

THE
SHAPING
OF
AMERICA

A GEOGRAPHICAL
PERSPECTIVE
ON 500 YEARS
OF HISTORY



Volume 2
Continental America
1800-1867

D. W. MEINIG

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ation the tensions that arose among the parts and the failure of these ties and cement to hold the nation together.

1. Filling in the Framework: Migration Westward

While warriors and statesmen were creating a spacious frame for the American republic and empire the dominant body of the American people was rapidly expanding in numbers and in space to create a broadening, relatively contiguous continental nation, pressing to and even beyond political borders on the north and south and extending from the Atlantic seaboard onto the margins of the great western prairies. The growth of population through all this period was astonishing, running about 33 percent each decade, the total rising from 5,306,000 in 1800 to 23,192,000 in 1850, a rate far exceeding that of any other large area in the world. Historical demographers credit about 21 percent of this growth to immigration, virtually all the remainder to natural increase (annexed populations accounting for less than 1 percent). Such fecundity was a source of great satisfaction to expansionist politicians, who regarded it as their most powerful weapon and excuse. As an Indiana congressman put it, in 1846: "I invite you to go to the West, and visit one of our log cabins, and number its inmates. There you will find a strong, stout youth of eighteen, with his better half, just commencing the first struggles of independent life. Thirty years from that time, visit them again; and instead of two, you will find in that same family twenty-two. This is what I call the American multiplication table." Some such multiplication, even if not this exact table, was widely apparent, and he went on to imply that you would not likely find the twenty-two all in one place because "the greater portion of this multiplying mass of humanity have their faces turned toward the setting sun." (We might presume that the twenty-two includes several young grandchildren; not necessarily, but a dozen pregnancies and a dead wife would be more likely than twenty births from the same mate.)

At the beginning of the century the inland margins of White settlement could be traced in the general form of a great wedge extending from the Genesee Country of western New York to the upper Ohio and closely along that river to the mouth of the Wabash, thence back southeastwardly to central Tennessee and bending around the Cherokee lands on south to coastal Georgia. Fifty years later settlers had spread across the plains of southern Michigan and the hills of southern Wisconsin and were pushing rapidly up the shallow river valleys of eastern Iowa, and the general frontier line was a broad arc extending from Green Bay to the Permanent Indian Frontier along the western boundary of Missouri and Arkansas, with a broad southwestern embayment curving deeply into Texas; the Coastal Plain from Corpus Christi on the west to the Suwanee River on the east was under

the Susquehanna Valley and northwest from Pittsburgh into the northern belt of expansion was very uneven and selective, reflecting the varied character of the land. It was everywhere a terrain remolded by the glacier and characteristically patchy, with areas of swamp and sand and gravel, of steepened slopes and drumlins, but also of terraces, and, especially, gentler uplands mantled with well-sorted glacial drift. The dense forests of mixed hardwoods were broken up by old fields and village sites of the largely vanquished Iroquois, and the country was laced with streams and spotted with lakes and attractive to early settlers tended to avoid the often swampy Ontario lake plain as much of this new region was at least equal in quality to New York, and much of it was superior to the mountainous western and northern regions where the greatest number of emigrants were drawn.

When the surge into central New York this movement slackened; the Holland Purchase and the Western Reserve developed much more slowly than expected; the war and depression of 1812-19 were a major interruption. All this while Upstate New York was being formed and furnished as a political and social region with a powerful new instrument for geographic expansion. The building of the Erie Canal had a strong local economic effect, and its completion in 1825 impelled a great boom that ramified far afield. The canal provided a western trunk route, giving birth to a set of new towns—and allowing the region to fulfill its envisioned role. This greatly enhanced avenue of travel was extended by sail and steam to Cleveland and Detroit and other ports along the shores of Lake Erie. At the same time the natural barrier that separated Michigan from ready land connection with Ohio was breached by a federal road across the Black Swamp, a dreaded thirty-mile-wide expanse including the Maumee River, the legacy of a once-larger Lake Erie. More important on the nature of the land between Lakes Erie and Michigan now were the earlier assertions that it was all a swampy wilderness, and by the 1830s the settlement was pouring in, fanning out from Monroe or Detroit across a broad belt of western country with its many oak openings toward Flint and Grand River, and flowing westward along the territorial roads toward St. Joseph. Some following the moraine around the end of Lake Michigan to the boomtown of Chicago, by the late 1830s this west-flowing stream was spreading across the West and edging into Wisconsin. Beloit, Rockford, Moline, and Galesburg were essential Yankee communities, and a New England influence was felt by many others beyond the area of domination, such as Peoria, Decatur,

The selective character of this western colonization was unmistakable, but it