studying American Culture. Curti was the ideal candidate to move high school history textbooks away from the foundation of the frontier thesis. But there was one major problem: Curti was Frederick Jackson Turner's student.

Curti earned his undergraduate and doctoral degrees from Harvard University, and he was one of Turner's last students. Curti received his PhD in 1927, and in the following years helped communicate Turner's ideas to a new generation of scholars. In 1928, Curti wrote an essay on Turner's historical methods: "The Section and the Frontier in American History: The Methodological Concepts of Frederick Jackson Turner."[89] Turner's biographer wrote about the effect of this essay on Turner's legacy:

> No historian could have placed his reputation in the hands of more skillful and solicitous executors than [Carl] Becker and Curti. Their essays were brilliant examples of historiographic analysis and shaped Turner's later image within the profession to a considerable degree. Theirs was a brilliant rear-guard action in defense of a beloved mentor…Nor were they about to hurt the feelings of their revered teacher and benefactor by unduly emphasizing the chinks in his armor.[90]

The essay was a complementary assessment of Turner: Curti summarized Turner's ideas, defended his adviser against major critiques, mentioned the large number of Turner's students throughout the field, and emphasized that Turners' influence on the study of history was "almost immeasurable."[91]

History, this work shaped my thinking about how an archive contributes to what facts became part of the historical narrative.

[89] Bogue, *Strange Roads Going Down*, 423.

[90] Ibid.

[91] Ibid., 428.

Curti respected his professor yet wrote a textbook that challenged the mythic narrative of the frontier thesis better than most authors throughout the twentieth century. This might have been Turner's lesson to his student: the frontier thesis was a direct contradiction of Turner's advisor. *Rise of the American Nation* isn't a perfect textbook, nor is it a direct contradiction of Turner's ideas. Other textbooks continued to elaborate on the underrepresented perspectives of Native Americans by including passages about the American Indian Movement and primary sources from Indigenous leaders.[92] But these books lack other qualifications of Turner's frontier thesis, such as the struggles of the farmer after the closing of the frontier. Todd and Curti wrote a textbook that includes the complexity required to challenge the frontier thesis. Perhaps because of his relationship with his professor, Curti saw beyond the scholarly superstar status of Turner and the frontier thesis.

IV – The Still Glorified Frontier and the Forgotten Farmer

In 1989, a group of academics declared themselves to be New Western Historians. The declaration occurred at a conference on trails in the America West. The conference was sponsored by the Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming State Endowments or Councils for the Humanities, and the conference was held in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Donald Worster, a founder of American environmental history, delivered the opening address: "Beyond the Agrarian Myth."[93] Worster argued that scholars had not analyzed the real violence, inequality, and contradictions of the West. Frederick Jackson Turner, the *oldest* Western

[92] For the textbook portrayal of American Indian Movement, see Daniel J. Boorstin and Brooks Mather Kelley, *A History of the United States since 1861* (Lexington, Mass.: Ginn, 1986), 469–72. For primary sources from Native American leaders in textbooks, see Carol Berkin, *American Voices: A History of the United States, Volume II*, 1992, 411–13.
[93] Donald Worster, "Beyond the Agrarian Myth," in *Trails: Toward a New Western History*, ed. Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde A. Milner, and Charles E. Rankin (Lawrence, Kan: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 3–25.

historian, had used a rose-tinted story to explain westward expansion. Later historians "remained true to the Turnerian spirit" and focused only on American progress. Worster promised that New Western History would write a more accurate account of the American West: "What the Booster will not do, and what the historian alone is in a position to do, is to examine those radical defects of society."[94] New Western Historians would study exploited peoples, the domination of nature, and the undemocratic concentration of power. Most importantly, New Western Historians would not use Turner's plot.

The name stuck; New Western Historians changed scholar's understanding of the West. However, Worster acknowledge that by the time New Western History was formed, Turner's thesis already rested on shaky foundations in the academic community. This paradigm didn't invent critiquing Turner, but it did create a catchy name for it. Historians in the 1950s began to question Turner's narrative, and these critiques added up over time.[95] In the 1980s and 1990s books, articles, and lectures showed the move away from Turner's plot. *Legacy of Conquest* by Patricia Nelson Limerick argued that exploitation paralleled American expansion west.[96] *Rivers of Empire* by Donald Worster showed that an "irrigation elite" consolidated power throughout the American West—elements of oligarchy existed in the supposedly democratic region.[97] *Nature's Metropolis* by William Cronon reinterpreted the rural/urban relationship between Chicago and the city's hinterland; the Wild West relied on connections, and self-reliant rural

[94] Ibid., 13.
[95] Ibid., 14–15. For a second summary of New Western History, see Patricia Nelson Limerick, "Layer Upon Layer of Memory in the American West," The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2000. Limerick summarized past critiques and future goals with four C's: continuity, convergence, conquest, and complexity.
[96] Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: Norton, 1987).
[97] Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985).

communities were mostly a myth after the railroad came to town.[98] These books became the cannon of New Western History, and represented the historiographic change in the field since 1950. These historians discarded Turner's version of American History, and they replaced the frontier thesis with a broader understanding of who belongs in the story of the American West.[99]

Except New Western Historians didn't forget about Turner. In 1994, Patricia Nelson Limerick and Richard White curated an exhibit for the one-hundredth anniversary of Turner's appearance at the 1893 Columbian Exposition. The exhibit focused on the United States' obsession with frontier imagery and narratives, and challenged these narratives with commentary that accompanied paintings, books, and "Turnerian library materials."[100] After the exhibit, Limerick and White each published an essay about the frontier's role in American culture. The one hundredth anniversary of a historian's lecture isn't exactly breaking news, but journalists extensively covered the exhibit and the academic debates, as if Turner might show up to refute the desecration of his ideas. James Grossman, in an introduction to the published essays, wrote, "This remarkable media interest in 'anti-Turnerian' scholars and their work owed to the 'discovery' by journalists that the 'frontier thesis' they had learned in school bore little relation to contemporary scholarship on the West." In newspapers, historians were asked to refute a theory they had assumed, James Grossman writes, "to be as dead as Turner himself."[101] To these reporters, the frontier thesis remained the essential explanation of the American West.

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[98] William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991).
[99] For additional work on the beginnings of New Western History, see William Cronon, George Miles, Jay Gitlin, ed., *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past* (New York, NY: Norton, 1993).
[100] Richard White, Patricia Nelson Limerick, and James R. Grossman, *The Frontier in American Culture: An Exhibition at the Newberry Library, August 26, 1994 - January 7, 1995* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), xii-xiii.
[101] Ibid., xii.

Education explains Turner's incubation in the public's understanding of American history. Grossman is perceptive about the reporter's Turner induced bewilderment. The chasm between the academic and popular understanding of Western history is large. The textbooks those reporters would have read support Grossman's assumption. The frontier thesis is the foundation of westward expansion as taught in high schools. For reporters of any age, the frontier thesis was used both for content and organization of American History. Even if those reporters went back to high school and sat through an American history class, they would be unaware that scholars moved on from Turner because textbooks used the same story of expansion throughout the entire twentieth century. Some of those reporters were taught a more nuanced understanding of Western history than any high school student in 1993.

At the same time the historical field critiqued Turner, textbooks stopped qualifying Turner's version of the agricultural frontier. Textbooks published in the 1980s and 1990s presented a more mythologized version of the frontier than books published in the middle of the century. As the United States urbanized, the struggles of the American farmer received less space in textbooks. Within textbooks, the account of these struggles was the most convincing evidence against Turner's version of history. Without these struggles, Turner's explanation of the nineteenth century agrarian ideal remained the unchecked foundation of Western history.

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Every textbook approved by the Texas Textbook Commission includes a "Turner" chapter. In these chapters archetypal Americans (mountain men, traders, miners, ranchers, farmers) populate the expansive West, always in that same order. Muzzey's textbook ("ever-moving westward frontier") and Faulkner's textbook ("one of our most brilliant historians has gone so far to say") are two extreme examples. But the theme continued long after historians

questioned Turner's progression. This is evident in chapter titles. Most westward expansion titles used between 1929 and 1992 are interchangeable: The Agricultural Frontier; Manifest Destiny, Westward Ho!; The Epic of The Frontier: How Venturesome Americans Spanned the Continent; Settling the West; The Opening of the Great West; Agriculture and the Last Frontier; Americans Conquer the Last Frontier; The Passing of the Frontier; The Opening of the West; The Last Frontier.[102] These chapters end with farmers throughout the entire West, preferably living on land claimed under the Homestead Act, for the narrative's sake, of course. With virtuous farmers throughout the West, the United States could now have its American Century these textbook authors implied. This is the type of argument that New Western Historians disagreed with. But there are so many other things that this ignores, they might shout. So ends the first stage of high school Western history: with the triumphant success of the farmer along the frontier.

Textbooks between 1927–1969 usually elaborate a second stage of Western history, the problems of the farmer. These struggles-of-the-farmer chapters were a reality check against the positive portrayal of expansion. The chapter titles show the central role agricultural problems: The Embattled Farmer; The Problems of the Farmers; The Present Problems of Agriculture; Farmers Revolt Against Big Business Practices; The Farmers Revolt.[103] Except for the earliest pioneers, farmers in the West didn't grow food solely for subsistence. Railroads connected farms to the American economy, and farmers relied on machines to increase their yields. Commodity prices and loans connected the farmer to the broader financial systems of the United States. The farmer couldn't bury his head in the dirt and pretend that individualism would create a better life

[102] In order, these chapter titles are from Faulkner (1934), Hamm (1935), Harlow (1937), Yarbrough (1943), Bragdon (1954), Craven (1961), Todd (1969), Boorstin (1986), and Davidson (1992).
[103] In order, these chapters are from, in order, Faulkner (1934), Hamm (1935), Yarbrough (1943), Todd (1969), and Boorstin (1986).

for his family. He had bills to pay. These chapters dispel the rose-tinted myth of Turner's frontier by emphasizing the financial and environmental struggles of the farmer.

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Money (and specifically paying back money loaned on credit) is the primary anxiety of the farmer in American history. The creed of the farmer is to protect the farm at all costs and pass the land onto the next generation. Everything—from conserving soil health to managing commodity surplus—is secondary to keeping the land. Missed loan payments are the largest threat to losing the farm, and losing the farm—no matter how unprofitable it might be—is the ultimate failure of the farmer.

Faulkner's 1934 textbook included a section titled "The Inflation of Currency is the Hope of the Farmer." The section begins with a claim: "no comprehension of this period [after the civil war] is possible without some knowledge of currency history and theory." The next eight pages include an outstanding amount of detail that clearly linked monetary policy to the conditions of the farmer. Faulkner explained two economic theories: how one type of currency can be "cheaper" than another, and how the amount of money in circulation can changed the price of agricultural products. These two theories provided the context for Faulkner to actually discuss the differences between gold and silver specie, instead of a meaningless surface-level reference. Finally, Faulkner wrote about the populist political movement and the legislation they were able to achieve through politics.[104]

Faulkner does an excellent job of answering the question, why does monetary policy matter to farmers? In short, the deflation of currency decreased income. This made loans more difficult to repay. Farmers are always in debt—that's the business model. The average nineteenth

[104] Harold Underwood Faulkner and Tyler Kepner, *America, Its History and People, A Unit Organization*, 498–506.

century homesteader scraped enough money together to move west and pay a homestead registration fee. To grow crops and earn money the farmer needed equipment, but to purchase equipment the farmer needed money in cash. This cycle sent farmers to the bank for loans. Farmers with a loan required good timing and a bit of luck to pay back the bank. A bad crop, bad weather, bad prices, or bad currency deflation ruined the farmer. After the Civil War, the federal government wanted to decrease the money supply. This would decrease commodity prices. But the farmer still had to pay interest on loans he had agreed to when prices were higher. Inflation, the "cheapening" of money, would counteract these issues.[105]

The frontier thesis was present within Faulkner's textbook. He was the author who called Turner a "brilliant" historian. But Faulkner also acknowledged the struggles of the farmer beyond Turner's conception of the frontier. Throughout American History farming has always been tough and unreliable career. Turner acknowledged the difficulties of the frontier, but implied that the American individual traits would overcome the wilderness. But textbooks remove agency and historicity from the portrayal of the farmer in the late twentieth century. These farmers inherit the frontier, and then are ignored.

Over time chapters about the excesses of big business and the Great Depression absorbed the material about the struggles of the farmer. This is a subtle shift in focus from rural to urban issues that resulted in drastic changes in textbooks. As textbooks authors dealt with more American history in the same number of pages, textbooks emphasized fewer struggles of the farmer. Faulkner wrote an approximately four-thousand-word section about the farmer's monetary struggles. Twenty-four years later, Avery Craven, in *American History*, his 1961 textbook, addressed monetary policy in a 143-word paragraph:

[105] For details about the financial concerns of the American farmer, especially in times of struggle, see Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

> Our government's policy in relation to money entered the picture. Creditors, including banks and Eastern businessmen wanted a "hard money" policy. This meant that all money would be backed dollar-for-dollar by gold or silver. Each dollar would be worth more and therefore prices would be lower. Farmers wanted a "cheap money" policy. They wanted to government to issue more paper money with less backing. Each dollar would have less value and thus prices for the farmers products would be higher. They believed that they would have less trouble paying off their mortgages in "cheap money."[106]

Compared to Faulkner, Craven's explanation is muddled. Remember, this book is for high school students without mortgages, tax returns, and retirement savings. They know little about finances. For the student, Craven's paragraph raises more questions than it answers: What does it mean for money to be backed by gold or silver? How can money be "cheap" and have less value, a dollar is a dollar, right? How could paying a mortgage back be easier, isn't all money the same? He doesn't explain that mortgage rates are fixed and that changes to the value of the dollar create repayment difficulties. He doesn't explain the difference between paper money and specie. Most importantly, Craven doesn't clearly portray why monetary policy matters for the farmer.

Craven's textbook decreased emphasis on the problems of the farmer, but still writes about the successes of the frontier. (Not surprisingly, Craven was one of Turner's students.[107]) Craven made the language of the frontier thesis central to his textbook's portrayal of westward expansion. Craven wrote, "The necessity of pushing back a wilderness step by step across a wide continent has had much to do with giving the American and his institutions their peculiar character."[108] Craven ignored the difficulties pioneers faced when the wilderness fought back.

The epigraph to Craven's westward expansion chapter is ironic: "Most authors in writing of 'the merry, merry farmer'…omit the mud and the dust and the grime, they forget the army

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[106] Avery O. Craven and Walter Johnson, *American History* (Boston: Ginn, 1961), 395. The textbook states that more detail will be given in a later chapter. However, later details are about the William Jennings Bryan and the 1896 Presidential Campaign, not the effects of monetary policy on farmers.
[107] Bogue, *Strange Roads Going Down*, 376.
[108] Craven, *American History*, 222.

worm, the flies, the heat, as well as the smells and drudgery of the barns."[109] Craven literally omits the dust that the farmer dealt with during the 1930s. The textbook only mentions the dust bowl—the most consequential agricultural event in the twentieth century—in relation to the financial troubles of the Great Depression: "a severe drought in 1934 also helped to reduce the surplus."[110] Myth withers when faced with complexity. A farmer's life was difficult, and the frontier wasn't the solution to all American problems even when free land existed. But Craven wrote about the myth of the frontier without acknowledging the actual complexity and struggles of the place.

New Western history focused on continuity: the history of the American West didn't end in 1893 with the closing of the frontier.[111] There's continuity in textbooks as well, but the wrong kind. Textbooks are a zero-sum exercise in writing. Textbooks used between 1986–1992 contain a similar dismissal of the twentieth century American farmer that propagated Turner's frontier thesis.[112] For something new to be included in the American Story, something must be left out. This reinterpretation of what is important is a crucial part of history. Turner acknowledged that. The topics that New Western Historians encouraged the historical field to study have appeared in high school textbooks. Native American history, federal power in the West, and environmentalism received space in textbooks after 1950. But the foundation of Turner's thesis remains in the nineteenth century frontier and the plot of westward expansion.

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[109] Ibid., 384.
[110] Ibid., 562.
[111] For an elaboration of continuity in New Western History, see Limerick, "Layer Upon Layer of Memory in the American West."
[112] See Daniel J. Boorstin and Brooks Mather Kelley, *A History of the United States since 1861* (Lexington, Mass.: Ginn, 1986); John A. Garraty, *The Story of America* (Austin: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1992); Carol Berkin, *American Voices: A History of the United States, Volume II*. In these textbooks, the struggles of the farmer are attributed to the Great Depression and not the struggles inherent to the agriculture way of life.

Turner's frontier thesis is a synthesis of the American agrarian ideal. Turner's ideas still dominate the public perception of American history partly because nothing, such as the struggles of the farmer, restrains the agrarian ideal. The textbooks left the farmer behind in the glorified frontier, and in 1992, the frontier remained significant in textbooks used in Texas High schools.

V – Conclusion

One can think about the high school version of western history like an old house. In 1893, Turner published the frontier thesis, and created the blueprints for a compelling narrative of westward expansion across the United States. When he was alive, Turner was the most renowned architect of American historiography. Turner's ideas were straightforward and explained the entirety of American history (if one was willing to ignore complexity and contradictions). In the 1920s and 1930s, textbook authors—builders of a historical narrative for high school students—relied on Turner's blueprints to write about westward expansion. Because of Turner's reputation, these textbook authors followed Turner's blueprint exactly. The authors directly used Turner's ideas by quoting him or paraphrasing the frontier thesis. This metaphorical house of western history was built to last.

After World War II, textbook authors realized that Turner's western history that needed an update. The number of people who belonged in the story of westward expansion had grown, so textbook authors used more space to elaborate on Native American and environmental history. Turner's design continued to be used in history textbooks, with a few additional narratives built on. Yes, the textbooks were different, and from a present-day perspective, a historian might say these textbooks were better. But the narrative of westward expansion within these textbooks wasn't fooling anyone. Turner was still the architect.

Then in the 1980's, New Western Historians declared the frontier thesis no longer fit for use. So they razed it to the ground. These historians were go-getters. After studying Turner's original western history blueprint, New Western Historians constructed a western history that acknowledged the complexity of the American West. Academically, this was an amazing achievement. But New Western History was still constructed on top of the frontier thesis foundation.

Unfortunately, a high school student only has time for the most foundational parts of American history, so a Turnerian version of western history was what these students learned. Turner's specific impact can be difficult to perceive because of how influential his ideas have been. In 1992, there was two hundred sixteen years of American history for a high school student to learn in five, fifty-minute classes per week during the school year. Even a historian can see the issue with this math problem.

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From 1919 to 1992, the Texas textbook adoption process influenced history taught to high school students across the nation. Textbook publishers targeted Texas adoption because of the size of the state's education system and the centralized adoption process. But in the 1990's the influence of the Texas Textbook Commission declined for two reasons. First, printing and computer technology improved.[113] Publishers could now customize textbooks for different state's curriculum (or political preferences).[114] In 2016, Dana Goldstein, a journalist, showed the differences between Texas and California editions of the same textbook. She found different

[113] Brian Thevenot, "The Textbook Myth," The Texas Tribune, March 10, 2010, https://www.texastribune.org/2010/03/26/texas-textbooks-national-influence-is-a-myth/. While Texas influence may be a modern-day myth, the state did have previous influence: "Because of their sheer buying power, large states with statewide textbook adoption processes did once indeed influence what went into the books, which used to be printed almost exclusively in national editions."

[114] Collins, "How Texas Inflicts Bad Textbooks on Us." Customization often occurred through "boxes" that included controversial elements of history and could be easily changed between editions.

interpretations on race, immigration, gender, sexuality, and the economy in American history.[115] The 1992 adoption period is the first time a "Texas edition" of a textbook appears on the list.[116] At this point, states didn't have to accept textbooks that were written with Texas approval in mind.

Second, in 1994 high school history became a national political issue, and Texas was no longer be the largest, guaranteed market for textbook publishers. The United States Congress created a council to recommend national education standards after critiques of education performance during the 1980s. The National Center for History in the Schools, based at University of California at Los Angeles, created curriculum standards for history. Lynne Cheney, the wife of the vice-president at the time, oversaw the committee.[117] In 1994, several days before the standards were released, Cheney published an op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal* that claimed the standards were created by individuals with "great hatred for traditional history."[118] To Cheney, the same patriotic narratives of American history *had* to be emphasized in high schools, regardless of a changing scholarly consensus. The content of textbooks, while always contentious, become a national political debate. The influence of Texas in textbook publishing waned, but the high school history textbooks shaped by seventy-three years of state adoption lists remained.

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[115] Dana Goldstein, "Two States. Eight Textbooks. Two American Stories.," *New York Times*, January 12, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/01/12/us/texas-vs-california-history-textbooks.html. This approach, while interesting, over emphasizes the importance of words and phrases and ignores the bigger picture. These two textbooks were written by the same team of historians. Differences exist between the textbooks and some of these differences contradict the nuances of historical understanding, especially around marginalized groups. However, these textbooks are almost entirely the same. The narrative foundations of textbooks, matter much more than differences between three-sentence biography sidebars. But grappling with changing narratives is a longer and more difficult process that requires an understanding of historiography. The work of journalists is vital to understand how textbooks are shaped by politics in the present day, even if the differences are minute. However, the ability to customize editions for different states, decreased Texas influence.

[116] James West Davidson, Mark H. Lytle, and Michael B. Stoff, *American Journey: The Quest for Liberty since 1865*, Texas Edition (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1992).

[117] Moreau, *Schoolbook Nation*, 3.

[118] Lynne V. Cheney, "The End of History," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 20, 1994.

Textbooks used to teach students about the past are the most important works of historical scholarship. There is undeniable nationalism in an *American* history textbook—a claim of who has American traits and who belongs to the nation's story. Since 1893, Turner's frontier thesis has been the privileged narrative within these textbooks. The frontier thesis portrayed the pioneer, miner, rancher, and farmer as more American than the Native American, immigrant, and the factory worker. New Western Historians ceded the explanation of westward expansion to Turner's frontier thesis. In scholarship, Turner is a historian whose ideas were relegated to myth. But within high school history textbooks, Turner's myth lived on.

11,502 words

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Bibliographical Essay

The midwestern goodbye starts about three conversations before someone leaves. From the living room, the conversation progresses to inside the front door, to outside the front door, to the hood of the car—a mutual entrapment of chattiness filled with repetition, digression, and trailed-off-sentences. A goodbye that seemingly never ends. I came to Yale ready to say goodbye to podunk Nebraska. I was going to be an engineer. I was going to move to some cool big city.

The summer after my first year, I was a raft guide on the Colorado River. I lived out of my car. In this challenging environment, I discerned that the robust intellectual frontiers of the American West were waiting to be rigorously pursued, so I began systematically reading the historical literature on water policy in the West. I'm kidding. I needed more raft guide stories to earn more tips. A book called *Cadillac Desert* fueled my money-making scheme[119] It worked. Middle-aged fathers love history facts. I learned about the doctrine of prior appropriation. Then about the Newlands Reclamation Act. Then the Colorado River Compact. My brain attached ideas to people: Lewis and Clark and exploration; Sam Adams (not the beer one) and speculative irresponsibility; John Wesley Powell and irrigation; Silas Reed and surveying; Floyd Dominy and dam building; Edward Abbey and monkeywrenching; David Brower and environmentalism; Donald Worster and aridity; Patricia Nelson Limerick and New Western History.

Eventually, I had a better understanding of what happened in the history of the American West, but I had no idea why. My high school history and anecdotal understanding of Western history was often wrong; I wasn't surprised. But still the present-day West makes little sense. John Wesley Powell warned about aridity in the 1870s, but farmer still grow alfalfa in Utah. Then I read *End of the Myth* by Greg Grandin, and I learned who Frederick Jackson Turner was.

[119] Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1993).

Turner created a language for how we talk about the West. There's a rhythm to this language that makes the Western History story easy to tell and easy to believe, and these Turner ideas live on. In my 8th grade American history class, my teacher projected the painting "American Progress" by John Gast during our lecture about Western History. In the painting an angel leads settlers across the plains. *This* is how the West was settled, my teacher said. For me, Turner's frontier thesis helped to explain the why-we-think-what-we-think about the American West. Like that midwestern goodbye, these ideas kept circling around in my head. Some combination of my education and my re-education led me to my senior essay topic.

In *Wolf Willow*, Wallace Stegner wrote that those who live in the plains gain a sense of human significance: "At noon the total sun pours on your single head; at sunrise or sunset you throw a shadow a hundred yards long…Puny you may feel there, and vulnerable, but not unnoticed." Yet on the coasts the people of the plains do go unnoticed, especially in academia. Anyone who lives between the mountains—the Appalachians and Sierras—is often forgotten. I was raised to be a Nebraskan. I've left the physical geography of Nebraska behind, but the human geography of the place—the contours of why we are, who we are—remain with me. This is a senior essay to help me understand my home.

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The first semester of the senior essay started. I had an idea without an archive—a shadowy outline of a project without any details. I shared these initial thoughts with Professor Gaddis, and he told me about his own high school history education: look for a Texas history comic book sponsored by an oil company, he said. A few Google searches later I found *Texas History Movies*. These comics were interesting, but I questioned their educational role. However, reading through these "historical" comics that were sponsored by an oil company, I realized

there is value in controlling the historic narrative of a region. The public understanding (and misunderstanding) of history is used to justify actions in the present. I wondered how the public understanding of history of the American West changed over time. I decided to look for old textbooks.

I had a better idea of what to do, but still no archive. Fortunately, textbook archives exist across the country, so I went online "shopping" for a place to do research. Eventual I settled on the Textbook Collection at the University of Texas at Austin. A Zoom call with the archival librarian confirmed this archive was "the one." The collection had most of the history textbooks adopted for state use between 1919–present.

I drove 12 hours to Austin, Texas to try and understand how the portrayal of Western History in High School History textbooks changed over time. Midwesterners like to pretend we bear the burdens of inconvenient travel: "Oh, don't worry, it's *only* a three-hour drive." That's relatively true, at least when compared to airports and Amtrak, but historically false. The history of the West is a history of faster transportation. I drove most of the Great Western Cattle Trail on a straight interstate road graded up from the prairie for my convenience. The drive was long and, even by my Nebraska standards, monotonous. Somewhere in Kansas I tested out my car's newly aligned tires. I drove one mile without touching the steering wheel.

At points, my research felt like that drive: long, monotonous, and in pursuit of uncertain benefits. I spent a week reading, taking notes, and scanning textbook pages. My research question rested on the differences between the relatively similar. 1920s and 1960s textbooks offer different interpretations of Western History using mostly the same facts. Who could parse out those differences? Hopefully, me—someone foolish enough to read those old textbooks.

My time in Austin was supposed to be profound. It wasn't. There I was, ready to discover the secrets of high school history education. I immediately ran into difficulties. There was so much material—a full library bookshelf worth. I couldn't read everything. My bank account wouldn't last. I'd overstay my accommodations (a Yale friend's high-school-bestfriend's girlfriend's subletter's living room floor). On the second day, I decided to model my research after a hypothetical small-town history curriculum. I would select one book from each adoption period (1927–1992) because, of course, schools would only purchase one American history textbook from the list. When that book became outdated, the schools would buy another. Of course, that tradeoff means I haven't read all the history textbooks used by Texas high schoolers. But I have read a hypothetical high school's history curriculum (a high school that could be anywhere in Texas) during this time.

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Back on campus, I began the process of organizing and writing the senior essay. At first, I was going to compare the language used to describe specific events in the textbooks. I quickly realized this idea was boring. Comparing differences in language felt like "gotcha" history. In the older textbooks, problematic language exists in all the ways one would expect it to, but I realized that the broader themes—such as Turner's frontier thesis—are both more interesting and more likely to be lifelong lessons for students. For example, if textbook writers focused on indigenous historical agency, then passages that discount the role of Native Americans in history would make a student feel uncomfortable.

In 2005, David Foster Wallace gave a commencement speech at Kenyon College. He began, "There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, 'Morning, boys. How's the water?" In the

published book, Wallace includes a page break—for a dramatic pause. Then continues, "And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, 'What the hell is water?'"[120] At first, I ironically fell into the same trap of countless other western historians. I didn't want to focus solely on Turner. But eventually I realized that Turner's frontier thesis is too influential in these textbooks. The ideals of the frontier thesis are everywhere in the popular perception of the West, and these textbooks became a way to better understand the water I grew up swimming in.

The bibliography presented an interesting challenge. Because I wrote, in part, about the history of New Western History, some of my primary and secondary sources were authored by the same people. For example, William Cronon's book *Nature's Metropolis* is a foundational book of New Western History. For my essay, this is a primary source. Cronon is considered a New Western Historian and this book is a direct product of his work. But his article, "Revisiting the Vanishing Frontier: The Legacy of Frederick Jackson Turner," is about Turner's legacy—not New Western History. When I discussed Turner, I cited Cronon's secondary analysis of Turner's frontier thesis. This was a fun lesson to learn: historiography is just doing history with other people's history as sources.

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Last spring, I walked across the commencement stage with my original graduation class. This semester—one last time selecting courses, going to lectures, and eating in the Davenport dining hall—has been a time to reflect on four years. I've been in a thankful mood.

[120] David Foster Wallace, *This is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, About Living a Compassionate Life*, (New York: Little, Brown, 2009), 3–4.

Thank you to my family: Mom, Dad, Charlie, Darin, and Finley. Without them, I wouldn't be at Yale. Thank you for rides to the airport, care packages, phone conversations, and constant support.

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More than anyone, Professor Gaddis deserves my thanks. When I asked him to advise my senior essay, I wrote, "I've heard enough about Cotulla, Texas to know where your geographic passions lie. It is difficult to find a Yale professor who acknowledges they are from a place—not just born fully formed into East Coast Academia." Over the years, I have admired and appreciated his geographic rootedness. His skill at diagnosing murky sentences and asking pointed questions helped me greatly while writing this essay.

Finally, the Davenport Dining Hall is the place that has made Yale a home. Kyle, Dom, Jackson, Jeffrey, Henry, Mia, and Alexandra, thank you for four-and-a-half years of breakfasts, lunches, and dinners together.