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0521361303 - River Towns in the Great West: The Structure of Provincial Urbanization in
the American Midwest, 1820-1870

Timothy R. Mahoney

Excerpt

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PART I

*Human geography and
the structure of regional life*

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I

*Introduction and
“topographical description”*

Introduction

In the middle of the nineteenth century the Ohio and Mississippi river valleys were considered by most travelers an essential part of any American tour. Yet, as has recently been argued, most British travelers were disoriented by the landscape they encountered.¹ More comfortable with the traditional categories of reference for appreciating scenery, they judged the relatively featureless western landscape to be boring and uninteresting. Composed of low-relief prairies, hills, moraines, and ravines, broken occasionally by clusters or lines of trees and long, shallow, meandering rivers, only to give way to more trees, more prairie swells or flat expanses, followed by more rivers and underbrush in various combinations and seemingly endless repetition – the midwestern topography offers a landscape that can numb the mind with tedium and bring on disorientation. Repetition tends to blur out the details, and landscape, as a feature to be analyzed, is reduced to pure space, measured by the passage of time to traverse it, which often has to be endured to the point of nervous exhaustion. The symptoms, though varied, seem clear: anxiety, boredom, a vague unfocused introspection, languor, or depression. Some travelers made the best of it and stressed the hypnotic, or peaceful, sense engendered by the breadth of the landscape and its seeming stillness.² Others found the solitude and quiet awe-inspiring and sensed vast natural forces at work. But such high-spiritedness, felt more often by American poets or travelers who saw practical opportunities in the land, was foreign to most and seems so forced as to appear as a rationalization to defend against the harpies of boredom. Whether one wants to call this cognitive response a kind of “horror vacui” or a low-level agoraphobia, it is an emotional response that, in reappearing time

1 Christopher Mulvery, *Anglo-American Landscapes: A Study of Nineteenth Century Anglo-American Travel Literature* (Cambridge, 1983), 211–43.

2 *Ibid.*, 216.

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and time again in the region's literature, history, and public discourse, and still continually referred to today, seems certainly to exist.³

The pervasiveness of this attitude is reflected in the responses of both residents and outsiders toward the land and region. The rapidity in which early settlers picked up stakes and moved on again may indicate a half-conscious response to an ever-beckoning flat horizon promising a more hospitable environment beyond. A kind of wanderlust – a continual interest in what is going on outside the region, a sense of being beyond or outside the mainstream or the center – has pervaded regional culture and life. In many cases, this perspective has led to social and cultural openness. In others it has fostered a bitter, defensive, and resentful provincialism. So too, the abundance of rather unscenic landscape may have encouraged residents to view the land practically, as a resource to exploit for economic ends, and not as an environment to live in and appreciate. Nature in the Midwest is not a picturesque garden: The climate is variable and often harsh, and the flora and fauna not very distinctive. As a result, the environment is viewed as a vast unity of undifferentiated space to be used and developed by similar kinds of people using the most efficient methods.⁴

From their first encounter with the prairies, travelers, settlers, government surveyors, speculators, town planners, and railroad men were apparently unable or unwilling to discern the natural contours of the land. Consequently, they created a geometric landscape of base lines, meridians, sections and townships, county grids, and town plats with numbered streets and alphabetically ordered names; railroad lines and roads that followed these markings; and rivers calibrated by distances above and below certain places, studded with numbered islands, or docks and levees, interspersed in a sequentially understood linear arrangement. The vastness of the area to be covered necessitated repetition simply to encompass it within the coordinates of an ordered system.⁵

To some extent, the ability to organize space so efficiently was a consequence of the environment and topography. The inclination may have existed elsewhere but the terrain was not suited to such arrangements. Yet, in

3 Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture* (New Haven, 1980) 34–44; *An Open Land: Photographs of the Midwest, 1852–1982*, ed. Victoria Post Ranney, cur. Rhonda McKinney (New York, 1983).

4 Mulvey, *Anglo-American Landscapes*, 215–31.

5 Scholars have viewed the effects of the flat terrain in different ways. See Michael P. Conzen, "American Urban System in the Nineteenth Century," in *Geography and the Urban Environment: Progress in Research and Applications*, 6 vols., ed. D. T. Herbert and R. J. Johnston (Chichester, 1978–84), 4: 333; John Jakle, *Images of the Ohio Valley: A Historical Geography of Travel* (New York, 1977), 9; and John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven, 1984), 32. Also see Robert Geddes, "The Forest's Edge," in *Architectural Design Profile* (London, 1982), 11; John Mack Faragher, *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie* (New Haven, 1986), 42; and Cullom Davis, "Illinois: Crossroads and Cross Section," in *Heartland* ed. James H. Madison (Bloomington, Ind., 1988), 127–57.

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imposing repetitious arrangements onto a relatively undifferentiated topography, early settlers and planners encouraged – even steered events into – repetitious social, economic, and political patterns across the region. In time, scholars of the region, conditioned by this repetition of social, economic, and political life across the area, emphasized what was similar in each town's, city's, or state's history and reinforced the perception that the culture and society, like the land, were uniform. Not surprisingly, local history, which seeks to understand what is unique about any one place's history, as well as what is universal in it, would find such a consensual agenda rather barren ground on which to develop. This same consensual agenda has continued to work against the development of any strong sense of regional self-consciousness in the Midwest by focusing on those aspects of midwestern life that were derived and remained continuous to life in the East. The Midwest, from such a perspective, is seen as a re-creation of the social, institutional, economic, and political life of the East in the West and, therefore, as a redundancy rather than some kind of new reality.

To combat this tendency, historians seem to have two options. First, they can narrow the range of their categories of topographical analysis and, in doing so, demonstrate that neither the landscape, the climate, nor the flora and fauna in the Midwest are as uniform as generally perceived. If one narrows the range of one's categories of analysis and sharpens one's eye for detail, variation becomes apparent. The vast prairies are actually a patchwork of different topographical and geological zones. The climate varies significantly from north to south and east to west. The openness of the region's boundaries to other regions and cultures has enabled people from all over the country and the world to enter it, creating dramatic urban and rural social, cultural, and political diversity. By emphasizing diversity, analysis shifts toward trying to explain variation and, by counteracting the consensual agenda, encourages the development of a true local history. The consensus tradition remains so strong, however, that such a tactic amid perceived uniformity still seems to involve splitting hairs and consequently to be parochial, redundant, even antiquarian. To break through the impressions of sameness and to discern variation and diversity across the region, one must do more; the historian must imagine, if possible, a new region defined by new or different criteria.

A fruitful approach would be to change the criteria by which one defines a region from topographical or ethnic features to patterns of human activity organized systemically across space. Economies, urban systems, transport networks, patterns of settlement, and social networks can provide a frame of reference for a regional study as readily as topographical features or climate. Of these systems, urbanization casts the widest net in drawing various phenomena into an explanatory framework. Urbanization could be defined as the concentration of population around some kind of economic, military, religious, or political

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establishment. In modern times, the motive force behind this concentration has been primarily economic. In the Midwest, most towns began with the decision of some farmer or peddler to specialize as a middleman or merchant among the people in the neighborhood. By drawing people to some central location, the merchant thus triggered the development of a market for goods and services and encouraged others to specialize in craft production and the provision of services. Specialization brought competition, which triggered more specialization and, by creating internal efficiencies, stimulated economic development. In time, clustering intensified to the point at which larger, successful firms, seeking to gain control of regional as well as local markets, increased production to a point at which economies of scale were achieved. When these economies were exhausted, they sought external economies to stay ahead of the competition; they would hire out work, or contract certain aspects of the production process to specialized producers, or even sell wastes or by-products to other specialized producers who would use the raw materials to produce another finished product.

Either way, small firms became large and clustering intensified, generating even greater external economies. The transport system, and flow of raw materials, capital, and labor that supported these large firms, reinforced the agglomeration advantages of the city over the town or country, drawing entire regions within their sphere. As a result, village and city, town and metropolis became interconnected, as did merchants, farmers, manufacturers, and laborers. In time, the space controlled by the network of roads, rivers, and information flows among towns and cities defined the structure of an urban region. Like beads on a string, cities are the points of interaction and contact, and they provide the sparks of growth and development that define the region.⁶

This breadth, of course, has been the basis of its appeal as a subject of study by urban historians for the last two generations. Traditionally, urban historians have employed three methods to try to understand the multilevel dynamics of the urbanization process. Most prevalent has been the case study or urban biography of a town or city. As a sample, the case study works best, if one assumes the universality of the process and limits generalizations to other places with similar functions in similar circumstances. Those urban historians uneasy with the single-case approach broadened their sample to include several cases among towns or cities with the same or different functions, with the intention of increasing the varieties of urban phenomena examined or compared and deepening their understanding of the process in general.⁷

6 Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Phillip II*, trans. Sian Reynolds (New York, 1972), 23.

7 Among the more recent comparative urban histories, see Gary Nash, *The Urban Crucible* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979; abridged ed., 1986); and William H. Pease and Jane H. Pease, *The Web of Progress: Private Values and Public Styles in Boston and Charleston, 1828-1845* (New York, 1985).

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More recently, some historians and historical geographers have argued that the diversity of urbanization is best appreciated and able to be explained by examining urban systems as a whole and, in particular, trying to understand the interaction among towns and cities within the system.⁸

From such a regional systemic perspective, it becomes clear that in spite of similarities among towns throughout a system, change at any town or city results from an interaction of local processes with regional forces of economic change. Ironically, by emphasizing the diversity of experiences and interaction among towns and cities across a complex urban economic system, the regional perspective provides new impetus for local history. By focusing on how local reality interacted with regional forces, it demonstrates more clearly that any local economy or society evolves not by the repetition of some universal process of development, but rather by the intersection of a local echo of that process with regional but external forces that over time shape, alter, and divert the course of local change. Gradually, the local economy and society becomes a kind of composite, built up by different episodes of activity, usually related to some interaction with the regional system outside, specific to itself, and providing a unique local context that can help explain the divergence of local events or phenomena from those in other towns.

Moreover, by examining regional dynamics, local events can be placed in a larger context and their true social or economic character known. For example, as regional forces concentrated at the entrepôts, more hinterland towns responded to entrepôt – but for them, outside – directives. Hence, not only did local life become more discontinuous, uneven, and distinctive from other towns once like it, but it also became more vulnerable to and dependent on outside decisions. It became more insecure, unable to control its own development – a subtle change that altered how almost any local event would be interpreted or understood. To find a relevant locale, which does more than repeat other case studies, requires therefore that one place local history in a regional context.⁹ The study of a regional process of urbanization thus provides a seamless web of explanation, among different processes, levels of

8 Allan Pred, *Urban Growth and City Systems in the United States, 1840–1860* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980); James Vance, *The Merchant's World* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1970); Michael P. Conzen, "Capital Flows and the Developing Urban Hierarchy: State Banking in Wisconsin, 1854–1895," *Economic Geography* 51 (October 1975): 321–8; Edward K. Muller, "Selective Urban Growth in the Mid-Ohio Valley, 1800–1860," *Geographic Review* 66 (1976): 178–99; Allan Pred, *Urban Growth and the Circulation of Information* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973); Michael P. Conzen, "The Making of Urban Systems in the United States, 1840–1910," *Annals, Association of American Geographers* 67 (1977): 88–108; John C. Hudson, "The Plains Country Town," in *The Great Plains: Environment and Culture*, ed. B. W. Blouet and Frederick Luebke (Lincoln, Neb., 1979), 99–118. On regionalism, see David Goldfield, "The New Regionalism," *Journal of Urban History* 10, no. 2 (February 1984): 171–86.

9 Timothy R. Mahoney, "Urban History in a Regional Context: River Towns on the Upper Mississippi, 1840–60," *Journal of American History* 72, no. 3 (September 1985): 318–39.

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reality, and units of organization, upon which a broader “total history” may be based. This analysis of the urban economic system that spread across the upper Midwest in the middle of the nineteenth century and then was transformed by the dramatic rearrangement of economic activity across the area has, in view of these remarks, three primary goals: to demonstrate the validity of defining a region by systemic, functional, or structural criteria; to establish a broad explanatory context to understand the development and evolution of a provincial regional society and culture; and to bridge the gap between generalized regional studies and what has been called a “true” local history.

To have any chance of differentiating a region defined topographically from one defined systemically, however, one must still know something about the contours of the physical environment. As William Cronon recently demonstrated with regard to seventeenth-century New England, human activities continually interact with the environment.¹⁰ As part of an ecosystem, with its own natural forces of change and process, man adjusts, responds, uses, controls, and is, in turn, shaped, limited, and forced into new strategies, either by the changes he has already wrought in the environment or by environmental changes that have taken place independent of human interaction. The relative power of either side to act or be acted upon depends on the character of the environmental features and human technology, willpower, and knowledge. It is imperative, as James Malin long ago suggested, and Robert Swierengra reminds us, that we emphasize this two-way interaction in order to avoid the simplistic notion that a confrontation between the two forces resulted in one or the other becoming dominant.¹¹ Walter Prescott Webb, in describing the harsh environment of the Great Plains and its impact on Easterners, drifted close to environmental determinism.¹² One must be careful, in a systemic approach, of not erring in the opposite direction, however, and discounting the role of the land, rivers, and climate in shaping regional life, as perhaps some studies of the progress of modern agriculture, water control, and technology have done.¹³ Whether one emphasizes the environment as it is changed by human intervention or the human response to the environment, each must be viewed as one side of an ongoing process with no end point of equilibrium beyond which historical change ceases to occur.

In this study of a regional economic and urban system, the focus will be primarily on the human response. But because those studied are

10 William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York, 1983), 1–15.

11 James C. Malin, *History and Ecology: Studies of the Grassland*, ed. Robert Swierengra (Lincoln, Neb., 1984), XV–XXIII. 1–17.

12 *Ibid.*, 84–9; Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Boston, 1952).

13 Allan Bogue, *From Prairie to Corn Belt* (Chicago, 1962).

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predominantly agricultural workers, expanding into a new region with insufficient data, technology, and economic and social support, their interaction with the new environment was especially intense.¹⁴ The study of the exact character of that environment I will leave to the environmental historians.¹⁵ I will refer only to those larger-scale hydrologic, climatic, topographical, and geological features to which Easterners had to accustom themselves and that had, therefore, a significant impact in shaping the human geographical pattern of economic and social activity.

To differentiate between a purer analysis of the physical environment and the geographical study of human interactions within the context of that environment's geographic arrangement, either in settling, occupying, traversing, or initiating economic activity across it, it will perhaps be useful to preface our analysis of regional life in the nineteenth century with a topographical description surveying the character of the environmental processes that distinguish midwestern topography from that in the East.

A "topographical description"

Geologists tell us, and every midwestern schoolchild knows, that the character of the land beyond the Appalachian Mountains was formed by the advance and retreat of a succession of glaciers between fifty thousand and ten thousand years ago. Acting not unlike century-long winters, these great sheets or rivers of ice eroded, rearranged, and redeposited vast amounts of soil and rock, leaving in their wake a relatively smooth deep layer of new land atop older geological formations, as well as a dramatically altered drainage system of lakes and rivers. Therefore, when crossing the Appalachians, immigrants, much like their ancestors or predecessors in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who emigrated from Europe to the Atlantic coast of America, were literally entering a new or immature environment that the forces of wind, water, and ice had hardly had a moment, in geological time, to shape.

Geologists have understood for some time how a glacier advances and retreats across land surface, creating topographical diversity within the general uniformity across its path. When the leading edge of a glacier stops, for instance, it will generally begin to deposit the debris and soil trapped within it onto the backside of a ridge of plowed land, risen in its advance, and form a *terminal* moraine. If a glacier is especially thick and heavy - and some glaciers reached a mile or two in depth - then it will dig deeper into the surface, shoveling larger pieces of earth in front of it. When such a glacier slows down

14 Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 1-15; Malin, *Studies of Grassland*, 1-11.

15 Michael O'Brian, ed., *Grassland, Forest, and Historical Settlement: An Analysis of Dynamics in Northeast Missouri* (Lincoln, Neb., 1984).

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and stops, the piles of stones and debris in front of it form hills, knobs, hummocks, the result being somewhat irregular *push* or *sump* moraines.¹⁶ But most of the geological impact of the glacier occurs as it melts and retreats across the land it has covered and scraped clean under its weight. As it recedes, sheets of water flow down its front onto the land, depositing debris and soil in low swells or meadows, often called outwash plains or *kame* moraines. The heaviest debris within the glacier drops more vertically downward, building up behind the terminal moraine, enhancing its size and extent even further. As the glacier further recedes, often unevenly – slowing down, speeding up, then perhaps stopping – it leaves in its tracks, other, less prominent moraines, roughly parallel to the terminal moraine, until the point at which most of the debris dug up from its heaviest and furthest extent has been redeposited; then lightened of its load, it retreats with a cleaner scrape to the north.¹⁷

Any significant glacier, therefore, in the course of its advance, will level the land, fill in valleys, scrape off hilltops, and smooth uneven surfaces and then, in the wake of its retreat, will leave a series of ridges, decreasing in size, extent, and depth from its furthest advance. The extent of these morainic systems depended on the size of the glacier. Vast and deep glaciers could lay down moraines extending across half the continent, whereas lesser glaciers, digging less deeply into the land, would leave smaller, narrower, shallower moraines along the paths of least resistance in the river valleys and low-lying areas of a region. By such movements, unified glaciers could split into “lobes,” each of which advanced across a narrower range of territory, sometimes intersecting and creating dense, chaotic, irregular networks of smaller moraines.¹⁸

The real complexity of the apparently unified midwestern topography derived from the fact that at least six different glaciers of varying size and extent surged south out of Canada and then retreated, each leaving behind them a new layer of soil, new systems of moraines, and new drainage flows on top of those left by previous glaciers. The result was the superimposition of the topographical effects of each glacier on one another, resulting in a more varied, complex topography than at first meets the eye. Of primary significance to the contemporary landscape are the last two glaciers, the Illinoian and the Wisconsin, which in their gradual advance and halting, uneven retreat across the region laid down the famous “Prairie Peninsula” (Figure 1.1).

Although theoretically presented on many maps as a great triangle of rich land extending out from the High Plains east across central Illinois, Indiana, and into Ohio, the Prairie Peninsula was, in fact, formed by the deposit of varying layers of soil from south to north by different glaciers as they advanced

16 Nevin M. Fenneman, *Physiography of Eastern United States* (New York and London, 1938), 477.

17 *Ibid.*, 455, 473–9.

18 *Ibid.*, 481–6.

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Figure 1.1. The Prairie Peninsula and the upper Mississippi River valley.

and retreated along a front from the western slope of the Missouri River valley to the headwaters of the Ohio River.¹⁹ After two earlier glaciers had already extended south to the line of the Missouri and Ohio river valleys and, in their drain-off, created the ancestors of both modern rivers, the Illinoian glacier moved south and covered a narrower area whose western border approximated the later Mississippi River valley and whose southern extent shadowed the

19 Ibid., 454; John H. Garland, ed., *The North American Midwest: A Regional Geography* (New York, 1955), 93–6.