CHAPTER 1

THE ANTEBELLUM VALLEY

To the south and west, stretch the vast waters of the Mississippi… There is something unspeakably sublime in the vast extent of earthly domain that here opens to the mind’s eye; and truly sublime is the contemplation, when we consider the life and energy with which it is fast teeming. An industrious and enlightened people, laying in the wilderness the foundations of commonwealth after commonwealth, based on justice and the immutable rights of man! What heart so cold as to contemplate this unmoved!

Fanny Wright, *Views of Society and Manners in America* (1821)\(^1\)

At 1,112 pages, the Reverend Timothy Flint’s *Condensed Geography and History of the Western States, or the Mississippi Valley* (1828) hardly seems “condensed,” and one wonders how many pages Flint might have judged adequate for an unabridged edition. Published in two volumes, Flint’s magnum opus mirrored the interdisciplinary scope and methods of “gentlemen scholars” and early national American men of letters. Beginning with the geology, geography, and biology of the natural world, Flint shifts to Indians and early European exploration, and then gives a thorough recounting of the history of the early American republic’s expansion into the Mississippi Valley. By page 447, near the end of volume 1 of the *Condensed Geography and History*, Flint has arrived at Andrew Jackson’s victory over the British at

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the Battle of New Orleans, fought only thirteen years prior. The remainder of volume 1, and all of volume 2, contains chapters devoted to each of the ten new Mississippi Valley states, plus Arkansas Territory, organized around the same all-encompassing interdisciplinary categories. It is “indisputable,” Flint writes in the preface, “that a compendious Geography and History … of a country, already containing four millions of inhabitants, was needed… Whether this book in any measure supplies the desideratum,” Flint leaves to the judgment of “the western people [who] are both warm hearted and in the main just. They will not deny him the merit of industry and good intentions, if nothing more.”

The Reverend Timothy Flint (1780–1840) was one of a breed of New England Yankees drawn to the trans-Appalachian West during the decades following the American Revolution. Born into a large North Reading, Massachusetts, farming family, Flint was a sickly child who suffered ill health throughout his life. He decided on a career in the church, graduated from Harvard in 1800, and traveled west, preaching the gospel throughout the Mississippi Valley from 1815 to 1825. Though Flint and his congregants soon concluded he made a poor minister, the knowledge he gained from his travels enabled him to write a popular memoir, Recollections of the Last Ten Years (1826). The next decade saw Flint, based in both Cincinnati, Ohio, and Alexandria, Louisiana, pursue a successful writing career, producing essays, novels, and histories on frontier topics at a remarkable pace. Amid all of these projects, he somehow found time to write and publish A Condensed History and Geography of the Western States, or The Mississippi Valley, and its sequel, The History and Geography of the Mississippi Valley (1832).

Considering his poor health, Timothy Flint put in an extraordinary amount of time and effort at research and writing.

2. Timothy Flint, A Condensed Geography and History of the Western States, or the Mississippi Valley, 2 vols. (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1828), 1:15.
3. James K. Folsom, Timothy Flint (New York, 1965), 7–9, 17–47; John Ervin Kirkpatrick, Timothy Flint: Pioneer, Missionary, Author, Editor, 1780–1840 (Cleveland, Ohio, 1911), 15–34, passim; Thomas Ruys Smith, River of Dreams: Imagining the Mississippi before Mark Twain (Baton Rouge, La., 2007), 60–61.
He noted that he “put his hand to the plough” for the *Condensed Geography and History* by examining nearly all available primary and secondary accounts and conducting research in Cincinnati, Saint Louis, and New Orleans. Flint was one of the first American scholars to systematically mine data from United States Census records. Despite arduous formal research, Flint said much of what he knew about the Mississippi Valley came from “devot[ing] the best portion of twelve years to exploring the western country[,] … travers[ing] the great valley, in all its chief directions.” “On foot and alone,” Flint had wandered and sailed “the Mississippi and its tributary waters.” He was particularly struck by “the physical aspect of the country, its amenity, beauty, fertility, and resources... The features of nature have received from their Divine Author the impress of his own immutability.”

Although “Man, his works, his ambitions, his hopes and fears are transitory” compared to God’s nature, Timothy Flint devoted most of his *Condensed Geography and History* to the story of man in the Great Valley. His itinerant ministry had “brought him in contact with all classes of [the valley’s] people, and all its aspects of society,” and made him one of America’s first social and economic historians. Modern students of Ohio and Mississippi rivermen have turned to Flint to document the lives of these inarticulate, early American frontiersmen and their role in the nation’s economic growth. “Every principal farmer, along the great water courses, builds, and sends to New Orleans the produce of his farm in a flat boat,” Flint wrote, and thus “a great proportion of the males of the West ... have experienced that expansion of mind, which can not fail to be produced by traversing long distances of country, and viewing different forms of nature and society,” from Pittsburgh, to the Missouri, to New Orleans. Flint was a product of his time and place, and his writings reflect early national prejudices. He describes Indians as primitives whose extirpation is foreordained, and, although many Yankees opposed slavery, Flint seems to accept, but not applaud, the South’s peculiar institution.

5. Ibid., 10, 14, 213; Michael Allen, *Western Rivermen, 1763–1861: Ohio and Mississippi Boatmen*
Between 1826 and 1833, Timothy Flint produced one dozen book-length works of fiction and nonfiction. These include *Francis Berrian* (1826), *A Condensed Geography and History of the Western States, or The Mississippi Valley*, *The History and Geography of the Mississippi Valley* (1828), *George Mason, the Young Backwoodsman* (1829), *The Lost Child* (1830), *The Shoshonee Valley* (1830), *The Personal Narrative of James O. Pattie* (1831), *The Art of Being Happy* (1832), *Indian Wars of the West* (1833), *Lectures upon Natural History* (1833), and Flint’s most influential book, *Biographical Memoir of Daniel Boone* (1833). Flint also founded and edited the *Western Monthly*, a Cincinnati literary magazine (1827–30), where he wrote one of the first stories about the legendary Ohio and Mississippi keelboatman Mike Fink. Although Flint’s hard work brought him much success, it also contributed to his increasingly ill health. Exhausted and ailing, he returned to the East Coast, serving a brief stint as editor of New York City’s *Knickerbocker* magazine (1833). Timothy Flint died August 16, 1840, in Salem, Massachusetts, and is interred at Harmony Grove Cemetery, where a monument stands today.6

The pages of *A Condensed Geography and History of the Western States, or The Mississippi Valley*, address many of the significant historical issues of the Mississippi Valley prior to the American Civil War. Timothy Flint discusses ancient Mound Builders and their Indian descendants; Spanish, French, and British explorers; Daniel Boone; the role of Christianity; the Louisiana Purchase; Lewis and Clark; the Burr Conspiracy; Tippecanoe; Andrew Jackson at Horseshoe Bend and New Orleans; and much more. Although he does not touch on all of the topics a modern American might list, Flint lays the groundwork for a broad interdisciplinary examination of America’s heartland. Indeed, the Reverend Timothy Flint’s *Condensed Geography and History* furnishes the modern scholar a roadmap to study the antebellum history of the western states of the Mississippi Valley.


BEGINNINGS

Around 12,000 BC, the great Ice Age came to an end in North America. As the earth began to warm, the gigantic glaciers slowly melted, and plant and animal life gradually evolved. Huge mastodons (ancestors of today’s elephants), mammoths, bison, giant sloths, bears, and cats roamed the lush plains abutting the receding glacial ice. Herds of these prehistoric animals were drawn to the Big Bone Lick, a major Ohio Valley salt deposit located downstream from the mouth of the Kentucky River. Because the lick was in swampy lowland, its quicksand-like mud occasionally entrapped salt-hungry animals. Many unfortunate bison and mastodons died at the lick, and their remains were evident 14,000 years later.7

The first European to note seeing these huge prehistoric bones was the French army major Charles LeMoyne in 1739. In 1755, the Shawnee captors of the pioneer emigrant Mary Ingalls showed her the site, and the British Indian agent and scientist George Croghan studied the remains in the late 1760s. Though he never visited the Big Bone Lick, President Thomas Jefferson sent William Clark to gather specimens there in 1807; Jefferson later wrote a scholarly paper about fossil mastodons and other post–Ice Age mammals. Meanwhile, the lick became a regular stop for hundreds of flatboatmen descending the Ohio. “Remarkable large bones have been found,” reported the 1802 Ohio and Mississippi Navigator, “which must have belonged to some monstrous animal whose race is now tho’t to be entirely extinct.”8

Human beings also inhabited the region, though archeologists still debate the origins of human life in North America, and Indians have their own creation stories. Most social scientists

believe humans crossed from Asia to North America roughly 12,000 to 14,000 years ago. The arrival of hunter-gatherers thus paralleled the receding glaciers. Paleolithic (Stone Age) hunters earned a living spearing bison, bear, wildcats, and other animals below the Late Wisconsin Ice Sheet in what we now call the Mississippi River Valley. Over the course of 10,000 years, these folk slowly made the transition from hunting and gathering to agriculture. Some of those early farmers were the ancestors of modern Indian people and are commonly known as Mound Builders.  

Americans have always been fascinated with Mound Builders, from the time of Thomas Jefferson’s studies to the present. Mound building civilizations in North America naturally invite comparisons to concurrent pyramid builders among Mexican, Central, and South American cultural groups, such as the Aztecs, Inca, and Mayans. A perusal of archeological analyses of North American Mound Builders reveals wildly varying start and end dates of particular groups. For example, the eminent archeologist Brian Fagan dates the Hopewell group from 400 BC to AD 200, while the Encyclopedia Britannica dates them 200 BC to AD 500. Generally speaking, the Hopewellian and Mississippian eras span approximately 2,000 years, from 400 BC to AD 1400. The exact chronology is not so important for our purposes until it approaches the beginnings of the southeastern Indian (Creek, Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Seminole) civilizations and European exploration of the Mississippi River Valley.

The Hopewell dwelt in the upper Mississippi Valley’s eastern sector, in modern-day Ohio, Wisconsin, Indiana, Illinois, western Pennsylvania, and New York. Their influence and cultural ways spread even further. The Hopewell raised maize (Indian corn), gathered nuts and berries, and hunted and fished. They created strong kinship networks and worked in metals (copper and silver) and clay. Although the Adena and other

groups constructed earthen burial mounds, the Hopewell took
the process to a much larger scale, using hundreds and perhaps
thousands of workers who hauled dirt in baskets strapped to
their backs. They were the first North Americans to construct
elaborate earthen mounds for use in defense, religious and burial
rituals, and more. One of the striking aspects of Hopewell effigy
mounds is that they were not pyramidal. The effigy mounds took
a number of shapes that, viewed today from an airplane, are
clearly identifiable as huge snakes, birds, and other figures. This
is noteworthy for many reasons, not the least of which is that
the Hopewell had no access to higher viewing elevations than
the mounds and the surrounding forest. They could not have
possibly shaped these elaborate effigy mounds by sight.11

During the millennium following the birth of Christ, the
Mississippian civilization slowly evolved, supplanting and
expanding that of the Hopewell. Mississippian flourished from
approximately AD 800 until the eve of European contact,
residing in the lower Mississippi Valley while ranging north to
the upper Mississippi and Ohio Valleys and as far east as the
Carolinas and northern Florida. Archeologists group their
multiple chiefdoms as Plaquemine, Caddoan, South
Appalachian, Middle, Fort Ancient, and Oneota Mississippian
peoples. Although there was great diversity in Mississippian
culture, important characteristics apply generally and help us to
understand their sophisticated civilization.12

Mississippian made their living farming, hunting, fishing, and
gathering. They were hoe farmers, raising maize, beans, squash,
gourds, and tobacco in the rich soil of the Mississippi Valley
lowlands. Corn was the centerpiece of their agricultural
sustenance and a prime trading commodity. They celebrated
corn—and the sun that made it grow—in religious rituals,
prayers, and dances. Corn was eaten boiled by the ear, baked,

Leonard Peacefull (Kent, Ohio, 1996), 71. The name Hopewell was drawn from an Ohio
farm family on whose land the first scientific excavations took place.
his senior paper on Mississippian culture at Tennessee Technological University,
and ground into meal; corn stalk roots were brewed for tea; and the husks filled mattresses and pillows. Mississippians also gathered hickory nuts and wild berries, and hunted bear, deer, raccoons, squirrels, turkey, ducks, geese, and other waterfowl. They were expert fishermen, harvesting the nutrient-rich catfish and bottom feeders of the Mississippi and its tributaries; probably half their calories came from fish and waterfowl.\textsuperscript{13}

The Mississippian’s primary social and political organization was the chiefdom. Chiefs were hereditary rulers who lived atop their village’s highest mound. Advised by kin and councilors, chiefs coordinated their communities’ agricultural production and distribution, religious ceremonies, and trade; they adjudicated villagers’ disputes and crimes; and they conducted relations with neighboring chiefdoms. The chiefs were war leaders whose fierce troops used bows and arrows, spears, axes, and maces to violently settle disputes over land or to avenge wrongs perpetrated by neighbors. Mississippian warriors are known to have scalped and tortured their enemies and burned villages to the ground. In some excavated graves, one-third of the bodies bear the marks of violent death. Chiefs formed military alliances and built elaborate palisades (walls built from logs) to protect their villages from attack. Warfare increased as resources grew scarce in the new millennium.\textsuperscript{14}

The fact that scholars and laypersons alike still call these Mississippian people Mound Builders reflects the significance of the huge earthen works around which their civilization revolved. Today, there are several places one can view and ascend the mounds, but the most awe-inspiring group lies in Cahokia, a few miles east of Saint Louis, across the Mississippi River in Illinois. Cahokia, the greatest of all the Mississippian communities, existed from approximately AD 700 to 1400, peaking during the years 1050–1200. In Cahokia, some one hundred and twenty mounds of varying size sat on a six-square-mile river lowland

\textsuperscript{13} Fagan, \textit{Ancient North America}, 432–34. Thanks to Kristeen M. Barker.
boasting an estimated ten to fifteen thousand people. A large circle of upright logs—named Woodhenge by archeologists—was used to track the seasonal path of the sun and thus determine calendar dates, solstices, and equinoxes. The city’s centerpiece was Monks Mound (named in the modern era after 1700s Catholic missionaries), standing 100 feet high with a 955-foot-by-775-foot base, equal to the base size of Egypt’s Great Pyramid of Giza. In contrast, Emerald Mound, one of the best-preserved mounds on the lower Mississippi (near Natchez) is smaller, yet still impressive at 35 feet in height with a base of 83 feet by 50 feet.

The mounds were the result of monumental and back-breaking labor. Workers carried earth from nearby diggings in basket loads weighing fifty to sixty pounds. The chief’s home sat atop a village’s highest mound, and governing councils met there; the town plaza, or courtyard, lay at the base of the mound. Cahokia’s forty-acre Grand Plaza served as the community’s market, ceremonial, and social center. Mounds served as sites for religious ceremonies, including funerals and human sacrifice rituals, complete with decapitations and sacrificial offerings. Mississippians might have built mounds so that they could enjoy viewing the grand Mississippi River while remaining safe from its powerful forces. Mound tops no doubt provided excellent refuge from the Mississippi Valley’s frequent floods and served as observation posts for leaders to oversee villagers below and those farming adjacent fields. Mounds were probably used as lookout posts to spy on marauding enemies, and if those enemies managed to breach a village’s palisade, mounds provided excellent positions for a defensive stand.

We can glimpse the society and lifestyle of ordinary


Mississippians using evidence from archeological digs and examining the folkways of their early modern Indian descendants. Villagers lived in rectangular or circular huts with mud-plastered walls and heavily thatched roofs to keep out rain and snow. They made their clothing from animal skins and woven grasses fashioned into breechcloths, leggings, shirts, skirts, and moccasins; in summer, they shed clothing, and in winter, they added fur mantles and stoles. Mississippians wore bead bracelets and necklaces and earbobs made from shells, bone, copper, and pottery. They adorned their bodies with tattoos. Adults spent their leisure with their children and extended kin. For pleasure, they feasted on bear steaks and venison, and smoked tobacco; they might have drunk a stimulant made from pounded holly leaves. Mississippians gambled at shell and dice games, and on the plaza they played lacrosse and used wooden sticks and polished stones to play a game resembling field hockey. Mississippians were excellent potters, and their cooking utensils and tableware were stout and attractive. They fashioned artistic copper and pottery statues and masks engraved with bird, serpent, bear, hand, skull, bones, and weeping eye images. The skull, bones, and weeping eye motifs reflect a natural concern over death.

Following the course of all great civilizations, the Mississippians slowly rose and then declined. Decline began gradually around 1200, and by 1400 the Cahokia site was abandoned. Indeed, the name Cahokia is not Mississippian, for they had no written language to preserve the community’s name. Cahokia is the name of a band of the Illiniwek (Illinois) Indian tribe that French explorers and priests found encamped at the foot of Monks Mound. Other Mississippians endured longer than the Cahokians, but met their same fate. European diseases such as smallpox and measles, against which Indians had no immunity, are no doubt one reason for the decline. Yet, in Cahokia and elsewhere, the decline had begun well before the Europeans’ arrival. According to the archeologist George R.

17. Pauketat, Ancient Cahokia and the Mississippian, 83–84; Fagan, Ancient North America, 446–50; Milner, Moundbuilders, 111–13, 140–42.
Milner, the Spanish explorer Hernando De Soto and his men “found a tangled and uninhabited wilderness” where the Savannah River Mississippians had once flourished. “Once impressive river valley societies had all but disappeared” before the Spaniards’ arrival. Why? Crop blight is a major culprit, and tree ring analysis indicates a series of droughts. The blight destroyed corn crops, and drought made a rebound impossible, resulting in famine. Then, too, fierce warfare between chiefdoms caused populations to decline. All of this hastened the Mississippians’ demise, but it did not leave the Mississippi Valley without Indigenous human occupants.18

Woodland Indian descendants of the Mississippians carried on their ways on a smaller and less complex scale. Because the Mississippians were geographically isolated from one another and had no written language, many traditions were lost as elders died. Yet descendant Indian tribes—the Natchez, Coosa, Creek, Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Seminole, and others—practiced and adapted remnant traditions through the early modern era before Indian removal. They continued hoe-farming, and Creeks and others practiced a green corn harvest ceremony that was a less elaborate version of the Mississippian ritual. Choctaws also retained core cultural elements and spiritual beliefs, following what they called “the straight bright path.” The elaborate villages of the Mississippians were succeeded by humbler and more transient communities that were no longer surrounded by huge bean, squash, and corn fields. No town like Cahokia ever rose again, and no more earthen mounds were built after 17th-century Natchez Indians discontinued the practice. Meanwhile, the Mississippians’ Indian descendants faced the European explorers and missionaries who began to arrive in the mid-1500s.19

When recounting the story of early European exploration of

18. Milner, Moundbuilders, 166–68.
the Mississippi River Valley, Mark Twain’s pithy description in *Life on the Mississippi* paints as negative a picture as any of today’s post-colonial storytellers. Twain adds healthy doses of his own humor, sarcasm, irony, and sacrilege to the familiar tales of Hernando de Soto, Jacques Marquette, Louis Jolliet, and René-Robert Cavelier, the Sieur de La Salle. In chapter 2 of *Life on the Mississippi*, Twain quickly covers the Spaniard de Soto’s 1542 sighting of the Mississippi River, saving most of his ammunition for the Frenchmen who followed. His transition is a reference to the fact that in “that day, all explorers traveled with an outfit of priests,” and, although food and other supplies often ran low, “they always had the furniture and other requisites for the mass.” In 1673, when Jolliet and Marquette sailed the Mississippi to the mouth of the Arkansas and were threatened by a “tribe of war-whooping savages,” the devout explorers “appealed to the Virgin for help; so in place of a fight there was a feast, and plenty of pleasant palaver and folderol.” La Salle’s 1681 expedition was even more “religious”: “La Salle set up a cross with the arms of France on it, and took possession of the whole country for the king—the cool fashion of the time—while the priest piously consecrated the robbery with a hymn.” La Salle then “drew from these simple children of the forest acknowledgments of fealty to Louis the Putrid [France’s King Louis XIV], over the water. Nobody smiled at these colossal ironies.”

The devastating impact on Indian peoples that accompanied the arrival of Christopher Columbus, de Soto, Jolliet, Marquette, La Salle, and subsequent European traders and settlers is an important and well-researched subject that makes for sobering reading. The advent of modernity inevitably meant the demise

21. Ibid., 7–9.
of hunting and gathering and agricultural Indian people. But this tragic process was not genocide, which is by definition premeditated. There are isolated instances of genocide in the history of Euro-American and Indian conflicts, and they are exceptions. While some have overestimated the number of pre-Columbian Indians, the mortality rate for the existing population was most certainly high. And the results of diseases were horrific, even if Europeans did not conspire to spread those diseases to the Indians.\(^{23}\)

Mississippi Valley exploration is part of the larger history of the Age of Discovery and European expansion into the New World. Beginning with Columbus in 1492, Spain spearheaded the drive to the west. The French followed the Spaniards’ penetration of North American frontiers, and they in turn were followed by Great Britain and her North American subjects. The old saying that Spanish explorers were motivated by “gold, God, and glory” is an accurate way to describe European colonialism if one adds scientific curiosity to the mix and stresses the fact that the four motives were unequal. Economic gain was no doubt a dominant motive, yet religious devotion, the quest for knowledge, and a desire for military/strategic advantage (as well as adventure and “glory”) figured importantly in the Spanish, French, and British exploration and settlement of the Mississippi Valley during the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries.\(^{24}\)

Hernando de Soto (c.1496–1542), Spain’s intrepid adventurer in Florida and the trans-Appalachian West, was a devout


nobleman in search of gold and silver. As a Spanish cavalry captain in Peru, de Soto had in 1536 taken a small fortune in Incan gold back to Seville, but he hungered for more. There was a legend that, in the eighth century, seven Spanish bishops migrated to the New World and founded the fabulously wealthy Seven Cities of Cibola; of course, there was also a story about a Fountain of Youth. Although de Soto did not believe these stories, his success in looting Peru no doubt fired his ambitions. Appointed governor of Cuba by King Carlos (Charles) V, he set sail for North America in 1539. With approximately one thousand troops and a platoon of priests, he landed in Tampa Bay and explored and conquered northern Florida, encamping near modern-day Pensacola. He wrote back to Cuba that local natives told him of “gold, silver, and many pearls. May it please God that this may be so. For of what these Indians say I believe nothing but what I see, and must well see; although they know … that if they lie to me that it will cost them their lives.”

Hernando de Soto then turned his eyes northward. Throughout 1540–41, he and his army explored and charted 350,000 square miles of the Old Southwest—modern Florida, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Arkansas. He first headed due north and then turned southwest, approaching the Mississippi River south of the Chickasaw Bluffs in northwestern Mississippi. His secretary Rodrigo Ranjel wrote, “They saw the great river. Saturday May 21 [1541], the force … began to build four barges to cross over to the other side. Many of the conquerors said this river was larger than the Danube.” De Soto’s priests won few converts and the “conquerors” took a beating from fierce Indians. Wounded in battle, de Soto first tried to press on across Arkansas toward New Spain (Mexico), but Indian fighters turned his dwindling army back; the Spaniards spent the miserable winter of 1641–42 encamped near the juncture of the Arkansas and Mississippi Rivers. Overtaken

with fever, de Soto sickened and died in either May or June of 1542. His men buried him, but Indians soon disinterred the body, placed it in a hollow log, and sank it in the Mississippi. Meanwhile, the remnants of de Soto’s failed army sailed to the Mississippi’s mouth, at last finding refuge along the northwestern coast of the Gulf of Mexico. Of the one thousand men de Soto had led into Florida in 1539, only three hundred lived to tell the tale.26

While the Spaniards had come from the south in the 1500s, French exploration of the Mississippi Valley emanated in the mid-1600s from Quebec City, the capital of French Canada. Under the leadership of Samuel de Champlain, the French had spent much of the first half of the seventeenth century founding and stabilizing their Canadian empire, preaching Catholicism, maneuvering against their British enemies on the lower Atlantic seaboard, and trading in furs with the natives. King Louis XIV, the Sun King, saw expansive colonialism as requisite to the growing glory of France, and he appointed the shrewd and energetic Jean Talon governor of New France in 1665. Talon aimed to expand the fur trade southward, thwarting British expansion while continuing to search for an elusive all-water route to Asian ports. In 1673, he dispatched Father Jacques Marquette and Louis Jolliet to explore the Mississippi River.27

Marquette and Jolliet—a priest and a cartographer/hydrographer turned frontier fur trader—mirror France’s intertwined religious, scientific, and economic motivations in exploring the Mississippi Valley. Marquette was trained by Jesuits in his native France before requesting to minister to Huron Indians on Lake Superior. Talon was as impressed by Marquette’s skills as a woodsman as his piety; Jolliet was also an adept woodsman who had traversed the Canadian wilds since his Quebec childhood. The two led a small band across Wisconsin,
trekking to the Wisconsin River and sailing its treacherous rapids to the Mississippi. When Marquette and Jolliet launched their canoes on the Mississippi on June 17, 1673, they became the first Europeans to explore its upper reaches.28

“Turning southward, they paddled down the stream through a solitude unrelieved by the faintest trace of man,” wrote the nineteenth-century historian Frances Parkman. “At length the buffalo appeared, grazing in herds on the great prairies which then bordered the river.” Near the eastern Iowa shore they met and parleyed with local Indians, then sailed past the mouths of the Missouri and Ohio Rivers. “Soon they began to see the marshy shores buried in a dense growth of cane, with its tall straight stems and feathery light-green foliage. The sun glowed through the hazy air with a languid stifling heat, and by day and night mosquitos in myriads left them no peace.” Arriving at the mouth of the Arkansas River, very near the place where de Soto had died more than a century earlier, they once again met and queried the local Indians (the “war-whooping savages” of Twain’s account). At last accepting the fact that the Gulf of Mexico, not the Pacific Ocean, lay at the Mississippi’s mouth, Marquette and Jolliet decided to travel no farther. They slowly worked their back way upstream, this time ascending the Illinois River to Lake Michigan, ending a 2,500-mile adventure near modern-day Chicago.29

While Marquette returned to his ministry, Jolliet proceeded to Quebec City in 1674 to make a full report. Although Jolliet had lost his maps and notebooks in a canoe accident, his verbal account greatly impressed Talon’s replacement, Governor General Louis de Buade, Comte de Frontenac et de Palluau, generally known as Frontenac. The disappointment over the Mississippi not being a route to the Pacific was immediately replaced by the realization that an all-water connection between the Great Lakes and the Caribbean was a wonderful consolation prize. Frontenac and other leaders reasoned they could link New

28. Thwaites, France in America, 56–57.
France to the Gulf of Mexico through a chain of forts along the Mississippi. They would trade with Indians for furs to ship to European markets via Quebec and a new port city to be built on the river's lower reaches. Moreover, their forts would bar British colonists from moving west. To begin the job of charting this grand plan—a plan that would lead to the founding of New Orleans and France's Louisiana Territory—Frontenac turned to his protégé, a shrewd Indian trader named René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle.30

René-Robert Cavelier, usually known as Robert de La Salle, was born in France in 1643 and as a teenager trained to be a Jesuit priest. Rejecting the rigors of the order, he embarked on an adventurous course that in 1666 led him to the Canadian fur-trading frontier, ranging as far west and south as Lake Ontario and the Great Falls of the Ohio. Although La Salle was by all accounts a cold and difficult man, he nevertheless inspired loyalty among his lieutenants, most notably Henry de Tonti and Father Louis Hennepin. With government backing, they moved in 1679 to begin the Mississippi Valley trading network, constructing forts at the mouth of the Saint Joseph River (Lake Michigan) and the upper Illinois River. Indian warfare and other setbacks stalled their plan, but in 1681 they descended the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers. La Salle wrote a friend in France that within the year he anticipated “the end of this business, which I hope will turn out well: for I have M. de Tonty, who is full of zeal, thirty Frenchmen, all good men … and more than a hundred Indians.”31

On March 13, 1682, La Salle’s troop arrived at the mouth of the Arkansas River and met with a band of Arkansas Indians, the scene Mark Twain sarcastically described in Life on the Mississippi. One of La Salle’s men later remembered “the civility and kindness we received from these barbarians,” who were “gay, civil, and free-hearted.” After a convivial exchange, La Salle

31. Walker, Mississippi Valley, 179–80; Parkman, Discovery of the Great West, 4–8, 216 (qtn.). La Salle’s troop was composed of 23, not 30, Frenchmen.
proclaimed France’s formal possession of the Louisiana Territory, and then sailed south to do so once again. Near the Gulf of Mexico, where the Mississippi branches into three outlets, La Salle, Tonti, and a third lieutenant sailed separate parties to the river mouths and reunited on the gulf. Assembling his men in military formation, on April 9, 1682, René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, took formal possession of the Mississippi Valley “in the name of the most high, mighty, invincible, and victorious Prince, Louis the Great, by the grace of God King of France.” A musket volley and shouts of “Vive le Roi!” followed the proclamation, as La Salle and his men sang, “The banners of Heaven’s King advance, the mystery of the Cross shines forth.” Mark Twain’s description of this “theft” is balanced by Parkman’s summary of the occasion:

On that day, the realm of France received on parchment a stupendous accession. The fertile plains of Texas; the vast basin of the Mississippi, from its frozen northern springs to the sultry borders of the Gulf; from the woody ridges of the Alleghanies to the bare peaks of the Rocky Mountains—a region of savannahs and forests, suncracked deserts, and grassy prairies, watered by a thousand rivers, ranged by a thousand warlike tribes, passed beneath the scepter of the Sultan of Versailles; and all by virtue of a feeble human voice, inaudible at half a mile.  

Returning north, La Salle worked feverishly to continue to build his fur-trading empire. Convinced the founding of a city near the river’s mouth was a first priority, he sailed by way of the Atlantic for the gulf in 1684 with four hundred men. When they missed the Mississippi’s mouth and became lost and stranded on the southeast Texas coast, some of his own men murdered him. New Orleans, the city La Salle envisioned, was not founded until 1718.  

Meanwhile, the English found themselves barred from access

32. Quotations from Parkman, Discovery of the Great West, 220, 225–27. Only a small portion of what became known as Texas was included in Louisiana. See also Twain, Life on the Mississippi, 9; Billington, Westward Expansion, 114–15.
to the Mississippi River Valley. Spain and France had explored, proselytized, and capitalized the trans-Appalachian West so early and so thoroughly that England could make no headway there until the mid-eighteenth century. Slowly building their colonial outposts on North America’s Atlantic seaboard, the British battled France in four colonial wars, regional conflicts that were part of a global power struggle. These wars began in the early 1700s and finally ended with British victory in 1763.  

The short-lived peace following Britain’s 1763 victory over France ushered in the trans-Appalachian expeditions of Daniel Boone. Boone was born in 1734 to a humble Quaker family in Pennsylvania’s Schuylkill Valley. He spent his youth following the game trails, moving farther down the Great Valley between the eastern Appalachian and Blue Ridge Mountains, and settling in the remote Yadkin Valley of North Carolina in 1751. Boone supported his wife and seven children as a farmer and professional hunter who also scouted for land companies. He had adapted the Indian practice of the long hunt—departing on lone or small-group hunting expeditions in the fall (after harvesting his crops), hunting and trapping deer, bear, fox, and beaver all winter (when the animals’ fur was thickest), and returning in the spring to market his catch and plant new crops. Boone’s youngest son, Nathan, recalled stories of his father’s hunting expeditions. The men “would wear moccasins of deer skins, stuffed well with deer’s hair to answer the place of stockings,” and deerskin “leggings” and “hunting shirt[s].” Nathan stated that although Boone thoroughly hunted and explored the eastern ridges and even trekked over the Appalachians into Watauga (northeastern Tennessee) before 1769, “he would never consider he had discovered the real West, which was Kentucky. The real West was the land beyond the Cumberland … mountain chain.”

Daniel Boone was an early explorer of the Cumberland Gap—the famed mountain pass connecting the old colonies of

Virginia and North Carolina (including what is now northeastern Tennessee) with Kentucky. Yet he was not the first white person to follow that route. In 1750, Dr. Thomas Walker and his party trekked the gap into Kentucky in a land speculation venture, following a well-worn Indian trail dubbed the Warrior's Path to the north. The Ohio River trader John Finley first saw the Bluegrass Country—the rich lowlands of east-central Kentucky—when he was captured and taken there by Shawnee Indians in 1752. Finley learned the Bluegrass was accessible from the east via the gap. Tales began to spread about wondrous hunting grounds with huge herds of deer and buffalo, and wild turkeys so thick their weight broke strong tree branches on which they roosted. But the French and Indian War intervened, temporarily halting exploration.36

Daniel Boone met John Finley during his military service in the French and Indian War; shortly afterward, Boone’s brother-in-law John Stewart traversed the gap on a hunting expedition with Benjamin Cutbird. Both men told him stories of the bounty of Kanta-ke, the Iroquois term for meadow; the Euro-Americans called this lush country the Kane-tok and, ultimately, the Kentucky Bluegrass. Boone’s first attempt to cross the gap (1767–68) led him too far north. So he teamed with Finley and three fellow backwoodsmen in a 1769 expedition funded by Judge Richard Henderson, a North Carolina land speculator. The five men (Boone’s brother, Squire, joined the party later) departed in May, and Boone did not return home until the spring of 1771. They successfully trekked the Warrior’s Path, crossing the Cumberland Gap into Kentucky, where their adventures ranged from sublime to disastrous. The early Kentucky chronicler John Filson quoted Boone’s memory of his first view of the Bluegrass:

> From the top of an eminence, we saw with pleasure the beautiful level of Kentucke. We found everywhere an abundance of wild beasts of every sort, through this vast forest. The buffalo were more frequent than I have seen cattle in the settlements, browsing on

the leaves of the cane, or cropping the herbage on those extensive plains.

For two years, Daniel thoroughly explored the new land as far north as the Ohio River. Then, as Boone headed home in 1771 with a small fortune in furs, Shawnee Indians robbed him and Squire of everything, including their horses. Daniel Boone did walk home to the Yadkin Valley with one priceless treasure, however. In his head was more knowledge of the Kentucky Bluegrass country than possessed by any other white man.37

During the next four years, Daniel Boone continued his explorations, blazing the Wilderness Road and founding the Bluegrass settlement of Boonesborough in 1775. There, he fought as a patriot in the American Revolution. Over the next two and a half decades his interest in hunting was joined and temporarily superseded by his land dealings and political career as a sheriff and territorial legislator. Meanwhile, he became a character of legendary stature during his own lifetime. Oral tales of Daniel circulated and found their way into print. In these stories, Boone was portrayed alone in the wilderness, hunting bear and buffalo, outrunning and outgunning Shawnee Indians, and always moving westward in advance of civilization; Boone supposedly believed the sight of chimney smoke meant his neighbors were too close and he had to move on. This tale type of the brave, wandering frontiersman ultimately formed the creative basis for James Fenimore Cooper’s Last of the Mohicans (1826), the first modern western novel. In these stories, the tension between Boone’s love of the wilderness and his desire to exploit and civilize it made for compelling art, because it accurately reflected Boone’s own history.38

In 1799, bankrupted by land speculation ventures and lawsuits, sixty-five-year-old Daniel Boone led his family across the Mississippi River to Spanish Saint Louis. A local youth

remembered Boone entering the city with “saddle bags, rifle on his shoulder, leather hunting shirt, and a couple of hunting knives in his belt, accompanied by three or four hunting dogs.” Awed Spanish and French officials received him with pomp and honored a warrant Boone held for land above Saint Charles; they even appointed him justice of the peace and militia commandant. Continuing his westward trek in advance of Euro-American civilization, Boone and his family settled on the lower Missouri River, where, within four years, they once again found themselves living in the United States of America. Boone’s Missouri tenure lasted twenty fruitful years. On the morning of September 28, 1820, eighty-five-year-old Daniel Boone told family and friends, “I am going, my time has come,” and the old explorer’s life expired.39

Even as late as Daniel Boone’s 1799 crossing, the exploration of the Mississippi River was not yet complete. The great river’s headwaters still remained unknown to white men. From the sixteenth century onward, French, Spanish, British, and American adventurers had searched for the Mississippi’s headwaters, and several men, most notably Father Louis Hennepin, erroneously claimed to have found them. Upon assuming the presidency in 1801, Thomas Jefferson ordered continued exploration of the “principal waters of the Mississippi and Missouri,” most notably by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark beginning in 1803. Their fellow U.S. army captain Zebulon Pike ascended the Mississippi River in 1805, but turned back at Leech Lake in north-central Minnesota, unaware he was only forty-five miles away from the much-sought headwaters. The final achievement remained out of reach for nearly thirty years, until the expedition of Henry Rowe Schoolcraft.40

The New Yorker Henry Rowe Schoolcraft (1793–1864) was a geologist and proto-ethnologist who traversed the Mississippi Valley during the early decades of the nineteenth century.

Schoolcraft accompanied army expeditions to Missouri and Arkansas in 1817–18, and then explored Lake Superior and the upper Mississippi in 1820. Appointed a federal Indian agent, he married an Ojibwa-Scottish woman, Bamewawagezhikaquay (Jane Johnston) Schoolcraft, in 1822 and, with her assistance, subsequently studied and published extensively about the culture of Great Lakes Indian people. In 1832, Schoolcraft set out to solve the Mississippi headwaters puzzle once and for all. On July 13, 1832, two hundred and ninety years after Hernando de Soto’s 1542 sighting of the Mississippi, Henry Rowe Schoolcraft wrote in his journal:

> We followed our [Indian] guide down the sides of the last elevation, with the expectation of momentarily reaching the goal of our journey. What had been long sought, at last appeared suddenly. On turning out of a thicket, into a small weedy opening, the cheering sight of a transparent body of water burst upon our view. It was Itasca Lake—the source of the Mississippi.41

**REVOLUTION**

Leaders of the American Revolution turned their eyes westward from the outset of the American war for independence. Certainly, early frontier historians like Theodore Roosevelt exaggerated the role of the Revolution’s western theater. The war was mostly fought and won in the northern and southern theaters of the original English colonies, not west of the Appalachian Mountains. Yet modern Americans cannot understand the Revolution in its totality without also turning their eyes to the Mississippi Valley. The British, recent victors in the French and Indian War, had developed a complex web of relationships with the defeated French and their Indian and Spanish allies in the West. To keep American colonists from stirring up a beehive, King George III’s Parliament forbade them

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from settling west of the Appalachians in the infamous Proclamation of 1763.\textsuperscript{42}

While General George Washington’s Continental Army and state militias concentrated on fighting British forces in New York, New Jersey, Virginia, and the Carolinas, the situation in the trans-Appalachian West demanded some show of force. Tory (Loyalist) militiamen combined their forces with Britain’s Indian allies to pose a serious threat to the Revolution; if the British held sway west of the mountains at war’s end, it would greatly complicate strong American desires to push out the Indians and annex this new country as part of any peace treaty. With few exceptions, Whig (Patriot) militiamen and their French and Spanish (and some Indian) allies, not professional Continental troops, fought the western battles. And while the Whigs’ record was mixed, they scored enough success to bolster American diplomats’ efforts at war’s end. This can be seen in the 1777–81 campaigns of Daniel Boone, George Rogers Clark, Bernardo de Galvez, and Tennessee militiamen at the Battle of King’s Mountain.\textsuperscript{43}

As the war began, central and western Kentucky Whigs retreated to strong fortifications at Saint Asaph’s, Harrodsburg, and Boonesborough to fight off Tories and their Delaware and Shawnee Indian allies. In 1777, which Kentuckians called the Bloody Year, there was recurrent fighting; the Shawnee chief Black Kettle and his men surrounded Boonesborough but failed to overrun its defenders. The next year, however, they succeeded in capturing Captain Daniel Boone and thirty-some frontiersmen on a salt-gathering expedition. The Shawnee moved their prisoners north of the Ohio and, as was the custom with select prisoners of war, Boone was adopted as Shawnee Chief Black Kettle’s son. In late spring of 1778, Boone learned the Indians were planning to once again assault his home. “I began to meditate an escape,” he later recounted to John Filson, and “on the sixteenth [of June], I departed in the most secret manner.” He later told his youngest son, Nathan, that after riding

\textsuperscript{42} Billington, \textit{Westward Expansion}, 175, 144–45, 156.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 175–76; Faragher, \textit{Daniel Boone}, 141–42.
some distance on horseback, he “went on foot as rapidly as he could” and “crossed the Ohio ... a little above Maysville.” After a remarkable four-day 160-mile wilderness trek, Boone reached Boonesborough on June 20, 1778, informed the settlers of the impending attack, and successfully led them in defense of the fort.44

Interestingly, Boone never forsook his Shawnee foster parents and maintained close relations after the war. When he removed to Missouri in 1799, Boone often visited Shawnee brethren on the lower Missouri River. In response to popular tales of his fierce exploits fighting Indians, Boone once responded, “I never killed but three... I am very sorry to say that I ever killed any, for they were kinder to me than the whites.”45

Patriot stands like Boonesborough were complemented by the offensive campaigns of the fiery Kentucky militia lieutenant colonel George Rogers Clark, the older brother of Meriwether Lewis’s 1803 co-captain William Clark. Commissioned by the Virginia legislature, Clark led one hundred seventy-five volunteers across the Ohio River into the western Illinois wilderness in June of 1778, just as Boone was escaping his Shawnee captors. On July 4, Clark launched a surprise attack on the small British garrison at Fort Kaskaskia, on the Mississippi River, and forced its surrender. When Clark informed neighboring Frenchmen that King Louis XVI had recently allied with the American Revolutionaries, they rallied to the cause, convincing British troops at Fort Vincennes, on the Wabash, to surrender to a French priest without firing a shot. But in December, the British captain Henry Hamilton marched a five-hundred-man army to the site and recaptured Vincennes. Clark then led his force across the wintry Illinois prairie, retaking Vincennes in a surprise attack on February 24, 1779. But Clark’s subsequent plan to take Fort Detroit fizzled; meanwhile, other western patriot militia battles produced mixed results.46

44. Faragher, Daniel Boone, 154–200 (qtns., 172, 174); Boone, My Father, Daniel Boone, 53–73 (qtn., 61).
45. Faragher, Daniel Boone, 39, 300. Because of his adoption, Boone was falsely accused, but quickly acquitted, of treason.
To the Patriots’ aid came General Bernardo de Galvez, governor of Spanish Louisiana. Prior to losing the French and Indian War, the French had ceded Louisiana Territory to their Spanish allies in consolation for Spain’s loss of Gibraltar. No friend of democratic republicanism, King Carlos (Charles) III of Spain was nevertheless as eager as Louis XVI to avenge their recent defeat by Britain. When Spain formally allied with the United States in 1779, the leader of their North American force was Don Bernardo de Galvez. Born in 1746 to a military family, Galvez was a veteran of the Seven Years War (the European component of the French and Indian War) and had bravely fought Apache Indians in northern Mexico. He was just twenty-nine years old when appointed governor of Louisiana in 1776. From his New Orleans base, General Galvez was now in a good position to assist the Whig cause.\footnote{Billington, \textit{Westward Expansion}, 181–83.}

Galvez began his work prior to the formal 1779 treaty alliance in collaboration with the American adventurers Oliver Wolcott, James Willing, and others. In February of 1777, Galvez sent keelboats north on the Mississippi loaded with what he officially described as “various effects … for sale there.” In fact, the “various effects” shipped to Pittsburgh were gifts, and included $70,000 worth of medicine, uniforms, gunpowder, and arms. Galvez supplied George Rogers Clark and other Patriot militiamen, and he provided Spanish gold and silver to advance the Revolutionary cause. After the August 1779 alliance, Galvez assembled a polyglot army to make war on British outposts in West Florida—that disputed territory encompassing the Florida panhandle west to Natchez and Baton Rouge. Galvez reinforced his Spanish troops with French, German, Mestizo, American Indian, and Afro-Cuban soldiers.\footnote{Caughey, \textit{Bernardo de Galvez in Louisiana}, 85–134.}

By September 1779, General Galvez and his men had defeated British defenders at four lower Mississippi River forts, including
Baton Rouge and Natchez, capturing five hundred fifty enemy soldiers and two navy ships. When he attacked Fort Mobile (on the Gulf Coast) in the spring of 1780, Galvez’s fleet ran aground. Undaunted, he ferried his stranded soldiers and sailors ashore and captured the fort before British reinforcements from Pensacola arrived. Galvez later wrote of “the valor and courage of our troops,” who “desire nothing more than to continue proving to his majesty the resolution they have of sacrificing themselves in his service.” One year later, Galvez moved west along the gulf to attack Fort Pensacola. Circumventing his own timid admiral, Jose Calbo de Irazabel, Galvez sailed four troop ships into Pensacola Harbor through fierce British fire, standing on the bow with sword raised to a fifteen-gun salute. The Battle of Pensacola raged on until May 1781, five months before General Cornwallis’s final British capitulation to George Washington at Yorktown, Virginia.  

To reward Galvez for his valor, King Carlos made Bernard de Galvez a count and added West Florida to the Louisiana colony he governed; later, Galveston, Texas, was named in his honor. While Galvez’s campaign seems merely a fascinating sidelight in the military history of the American Revolution, it had extremely important consequences. Galvez shipped much-needed supplies and money to western Whig guerillas, and his military campaigns distracted and crippled overextended British forces. In consequence, Spain controlled all Mississippi River navigation from Natchez (at approximately 31 degrees latitude) southward, and had added British West Florida to its empire. Of course, Spain’s flirtation with American independence would soon end. Almost immediately after the war ended in 1783, Americans replaced Britons as Spain’s chief foes in the lower Mississippi Valley.  

As Bernardo de Galvez waged his attack on Britain’s Mississippi and Gulf Coast ports, a final chapter in the story of the American Revolution began to unfold. Although the Battle

49. Ibid., 149–214 (qtn., 184–85).
of King’s Mountain was fought in the eastern foothills of the Appalachians, near modern-day Charlotte, North Carolina, the Patriot troops who fought there were primarily mountaineers from Watauga in northeastern Tennessee, which was then still part of North Carolina. This small battle fits into the larger context of Great Britain’s final defeat in the Revolution. Thwarted in New England, New York, and New Jersey, General George Cornwallis turned southward. After the British captured Charleston, South Carolina, their plan was to sweep north through the Carolinas to Virginia, where Cornwallis would meet and defeat Washington’s Continentals in a final decisive battle to win the war.\textsuperscript{51}

Yet Cornwallis was thwarted from the outset by Patriot militiamen using guerilla tactics—ambush, night attack, hit-and-run, etc.—to halt his progress. To protect the left (Appalachian) flank of his advance, Cornwallis dispatched a Scottish Highlander, Major Patrick Ferguson, and approximately one thousand Tory militiamen. Angered by attacks emanating from the west, Ferguson had sent a written warning to Patriot mountaineers: “If they [do] not desist from their opposition to British arms, [I will] march [my] army over the mountains, hang their leaders, and lay their country waste with fire and sword.”

The immediate result, of course, was that the mountain men chose to ride east to find Ferguson. The Tennessee colonels William Cleveland, Isaac Shelby, Arthur Campbell, and John Sevier assembled approximately fifteen hundred militiamen at Sycamore Shoals, in the northeastern corner of Tennessee, September 25, 1780. After crossing the crest of the Appalachians, they found Ferguson in a strong defensive position atop King’s Mountain on October 7, 1780.\textsuperscript{52}

Historians debate the role of the militia and guerilla tactics in America’s victory over Great Britain,\textsuperscript{53} and King’s Mountain


\textsuperscript{52} Higginbotham, \textit{War of American Independence}, 363–64.

provides a good test case. King’s Mountain was a true guerilla action: both armies were exclusively composed of American-born militiamen. But on October 7, the Patriots threw in a formal military tactic to seal the Tories’ fate. King’s Mountain, like most eastern mountains, is relatively small, a few hundred feet high, and covered in heavy brush amid deciduous forest. The Americans advanced stealthily, using camouflage to cover their movements. When Ferguson’s force boldly charged the middle of the Patriot line, the Patriots surprised him. Feigning a retreat, the soldiers at the center of their line turned and rushed a few hundred yards to the rear, but then turned again to stand and fight. Major Ferguson’s force had rushed into the vacuum only to find that, to their rear, the mountaineers had turned their flanks inward and now surrounded the Tories completely. Wounded, Ferguson was reportedly dragged to death by his own horse, one foot caught in his stirrup. When the smoke cleared, two hundred twenty-five Tories lay dead; one hundred sixty-three were wounded, and seven hundred fifteen taken prisoner of war. The mountaineers had twenty-eight killed and sixty-two wounded. Most important, King’s Mountain combined with other setbacks to completely thwart Cornwallis’s southern offensive. And Whig militiamen deserve some (not all) credit for the beleaguered state of Cornwallis’s army when it arrived to face Washington at Yorktown one year later.54

Immediately following King’s Mountain, Colonels Sevier and Campbell returned home to help defeat Britain’s Cherokee allies. Trans-Appalachian westerners welcomed peace and news of Britain’s 1781 defeat at Yorktown. And they were overjoyed to learn the terms of the 1783 Treaty of Paris, officially ending the Revolutionary War. Negotiating without their French and Spanish allies, the newly independent Americans gained remarkable concessions and impressive new boundaries. A northern border divided the United States from British Canada at the Great Lakes, while the southern border with Spain ran across the 31st parallel. The western border was the Mississippi

River itself, from the Great Lakes south to the 31st parallel. The new United States of America had annexed nearly all the eastern half of the Mississippi River Valley.\(^{55}\)

### THE POLITICS OF EXPANSION

Revolutionary Americans’ expansion west across the Appalachian Mountains figured importantly in much more than military and diplomatic developments. The views of the Patriots Thomas Jefferson and Timothy Pickering mirror vastly different attitudes toward the pioneer folk settling the trans-Appalachian West. An ardent agrarian, Jefferson wrote in 1781, “Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made the peculiar deposit for genuine virtue.” However, Jefferson’s Federalist foe Pickering wrote in 1785, “The emigrants to the frontier lands … are the least worthy subjects in the United States. They are little less savage than the Indians.” During the Revolutionary era, both Jefferson and Pickering advocated expansion of the American republic over the Appalachians into the Mississippi River Valley, but they did so from these widely disparate points of view. Their disagreement mirrors a larger debate and shows the significance of the Mississippi Valley in the early national era.\(^{56}\)

In *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, Gordon S. Wood sees westward expansion as contributing to the breakdown of aristocratic traditions and the growth of American exceptionalism in a democratic republic. Combined with a rapidly increasing population, westward expansion “was the most basic and liberating force working on American society during the last half of the eighteenth century.”\(^{57}\)

By Revolution’s end, the task of governing the new lands west of the Appalachians fell to the Continental Congress, now called

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the Confederation Congress because it operated as the sole
branch of government under America’s first constitution, the
Articles of Confederation. The Mississippi Valley was in fact
a stumbling block in officially ratifying the Articles of
Confederation, because some small states like Maryland had
refused to do so until speculators and “landed” state governments
in New York, Connecticut, Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia
surrendered their western land claims to the new federal
government. When most of them did so in the early 1780s,
America’s National Domain was born, and the states officially

Some still incorrectly teach that the Confederation Congress
was a weak body that accomplished little, a mere footnote on the
way to the federal Congress under the U.S. Constitution. In fact,
the Confederation Congress’s record is superior to that of any
other revolutionary legislature in history. Its accomplishments
include helping to defeat one of the greatest military powers on
earth, negotiating the beneficial Treaty of Paris, and creating the
first American western policy, setting the course for land sales,

Following the peace treaty, congressional committees set to
work drafting laws to govern the West. Congressmen were
spurred on by the promise of land sale revenues from the
thousands of pioneers pouring over the mountains into the Ohio
Valley. But differences of opinion over western policy soon
combined with other issues and led to formation of political
factions. In the 1780s, Patriot Whigs divided into camps that
would in the 1790s become America’s first two political parties,
the Federalists and the Jeffersonian Republicans.\footnote{Allen, \textit{Confederation Congress}. For trans-Appalachian emigrants, see chapter 2, this work. Jeffersonian Republicans were not connected to modern Republicans; the Jeffersonians became the Democratic Party under Andrew Jackson.}
With some exceptions, these factions were regional, with southerners and westerners opposing easterners (“easterner” was the early national term for northeasterners, including New Englanders). Because regional political foes often practiced different occupations, southern and western planters and farmers opposed eastern businessmen. And, again with notable exceptions, there were differing regional ideologies. While all good Revolutionary Whigs opposed centralized governmental authority, many influential easterners were nationalists who sought a more viable central state by strengthening the Articles of Confederation at the expense of the states’ powers. Many of them were former Continental Army officers. Their opponents were mostly rural western and southern radicals like Jefferson who favored states’ rights over national power. For our purposes, the terms “eastern nationalists,” “southerners,” and “westerners” will suffice so long as readers remember there are important exceptions (for example, George Washington and John Marshall were both southern nationalists). Eastern nationalists went on to advocate the new federal Constitution in 1787 and form the Federalist Party, while southerners and westerners, for the most part, were antifederalists who became Jeffersonian Republicans.61

As suggested by the above quotations from Thomas Jefferson and Timothy Pickering—“the chosen people of God” versus “the least worthy subjects ... little less savage than the Indians”—members of Congress disagreed sharply over proposed laws for governing the western territories. In 1783–84, Congressman Jefferson and his allies William Grayson, Hugh Williamson, David Howell, and others held the upper hand. They passed a territorial government ordinance—the Ordinance of 1784—paving the way for sixteen new states in the trans-

Appalachian West via liberal provisions for voting, formation of territorial governments, and joining the union as equal members. This democratic plan for governing the white settlers of the new American empire was unprecedented in the history of colonialism (not even the Romans were so generous in granting citizenship in their empire). Although Jefferson and his allies failed in their attempt to grant free land to the westerners, the radicals held what one historian has called “optimistic expectations of western innocence and regeneration.” Yet they also saw political and economic advantages in expansion. Southern agrarians foresaw westerners continuing America’s agricultural expansion and becoming political allies in thwarting eastern plans for industry and centralized government.62

Easterners, however, had some plans of their own. Thomas Jefferson’s departure to become the American ambassador to France coincided with the rise of eastern nationalists in the Confederation Congress. Timothy Pickering, John Jay, Rufus King, Nathan Dane, Gouverneur Morris, and others looked to the West as a means of consolidating national power through the army, Indian policy, and diplomacy with Britain and Spain. Unlike Jeffersonians, eastern nationalists distrusted the “lawless Banditti” of the West and rightly feared new western states would decrease their own political and economic clout while spreading slavery into the territories. Their solution was a sort of reluctant expansionism, one in which the central government would garner revenues from land sales while overseeing a slow, well-organized advance westward. A Massachusetts congressman wrote:

It has been a question, with the Eastern Delegates especially, whether peopling these new regions with emigrants from the old States, may not, in one point of view, be a disadvantage to them. But it has been found, that these new lands are very inviting to settlers, and that, if not regularly disposed of and governed by the

Union, they will in a very few years be seised and settled in an irregular manner, and perhaps at no less expence to the Inhabitants of the Old states. Considering these circumstances, the advantage of regular settlements, of lessening the public debt and military expences on the frontier, and of keeping, by such settlements, that Country more effectually connected with the Union, Congress have been induced to adopt measures to establish Government, etc. there.63

The easterners went to work, led by Rufus King and Nathan Dane of Massachusetts and John Jay of New York. After granting western lands to Continental Army officers in lieu of pensions, they passed the Land Act of 1785 creating a New England township grid (640-acre sections in 36-section-square townships) and offering land at $1.00 per acre. But because the minimum purchase was a township, only capitalized entrepreneurs (most of them easterners) could apply. Nationalists envisioned a controlled westward expansion onto speculator-owned lands, supervised by the government and avoiding Indian warfare, a plan that would be foiled by frontier squatters time and again. The Indian Ordinance of 1786 aimed to settle disputes by acknowledging Indian right of soil and requiring contractual (treaty) purchase of land. The ordinance reflects both the New Englanders’ humanitarianism and their shrewd strategy of maintaining an Indian buffer to slow the westward advance, shaky propositions that Jeffersonian (and, later, Jacksonian) frontiersmen would continually thwart. But on paper the eastern plan appeared a sensible way to expand west while producing land sales revenue for the new government.64

Debate over the 1786 Jay-Gardoqui Treaty (not the more famous Jay’s Treaty of 1794) provides a case study in the political costs of easterners’ reluctant expansionism. As noted, France had ceded the Louisiana Territory to her Spanish allies prior to their

1763 defeat in the French and Indian War, and, although Spain would eventually return Louisiana to France, the Spaniards held sway on the Mississippi south of Natchez from 1762 to 1803. When America’s westward surge recommenced in 1783, Spain reacted by closing the Mississippi River south of the 32nd parallel to all American commerce on July 22, 1784. Angry southerners and westerners demanded the river be reopened, so the Confederation Congress’s foreign affairs committee sent the diplomat John Jay to Spain to parley with Don Diego de Gardoqui. In fairness to Jay, Congress sent him to bargain from a very weak position. America had no treaty right to navigate along Spain’s Mississippi shores, and no strong army or navy to force a claim. After a seeming impasse, Gardoqui made Jay a proposal that was, from a diplomatic perspective, generous. He offered the United States a military alliance with Spain and a trade treaty favorable to the northeastern states. In return, all Jay had to do was agree to forego American navigation of the Mississippi River for twenty-five years. John Jay signed the treaty and sent it to Congress in hopes of securing the constitutionally required nine (out of thirteen) state votes.65

One historian suggested that the reaction to the treaty was akin to throwing a bomb down the congressional aisle. A fierce debate ensued, baring the factional divide and sharp differences between easterners and the South/West alliance. Jay spoke on the matter, expressing regret but arguing this was a good bargain considering America’s weaknesses. A North Carolina congressman wrote home, “The subject was … agitated with warmth which might reasonably have been expected.” Southerners believed “use of the Mississippi is given by nature to our western country, and no power on earth can take it away from them.” James Madison characterized Jay’s efforts as “short-sighted” and “dishonorable.” The proposed treaty, southerners

declared, would ensure “Eastern states are to receive the benefits ... and the Southern states are to pay the purchase by giving up the Miss[issippi].” In the end, the treaty failed to muster the required nine votes. All states above the Mason-Dixon line (the southern border of Pennsylvania) voted aye, while all those south voted nay.  

In supporting John Jay’s doomed treaty, eastern nationalists acted on complex and, at times, selfish motives. Although Rufus King wrote a friend that it “would be impolitic” to speak frankly because their true views about the West could not “with safety be now admitted” openly, easterners left sufficient evidence to form a picture. King doubted the “loyalty” of western squatters and “banditti,” and feared their “pursuits and interests ... will be so opposite [ours], that an entire separation must eventually ensue.” If westerners did remain in the Confederation, the new states would ally with the South and diminish easterners’ power (easterners “have a majority and will endeavor to keep it,” William Grayson had warned). Then too, there was economics. One easterner wrote that westward expansion “must in consequences depopulate and ruin the Old states,” draining away laborers and thus raising wages. If westerners could be “cut off for a time from any connections except with the Old States, across the mountains,” the resultant stability “would be highly beneficial to them both, and bring considerable trade.”

John Jay’s views reflect all these political and economic


motives combined with the desire to avoid an Indian war. They also reflect complete ignorance of conditions in the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys. Although Jay had traveled widely across the northeastern United States and in Europe, he had never been south or west of Philadelphia. He predicted the West “will one day give us trouble” and expressed doubts “whether after two or three generations [westerners] will be fit to govern themselves.” In a candid letter to his fellow diplomat Thomas Jefferson, Jay asked,

Would it not be wiser gradually to extend our settlements as want of room should make it necessary, than to pitch our tents through the wilderness in a great variety of places, far distant from each other, and from the advantages of education, civilization, law, and government which compact settlements and neighborhoods afford? Shall we not fill the wilderness with white savages?—and will they not become more formidable to us than the tawny ones which now inhabit it?

It is interesting that John Jay was trying to persuade Jefferson, whose view of the West was so diametrically opposed to his own. Then, too, there is real class prejudice in the last quoted sentence of Jay’s letter. Easterners like Jay looked down on the “squatters, insolvent emigrants and demagogues” and “white savages” who populated the trans-Appalachian West. “Border” folk “looked rude in their manners and dress” and gave “an unfavorable opinion of the country.” “Under pressure of poverty, the [jail], and the consciousness of public contempt,” wrote the Connecticut jurist and poet Timothy Dwight, they “leave their native places, and betake themselves to the wilderness.” Writing about western Pennsylvania’s backwoodsmen, Dr. Benjamin Rush of Philadelphia observed,

The first settler in the woods is generally a man who has outlived his credit or fortune in the cultivated parts of the state... As he lives in the neighborhood of the Indians, he soon acquires a strong tincture of their manners. His exertions, while they continue, are violent, but they are succeeded by long intervals of rest. His pleasures consist chiefly in fishing and hunting... Above all he
revolts against the operations of the laws. He cannot bear to surrender up a single natural right for all the benefits of government.\(^{68}\)

The Jay-Gardoqui Treaty defeat was the only setback in the advance of eastern nationalist western policy. Northeasterners immediately began work replacing Thomas Jefferson’s territorial government Ordinance of 1784 with their own Northwest Ordinance of 1787 (to be followed by the Southwest Ordinance of 1789). This all paralleled a crucial nationalist surge that resulted in the 1787 Philadelphia Convention drafting the federal Constitution to replace the Articles of Confederation. Thus, as the Federalist founders drafted the Constitution in Philadelphia, their nationalist allies in the Confederation Congress in New York City worked on a new law for the western territory. Nathan Dane chaired a reconstituted territorial government committee dominated by easterners.\(^{69}\)

Progressive historians used to lambaste easterners for emasculating Jefferson’s territorial system, but in retrospect the Dane committee’s changes were moderate albeit less democratic. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 legislated for the territory north of the Ohio, east of the Mississippi, and south of Canada; the Southwest Ordinance would do the same for the U.S. territory south of the Ohio. The Dane committee reduced Jefferson's number of new states from sixteen to nine, and it slowed the process of statehood by raising the population requirement to 60,000. Congress also checked direct territorial democracy, as territorial governors would now be federal appointees and so too would judges. Yet Congress also provided territorial residents with their own legislature, a bill of rights,


and a nonvoting congressional representative. And again, American colonialism was benign compared to that of Spain and France. While Indians certainly bore the full brunt of American colonial power, white settlers from the old states kept their American citizenship and looked forward to joining the Union in new states with equal representation and all the rights of the original thirteen. There was no precedent in the history of world civilization for an empire like this one.\(^{70}\)

In sum, from 1784 to 1787 the Confederation Congress crafted laws for the West that continue to affect our nation. Flying over the United States today in an airplane, one is struck by the checkerboard pattern of the land below—the long right-angled roads and square fenced fields that constitute our modern townships and land sections first introduced by the 1785 Congress. And when today’s Indian tribes take the government to court for abrogation of treaties, they do so under the right of soil and contractual treaty provisions of the Ordinance of 1786. All of the western states through Alaska and Hawaii have joined the Union under terms tied directly to the Ordinance of 1784 and the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. And when we listen to news stories about the governor of Puerto Rico, territorial legislators on Saipan, or American Samoa’s congressional representative, we are seeing the legacy of the Confederation Congress’s trans-Appalachian settlement policy.

An equally important result of the territorial ordinances manifested itself throughout antebellum debates over slavery in the territories. Although a slaveholder, Jefferson had unsuccessfully tried to add a clause to the Ordinance of 1784 banning slavery in all new states to arise in the trans-Appalachian West. His fellow southerners thwarted the effort, but eastern nationalists successfully renewed it in 1787. The Northwest Ordinance outlawed slavery in all the states to be created above the Ohio River (Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan

and Wisconsin), while the Southwest Ordinance (1789) allowed slavery south of the river (Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Alabama). Meanwhile, the Constitutional Convention, meeting concurrently in Philadelphia during the summer of 1787 and at loggerheads over the slavery question, soon produced a document that says remarkably little about how new states will join the Union and absolutely nothing about the status of slavery in the territories before statehood. Historians have correctly assumed this is not a coincidence. Obviously, the Constitutional Convention ended the standoff between anti-slavery easterners and pro-slavery southerners by persuading Congress to pass a statute, the Northwest Ordinance. The long-term problem, of course, is that statutes are not fundamental (constitutional) law and can be repealed or changed by a majority vote of congressmen. When Congress overturned the Missouri Compromise of 1821 with the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, the nation learned the downside of the Compromise of 1787. On the other hand, without the Northwest Ordinance there might never have been a federal Constitution in the first place.\(^{71}\)

Meanwhile, the ushering in of a new federal government in 1789 marked a new stage in the politics of expansion over the mountains and into the Mississippi Valley. Eastern nationalists became Federalists, a party led by Washington, Jay, King, Pickering, Alexander Hamilton, and John Adams, and based in the commercial Northeast with some southern membership. Under Washington and Adams, Federalists would dominate the federal government until 1800. Most southerners and antifederalist opponents of the Constitution formed the Jeffersonian Republican Party, led by its namesake, the former nationalist James Madison, John Randolph, Nathaniel Macon, and Albert Gallatin. The Republicans attracted rural western Pennsylvanian and upstate New York farmers into an agrarian

party of slaveholders and frontier farmers who stood against the more urban and commercial Federalists. They also enlisted New York City’s Aaron Burr and cultivated radical French (and Irish) immigrants.\textsuperscript{72}

As always, the parties battled over the Mississippi Valley. When Secretary of Treasury Hamilton needed revenue, he called on Congress to tax western Pennsylvania whisky distillers at 25 percent, and the Whisky Rebellion (1794) began. When Kentucky and Tennessee applied to join the Union in 1791 and 1796, Republicans voted aye but Federalists balked unless a new northern state (e.g., Vermont) could balance the Senate. When reckless Jeffersonian frontiersmen started Indian wars, the Federalists went to war, but grumbled about the expense and bloodshed. And when it came time to pass a new land law in 1795, Federalists raised the price to $2.00 an acre over Republican protest. In retrospect, we can see that all of this was political suicide. A rapidly growing nation was not going to vote for a political party that resisted westward expansion. In 1796, Tennessee’s three electoral votes brought Thomas Jefferson within a hair’s breadth of defeating John Adams for the presidency (Tennesseans also elected a young Jeffersonian named Andrew Jackson as their first congressman). Four years later, Jefferson was elected and Adams went home to Massachusetts. Soon, the price of land dropped, Ohio entered the Union, and Jefferson sent negotiators to France to talk to Napoleon about purchasing the port of New Orleans. They returned with a treaty popularly called the Louisiana Purchase.\textsuperscript{73}

If approved, the 1803 Louisiana Purchase would bring huge consequences, doubling the size of the American nation and marking the course for nearly a century of westward expansion. The land Napoleon offered to cede to Thomas Jefferson for $16,000,000 (about $233,000,000 in today’s dollars) was the entire western half of the Mississippi Valley, all of the territory

\begin{footnotesize}

\textsuperscript{73} Michael Allen, “The Federalists and the West, 1783–1803,” \textit{Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine} 61 (October 1978), 315–32.
\end{footnotesize}
contained within the river systems originating in the Rocky Mountains and flowing east to the great river. Following the 1783 British surrender of their (and their Indian allies’) claims to the trans-Appalachian West, the Mississippi Valley would constitute a contiguous national ecosystem, the setting for the republic’s exuberant and tumultuous growth throughout the course of the nineteenth century. Jefferson could see this great potential, and before the Senate approved the treaty he had secretly dispatched the U.S. Army officers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark and a Corps of Discovery to explore the new territory.\textsuperscript{74}

Strident Federalist opposition to the 1803 Louisiana Purchase mirrors the decline of their party, yet it also offers a fascinating glimmer of how their beliefs in nationalism, union, and a viable central state might eventually survive and triumph under another political banner. When Jefferson first presented his breathtaking purchase of the Louisiana Territory to Congress, Connecticut’s \textit{Hartford Courant} sounded the arch-Federalist battle cry:

Fifteen million dollars for bogs, mountains, and Indians! Fifteen million dollars for uninhabited wasteland and refuge for criminals! And for what purposes? To enhance the power of Virginia’s politicians. To pour millions into the coffers of Napoleon on the eve of war with England.

Congress’s dwindling Federalist cadre objected to the huge cost and raised constitutional questions about adding foreign territory through treaty and unilaterally granting U.S. citizenship to French and Spanish nationals. While the purchase passed easily, twenty of the twenty-five House opponents were Federalists, and all five Senate nays came from Federalists. Jefferson succeeded in adding to the Union what one Federalist termed a “Gallo-Hispano-Indian ominum gatherum of savages and adventurers.” Delaware’s Fisher Ames lamented, “Now by

adding an unmeasured world beyond that river [Mississippi] we rush like a comet into infinite space. In our wild career we may jostle some other world out of its orbit, but we shall, in every event, quench the light of our own.”

The silver lining for eastern nationalists in this seeming debacle is that Alexander Hamilton, Rufus King, and John Marshall all supported the Louisiana Purchase, and so too did the junior Senator from Massachusetts, John Quincy Adams, son of the defeated president. John Quincy Adams could see on which side his bread was buttered, and he soon declared himself to be a “national Republican” and (temporarily) joined the party of his father’s enemies. The irony of this whole story is that the Federalists’ heirs, the Whigs and Lincoln (not Jeffersonian) Republicans, all attracted many votes from the West and especially the Old Northwest. David Crockett, Henry Clay, William Henry Harrison, and Abraham Lincoln all rose to power when nationalists learned how to harness western democracy to eastern capitalism. As the nineteenth century progressed, nationalists would learn how to pass around the liquor jug and the barbequed beef and pork, besting the Jacksonian Democrats and becoming a party of the people.

Much happened during those years between Fisher Ames and Davy Crockett, “Old Tippecanoe” (Harrison), “Harry of the West” (Clay), and “Honest Abe” Lincoln. The industrial revolution shifted New England’s economy from ocean commerce to manufacturing, and the East became democratized. Transplanted easterners settled the Old Northwest and fanned out across the Mississippi River to Iowa and Minnesota. Steamboats, the Erie Canal, and railroads linked East and West, and many westerners


furnished raw materials and growing markets for the East while southern Democrats groaned in dismay. The Confederation era’s South-West alliance was replaced by an East-West alliance (excepting Missouri, Arkansas, and Texas) that lasted through most of the nineteenth century. Free market capitalism, democracy, and a belief in free labor and “free soil” linked two regions that eastern nationalists once thought incompatible. When, in 1861-65, Lincoln waged war on the Old South, Ulysses S. Grant of Illinois and William Tecumseh Sherman of Ohio led tens of thousands of upper Mississippi Valley soldiers in support of their Yankee brethren.77

**WHO WAS DAVID CROCKETT?**

Of the many stories told about Colonel David Crockett, most concerned his exploits as a hunter, frontier farmer, soldier, and Congressman. But Davy Crockett was also a river man, and the brevity of his boating career provides the punch line for the following story drawn from his autobiography, *A Narrative of the Life of David Crockett, by Himself* (1834).

Around 1826, after a hunting season in which he claimed to have killed “one hundred and five bears,” Crockett decided to take a river trip to New Orleans. Captaining two flatboats loaded with “thirty thousand staves” (lumber), he sailed down the Obion River and into the Mississippi, but things soon got rough. Davy discovered his “pilot was as ignorant of the business as myself” and, unable to land the boats, he decided to “go on and run all night.” Then disaster struck: “We went broadside full tilt against the head of an island where a large raft of drift timber had lodged,” and soon “water was pouring thro’ in a current” and the boats were “sucked under” the timber drift.78

Trapped in his cabin below, Crockett looked death in the face and called out for help. As the cabin filled with rushing river water, several men in his boat crew yanked him through a small

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porthole; he escaped, “literally skinned like a rabbit.” Their boats and cargo lost, the crew members spent the night shivering from the cold, but happy to have “made such a marvelous escape.” He concludes:

This was the last of my boats, and of my boating; for it went so badly with me, along at the first, that I hadn’t much mind to try it any more. I now returned home again, and as the next August was the Congressional election, I began to turn my attention a little to that matter.79

Unlike some Davy Crockett stories, the above tale probably has more elements of truth than fancy in it. Crockett did make an unsuccessful flatboat trip, losing his boats at Devil’s Elbow, a treacherous spot on the Mississippi near Memphis. But a few elements of the story are probably concocted for literary effect. It is unlikely Crockett killed one hundred and five bears in less than a year; that would require killing one bear and hauling it out of the woods every two or three days. And perhaps the dramatic rescue scene was embellished a bit? And it is perhaps too neat a coincidence that Davy could transition perfectly out of flatboating and into his first election to Congress. That sequence certainly worked out nicely for literary effect and the beginning of the next chapter of the *Narrative of the Life of David Crockett, by Himself.*

Then too, this part of the book was probably not even written by Crockett. The handwriting of the manuscript Crockett delivered to his publisher was that of his colleague, the Whig congressman Thomas Clinton of Kentucky. Crockett claimed authorship but acknowledged Clinton helped “correct it as I write it.” Clinton received half of the royalties from the phenomenally successful *Narrative.*

As the above suggests, sorting out the truth about David Crockett is a bit of a chore. Who was David Crockett? The answer depends upon whether one is asking about Colonel *David* or *Davy* Crockett, or the fellow who has jumped back and forth

79. Ibid., 199–200.
between those two identities throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.  

We must begin by tracing the factual history of the life of David, not Davy, Crockett. David was the name of the frontiersman-turned-politician who came of age in the Tennessee wilderness. Colonel David Crockett and his family seldom used the name Davy; that name was used by 1830s literary artists who built the myth of Davy Crockett out of the life story of David Crockett. But it was no accident that storytellers and artists were drawn to this historical David Crockett, for his history reflects classic American themes of democracy, manifest destiny, partisan politics, provincialism, frontier traits, and nostalgia for a vanishing frontier past.

“My father’s name was John Crockett, and he was of Irish descent,” Crockett begins the Narrative. Crockett meant northern Irish, or Scots-Irish descent; his people were poor Pennsylvania farmers who migrated from Revolutionary-era Carolina over the Appalachians to what would soon become Tennessee. There, John Crockett fought alongside the mountaineer militiamen who routed the British at the 1780 Battle of King’s Mountain. Six years later John’s wife Rebecca gave birth to David in Greene County, east of Knoxville.

Life was hard in the Tennessee mountains. With a large family to support, Crockett’s parents ran a tavern and scratched out a living from the soil. David grew up wild, truant from school and employers, and running away from home at age thirteen. He finally returned home in 1802, a hardened hunter, trapper, and farmer. Two brief courtships followed, the second resulting in an 1806 marriage to Polly Finely. The newlyweds roamed the Tennessee-Alabama country, farming the first of eight Crockett homesteads and bringing two sons into the world. But “I was better at increasing my family than my fortune,” David later


81. Crockett, Narrative of the Life of David Crockett, 14–16; Michael Lofaro, ed., Davy Crockett: The Man, the Legend, the Legacy (Knoxville, Tenn., 1985), xviii.
wrote, and the family struggled. Soon the Creek Indian War pulled David Crockett away from his family and sent him down the road to fame in the War of 1812.  

By the time of his Indian war service, Crockett had already acquired a reputation as a skilled hunter and scout. Southern militiamen fought the Creek Indians, British allies and staunch foes of America’s surge westward. When the Creeks attacked Fort Mims in 1813 and killed more than five hundred soldiers, women, and children, Crockett joined the Tennessee state militia general Andrew Jackson in a counteroffensive. At this time, Jackson was an up-and-coming Tennessee judge, soldier, and politician; his and Crockett’s careers would cross again as both allies and rivals. Crockett saw combat and was promoted to sergeant, but he soon soured on military life and returned home after his ninety-day enlistment was up. He re-enlisted the next year, but missed the crucial battles of Horseshoe Bend and New Orleans. “This closed my career as a warrior, and I am glad of it,” he wrote, “for I like my life now a heap better than I did then.” In fact, he would serve twice again, once as a peacetime Tennessee militia colonel and, finally, as an 1836 volunteer at the famed siege of the Alamo. 

Polly died unexpectedly in 1815, and Crockett quickly courted and married Elizabeth Patton, a young widow. They shared five children from former marriages and brought four of their own into the world. They also shared Elizabeth’s “snug little farm,” but not for long. Crockett, who never seemed content to stay in the same place for long, packed them all up in 1816 and moved to Shoal Creek, in Lawrence County, Tennessee. It was there that his reputation as a hunter, soldier, patriot, and family man propelled him into a political career. 

Although he had little formal education, and no legal education whatsoever, David Crockett was appointed magistrate and then justice of the peace. “I had never read a page in a law book in all my life,” Crockett remembered, so he mapped out a common-

82. Hutton, introduction, viii–ix; Crockett, Narrative of the Life of David Crockett, 68.
83. Lofaro, Davy Crockett, xviii–xix; Hutton, introduction, xii.
84. Crockett, Narrative of the Life of David Crockett, 125–33.
sense course to perform his duties. Whenever a crime occurred, “I and my constable ordered our warrant [orally], and then he would take the man, and bring him before me in trial.” But when the state legislature insisted that “warrants must in writing and signed; and that I must keep a book, and write my proceedings in it … [t]his was a hard business for me, for I could just barely write my own name.” In time, Crockett improved his literacy, handwriting, and legal knowledge. “I gave my decisions on the principle of common justice and honesty between man and man.”

In 1818, Lawrence County voters elected David Crockett colonel in the 57th Tennessee State Militia Regiment. Then, in 1821 and 1823, they sent him to the state legislature in Nashville. Crockett supplemented his meager government salary by continuing to farm and hunt; it was during this time that he embarked on his disastrous flatboating venture. Whether or not there was a direct relationship between his failed flatboat trip and his congressional campaign, both events did occur in 1826–27.

Colonel David Crockett’s 1827 congressional victory began a meteoric and short-lived (nine-year) national political career. He campaigned in typical frontier style, opening his rallies with a barbeque, giving a speech, and ending with a dance. In between he treated the crowd to drinks, “a little of the creature to put my friends in a good humor.” Crockett was a clever speaker known for his humor. One of his recurrent tricks was to repeat verbatim his opponent’s stump speech before he could deliver it himself, leaving his opponent speechless, as it were.

From 1827 to 1835, Crockett won his congressional seat three times, lost it twice, all the while receiving praise and vilification and the status of a potential Whig Party presidential candidate. He began in Congress as a Jacksonian Democrat, an opponent of then-sitting President John Quincy Adams. As noted, Jackson’s

85. Ibid., 133–35.
86. Ibid., 137–45, 195–200.
87. Hutton, introduction, xiii; Crockett, Narrative of the Life of David Crockett, 201–20.
and Crockett’s careers paralleled at times, and the two shared a remarkable similarity as legendary Tennesseans whose exploits were celebrated in oral tradition. True, Crockett was younger than Jackson and lacked the résumé of the Hero of New Orleans, but he would ultimately gain equal historic and folkloric stature. Perhaps Jackson recognized that his ally could soon become a rival, for the two soon parted ways.

Crockett remembered he had followed Jackson’s “principles as he laid them down, and as ‘I understood them,’ before Jackson’s election as president.” By 1831, the issues of Indian removal, tariffs, internal improvements, and the Bank of the United States had driven Crockett into the rival Whig camp. It was Jackson’s 1830 plan for Indian removal—extirpating Chickasaw, Cherokee, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole people from Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, and the Carolinas to a “permanent Indian frontier” in Oklahoma Territory—that first angered Crockett. He had left the Creek Indian War in part because he saw some justice in their opposition to Indian-haters like Jackson. Crockett’s congressional district lay adjacent to Chickasaw land, and, like Sam Houston, Crockett had many Indian friends.

In his most famous speech before Congress, David Crockett defended the “native people of this country as a sovereign people” and attacked the Democrats who wanted to take their land and ship them west. Should Congress “turn a deaf ear to [the Indians’] cries, misery must be their fate.” If Indian removal was not “oppression with a vengeance, [he] did not know what was.” Acknowledging a vote against removal might hurt his political fortunes, Crockett concluded that if he were to “exchange [my] conscience for mere party views” he hoped his “Maker would no longer suffer him to exist.” Indeed, although he “should like to

please” his constituents, he ultimately “had a settlement to make at the bar of God.”

With his folk hero status, speaking skills, and down-home, principled demeanor, Congressman David Crockett initially seemed a godsend to the Whig Party. Ideological descendants of the Federalists, Whigs espoused a solid program of economic nationalism, but they suffered the unfair reputation of being “elitists” when compared to their Democrat opponents. “Old Hickory”—as Jackson was affectionately called—and his followers were very successful in marketing Democrats as the “Party of the Common Man.” The Whigs had not yet cultivated candidates like “Old Tippecanoe” (William Henry Harrison) and “Honest Abe” Lincoln, but Crockett would play a major role leading them in that direction. Thus Whig stalwarts like Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, and former president John Quincy Adams welcomed Crockett as their own “common man,” a symbol that they too represented homespun values, frontier courage, equality, and the aspirations of the democratic majority.

Ultimately, Crockett’s feisty independence alienated some of his Whig allies, just as it had Democrats. In 1831, he lost his congressional seat. He won it back in 1833, but in 1835 he lost it again. Disgusted with Washington, D.C., and party politics in general, Crockett supposedly told the voters to “go to hell” because he “would go to Texas.”

Whether or not David Crockett ever uttered such a clever (and artistic) story transition is irrelevant. What history tells is that moving to Texas in 1836 was really not a bad idea for an unemployed politician looking for new opportunities. Texas, still part of Mexico, was home to thousands of rebellious Americans, many of them Crockett’s former cronies from Tennessee. They were poised to declare themselves independent from Mexico. Crockett no doubt reckoned Texas the perfect place to rebuild his financial fortunes and perhaps become a territorial governor,

93. This and the next three paragraphs are based on Hutton, introduction, xxvi–xxxvii.
or congressional representative, or maybe even the president of a Texan republic.

Colonel David Crockett rode into Texas just as the Texas Revolution of 1836 broke out. Entering San Antonio in February of 1836, he declared to Jim Bowie, William Travis, and their small Texan militia, “I have come to aid you all that I can in your noble cause.” Tragically, he never lived to see, or benefit from, the Texas republic he fought to create. On March 6, 1836, David Crockett fought alongside one hundred eighty-eight Texans defending the Alamo against an attack by General Santa Anna’s Mexican army of fifteen hundred. The Texans fought to the last man, and we know Crockett was one of the very last standing. As Mexicans stormed and seized the Alamo, Crockett finally surrendered to the victors.

Much of what we know about subsequent events comes from the diary of a Mexican lieutenant, Jose Enrique de la Pena. Characteristically, Crockett used his verbal skills to try to talk his way out of the situation; he described himself to his captors as a mere tourist who had mistakenly wandered into a combat zone and taken up arms in self-defense. Unimpressed, Santa Anna ordered execution of Crockett and his few remaining compatriots. But there was no firing squad. Crockett died, unarmed, as angry Mexican soldiers repeatedly thrust their swords into his body. “Though tortured before they were killed,” wrote Lieutenant Pena, “these unfortunates died without complaining and without humiliating themselves before their torturers.”

Thus ended the historic life of Colonel David Crockett, and began the folkloric and popular culture life of Davy Crockett, an American icon. Indeed, the confusion between David and Davy had begun only a few years before Crockett’s death at the Alamo. In 1833, Washington, D.C., theatergoers thronged to see James Kirk Paulding’s Lion of the West. Much of the reason for the play’s enthusiastic reception was the audience’s identification

of the leading character as the Tennessee congressman David Crockett. Although the play’s hero, played by the famed actor James Hackett, was called Nimrod Wildfire, Americans instantly recognized Wildfire as a dramatized version of Crockett. Attired in buckskin breeches, moccasins, and a raccoon-skin cap, his trusty Kentucky long rifle was always at his side. Wildfire was a skilled hunter, ferocious Indian fighter, and slick talker. “Mister, I can whip my weight in wildcats!” Wildfire snorted. “My father can whip the best man in old Kaintuck, and I can whip my father!”

On the opening night of the Washington, D.C., performance of *The Lion of the West*, the theater audience was treated to a view of two Colonel Crocketts at one time. The real David Crockett, in town for what would be his last congressional session, decided to attend and see his mythic alter ego on stage. When Hackett—as Nimrod Wildfire—took the stage, he paused for a moment and looked up into the balcony where Congressman Crockett was seated. Hackett then doffed his coonskin hat and, with sweeping bow, paid respects to the man upon whom his character was based. Simultaneously, David Crockett arose and tipped his formal dress hat to Hackett. For one crystal moment, two Colonel Crocketts—one imaginary and one real—stood and saluted one another. The audience cheered wildly, whistling, shouting, and stamping its feet. Then, just as suddenly as the scene had begun, Congressman Crockett took his seat and *The Lion of the West* began.

Who was David Crockett? He was a Tennessee frontiersman—a husband, father, farmer, scout, hunter, soldier, river man, judge, state legislator, and United States Congressman who died fighting for Texas independence at the Alamo in 1836. David Crockett was an American, and through his story we can view very important themes in early national American history: the settlement of the Mississippi Valley, the rise of democracy

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and party politics in the Age of the Common Man, and, finally, American westward expansion and manifest destiny.

THREE PROPHETS AND A FORCE TO CONTEND WITH

On June 16, 1806, a seeming miracle occurred among Shawnee Indians in the village of Greenville, in central Ohio. William Henry Harrison, governor of the Indiana Territory, was engaged in a campaign to conquer the Shawnee and curb the power and reputation of Tenskwatawa, a religious prophet who had risen up among them and challenged American dominance. Earlier, in the spring of 1806, in an attempt to cast doubt on Tenskwatawa’s authenticity, Harrison questioned the prophet’s direct connection with divine authority. He challenged the Shawnee to show “he is really a prophet” through a miraculous act.\(^{97}\)

What happened in mid-June astounded Harrison and galvanized Ohio Valley Indians around Tenskwatawa, the Shawnee Prophet. Tenskwatawa had called his followers together, promising them he would use his powers to produce what the Shawnee call Mukutaaweethee Keesohta, a “black sun.” On the morning of June 16, with Greenville filled with worshippers, Tenskwatawa retired to his lodge for prayer and contemplation. Then, at approximately noon, the multitude watched in amazement as the sun slowly disappeared and the daylight lessened to a murky grey twilight. At a moment timed for dramatic impact, Tenskwatawa emerged from his lodge and announced, “Did I not speak the truth! See, the sun is dark!” Then, promising his people he would restore the sun to its former brightness, Tenskwatawa stood by as what was actually a solar eclipse receded. The sun once again appeared, but the lives of Indians in the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys were changed forever.\(^ {98}\)

Prophets serve as interpreters of God’s word to their followers. Many of the world’s great religions have recognized

\(^{97}\) R. David Edmunds, *The Shawnee Prophet* (Lincoln, Nebr., 1983), 47. Some versions of this story have Harrison directly challenging Tenskwatawa to “cause the sun to stand still.” Ibid.

\(^{98}\) Ibid., 48–49.
prophets—holy men who have been touched by God and have communicated with Him.\(^99\) The Hebrews were led by Abraham, Moses, Isaac, Aaron, Jacob, and other Old Testament prophets; Muslims acknowledged the same prophets and followed their own prophet, Mohammed. Jesus, the Messiah, instructed his Twelve Apostles to interpret and spread God’s word to the masses. Since the first millennium, Catholics have granted sainthood to scores of men and women who have been touched by the Lord and interpreted and relayed His word; Joan of Arc, for example, was called to duty by a vision from God. While Confucians and Buddhists do not recognize prophets in the Western sense of the term, Confucius was, and is, held in awe for his wise teachings; today’s Dalai Lama commands the same kind of veneration, as does the Catholic Pope. For four millennia, prophets have arisen among all of the world’s people with varying effect and success.

The history of religion in the Mississippi Valley should certainly be told alongside the stories of the Mound Builders, early explorers, Revolutionary war soldiers, early national government leaders, and frontier folk heroes. America’s trans-Appalachian frontier proved to be fertile ground for both Indian and Christian prophecies. The Shawnee Indian Tenskwatawa figures prominently alongside the followers of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in telling the story of Mississippi Valley religion.

While on the surface there appear to be great differences between Tenskwatawa, Joseph Smith, Jr., prophet of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and his son Joseph Smith III, prophet of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, there are also interesting and important similarities. All three men rose to prominence during the decades of religious ferment called the Second Great Awakening. All three were charismatic believers in providential manifestations of God’s (or the Master of Life’s) will; they all believed in moral law as a

counter to sin and evil; and they believed in resurrection and eternal life, heresy, heaven and hell, and tradition (as opposed to modernity). All three devoted their lives to proselytization of God the Master’s word to convert the masses and welcome them to the fold with holy ordinances and rituals.

The Shawnee Indian prophet was born a triplet in 1775 in western Ohio. Originally given the name Lalawethika (“The Noisemaker”), he matured during the difficult years of the American Revolution and expansion of the newly independent American republic onto Shawnee lands in the Ohio Valley. Allies of the French during the French and Indian War, the Shawnee naturally gravitated towards victorious Great Britain afterwards. As the American Revolution approached, they shrewdly saw the British as a lesser evil than the expansionist Revolutionaries, and fought alongside them. Following Britain’s defeat, and British betrayal in treaty negotiations, the Shawnee continued to resist American expansion in a series of Ohio Valley Indian wars. Though forced again to surrender land at the Treaty of Greenville (1795), their resolve strengthened. They continued what they saw as their only hope of survival, remaining staunch British allies into the new century and the impending War of 1812.100

Thus Lalawethika grew up in a tumultuous age for the Shawnee, during which they made their last stand and sustained an inevitable defeat to American expansionists. It was also a time when whites were swept up in a major Protestant religious revival, the Second Great Awakening, that spilled over into the Indian villages. Lalawethika’s mother, Methoataske (“Turtle Laying Its Eggs”) was of Creek descent. His father, Puckeshinwa, a leading war chief of the Kispokotha band of the Shawnee, lost his life at the Battle of Point Pleasant shortly before Lalawethika was born. He had several siblings, including a brother

Kumskaukau (the other surviving triplet), and Tecumseh, seven
years his elder. Shortly after Lalawethika’s 1775 birth, however,
Methoataske deserted him and his siblings. She apparently
traveled west to escape both grief over her husband’s demise and
the dangers of Revolutionary warfare. The family never saw her
again.\footnote{101}\footnote{Edmunds, \textit{Shawnee Prophet}, 28–29.}

Lalawethika’s childhood was difficult. Parented by older
siblings and family friends, he was ignored as they lavished
attention on his charismatic older brother Tecumseh. As
Tecumseh matured, it became apparent he was to inherit the
venerated war chief status of their deceased father. This made
Lalawethika jealous, yet he and Tecumseh maintained a strong,
if tense, connection. Always an unruly child, he turned into a
braggart. Once, when playing carelessly with an iron-tipped
arrow, he poked himself and lost the sight in his right eye. As
his problems and insecurities mounted, Lalawethika developed a
strong taste for alcohol.\footnote{102}\footnote{Ibid., 30–31.}

Although he was not a brave warrior like Tecumseh,
Lalawethika did go to war in 1794 and fought alongside
Tecumseh at the Battle of Fallen Timbers. After the Shawnee
defeat by the American general “Mad Anthony” Wayne,
Tecumseh refused to attend the subsequent Treaty of Greenville
council, but Lalawethika was there. When Tecumseh moved their
band farther west into the White River country of Indiana,
Lalawethika followed. He took a wife and fathered children, but
his poor eyesight and deficient hunting skills kept his family on
the margin; facing adversity, he always turned to alcohol.\footnote{103}\footnote{Ibid., 32.}

However, things began to change when Lalawethika found a
mentor. Penagashea, a respected and aged prophet and medicine
man, befriended the troubled young man and shared some of his
knowledge of religion and medicine with him. As Lalawethika
studied and began to practice medicine, some tribe members
began to change their bad opinions of him. When Penagashea
died in 1804, Lalawethika was seen as a possible heir, but the ill
will he had built during the first three decades of his life left a residue. The ultimate turning point came in the wake of a vision Lalawethika experienced in April of 1805. It was a personal religious awakening that would send reverberations throughout the Indian villages of the trans-Appalachian West.\(^{104}\)

One day Lalawethika suffered a seizure, collapsed, and reportedly lost all signs of life; his family and tribesmen believed he was dead. Then, in the midst of the funeral planning he suddenly awakened and spoke to his stunned brethren. During his sleep, Lalawethika explained, he had a vision. The Master of Life showed him paradise, a “rich fertile country, abounding in game, fish, pleasant hunting grounds and fine corn fields,” where Shawnee could “plant, … hunt, [or] play at their usual games.” But only pious and virtuous Indians could enter paradise; the Master of Life sent those who had sinned to a fiery torture. Lalawethika’s first vision was followed by others. He learned the Master of Life saw a decline in morals among the Shawnee and commanded them to return to traditional, non-European ways. The Master forbade alcohol, polygamy, adultery, disrespect of elders, false prophets, and violence against fellow Shawnee. White Americans were the “children of an Evil Spirit,” and the Shawnee must cleanse themselves of white technology, clothing, and food. Although the Master of Life commanded Indians to live at peace with one another, war against the white man was a holy cause in which the Master would protect his people from harm.\(^{105}\)

Following his vision, Lalawethika took the name Tenskwatawa, the “Open Door”; to whites, he became known as the Shawnee Prophet. He abstained from alcohol and began to proselytize and win converts among the Shawnee, Kickapoo, Delaware, Miami, Wyandot, Fox, and other Mississippi Valley tribes. Converts partook in an elaborate ritual that included gently drawing threaded beans through their fingers. R. David Edmunds notes the similarity of Tenskwatawa’s ritual use of beads and that of Catholic priests and the holy rosary. Edmunds

104. Ibid.
sees this as an exception to Tenskwatawa’s Indianness, and otherwise ascribes his beliefs to Native traditions.106

Yet there are connections in the story of Tenskwatawa to Judeo-Christian prophecy, and other world religions as well. Priests and Protestant missionaries and preachers traversed the Ohio Valley, and it seems likely Tenskwatawa was influenced by both Catholicism and Old and New Testament elements of the Second Great Awakening teachings. Tenskwatawa’s religion arguably incorporated an incipient monotheism (via the Master of Life), strict rules regarding moral behavior, and a concept of sin and evil, including heresy and veering from traditional lifestyle. The prophet’s religion featured holy ordinances and rituals, proselytization and conversion, and a belief in creating a holy community on earth (Zion in Hebrew theology), as well as heaven. And of course there was a belief in providence—God’s demonstration of his power through miraculous earthly events. Woven throughout was a striving for eternal life, on earth in a holy community and then in paradise (heaven). All of this was interpreted and taught by Tenskwatawa, a prophet who had himself been resurrected from death and called to preach the gospel.

Throughout the years leading up to the War of 1812, the Shawnee Prophet’s power and influence spread across the Mississippi Valley as far south as the Cherokee and Creek villages. The story of his miraculous darkening of the sun awed the multitude (though Harrison and others soon reasoned that a party of American scientists had told Tenskwatawa about the imminent solar eclipse). He became his brother Tecumseh’s spiritual partner in much the same way as the Book of Mormon depicts a joint warrior king/spiritual king leadership of ancient Nephites. Together, the two embarked on a quest to create a grand Indian confederacy, allied to save their way of life from white invasion and conquest. Based in Prophetstown, a Zion (or Mecca) established near the juncture of Indiana’s Tippecanoe Creek with the Wabash River, Tenskwatawa and Tecumseh

enjoyed remarkable success. Hundreds of followers made the pilgrimage to Prophetstown to see the Shawnee Prophet and carry his teachings back to their far-flung villages.\textsuperscript{107}

Yet there was no stopping the white adherents of industrial revolution, modernity, democratic republicanism, and Christianity. Tenskwatawa’s prayers to the Master to protect Indians from white bullets went unanswered. He managed to keep his own life in 1811, avoiding combat when William Henry Harrison’s army attacked Prophetstown and won victory in the Battle of Tippecanoe. Tecumseh was also absent from Tippecanoe (he had traveled south to recruit more members for their confederacy). But after the War of 1812 officially commenced, Tecumseh lost his life fighting bravely alongside the British at the Battle of the Thames, October 5, 1813. The U.S. Army prevailed, and because he had promised the Shawnee warriors protection and victory, the Shawnee Prophet’s power and prestige began a slow decline.\textsuperscript{108}

Tenskwatawa’s ebb mirrored the demise of most Indians between the Appalachians and Mississippi River. One year after the Shawnee met defeat at the Thames, Andrew Jackson routed Alabama’s Creek Indians in the Battle of Horseshoe Bend. And only three years following Jackson’s spectacular 1815 victory over British troops in the Battle of New Orleans, he defeated North Florida Indians in the First Seminole War. Although there would be a bloody Second Seminole War (circa 1833–42) and Black Hawk’s War (1832) on the upper Mississippi, the fate of Indian people was sealed, and the idea of Indian removal gained momentum. Throughout the 1820s and 1830s, defeated trans-Appalachian Indians were relocated, usually forcibly, to reservations in Indian Territory, west of the Mississippi River. Only a few bands of Seminole and eastern Cherokee managed to avoid federal troops by hiding out in, respectively, the Florida Everglades and Appalachian Mountains. When Chief Justice


John Marshall and the Supreme Court issued a ruling in favor of the Cherokee in *Worcester v. Georgia* (1832), the president of the United States was the old Indian fighter and Democrat Party hero Andrew Jackson. Jackson ignored the ruling and continued plans for executing the Indian Removal Act of 1830.  

Following the War of 1812, the Shawnee Prophet retreated to Canada, where the British offered protection and sustenance. He soon tired of exile and began to negotiate with Lewis Cass, Michigan’s territorial governor. Cass persuaded Tenskwatawa of the wisdom of relocating the Shawnee to the west, and Cass hoped to parlay whatever support Tenskwatawa still retained among his people to achieve that end. The relocation process was a long one, stretching from 1824 to 1828, as the Shawnee crossed the upper Midwest and into Missouri. At last, Tenskwatawa’s party arrived on the designated Shawnee Indian Reservation in eastern Kansas on May 14, 1828. Over the next eight years, his following deteriorated to only family members; their small encampment was a sad sequel to his Prophetstown Zion and its multitudes. A high point for Tenskwatawa came in 1832 when the acclaimed western artist George Catlin asked to paint his portrait. Later commenting on his famous subject, Catlin wrote that Tenskwatawa was “shrewd and influential, perhaps one of the most remarkable men who [had] flourished on these frontiers for some time past.” But Catlin also noted that the aged prophet had begun a physical decline and appeared “silent and melancholy.”

After sitting for Catlin, Tenskwatawa disappears from contemporary accounts of tribes and leaders in the Indian Territory. He lived out the final years of his life in obscurity, no longer a prominent personage among the Shawnee. Tenskwatawa died in November 1836, near modern-day Kansas City, Kansas; no one today knows where his remains lie.  

than two years after the death of the Shawnee Prophet, and less than a hundred miles away, the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith, Jr. (1805–1844), led his band of Latter-day Saints to found their own Zion in northwest Missouri.

The Mormon prophet Joseph Smith, Jr., was born December 23, 1805, in Sharon, Vermont, the fifth of eleven children. His parents, Joseph Senior and Lucy Mack Smith, were humble farmers who moved their family to western New York State in the winter of 1816–17, seeking new opportunities. The Smiths crossed the mountains, arriving near Palmyra, New York, during the beginnings of the Second Great Awakening, a major religious revival that would ultimately sweep over all of the United States. Joseph Smith, Jr., came of age in New York State’s Burned-Over District, a stretch of territory roughly paralleling the Erie Canal construction route that was known for religious fervor and political and social radicalism, including millennialism, Christian socialism, temperance, abolitionism, feminism, dietary experimentation and vegetarianism, and sexual and marital experimentation, including plural marriage and celibacy.¹¹²

The Smith family’s religious faith sprang from the ground of Yankee Puritanism and was nurtured in the fires of the early New England phase of the Second Great Awakening. Joseph Senior and Lucy Mack Smith were religious seekers who had adopted, but were unsatisfied by, the teachings of the backcountry Methodist and Presbyterian churches. The Smiths retained the strong Calvinist belief in providence—God’s clear demonstration of His will through actions and events on earth. Their son Joseph Junior inherited both their providential beliefs and their yearning for the true church. In 1820, at age fifteen, Joseph left his family’s crowded cabin and wandered into a nearby grove of trees to pray. It was there he experienced what Latter-day Saints later called “the First Vision.”¹¹³

¹¹¹. Ibid., 187.
In three accounts written in the 1830s, Joseph Smith, Jr., recalled what happened to him that miraculous day in the woods. He had gone there with a troubled heart, anxiously searching for meaning in his life. Joseph recalled that, while on his knees praying aloud, “a pillar of light” came “down from above and rested upon me.” “I saw the Lord and he spake unto me saying Joseph my son thy sins are forgiven thee.” Then another person appeared in the light, and the Lord said, “This is my beloved Son, Hear him.” Joseph learned that “the world lieth in sin” because all the modern churches preached false doctrine. “All their Creeds were an abomination in [H]is sight” and there needed to be a restoration of the beliefs and practices of the ancient Church of Christ. 114

Joseph recalled that he returned home “filled with love and for many days I could rejoice with great Joy and the Lord was with me.” Convinced he was cleansed of sin, Joseph nevertheless puzzled over God’s pronouncement that no existing church could sustain his faith, and he continued to pray for guidance. Late in the evening of September 21, 1823 as the Smith family slept, an angel named Moroni appeared before Joseph, clothed in a “robe of exquisite whiteness.” “His whole person was glorious beyond description, and his countenance truly like lightning.” Moroni directed Joseph to a nearby hill where he unburied a “book written upon gold plates, giving an account of the former inhabitants of this continent and the source from whence they sprang.” Seven years later, Smith had translated and published 5,000 copies of the Book of Mormon. The scripture told the story of how an ancient tribe of Israel had come to the New World before the birth of Christ. Their descendants—Nephites and Lammanites—had witnessed a miraculous New World reappearance of Jesus Christ after his crucifixion and had become Christians. But then they fell into decline, burying the

golden plates on which they had written the only record of their story.\textsuperscript{115}

Upon the 1830 publication of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith, Jr., and a small band of followers founded the Church of Christ, which Smith led as first elder, “seer, prophet, translator, and apostle of Jesus Christ.” In 1838, they adopted a new name, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, proclaiming to have restored Christ’s one true church. In keeping with their restoration beliefs, the Saints were governed by a prophet president (Smith) who was advised by a three-man first presidency, a quorum of twelve apostles (“the Twelve”), an assemblage of “the Seventy,” and an all-male priesthood of laymen elders. In the heat of the Second Great Awakening, the Saints enjoyed great success, but they also aroused suspicions and accusations of heresy for their unorthodox beliefs. During the 1830s, Joseph led them from western New York, to Kirtland, Ohio, and to northwestern Missouri. Run out of Missouri by mobs and a gubernatorial extermination order, they fled to southwestern Illinois, where, in 1839, Joseph proclaimed Nauvoo, Illinois, on the banks of the Mississippi River, to be the Saints’ New Zion.\textsuperscript{116}

The Latter-day Saints’ enemies pointed (and still do today) to alleged heresies—the belief that Hebrews inhabited the New World before Christ, certain temple rituals, baptism of the dead, the interpretation of the holy trinity, and, of course, the practice of plural marriage.\textsuperscript{117} Yet, despite their uniqueness, Latter-day Saints fit within the parameters of the Christian movement. They were monotheists who believed Jesus Christ was the son of God, the Messiah; they believed Christ was crucified and martyred to atone for human sin, and that he was resurrected to return in a second coming (millennialism). They believed that in becoming Christians they were forgiven their sins and promised

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eternal life. And they believed it their duty to proselytize and convert non-Mormons (whom they called “Gentiles” in Hebrew fashion) and to seek a Zion, a worldly kingdom where they might reside, aspiring to peaceful and moral lives as they awaited Christ’s return.

When Joseph Smith arrived in Nauvoo in 1839, he and Emma Hale Smith (1804–79) had been married for twelve years. Like the Smiths, Emma’s parents, Isaac and Elizabeth Lewis Hale, came from old New England Puritan stock; their family trees extended back to Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Vermont. In 1790, Isaac Hale had removed the family from Pennsylvania’s Susquehanna Valley to western New York State, where Emma was born on July 10, 1804. She grew into a tall, quiet, dark-haired girl who was a fine singer and independent thinker. She met Joseph in 1826, when he and his father briefly boarded at the Hale household. Joseph soon told his mother that Emma “would be my choice in preference to any other woman I have ever seen,” and Emma was equally smitten by handsome, six-foot, brown-haired Joseph. But her father balked, for he believed Joseph was a dreamer and “treasure hunter” (the Smiths were known to have dug for buried treasure). “Preferring to marry him to any other man I knew,” Emma later wrote, she and Joseph “eloped to marry” on January 18, 1827, and Emma was baptized into the Church of Christ in 1830. She would bear nine children and adopt two, but six of the eleven died in infancy. She trekked alongside her husband and established homes for their family in New York, Ohio, and Missouri before the Smiths arrived in Nauvoo in 1839.118

Though Nauvoo was a sparsely populated wetland when the Latter-day Saints arrived, by 1844 it had reached a population second only to Chicago, with 12,000 residents in brick and framed timber houses and log cabins. Missouri and Ohio followers were joined by several thousand British converts who arrived on steamboats via New Orleans. “The rapid increase of

118. Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith (Champagne-Urbana, Ill., 1994), 1–79; Bushman, Rough Stone Rolling, 52–54. Treasure-hunting is discussed in Bushman, 48–52.
our city is almost incredible,” wrote one Saint. “Every day is seen, phoenix-like, the ponderous fronts of new and extensive buildings starting into existence, peering themselves above the roofs of the more humble ones that surround them, and where lots [in a short time] smile under the products of cultivation to be crowned with residences.” Joseph set the Saints to work at many projects, the most important of which was building a huge temple atop a nearby bluff overlooking Nauvoo and the Mississippi River.119

While residing in Nauvoo, Joseph Smith, Jr., and the Latter-day Saints became Mississippi river men. Nauvoo’s construction projects created a huge demand for logs and lumber, so in 1841–42 the church dispatched a company of Saints northward to log and mill timber at a pinery on Winnebago Indian land abutting Wisconsin’s Black River. Joseph recalled,

A company was formed last fall to go up to the pine country to purchase mills, and prepare and saw lumber for the Temple and the Nauvoo House, and the reports from them are very favorable: another company has started, this last week, to take their place and to relieve those that are already there: on their return they are to bring a very large raft of lumber, for the use of the above-named houses.

On October 13, 1842, Joseph reported, “The brethren arrived from Wisconsin with a raft of about 90,000 feet of boards and 24,000 cubic feet of timber for the Temple and Nauvoo House.” This raft, “covering an acre,” consisted of timber, lumber, and shingles. Although the enterprise was $3,000 in debt, it provided much needed wood and sparked a desire to try again. While some men remained in Nauvoo “to drive the work at home,” a new logging crew departed to harvest and plane an 1843 crop.120

Steamboats had navigated western rivers for more than

119. Flanders, Nauvoo, 1–56 (qtn., 156).
twenty-five years prior to the founding of Nauvoo, and some three hundred sixty-five steamboats worked the upper Mississippi River. Nauvoo became a significant steamboat landing, visited on average by five steamers each day. Most new British converts arrived via steamboats and if, upon arrival, a would-be Saint was not already baptized, the Mississippi River provided a convenient and sacred font; Joseph and the elders baptized as many as one hundred in a single service. Always the entrepreneur, the Latter-day Saint prophet began steamboating in 1840, when he purchased a steamer (on credit) from the federal government through the agency of a young Army Corps of Engineers lieutenant, Robert E. Lee. Smith rechristened the boat Nauvoo and used it for both Latter-day Saint transport and the upper river commercial trade. But he defaulted on the boat payments, and on July 11, 1841, the U.S. government won judgment against Smith for $5,184.31 in the U.S. District Court for Illinois. Joseph Smith then turned to Captain Dan Jones, co-owner of the Maid of Iowa. In April of 1843 (three months after he was baptized in the Mississippi River), Captain Jones piloted a boatload of English converts upriver to Nauvoo. Joseph negotiated with Jones and his associate Levi Moffat for the Maid of Iowa: “After much conversation and deliberation,” Smith wrote, “I agreed to buy out Jones, by giving him property in the city worth $1,321, and assuming the debts [for the Maid of Iowa].” The steamer immediately went to work ferrying passengers between Nauvoo and Montrose.121

While the Latter-day Saints had, by 1844, built Nauvoo into a prosperous settlement, they had also moved into theological, political, and military realms that greatly angered their non-Mormon neighbors. With approximately five thousand Saints eligible to vote, Joseph became involved in Illinois politics, attracted the support of Judge Stephen Douglas, and announced

his candidacy for the U.S. presidency. In addition to stating unpopular antislaavery views, Smith’s campaign literature listed him as “Lieutenant General Joseph Smith,” denoting his rank in the two-thousand-man Nauvoo Legion, nominally an army of the Illinois state militia. His rising political and military power appeared even more threatening to nonbelievers because of a series of new revelations, as Smith proclaimed the doctrine of baptism of the dead and instituted an elaborate set of temple rites known only to the Saints. The fire that lit this powder keg was the Latter-day Saint renewal of the ancient Hebrew practice of polygamy. Opposition within his own ranks combined with outside fears and hatred, and in June of 1844, Joseph and his brother Hyrum were charged with treason, arrested, and detained in the nearby Carthage, Illinois, jail. On June 27, 1844, a mob broke into the jail and murdered Joseph Smith, Jr., and his brother. The Latter-day Saint prophet was now a martyr.\footnote{Bushman, \textit{Rough Stone Rolling}, 4–5, 423–27, 437–46, 448–52, 514–17, 546–50.}

Following Joseph’s death, Nauvoo was beset by chaos. It would be two years before the main body of Saints made their famed exodus across the frozen Mississippi en route to Utah, and in the meantime they desperately needed a leader. Unfortunately, Joseph Smith, Jr., had left conflicting instructions as to the choice of a successor. On the one hand, he had anointed his oldest son, Joseph III, as his heir apparent, and there is much evidence supporting this. On another occasion, however, he had stated that Emma would give birth to a son named David who would succeed him. And indeed, Emma was pregnant when Joseph was murdered and soon gave birth to a son she named David Hyrum Smith. Finally, as Joseph had departed for the Carthage jail, he passed his authority to the twelve apostles, who rightly believed they would play a role in choosing a successor. Because Joseph III was not yet twelve years old at the time of his father’s murder, and David was yet unborn, there was considerable confusion. The Twelve met and deliberated at length. They considered either designating an interim leader until Joseph III came of age, or taking the dramatic step of designating a new prophet.
Several names came to light. At one time or another, the elders Sidney Rigdon, Lyman Wight, James J. Strang, William Smith, William Marks, Charles Thompson, Alpheus Cutler, James Colin Brewster, and of course Brigham Young were seen as candidates to become the new Mormon prophet. But the Twelve had not yet reckoned with one of the most powerful characters in this drama: Emma Hale Smith.\(^{123}\)

During the years 1844–46, as he slowly emerged as the new leader of the Latter-day Saints, Brigham Young met with Emma Smith on several occasions. Well aware of the Saints’ love and respect for the Smith family, Brigham needed Emma, Joseph III, and the rest of their family to accompany him as he led the Saints west to the Great Basin of Utah. According to some reports, he assured Emma that Joseph III “is too young to lead his people now, but when he arrives at a mature age he shall have his place. No one shall rob him of it.” But Emma would have none of it, and in retrospect we can see her motives were tied to her hatred of polygamy and Young’s role as the aspiring leader of a polygamist church. Joseph had tried and failed to convince Emma of the righteousness of plural marriage, and after his death she did not intend to raise her children in the company of polygamists. This combined with Emma’s other disagreements with Young (mostly over the division of church and personal property and debt litigation) to create an irreparable breech. During the winter of 1846, parties of Latter-day Saints began to cross the frozen Mississippi River and gather on the Iowa shore. In the spring, Brigham Young led the advance party of Saints across Iowa and the Great Plains. Yet Emma Smith and her five children remained in Nauvoo. Years later, Brigham Young bitterly complained, “Emma … is a wicked, wicked, wicked woman and always was.”\(^{124}\)

Emma Hale Smith played a varied and important role in the growth of both the original and Reorganized Latter-day Saint

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churches. Although she was not an aggressive, outspoken woman, Emma’s bearing, loyalty, and good sense had made her a de facto counselor to the prophet and their son Joseph III. In 1835, the Twelve appointed Emma to choose the music for what became *A Collection of Sacred Hymns, for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Selected by Emma Smith* (Kirtland, 1835). And in 1842, Emma helped to found the Female Relief Society, a church group that to this day performs important social work among the Saints. By all accounts, Joseph’s polygamy drove a wedge between the two. Emma was so opposed that Joseph gave up trying to win her over and never revealed to her the complete extent of his polygamy; she knew that he was a polygamist but did not know all of the women to whom he was married. This struggle helps explain why, after Joseph’s death, Emma raised her five children in the false belief that their father had never practiced polygamy and that it was Brigham Young who first revealed and practiced plural marriage. “No such thing as polygamy, or spiritual wifery, was taught, publicly or privately, before my husband’s death,” she told sons Joseph III and Alexander in 1879. Joseph “had no other wife but me.”

This falsehood notwithstanding, Emma rebounded from the murder of her husband and did an admirable job raising her five children in Nauvoo during the mid-nineteenth century. In 1847, Emma married Lewis Bidamon, a prosperous merchant and militia major who had business dealings with the Saints but was not himself a believer. Bidamon had failings (he fathered a child out of wedlock that Emma raised), but the Smith children all respected him and were grateful their mother had found a new husband and partner. Mr. and Mrs. Bidamon attained upper-middle-class status and comforts through merchandising, farming, and the hotel business. Meanwhile Joseph III grew to manhood in the village by the Mississippi River. Unsure of his calling in life, he worked for his stepfather and tried his hand at farming. He briefly studied law and, though he never became a practicing lawyer, was elected Nauvoo’s justice of the peace.

In 1856, he married Emmeline Griswold over her parents’ strenuous religious objections and continued to seek his calling.¹²⁶

Emma Smith Bidamon and her children were not the only Latter-day Saints who chose not to migrate to Utah. An estimated ten thousand Saints, most (not all) of them antipolygamy, remained in the Midwest, divided into separate bands. Some were trekkers who had grown weary on the Mormon Trail and dropped out to settle in Iowa and eastern Nebraska. Sidney Rigdon, William Smith, William Marks, Charles Thompson, Alpheus Cutler, and James Colin Brewster all aspired to leadership roles among remnant believers, and Lyman Wight eventually took a band of Saints south to Mexico. James J. Strang, a charismatic and egotistical polygamist, led thousands of Latter-day Saints to a colony on Lake Michigan’s Beaver Island, where he was murdered by a follower in 1856. Joseph Junior’s unstable brother William B. Smith had joined Strang, but then seceded to gather his own movement. When William’s band splintered in 1850, two moderate and respected antipolygamy, Jason W. Briggs and Zenas Gurley, formed congregations that continued to search for a prophet. Based in northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin, Briggs’s and Gurley’s sizeable groups were well-connected to smaller bands of Saints. In 1851, Briggs said God spoke to him and declared, “The successor of Joseph Smith is Joseph Smith, the son of Joseph Smith the Prophet. It is his right by lineage, saith the Lord, your God.”¹²⁷

When he was not studying law or courting Emmeline Griswold, Joseph III was studying the Bible and the Book of Mormon. In this he had Emma’s indirect support. “I have always avoided talking to my children about having anything to do in the church,” Emma told visitors in the late 1850s, “for I have suffered so much I have dreaded to have them take any part

in it.” Then she added, “But I have always believed that if God wanted them to do anything in the church, the One who called their father would make it known to them.” God had first made Himself known to Joseph III in the early 1850s. In study and prayer, Joseph concluded that Mormonism was indeed the one true religion, but that during the Nauvoo period the church had strayed from its theological foundation. Polygamy, he later wrote, was “abomination in the sight of God,” and Joseph III was highly skeptical of the elaborate temple rites, including baptism of the dead, introduced in the Nauvoo church. One day in 1853, pondering the many schisms of Mormonism and what possible role he might play in the Restoration, Joseph III experienced a religious vision in which he faced a choice between service in the secular or spiritual spheres—business and the professions or serving the Holy Spirit. He was praying for guidance when “the room suddenly expanded and passed away,” and,

I saw stretched out before me towns, cities, busy marts, court houses, courts, and assemblies of men, all busy and all marked by those characteristics that are found in the world, where men win place and renown. This stayed before my vision til I had noted clearly that the choice of preferment was offered to him that would enter in, but who did so must go into the busy whirl and be submerged by its din, bustle and confusion. In the subtle transition of a dream I was gazing over a wide expanse of country in a prairie land; no mountains were to be seen, but as far as the eye could reach, hill and dale, hamlet and village, farm and farm house, pleasant cot and homelike place, everywhere betokening thrift, and the pursuit of happy peace were open to view. I remarked to him standing by me, but whose presence I had not before noticed, “This must be the country of a happy people.” To this he replied, “Which would you prefer, life, success, and renown among the busy scenes you first saw; or a place among these people, without honor or renown? Think of it well, for the choice will be offered to you sooner or later, and you must be prepared to decide. Your decision once made you cannot recall it, and must abide by the result.”

128. Newell and Avery, Mormon Enigma, 269, 271; Launius, Pragmatic Prophet, 66–67 (vision qtn.), 117 (polygamy qtn.).
Joseph Smith III was destined to follow a path similar to his father, one with interesting similarities to that of the Shawnee Prophet, Tenskwatawa. Like both men, Joseph III believed in providence and had experienced a visionary religious call to serve as a prophet of the Lord, the Master of Life. God called him to lead a church with holy ordinances and rituals, a church that would seek converts through proselytization. Like his father and Tenskwatawa, Joseph III would caution his followers against abuse of alcohol; like Tenskwatawa, but unlike Joseph Junior and Brigham Young, Joseph III opposed polygamy. In questioning priestly temple rites, Joseph III was calling for a restoration of founding principles. All three prophets called for a return to the piousness of an untainted past and aimed to build a holy community—a new Zion—on earth. Indeed, Joseph III’s vision of “a wide expanse of country in a prairie land … hill and dale, hamlet and village, farm and farm house, pleasant cot and homelike place,” resembles Tenskwatawa’s “rich fertile country, abounding in game, fish, pleasant hunting grounds and fine corn fields” where Shawnee could “plant, … hunt, [or] play at their usual games.”

In 1859, pushed to despair by family reverses and the loss of a baby daughter, Joseph Smith III kneeled down in prayer, and his prayers were answered. He later wrote a letter to William Marks, who had joined Gurley and Briggs in what they now called the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. The letter began: “I am going to take my father’s place at the head of the Mormon Church.” On March 20, 1860, Marks and others visited Joseph III in Nauvoo, where Marks reportedly told Joseph, “We have had enough of man-made prophets and we don’t want any more of the sort. If God has called you we want to know it.” Smith carefully explained his call to the elders and they left satisfied they had found their new leader.129

On April 4, 1860, Joseph Smith III and Emma Smith Bidamon crossed the Mississippi River. Their journey, though momentous, was not as grand as the 1846 exodus of Saints from

Nauvoo. Boarding a leaky rowboat, the two headed towards Montrose, Iowa, with two friends helping Joseph row. The wind blew, waves washed water into the boat, and Joseph reportedly used his shoe to bail out the water. At Montrose, they boarded the Illinois Central Railroad, which crossed the Mississippi at Davenport and took them back into Illinois. They arrived in Amboy, a small town in north-central Illinois, late that evening. The Reorganized Church was meeting in Amboy, and Joseph and Emma had come to join them. Upon entering the room Joseph later recalled, “I became fully aware of the fact that the same Influence and Power that had been at work with me, had determined my course of action, and had finally led me into their midst, had also been manifesting itself to many of these faithful, loyal, and devoted old-time Saints.” Standing to address the group the next day, Joseph III said simply, “I have come here, not to be dictated by any man or set of men. I have come here in obedience to a power not my own, and I shall be dictated by the power that sent me.”

130. Launius, Pragmatic Prophet, 115–17.


NASHOBA

Mormonism was an important part of utopian communalism, a movement that swept across the United States of America during the decades before the Civil War. Although the noun “utopia” comes from the Englishman Sir Thomas More’s 1516 fictionalized account of an ideal community, America was the land where utopians actually launched a number of these experiments. From the time of its founding, America was viewed by settlers as a place where they might build a radical new society—a City on a Hill as Puritans called it—amid the woodlands of the New World. As utopianism grew, many of its adherents looked west to the Mississippi Valley, which they viewed as an unspoiled wilderness where they could plant their communities.

Alice Felt Tyler’s 1944 classic Freedom’s Ferment began the
focused academic study of American communalists—autonomous local groups who formed to achieve a more perfect society by sharing goods and forbidding private property ownership. Tyler and subsequent scholars divided communalists into two main categories: religious folk (like the Mormons) and those of a secular stripe. While the religious groups fared better than the nonbelievers, no communalists except the Mormons ever gained widespread popular support for their movements. Yet all of them left a fascinating history in settlements like Ephrata, Mount Lebanon, Harmony, Fruitlands, Brook Farm, Oneida, and many more. During the decades preceding the Civil War, communitarian experiments dotted North America from New England to the banks of the Wabash and Mississippi Rivers. What they shared in common was a belief in human perfectibility in a new age of peace and harmony they all believed was close at hand.\textsuperscript{133}

The secular communalist dreams of Frances “Fanny” Wright (1795–1852) make up a fascinating story set in the early Mississippi Valley. Wright and her younger sister Camilla were born on the coast of Scotland in the late eighteenth century to affluent parents who flirted with radical political beliefs. James Wright, Jr., their merchant father, had subsidized the printing of an edition of \textit{Rights of Man}, Thomas Paine’s paean to the French Revolution, and young Fanny was captivated by stories of the American Revolutionaries and the Enlightenment ideals expressed by Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence. Orphaned as young children and raised by wealthy London relatives, Fanny and Camilla matured into idealists, but with an important distinction: Because they had inherited their parents’ fortune, the two sisters could literally invest in changing the world. Thomas Paine had earlier written in \textit{Common Sense}, “Every spot of the Old World is overrun with

\textsuperscript{133} Tyler, \textit{Freedom’s Ferment}, 196–211. Walters surveys and notes similarities between religious and secular communes, in \textit{American Reformers,} 41–75. For perfectionism and millennialism see Walters, \textit{American Reformers,} 39. See also Bestor, \textit{Backwoods Utopias,} 1–59.
oppression. Freedom hath been hunted round the world,” and thus only in America could there be “an asylum for mankind.” In 1818, Fanny and Camilla Wright set sail for the United States.\textsuperscript{134}

After an extended tour of America, Frances Wright wrote, “It is said that every man has his forte, and so, perhaps, has every nation. That of the American is clearly good sense: this sterling quality is the coin of the country.” Fanny Wright’s love of the new nation eventually led her to become a naturalized American citizen. As she left the Atlantic seaboard and traveled west, the tall, lively young woman seems to have embraced agrarianism and the myth of the West, convinced that the trans-Appalachian frontier could become a utopia within the larger American utopia. She observed:

The western states seem destined to be the paradise of America. The beauty of their climate is probably unrivalled, unless it be by some of the elevated plains of the southern continent. The influence of the mild breezes from the Mexican gulf, which blow with the steadiness of a trade wind up the great valley of the Mississippi, is felt even to the southern shore of Lake Erie.

Of course, Wright did not like everything she saw. Slavery, human greed, and the inequality of the sexes drew her ire. Yet she viewed the Mississippi Valley as a place where she could begin to reform these evils. Returning briefly to Europe, Wright began to hatch a plan, aided by her and Camilla’s family fortune and an impressive group of allies.\textsuperscript{135}

Fanny Wright’s 1821 publication \textit{Views of Society and Manners in America} gained her notoriety and a lifelong friendship with the iconic French hero of the American Revolution, the Marquis de Lafayette. She accompanied Lafayette on his triumphal 1824–25 American tour and in the process met Thomas Jefferson, with


\textsuperscript{135} Wright, \textit{Views of Manners and Society in America}, 65, 234.
whom she shared her antislavery views. She also drew the attention of President James Monroe and, out west, the Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky and General Andrew Jackson, whom Lafayette had recommended she consult about purchasing lands in western Tennessee. Like so many of his contemporaries, Jackson was charmed by the vivacious Scotswoman, and he pointed her to two thousand wild acres astride the Wolf River, near what would soon become the town of Memphis, Tennessee. Frances and Camilla bought the land in 1825 and launched a settlement called Nashoba, after the Chickasaw word for “wolf.”

Fanny Wright opposed inequality of race, class, and gender as manifested in nineteenth-century slavery, capitalism, and what we today call misogyny and sexism. In Nashoba, she aimed to establish a small model society that would eradicate all these evils. Her plan, developed with the help of the antislavery radical George Flower, was bold. She would use her own fortune and solicit donations to purchase about thirty slaves from their masters and move them to Nashoba. There they would work alongside a small cadre of enlightened white settlers (including herself and her sister) in a community that forbade individual property ownership and encouraged experimentation in marriage. The slaves would be educated and their wages applied towards purchasing their own freedom. Once freed, Wright aimed to recolonize them in the Black republic of Haiti. Nashoba would be a model experiment for what Wright and others envisioned would become a network of farms enabling Americans to gradually end the evil institution of slavery.

To modern readers, elements of Fanny Wright’s plan may seem conservative. Though she was a rich woman, Fanny did not intend to buy slaves and grant them freedom. They would remain enslaved until they reimbursed their purchase price and

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136. Morris, *Fanny Wright*, 108–10; Tyler, *Freedom’s Ferment*, 207–208. Although the Wrights’ time in Nashoba parallels that of David Crockett, who represented west Tennessee in Congress, there is no record that they ever met.

137. Tyler, *Freedom’s Ferment*, 208; Morris, *Fanny Wright*, 104–106. There are differing counts of the exact number of slaves Fanny brought to Nashoba, ranging from fifteen to thirty-one.
the cost of their education through labor at Nashoba. The capitalist desire for profit—something Wright abhorred—lay at the basis of all of her plans. She would give slaveholders a profit incentive to sell and slaves the incentive of working for their freedom. Moreover, when Blacks were educated and freed, they would be deported via a colonization scheme popular among some white Americans who opposed slavery but doubted Blacks and whites could ever live together as free citizens of the same nation. Although Wright did not actually support colonization, allies convinced her it would make her plan palatable to less enlightened souls. And despite all her compromises, Fanny Wright’s proposals were extremely radical by antebellum standards. The vast majority of white folks who heard of Wright’s Nashoba plan were no doubt shocked by its audacity. They were probably also struck by its infeasibility.  

The correspondence of the Wright sisters and their friends dating from Nashoba’s 1826 founding through its 1829 demise shows an arc of great enthusiasm quickly descending into profound disillusionment. “I write you dear Love from our log cabins around wh[ich] the axes are ringing & all is stirring,” Fanny wrote to her friend Julia Garnett from Nashoba in 1826:

All are cheerful & contented & a fiddle wh[ich] we procured immediately for one of the men who knows how to turn some merry tunes strikes up regularly every evening... Our woods at this moment are in full beauty of spring tender verdure and fine pasture... I am—busy—busy... Our people here continue cheerful & happy & grown in industry.

Yet Fanny’s English friend Frances Trollope soon assessed the futility of the venture, writing from Nashoba in 1828, “One glance sufficed to convince me that every idea I had formed of the place was as far as possible from the truth. Desolation was

the only feeling—the only word that presented itself; but it was not spoken.” Trollope, who had come to live and assist Fanny in her utopian experiment, quickly boarded a steamboat bound for Cincinnati.140

Illness fostered by western Tennessee’s climate and swampy environment was an early sign of Nashoba’s demise. “Since writing to you last my loved friends my time has been most painfully engrossed in attending our dear Fanny during a severe attack of fever,” Camilla wrote home in October of 1826, describing the symptoms of malaria. Though Fanny soon reported, “I am alive and travelling fast into health,” she departed Nashoba to convalesce (and raise more money) in Europe, beginning a pattern of absentee stewardship of the commune.141

Conflicts over money and work assignments soon arose among the utopians, and Fanny noted they were forced to change their socialist groundings, “leaving cooperation in the strict sense of the word to the next generation & demanding of our associates to bring a small income in money” for “food & kitchen services.” The fact that Nashoba’s total 1827 farm revenues (from cotton, corn, and fodder) amounted to less than $300 led Wright to comment dryly, “Cooperation has nigh killed us all.” Fanny was on track to lose half her total assets on Nashoba, and things were getting worse. An 1827 article in a Baltimore antislavery magazine reported that the white colonist James Richardson was cohabiting with the mulatto daughter of Nashoba’s school principal, and that he had on several occasions publicly “tied up and flogged” some of Nashoba’s slaves.142

“There was a time … when I should have said come—share a sisters home at Nashoba,” Camilla sadly wrote Harriet Garnett in late 1828, “but that once pleasing vision is ended.” In 1828, Fanny

141. Camilla Wright to Mr. le Baron Hyde de Neuville, Oct. 29, 1826, in Payne-Gaposchkin, “Letters of Frances and Camilla Wright,” 437–38. Fanny added a postscript: “I drink wine by the quart & bark wh[ich] since the fever was quelled have been my elixir vitae.”
and Camilla left Nashoba to the care of an overseer, a rapidly dwindling number of white colonists, and their slaves. Although the sisters accepted ultimate responsibility for the Nashoba property and the slaves left behind, they now sought refuge in New Harmony, Indiana, where the Welshman Robert Owen, a fellow radical, had recently begun his own communitarian experiment along the Wabash River. Owen was an early inspiration for Fanny’s utopianism, and she had told Camilla, “The principles advocated by Owen are to change the face of the world as surely as the sun shines in the heavens.” Owen’s ideology “reconciled me with life, & gave me hopes for the human race as high as my former despair had been deep.”

Having accrued a fortune in the Scottish cotton textile trade, Robert Owen dedicated his life to the eradication of poverty through socialism. Owen’s avowed enemy was individualism (he called it the “individual system”) and its selfish economic, religious, and marital practices. “[The] individual system,” Owen wrote, was “directly opposed to universal charity, benevolence, and kindness.” Owen denied the existence of individual will; he believed that, in a controlled environment, humans could be shaped and reformed by utopian planners like himself. Although he had already created a model factory village in Scotland, Owen, like Fanny Wright, saw the Mississippi Valley as a seedbed for this radical, secular, perfectionist transformation. In 1824, he purchased Harmony, the Wabash River site of a successful religious utopia founded by the German fundamentalist George Rapp. Rapp sold the entire Harmony town site and infrastructure to Owen and led his own followers eastward. Owen envisioned New Harmony as a “halfway house,” where residents could reform their ways, give up individualism, and learn to live cooperatively.

Fanny and Camilla soon discovered that Owen’s New

Harmony utopia was in even worse shape than Nashoba, if only because its populace and ambitions were so much greater. Founded in 1825 with a huge capital investment, Owen’s experiment boasted a population of nine hundred individuals, many of whom turned out to be rugged individualists indeed. Robert Dale Owen, one of the founder’s sons, later described New Harmony’s utopians as “a heterogeneous collection of radicals, enthusiastic devotees to principle, honest latitudinarians, and lazy theorists, with a sprinkling of unprincipled sharpers thrown in.”

New Harmony began well enough. European intellectuals and teachers in the group established a good school, and they published an influential newspaper, the *New Harmony Gazette*. There were plays, concerts, and dances (and no sanctioned church services). But the collective was lacking in artisanal skills, and New Harmony’s pottery, cotton, and woolen mills floundered (the colonists did produce some lumber and flour). Then, too, critics arose both outside and inside the community. Outsiders were scandalized by Owen’s atheism and anticapitalist views, while his own recruits quickly grew dissatisfied. Some of the Owenites left New Harmony to found more than a dozen small, short-lived Mississippi Valley utopias. Meanwhile, New Harmony generated a band of whiners and shirkers as the “disease of laziness” led to “grumbling, carping, and murmuring.” Much later in his life, Owen’s son Robert Dale Owen astutely noted that the United States was a very poor place to try and do away with individual property rights through communalism. In America, wages were high and land was cheap, squashing “any feeling of the necessity for cooperative action.”

Like Fanny Wright, Robert Owen was an absentee utopian, interested in big ideas but unwilling to deal with the daily details necessary to carry them to fruition. After purchasing New

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Harmony in 1824, he returned to England, visiting New Harmony in January 1826. He sailed back to England the same year, leaving his sons in charge of the venture. Owen traveled to the Wabash River community again in 1827 to find the dwindling, disheartened populace described above. He immediately declared New Harmony a failed experiment, liquidating and privatizing the settlement and offering generous terms and loans to the remaining residents. The financial outcome was Owen’s loss of 80 percent of his personal fortune. Although Owen returned to England to pursue other radical endeavors, all of his sons remained and became American citizens and stalwart Indianans.¹⁴⁷

Fanny Wright had not lingered in New Harmony. She stayed just long enough to deliver the first public address ever made by a woman on American soil, then departed on a tour with Robert Dale Owen to preach their secular gospel and try to raise more money. Fortuitously, New Harmony’s downfall had provided the solution for Fanny Wright’s own failed idealism. The New Harmony Gazette was in financial trouble, and Wright came to the rescue. Camilla noted that Fanny decided to underwrite the Gazette so it “sh[ould] not fall to the ground & immediately affixed her name to it as Editor conjointly with R.D. [Owen].” One of Fanny’s contractual terms, however, was that she could publish the paper in any location she chose. She immediately moved the Gazette from the backwoods of the Mississippi Valley to New York City, where she “devoted herself exclusively to the superintendence of the Gazette,” which she renamed the Free Enquirer. Fanny Wright had apparently decided that the best way to advocate against individualism was as an individual journalist and public speaker.¹⁴⁸

On the lecture circuit and in the pages of the Free Enquirer, Wright helped lay some of the intellectual foundations of the modern American labor, feminist, and socialist movements. She condemned the commercial class and its treatment of northern

¹⁴⁷. Bestor, Backwoods Utopias, 187–201; Tyler, Freedom’s Ferment, 204.
factory workers, and assisted in forming a Working Man’s Party to advance workers’ political clout. She advocated free universal public education through a system of publicly financed, secular boarding schools. Her feminist writings espoused the view that men and women possessed different natures and that men were naturally more pecuniary, violent, and individualistic than women. Government and economics could be reformed only by allowing female access to those spheres of activity. This would require woman’s suffrage, integration of the professions, redistribution of wealth, and a cultural revolution in marital and sexual relations. Fanny agreed with Camilla that marriage was “one of the most subtle inventions of priestcraft” for stifling female happiness. Wright stated that in a just world, no woman would be forced to “forfeit her individual rights or independent existence, and no man assert over her any rights or power whatsoever, beyond what he may exercise over her free and voluntary affections.” This meant not only more open marriages, but also consensual sexual relations before and outside of marriage. Fanny believed sexuality was “the strongest and … noblest of the human passions,” and the basis of “the best joys of our existence,” and “the best source of human happiness.”

Most Americans found Fanny Wright’s views dangerous and scandalous, and her public speeches drew protesters angry over what they called “Fanny Wrightism.” It is worth reemphasizing that, before Wright, no American woman had ever made a public speech. Camilla wrote of the incendiary nature of Fanny’s speeches but claimed “even her most violent opposers expressed their admiration and wonder at her transcendent talents as a public speaker & almost admitted her eloquence to be irresistible.” In lecture tours that began in the Ohio Valley towns of Cincinnati, Louisville, and Vincennes and ultimately took her back east, “her manner, her voice, her appearance alike called forth repeated bursts of applause from her audience & her heretical doctrines on religion and morals were received with

149. Quotations in Morris, Fanny Wright, 2, 146, 156. Wright’s labor activism is discussed in Walters, American Reformers, 189–90. See also Frances Wright, Course of Popular Lectures with Three Addresses of Various Public Occasions ... (1834; repr. New York, 1972).
feelings of deepest interest & curiosity,” Camilla believed. In all of her speeches, Fanny Wright presented her radical ideas as being consummately American—a natural fulfillment of the American Revolution’s promise of liberty and equality.  

Despite having spent much of the 1820s critiquing the tradition of marriage, Fanny followed Camilla in marriage in 1831 when she wed William Guillaume D’Arusmont, a French physician she met at New Harmony. The couple had one child, Frances Sylva D’Arusmont, and they lived in France for a brief period before returning to the United States in 1835. Although Fanny would continue her trans-Atlantic lifestyle, Cincinnati, Ohio, became an anchor for her until the end of her life. She continued to advocate reform as an individual citizen, but never with the passion that she exuded in the 1820s. Wright was active in the northern wing of the Democratic Party and wrote one last book, published in 1836. After she and D’Arusmont divorced, Fanny spent much of her time in legal wrangling over their cojoined estates. She died in Cincinnati December 13, 1852, of complications from a fall down an icy staircase. Her headstone in Cincinnati’s Spring Grove Cemetery reads, “I have wedded the cause of human improvement, staked on it my fortune, my reputation and my life.” Estranged from Frances Sylva, Fanny nevertheless left her a sizable estate that included her Tennessee Nashoba holdings.  

Although it might seem that the utopians Fanny Wright and Robert Owen shared little in common with Joseph Smith, Jr., and the Nauvoo Mormons, there were similarities as well as differences. All three advocated communal ownership of property, although the Mormons allowed for family property rights within their strict tithing and social welfare system. All three advocated radical experimentation with the institution of

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marriage. Unlike Owen and Wright, Smith did not oppose marriage outright, but the Mormons’ plural marriage doctrine took the tradition much further out of the mainstream than Owen’s and Wright’s failed experiments. In her tolerance of premarital and extramarital sex, Fanny practiced what would become a modern social norm. Perhaps most significant, Owen’s and Wright’s secular ideologies actually overlapped with the religiosity they so despised. As Walters and others have shown, both secular and religious communalists espoused perfectionism—the belief that human beings could cleanse themselves of flaws, or sins. And both groups believed that a new age had arrived, an age secularists termed “enlightened” and the devout believed was the beginning of a “kingdom of peace on earth.” As the decades of the nineteenth century advanced, these millennial beliefs would become hugely consequential. And, as we shall see, perfectionism and millennialism became powerful forces when intertwined with the growing debate over slavery.152

What happened to the Nashoba slaves, the voiceless human actors in Fanny Wright’s failed utopian dreams? Wright worked hard to achieve a just outcome. In November of 1829, two years prior to Fanny’s marriage and Camilla’s death, Camilla wrote about Fanny’s plans. She said Fanny had concluded that because the Nashoba slaves were “a constant source of anxiety & pecuniary loss,” she had decided to “free … herself from all further responsibility regarding them, by … conveying them to Hayti [Haiti],” a Black republic in the Caribbean. Camilla’s husband, Richesson Whitbey, soon accompanied thirty-one Nashoba Blacks “by steamboat to N. Orleans,” where Fanny held the legal paperwork to free them. Fanny and her soon-to-be husband William Guillaume D’Arusmont departed New Orleans with the manumitted Blacks on January 19, 1830, and landed at Port au Prince about a month later. The Haitian president Jean Pierre Boyer and his governmental aides, who had been apprised of Wright’s mission by the Marquis de Lafayette, gave them a

warm welcome. Boyer granted all the former Nashoba slaves good land and a generous stipend with which to begin again in Haiti.153 There is no record of their lives or the lives of their descendants thereafter. In the United States, meanwhile, a storm was brewing over slavery. This was a storm Fanny Wright had, in small but important ways, helped to create.