INTRODUCTION

A small picture in the corner of a magazine masthead says a great deal about the historians who have researched and written about the United States of America over the past century. The picture is of a steamboat, and it is with this steamboat that my story begins.

Prior to 1964, the Journal of American History was named the Mississippi Valley Historical Review (MVHR) because today’s Organization of American Historians (OAH) was originally named the Mississippi Valley Historical Association (MVHA).¹ The old Mississippi Valley Historical Review featured a steamboat on each issue’s cover. When the Mississippi Valley Historical Association renamed itself the Organization of American Historians in 1964, society leaders left the steamboat image on both the cover and masthead of the renamed Journal of American History to remind a new generation of readers of the society’s historic roots. By 1986, however, the steamboat was gone from the magazine cover, and the OAH had introduced a new logo (a waving OAH flag) on its stationery and newsletter. In today’s Journal of American History, a small steamboat remains only in the corner of the JAH masthead.²

2. Richard Kirkendall (former executive secretary of OAH) to Michael Allen, Aug. 6, 2010, and Lewis Perry (former editor of JAH) to Michael Allen, Aug. 12, 2010, both in author’s possession. Perry, who kept a stylized steamboat on the cover into the 1980s, states, “I don’t believe there was much concern [about removing the steamboat] after members got used to the change from MVHA to OAH.” Unlike Kammen, Kirkendall, and Perry, Jon Lauck documents a much more contentious transition from Mississippi Valley Historical...
The decision to name a historical society and its official magazine after a geographic region—the Mississippi Valley—came naturally to members of the first generation of professional American historians. Many (not all) of them believed the Mississippi Valley to be the heartland or cultural hearth of the nation. While today there are Missouri Valley and Ohio Valley history conferences and a Southern Historical Association, in fact those groups’ meetings feature papers across specializations and continents. The idea of a heartland is not as strong as it once was.3

Briefly defined, the Mississippi Valley is that region of North America bounded by the Appalachians to the east and the Rocky Mountains to the west. The Mississippi River is formed at Minnesota’s Lake Itasca and descends south to the Gulf of Mexico. Along the way it is fed by the Ohio and Missouri, Minnesota, Illinois, Des Moines, Yazoo, Arkansas, Ouachita, White, Red, and several other rivers and their tributaries. As a distinct cultural place, the Mississippi Valley is typified by the deciduous forests, valleys, prairies, and floodplains extending west from the Appalachians to the 98th meridian, where the Great Plains commence.4

The belief that the Mississippi Valley was vitally important in American culture led the early scholars to write about it. Although no one today has authored a far-reaching scholarly synthesis of the history of the Mississippi River Valley, several nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century scholars and writers tried to do so. If one does a library subject search today for “Mississippi Valley,” a handful of works by these writers will

Association to Organization of American Historians in From Warm Center to Ragged Edge: The Erosion of Midwestern Literary and Historical Regionalism (Iowa City, Iowa, 2017), 94–99. A masthead is an informational overview of a publication and everyone involved in its creation that appears in the opening pages of the publication. The masthead lists publisher, editors and staff, and contact information.

3. Thanks to Bob Walls for sharing his thoughts on this.

appear, all bearing publication dates from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century.

The booster scholar Timothy Flint leads the list with his *Condensed Geography and History of the Western States, or The Mississippi Valley* (1828), followed by John W. Monette’s *History of the Discovery and Settlement of the Valley of the Mississippi: The Three Great European Powers, Spain, France, and Great Britain, and the Subsequent Occupation, Settlement, and Extension of Civil Government by the United States, until the Year 1846* (1848). Henry Lewis’s interdisciplinary *The Valley of the Mississippi* (1854) was originally published in German and is graced with reproductions of Lewis’s own paintings of the valley, especially the upper course. After the Civil War, J. W. Foster wrote a more focused scientific account, *The Mississippi Valley: Its Physical Geography, Including Sketches of the Topography, Botany, Climate, Geology, and Mineral Resources and of the Progress of the Development in Population and Material Wealth* (1869), followed by C. B. Walker’s tome, *The Mississippi Valley, and Prehistoric Events; Giving Account of the Original Formation and Early Condition of the Great Valley; of Its Vegetable and Animal Life; of Its First Inhabitants, the Mound Builders, Its Mineral Treasures and Agricultural Developments* (1880).

Then, into the midst of these scholarly inquiries stepped Samuel Clemens, under the pen name Mark Twain. It is doubtful Twain ever intended *Life on the Mississippi* (1881) to be a definitive all-encompassing portrait of the Great Valley, yet it has been accepted as such for well over a century. An honest

8. Foster, *Mississippi Valley*.
appraisal of the book would conclude it is uneven—both brilliant and, occasionally, tedious.\textsuperscript{10}

Mark Twain was a great recycler of material, and the heart of the book \textit{Life on the Mississippi} is an edited version of “Old Times on the Mississippi,” a series of lively articles he earlier published in the \textit{Atlantic Monthly}.\textsuperscript{11} Since the articles focused only on Twain’s own 1850s steamboating days, the book needed a front and back, as it were. For the former, he churned out three short chapters covering 4,000 years of human history prior to the Steamboat Age; for the latter, he revisited the Mississippi River on a steamboat trip and wrote it up in his popular travelogue style. As we shall see below, \textit{Life on the Mississippi} has its moments but often wanders afield.\textsuperscript{12}

One author who followed would become just as famous and, occasionally, as outlandish as Mark Twain. Theodore Roosevelt was a gentleman scholar who also dabbled in cattle ranching, big game hunting, police force administration, military conquest, and politics. \textit{The Winning of the West}, published in consecutive volumes from 1889 to 1896, was a paean to the Mississippi Valley. In a paper he read before the Wisconsin Historical Society, Roosevelt spoke of the upper tier of states of the “Valley of the Upper Mississippi” as “the heart of the country geographically ... in population and in political and social importance.” Roosevelt concluded, “I regard this section as the heart of true American sentiment.”\textsuperscript{13} James K. Hosmer of the Minnesota Historical Society followed Twain and Roosevelt in 1901 with a concise chronological overview, \textit{A Short History of the Mississippi Valley}.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{10} Mark Twain, \textit{Life on the Mississippi} (1881; repr., New York, 2001).
\textsuperscript{12} See Mark Twain, “The Raftsman Passage,” in \textit{Adventures of Huckleberry Finn} (1883; repr. New York, 1977), 233–41. \textit{Life on the Mississippi} is discussed in chapter 4, this work.
\textsuperscript{14} James K. Hosmer, \textit{A Short History of the Mississippi Valley} (Boston, Mass., 1901).
It was at this time that a group of American historians from the Midwest formed the Mississippi Valley Historical Association. Both the political and intellectual history of this group bespeak a belief in American exceptionalism. Alienated by what some perceived as the East Coast elitism and neglect of the American Historical Association, midwestern scholars formed the rival Mississippi Valley Historical Association in 1907. While the nucleus of the MVHA was state historical society administrators, they soon welcomed professors and secondary school teachers.\footnote{John R. Wunder, “The Founding Years of the OAH,” \textit{OAH Newsletter} 34 (November 2006), 1, 6, 8.}

Like many of the organization’s founders, Professor Clarence Alvord of the University of Illinois believed the AHA “underemphasized” the history of the American heartland. The AHA opposed formation of the new society, starting a feud that lasted a decade but was ultimately resolved. In the meantime, Alvord became editor of the society’s new journal, the \textit{Mississippi Valley Historical Review}, founded in 1913. He referred to its readership as “the fraternity of western historians” and began to print a large replica of a steamboat on the cover.\footnote{Ibid.; Kammen, “The Mississippi Valley Historical Association, 1907–1952,” 17–19.}

Frederick Jackson Turner ably outlined “The Significance of the Mississippi Valley in American History” in a 1908 keynote speech before the new organization. Turner’s talk, subsequently published in the \textit{Proceedings of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association, 1909–1910}, and as a chapter of his anthology \textit{The Frontier in American History} (1920), is the smartest overview of the subject ever written. Turner had and has many critics,\footnote{Richard Hofstadter, “Turner and the Frontier Myth,” \textit{American Scholar} 18 (Autumn 1949), 433–43; Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde Milner III, and Charles Rankin, eds., \textit{Trails: Towards A New Western History} (Lawrence, Kans., 1991).} and it is true that Turner produced only three books during his career, one of them a collection of essays. Folktales among historians telling how Turner wrote many of the latter essays on board railroad trains en route to meetings where he was to give the dinner address are unproven (though Mark Twain might have approved of this kind of recycling). Indeed, Turner had worked
as a typesetter and newspaperman prior to his academic career, and on occasion he worked like a journalist. This is not necessarily a bad thing. Despite his failings, Frederick Jackson Turner continues to demand our attention.  

Turner’s essay “The Significance of the Mississippi Valley in American History” is directly related to his seminal 1893 essay, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” In that piece, Turner had turned the dominant historiographic paradigm—germ theory—on its head by arguing American culture was not determined by European roots (“germs”) but rather was a unique result of the frontier experience. The frontier took newly arrived colonists and “Americanized” them—forcing them to learn Indian skills to adapt to a hostile environment or die. The result was a new, exceptional American character working “for good and for evil.” According to Turner, the new frontier American was innovative, courageous, strong, democratic and egalitarian, and nationalistic. As for the “evil” to which Turner also alluded, the frontier simultaneously produced a culture that was violent, wasteful, itinerant, insolvent, and anti-intellectual.  

Turner believed the frontier was a process not a place, and that the frontier replicated itself each time Euro-Americans advanced into Indian Territory. Most of the examples from “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” are taken from the Mississippi River Valley. Born and raised in Portage, on the Wisconsin River, Turner saw the Mississippi Valley as a crucial frontier in converting Europeans and easterners into Americans.  

Turner’s published Mississippi Valley speech provides an

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18. Turner, “Significance of the Mississippi Valley in American History,” 177–204; Wilbur Jacobs, foreword to The Frontier in American History, passim. As a graduate student, I heard several variants of what might be labeled the “Turner used dinner speeches written aboard trains for his books” tale type.  


outline for an interdisciplinary study of the Great Valley. He begins in a politic way, noting, “Already our eastern colleagues are aware” of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association’s members’ important work in researching “movement of population, diplomacy, politics, economic development, [and] social structure” of the trans-Appalachian West. Typical of his generation, he dismissed Mound Builders and Indians as “primitive” and “savage peoples,” and one can search in vain for the female pronoun in the essay. Turner’s main interest in African Americans is slavery’s role as a catalyst for antebellum territorial debates, especially over the Louisiana Purchase. Yet, judged by the standards of the time, “The Significance of the Mississippi Valley in American History” is a progressive call for an interdisciplinary cultural history of this geographic region. “The Mississippi Valley,” Turner concludes, “has furnished a new social order to America.”

During the twentieth century, journalists and creative nonfiction authors produced books about selected aspects of the Mississippi River Valley. One of the most important accomplishments was the Rivers of America Series. With the support and encouragement of Frederick Jackson Turner, the novelist and poet Constance Lindsay Skinner first conceived and edited the Rivers of America Series in the 1930s. Skinner believed “the American nation came to birth upon the rivers” and had evolved in its myriad river valleys. During an astounding press run that spanned the years 1937 to 1974, Farrar and Rinehart and its corporate successors contracted authors to produce sixty titles, each devoted to an important American river. Skinner and her colleagues left the student of the Mississippi Valley a treasure trove.

23. Constance Lindsay Skinner Induction File, National Rivers Hall of Fame, National Rivers
Meanwhile, academic writers pursued related work. Turner’s thesis combined with creation of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association and the further professionalization of historians to foster hundreds of focused scholarly articles and books set in the Mississippi Valley. Nearly all of them sprang from doctoral dissertations about exploration, diplomacy, military, political, social, and cultural history within the Great Valley. These authors include Clarence Alvord, Milo Quaife, Arthur Preston Whitaker, Thomas Perkins Abernethy, Archer Hulbert, and Leland D. Baldwin (to name a very few), who trained a subsequent generation that included John D. Barnhart, R. Carlyle Buley, Ray Allen Billington, Merle Curti, Thomas D. Clark, Vernon Carstensen, and, later, Martin Ridge, Malcolm J. Rohrbough, and others.24

In the 1970s, following the name change of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association, new social historians brought a different methodology and ideology to the study of the Mississippi Valley. Uninterested in cultural geography and exceptionalism, they produced scores of works focused on race, class, gender, and environment in the Mississippi River Valley. Here, the names Daniel Usner, Richard White, John Mack Faragher, William Cronon, Stephen Aaron, Tom Buchanan, and John Seelye come to mind.25

Surveying this vast body of literature, one is struck by the fact that, of the hundreds of monographs about the Mississippi Valley, all but a dozen avoid synthesis and instead focus on specific topics within Mississippi Valley history. And of those dozen books that take a sweeping view, nearly all were written in the middle and late nineteenth century.26

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With this historiographical context in mind, and in the second decade of a new century, and amid the work of a new generation of American historians, it is time to return to the idea of the Mississippi Valley as a cultural hearth and a major force in the creation of American civilization. Fortunately, I am not alone in recognizing this need. Robert D. Kaplan spotlights the crucial role of the Mississippi Valley to America in *Earning the Rockies: How Geography Shapes America’s Role in the World* (2017). Jon Lauck’s books *The Lost Region: Toward a Revival of Midwestern History* (2013) and *From Warm Center to Ragged Edge: The Erosion of Midwestern Literary and Historical Regionalism, 1920–1965* (2017) have combined with the work of others to revive the scholarly study of the upper half of the Great Valley. The Midwestern History Association formed in 2014, and dozens of historians have answered Lauck’s call in conference panels, dedicated conferences, scholarly journals, and *Finding a New Midwestern History*, edited by Jon Lauck, Gleaves Whitney, and Joe Hogan (2018). This book is my contribution to that effort.

In planning how to write about the Mississippi Valley, I have heeded the pitfalls inherent in trying to do it all (like Flint, Hosmer, and Walker) or focusing on isolated topics (like the new social historians). I am drawn to authors who paint a broad picture through use of carefully selected and representative vignettes (“histories”). Henry Lewis did this, and I believe this is what Mark Twain might have accomplished in *Life on the Mississippi*. In *Father Mississippi* (1927), Lyle Saxon uses the selected vignette methodology, and in *Look Down That Winding River: An Informal Portrait of the Mississippi* (1973), Ben Lucien Burman, an author who devoted his career to writing about


Mississippi Valley folk, paints a similarly evocative portrait of river life.  

My own hero is Daniel Boorstin, a distinguished University of Chicago professor and Librarian of Congress, who used selected histories to portray American civilization in his Pulitzer Prize–winning trilogy, *The Americans*. Although *The Americans* is not a Mississippi Valley work (though it lingers in the Great Valley in portions of volume 2), Boorstin uses an interdisciplinary case study method to artistic ends, painting a word picture of the history of American culture. No one can ever hope to replicate Boorstin’s work, but he inspires the effort. In a related vein, I have been strongly influenced by two historians whose work offers methods for writing geographically based historical narrative. Walter Prescott Webb’s *Great Plains* (1931) and Fernand Braudel’s *Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (1972) successfully explore American and European history through the lens of cultural geography.  

In this book, I have combined forty-eight histories of the Mississippi Valley. It is an interdisciplinary work with chapters that proceed more or less chronologically and are organized around areas of study—nature and the environment, history, economics, folklore, popular culture, literature and the arts, movies, and music. Within the chapters are topics ranging from the natural world, to Mound Builders and Indians, to Frances Wright and General U. S. Grant, to postbellum Redeemers and Black Republican congressmen, to Kate Chopin, to Thomas Hart Benton, to Harry Truman, to blues, gospel, and country musicians. There will no doubt be questions and disagreements about the particular individuals and topics I have chosen to

portray. I tried to find interesting stories reflective of larger themes and trends within each chapter’s area of study. There are other stories I might have told, and stories that other writers would have chosen. Some might eschew biography, but I was drawn to the stories of individuals in the Mississippi Valley.

A few times I have wandered outside the Mississippi Valley—a little east of the Appalachian crest and west of the 98th meridian—to tell stories linked to the valley’s history and culture. The Rocky Mountain trappers might seem a world apart from the Great Valley, but they descend from Appalachian mountain men, and Saint Louis was their mecca. Jews in Atlanta, Georgia, share a history and culture with their brethren in New Orleans, Natchez, and Nashville. Mount Airy, North Carolina, the inspiration for *The Andy Griffith Show*'s Mayberry, lies slightly east of the Appalachians, but the show’s folkways and values strongly resonate farther west. The same connections apply to the North Carolinian Junior Johnson and the Alabamian Kenny Stabler—heroes of NASCAR (stock car) racing and Southeastern Conference college football. The movie *Smokey and the Bandit* ends in Georgia only after Burt Reynolds, Sally Field, Jerry Reed, and Jackie Gleason have raced from Texarkana across the lower Mississippi Valley to get there. Mississippi Valley food and drink customs have worked their way east (and west) as well.

The book ends in the 1960s and ’70s, but there is no exact end date. The last chapter tells the story of Bob Dylan’s recording sessions in Nashville, Tennessee, Muscle Shoals, Alabama, and New Orleans, Louisiana. I also examine the birth of rock-and-roll music, the civil rights movement, the demise of the segregationist wing of the Democratic Party, and Ronald Reagan’s path from Dixon, Illinois, to the presidency. But the further I moved into a world I have experienced during my own lifetime, the warier I became about my ability to write about it. The late Murray Morgan, a beloved local historian of Tacoma, Washington (where I teach), often joked that he ended his *Puget’s Sound: A Narrative of Tacoma and the Southern Sound* (1979) in the year 1916 because that was when he was born. Actually Murray Morgan’s method is a pretty good one, and, while I lack his will
power, I have tried to avoid the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. I leave it to other writers to explore the impact of Louisiana’s Cancer Alley, the environmental movement, the emergent Sun Belt and new Republican South, New Orleans hip-hop music, and many, many other important modern Mississippi Valley topics.

While I have done archival research and use traditionally published and online firsthand sources, I rely heavily on secondary sources. For the latter, I have consulted recent scholarship, but have concluded that in many (not all) instances the older histories remain the best works available. In chapters about the arts (literature, movies, music, paintings, etc.) and popular culture, I rely much more heavily on the actual works than the analyses by contemporary art and literary critics. Although I do analyze movies, songs, and books, I am most interested in telling the stories of the artists who created them and retelling the stories those artists told in their work.

I wrote the basic outline for this book when I was a young man. In 1974, I presented it as a prospectus for a master’s thesis to Harry Fritz at the University of Montana, and he just smiled good-naturedly and set me to the task of researching the Federalists and the West. A few years later, at the University of Washington, Seattle, Bill Rorabaugh also smiled, informed me I was proposing the kind of book someone writes when they are around 60 years old, and set me to work on a social history of flatboatmen. Well, fellows, forty years later, here it is.

In concluding, I would like to turn to the field of biology. In studying the Mississippi Valley, it is necessary to begin by studying the natural world, the plants and animals that populate its ecosystem. I believe this because of the way I came to study the place. I was a stranger, one who had grown up in the semiarid foothills (the Columbia Plateau) of eastern Washington State. I was twenty-four years old when I entered the Mississippi Valley for the first time in my life. One summer day in 1975, I hitchhiked south from Minneapolis–Saint Paul and then east on I-40. Crossing Iowa heading for Davenport and the Quad Cities, I was struck by the mysterious land in which I found myself. I
was moved by the landscape, lush vegetation, and overwhelming humidity. For an eastern Washington boy, the first sight of fireflies at dusk on the Mississippi was unforgettable.

About thirty years prior, Jack Kerouac had viewed the Mississippi River for the first time at the Quad Cities. In On the Road, Kerouac writes,

I took over the wheel and ... drove clear through the rest of Illinois to Davenport, Iowa, via Rock Island. And here for the first time in my life I saw my beloved Mississippi, dry in the summer haze, low water, with its big rank smell that smells like the raw body of America itself because it washes it up.  

More than one hundred and seventy years ago, two religious prophets spoke of their Mississippi Valley homeland. The first was Tenskwatawa, the Shawnee prophet and brother of Tecumseh. He experienced religious trances and visions. He called for a return to the ways of the Ohio Valley wilderness during his fight to save his beloved homeland from the Euro-American advance. One of those Euro-Americans, the Latter-day Saints prophet Joseph Smith, Jr., traveled west from upper New York state and Ohio, to Independence, Missouri, and Nauvoo, Illinois. In the 1830s and 1840s, Smith told his followers that the vast and fertile Mississippi Valley was the new Zion, a land to which Jesus Christ would one day return.

These men evocatively described the spiritual forces of the land and culture of the Mississippi River Valley. Yet their words are no more powerful than those of the unlikely hero of a novel set before the Civil War, an illiterate boy who grew up in a Missouri village a few hundred miles north of Saint Louis. Sailing south on the great river on a log raft, helping his friend, a slave named Jim, escape to freedom, lying on his back, gazing up at the stars, swimming and fishing, Huckleberry Finn was also awed by the Mississippi River’s power and beauty. In words

that are strong because they are spare, Huck recalled that drifting down the “big river” made him feel “kind of solemn.” The Mississippi was—and is—“awful still and grand.”