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Liberty is Pioneering: An American Birthright

In the generation following the Revolutionary War, pioneering became an American birthright. British restrictions on colonists' mobility—particularly the Proclamation Line of 1763 (which forbade western settlement by prohibiting colonial governors from authorizing surveys or issuing land grants beyond the crest of the Appalachian Mountains) and the Quebec Act of 1774 (which extended the northern colony's boundaries to include lands south to the Ohio River and west to the Mississippi River)—had infuriated Americans who expected not only access to these "vacant" lands but eventual ownership as well. Suggestively, upon receiving news of the Minutemen's April 1775 uprising, a party of land surveyors illegally roaming central Kentucky named their campsite "Lexington," relating their own rebelliousness to the shrugging off of British control in Massachusetts. For many Americans, westward exploration and eventual migration were among the natural rights to which Thomas Jefferson appealed in the Declaration of Independence and for which American colonists were fighting a war.

As military conflict raged, colonists expressed increasing interest in the opening of western lands as a spoil of war. Still, the colonial experience had been one of *settling* lands, not *pioneering*. As a noun, "pioneer" had been part of the English vocabulary since the mid-1500s, meaning one who prepared the way, usually referring to soldiers or road-clearers. Following the Revolution, more traditional thinkers assumed that residents of the new confederation of states would act upon this definition. J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, Georges-Henri-Victor Collot, Harry Toulmin, and other foreign observers interpreted American pioneers as preparing the way for "civilization": opening new lands and making minor improvements before more permanent waves of migrants arrived. And initially, the earliest Americans who wandered into trans-Appalachia seemed to act accordingly. In the 1770s and 1780s, single and unrooted men sought to make quick fortunes as long hunters, fur traders, and land surveyors before returning to the East. Daniel Boone, Simon Kenton, John Donelson, John Sevier, and others engaged the western wilds of Kentucky and Tennessee, few intending to stay (1).

But pioneering as an activity, as a verb, was a *revolutionary* idea. In fact, the earliest usage of "pioneer" as a verb was 1780, just as American settlers began to traverse the Appalachians. Ironically, businesses like the Transylvania Company were the first to pioneer trans-Appalachia. In accumulating invaluable knowledge of the region and its native inhabitants, Boone, Donelson, and other wanderers became

agents for land companies that sought to convert western lands into commodities, and transform property into paper titles. Virginia's and North Carolina's governments favored these enterprises and their wealthy backers over the potential free-for-all of thousands of smaller pioneers, giving preference to speculators' negotiations with resident American Indians, acquiescing to their plans for land sales, and betraying the egalitarian promise of the West. State governments left the regulation and implementation of land sales to speculators who, like William Blount and Richard Henderson, monopolized the best lands for their own profit (2).

But as early as 1775, Benjamin Franklin recognized "many thousands of families that are ready to swarm" westward to "secure land for their children." As the war ended, and certain of their moral right to a piece of the West, settlers crossed the mountains, invoking a homestead ethic to justify land claims and contest the dominance of the speculators. Few had legal title, so they preempted tracts of land by making unofficial surveys, building rudimentary cabins, and planting corn in small plots. Virginia's effort to make preemption illegal in 1779 was fruitless; squatters continued to articulate their resentment of large-scale speculation through their actions. Many were not satisfied with small-scale acquisition, however, and claimed tracts that exceeded conventional definitions of a family-sized farm, taking cues from larger proprietors about finding profit in good western lands. As squatters and speculators claimed, surveyed, and sold lands, a titular quagmire took shape in Kentucky and Tennessee that would remain unresolved throughout much of the nineteenth century (3).

Initially, a similar scenario manifested itself in the Old Northwest. In the late 1770s and early 1780s, squatters already were staking claims to Ohio lands. Without state governments to regulate land distribution, the Confederation Congress tried to stem the tide by refusing to defend against Indian attacks. But squatters persisted in claiming their share of the West. With the Land Act of 1785, the federal government brought some order to the madness, sending Thomas Hutchins to survey the region systematically. Yet, by pricing land at \$1 per acre with a minimum purchase of 640 acres, the congressional system made it virtually impossible for poorer pioneers to take advantage of the Land Ordinance legally. Instead, speculators like John Cleves Symmes and Jonathan Dayton purchased millions of acres, resold smaller portions to middling settlers, and failed to keep adequate surveying records. When approximately five hundred French immigrants bought a tract of land from the Scioto Company and established Gallipolis, they dis-



Rivers often provided the best routes to the new land on the frontier. The men above demonstrate how to use a raft designed in 1818 to make navigation easier. (Image courtesy of the Department of State Patent Office, National Archives and Records Administration, ARC #594909.)

covered that their agent had not forwarded their payments to the company and that the company did not have actual title to the lands! As in Kentucky and Tennessee, early Ohio's overlapping claims and confused titles led to legal challenges well into the nineteenth century (4).

Battles between squatters and speculators, often fought in the courts, evinced the hunger for acquiring and retaining control of land. Later, federal control of the public domain north of the Ohio and south of Tennessee would redirect squatter animosity toward the government itself and transform a chaos of litigation into a chronic political controversy. But either way, private property and individual rights constituted the foundation of the republic, as James Madison conceded: "The rights of property are committed into the same hands with personal rights." But ownership was not enough: land provided opportunity for private profit.

As James Fenimore Cooper described in his literary exploration of *The Pioneers* (1823), the *action* of pioneering included immediate profiting from land ownership. "It is a singular feature in American life, that, at the beginning of this [nineteenth] century, when the proprietor of the estate, had occasion for settlers, on a new settlement and in a remote county, he was enabled to draw them from among the increased of the former colony." There was a steady stream of new settlers pouring from the East, particularly from the cities where population densities placed too large a strain on rudimentary infrastructures, from New England where land was at a premium, and from the southern backcountries where fur traders and long hunters had already established ties with trans-Appalachia (5).

To be successful, settlers sought out lands with uncontested titles (or at least with the appearance of clearly defined titles), accessibility

to roadways or waterways that would bind residents to economic and social networks, and freedom from the threat of Indian attack. Areas east of the Appalachians—for example, William Cooper's tract in upstate New York and South Carolina's Long Canes district—offered such advantages and commanded high prices as a result. In trans-Appalachia, however, land titles continued to be problematic, transportation was impeded by the mountains to the east and alternating Spanish and French control of New Orleans to the southwest, and Indians remained powerful deterrents to white migration both north and south of the Ohio River.

Many Native Americans wished to maintain their traditional lifestyles and viewed American encroachment on western lands as threatening to their cultural ways. Others had become economically involved with the earliest long hunters and fur traders, modifying cultural patterns of reciprocal gift-giving to allow for profit and more materialistic consumption: alcohol, blankets, guns, clothing. Settlement in hunting grounds, in this case by increasingly large numbers of whites, contested the moral foundation for American Indians' traditional cultures and reduced Indian participation in the fur trade. Indians reacted violently, attacking white farmsteads and small settlements, trying to frighten pioneers out of the West. Significantly, Indians who had joined in profit-making and material consumption did not commodify land. While federal troops, waves of white settlers, and the loss of the hunting lands certainly undermined native cultures, the Indians' own emphasis on communal land usage rather than private property ownership may have been most detrimental. They could not conform to new land usages that accompanied the commercial and consumer revolution overtaking their villages, the cornerstone of which was the idea of private property (6).

Even if successful in gaining some degree of security from the Indians, pioneers benefited little from land ownership if transportation routes were poor. Natural routes such as the Ohio River and the Wilderness Road through the Cumberland Gap connected eastern economic and social networks to western settlements. Merchants in Pittsburgh, Marietta, Lexington, Louisville, Cincinnati, and St. Louis imported goods from eastern suppliers. Communication arrived in the form of eastern newspapers. Eastern bank notes kept the west financially bound to Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Alexandria. Baptist, Methodist, Catholic, Episcopal, and Presbyterian officials sent ministers and circuit riders into trans-Appalachia to extend denominational influence. The East maintained strong ties to the West (7).

But the impediments of the Appalachian Mountains, inconsistent access to the port of New Orleans, and other problems idiosyncratic to western life made pioneers' sense of unity with the East tenuous. In the 1780s, the Confederation Congress attempted to bring some order to the West, but the founding generations' vision of a harmonious and stable society led by aristocrats quickly disintegrated as landowners in the Scioto Valley of Ohio, along the Maysville Road in Kentucky, in Tennessee's Military Reservation, and elsewhere promoted private interest as the cornerstone of the public good. Indeed, many pioneers began to view the Land Ordinance and the few other Confederation measures as restrictive and incompatible with private profit. Then, in 1784 the Spanish closed the Mississippi River to American shipping and pioneers pleaded with the Confederation Congress to intervene. For two years John Jay negotiated with his Spanish counterpart, Don Diego de Gardoqui, but the treaty they produced in 1786 sacrificed western pioneers' needs to eastern merchants' desires for direct trade with Spain. Under pressure from the West, Congress would not ratify the treaty.

The terms of the failed Jay-Gardoqui Treaty deepened westerners' distrust of the East, which had simmered since the beginning of the Revolution. Immediately after the war General James Wilkinson had migrated to Lexington, Kentucky, to open a store, and within four years he was privately advocating secession and protection under Spanish rule, with a modicum of success. The rumblings of secession circulated for a decade. Only Spain's agreement to Pinckney's Treaty in 1795, which granted American navigation rights along the Mississippi River subject to duties, quieted these persistent secessionist rumors.

By the 1790s, with Federalists firmly in control of the newly formed federal government, hundreds of pioneers sent petitions demanding free navigation of the Mississippi River through New Orleans, federal troops to fend off Native Americans, and resolution of land title disputes. Their appeals should not be surprising: government, albeit in the form of county courts, had been a regulating force in economic development throughout the settlement process. But pioneers and their local courts had proved themselves incapable of resolving the Indian problem or the quagmire of land titles in the Southwest. Further, they had no power to negotiate with foreign nations. National leaders responded by sending John Jay to England in 1794 to negotiate, successfully, a reduction of the British presence on the northwestern frontiers. The following year, Thomas Pinckney visited Spain and secured free navigation of the Mississippi River for three years, restraint of Spanish-supported Indians on the southwestern frontiers, and recognition of West Florida's boundary at the 31st parallel. Jay's Treaty proved unpopular, especially for its failure to address eastern interests, but Pinckney's Treaty was greeted enthusiastically.

Both, however, effectively transformed the West. Northwestern Indians, chastised by federal troops under Anthony Wayne at the Battle of Fallen Timbers in August 1794, found themselves deserted by British garrisons retreating under the terms of Jay's Treaty. Forced to come to terms with American pioneers, they yielded a spacious tract of Ohio Valley land in the Treaty of Greenville in 1795. Southwestern Indians

could no longer rely on the patronage of Spanish officials in New Orleans, and neither could western secessionists. By curbing the Indian menace and opening the Mississippi River, Pinckney's Treaty temporarily quieted pioneer discontent.

Federalist actions laid the groundwork for economic and political transformations over the next two decades that would sweep trans-Appalachian pioneers into prosperity. Most pioneers took up farming, the quintessential American activity, since it allowed one to benefit immediately from owning land. Nathaniel Hart was ten years old when his family moved westward. A member of the generation born after the Revolutionary War whose lives paralleled the ideological, economic, and territorial creation of the United States, he inherited the promise of liberty that his father and thousands of other Americans had secured through war, including the conventional wisdom that the West was a place where that promise was most easily fulfilled. Unlike his father, who owned a ropewalk, Nathaniel aspired to be a farmer and projected his start-up costs as \$6000 for a house, \$1000 for a distillery, \$500 to construct a mill, and another \$500 for a barn. "When this is all done if I do not break in doing it," he concluded, "I hope to be in a situation to make money." Obviously, his farm was not the average yeoman homestead; his intentions, however, mirrored the aspirations of most pioneers (8).

Rising European demands for agricultural produce stimulated western farming and exports and rewarded pioneers who pursued the market. Not surprisingly, therefore, westerners turned to the emerging Democratic-Republican Party to represent their interests and secure their inheritance of pioneering as liberty. With the election of 1800, most of the West joined Jefferson in his vision of an agrarian republic in which pioneer farmers' needs were paramount. But this western agrarian republic was not the simplistic, subsistence-oriented economy that has come to dominate historical understanding of the trans-Appalachian pioneers. Like their friends and relatives east of the Appalachians, westerners were too tempted by the market economy to settle for mere subsistence. Regional newspapers celebrated not only the agrarian ideal but also the profit that could accompany it:

Look round your farms—how rich the prospect seems!
The orchard bends, the field luxurious teems!
Here Agriculture opens to our view,
A land of milk and honey, rich and new.

Corn—which historically represented the first efforts at claiming land and eking out an existence in the wilderness—quickly became the major cash crop. Between 1799 and 1802, profits earned from the export of Kentucky corn equaled the value of goods imported into the state. As pioneer migration accelerated, so too did market participation. By 1802, so many farmers entered into the Ohio River Valley corn trade that regional prices plummeted to unprecedented levels. By 1805, however, production was on the rebound; Kentucky merchant Daniel Halstead applauded how the profits from corn and other agricultural productions again "over Balance the in ports." The musings of one pioneer restated the point in a more lyrical manner:

May the Lord be praised
how I am a mased
to see how things have mended
hot cake and tea
for supper I see
When mush and milk was intended.

Subsistence was never the objective; it was just a temporary consequence of relocation (9).

The mad rush of merchants into trans-Appalachia symbolized the quick conversion of the region from subsistence into a pioneer market economy. Any farmer could participate, and any merchant could become a middleman. It should not be too surprising, then, that many men of commerce became western political leaders, in both the Federalist and Democratic-Republican parties. The two parties shared the vision of a western republic led by aristocrats, and as men of commerce, local and regional political leaders increasingly positioned themselves as that aristocracy. It was Democratic-Republican farmers and merchants, however, who argued that individual pursuit of profit contributed to larger societal advancement. Indeed, it was not a market revolution that they feared (to the contrary, they early and eagerly tapped into it), but rather unwelcome federal, state, and corporate regulation—including chartered banks, inspection stations, and companies—that threatened individual pursuit and societal harmony.

Jeffersonian partisans, then, provided a political context for the pioneering activity underway in trans-Appalachia. In contrast to the 1780s and early 1790s, when westerners were hard pressed to find any government truly interested in their problems, the late 1790s and early 1800s witnessed the mainstreaming of pioneer concerns into partisan politics. Jeffersonian Republicans wished to make the West accessible to as many pioneers as would take up the challenge, ensuring the success of a combined agrarian and commercial economy (10).

For the generation following the Revolutionary War, then, pioneering allowed them to pursue private interests, acquire and sell land, grow and export agricultural productions, and construct an economy (and consequently a polity and society) that reflected their faith in private property, individual pursuits, and other natural rights so eloquently phrased in the Declaration of Independence. The significance of this opportunity was most evident as the first generation of westerners reached their elder years. In the 1840s, as *Leatherstocking Tales* and stories of Alligator-Horse Men transformed American culture, “pioneer” became an adjective, labeling those who had opened the West and the future based on revolutionary ideals three generations hence. It revitalized the myth of the pioneer in nineteenth-century America, and inspired continued migration to the West where liberty continued to be pioneering (11). □



“Hunter’s of Kentucky. Or half horse and half alligator.” This broadside includes a poem describing the valor of Kentuckians at the Battle of New Orleans during the War of 1812. Describing them as “half-horse” and “half-alligator,” the poem emphasizes the fierce image of the frontiersman. (Image courtesy of the Filson Historical Society.)

Endnotes

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2. “Pioneer,” in Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, n.p.

3. Benjamin Franklin, “A Plan for Settling Two Western Colonies,” in *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Leonard W. Labaree et al., 30 vols. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959-), 5: 456-62; Stephen Aron, *How the West Was Lost: The Transformation of Kentucky from Daniel Boone to Henry Clay* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 58-101; John R. Finger, *Tennessee Frontiers: Three Regions in Transition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 99-124.

4. R. Douglas Hurt, *The Ohio Frontier: Crucible of the Old Northwest, 1720-1830* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 189-97; Andrew R.L. Cayton, *The Frontier Republic: Ideology and Politics in the Ohio Country, 1780-1825* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1986), 12-50.

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7. Craig Thompson Friend, *Along the Maysville Road: The Early Republic in the Trans-Appalachian West* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, forthcoming); Kim Gruenwald, *River of Enterprise: The Commercial Origins of Regional Identity in the Ohio Valley, 1790-1850* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002); Marion Winship, “Kentucky in the New Republic: A Study of Distance and Connection,” in Friend, *The Buzzel About Kentucky*, 101-24.

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9. *Kentucky Gazette*, October 2, 1798; François André Michaux, *Travels to the West of the Alleghany Mountains*, in *Early Western Travels, 1748-1846*, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites, 32 vols. (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clarke, Co., 1904-1907), 3: 205, 239; William Faux, *Memorable Days in America*, part I, in Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels, 1748-1846*, 11: 187; *Laws of Kentucky*, 2 vols. (Lexington, KY: John Bradford, 1799), 2: 411-3; Daniel Halstead to Alex Sanders, 1805, Daniel Halstead Account Books, 1797-1830, Filson Historical Society, Louisville, KY; inside cover of Mason County, Kentucky, Account Book 1797-1799, Filson Historical Society.
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