

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-07963-2 - Regional Cultures and Mortality in America
Stephen J. Kunitz
Excerpt
[More information](#)

Introduction

England, together with the rest of the world, is changing. And like everything else it can change only in certain directions, which up to a point can be foreseen. That is not to say that the future is fixed, merely that certain alternatives are possible and others not. A seed may grow or not grow, but at any rate a turnip seed never grows into a parsnip.

George Orwell
The Lion and the Unicorn¹

The question I seek to answer in this book is how, and to what extent, the political institutions and cultures of the 48 contiguous US states influence the mortality patterns of their various publics. There are of course great similarities with regard to the places where many of us shop, eat, and seek entertainment and news, and great cohesiveness when the country is under attack. And there are often similarities in manners and styles of life among people of the same social class or occupation, wherever they are. These homogenizing forces of patriotism, lifestyle, and consumption habits are, however, offset by great heterogeneity among sections of the country that have been obvious since before the founding of the republic and which continue to be evident today, nowhere more so than in the way regional political cultures have shaped the conflicts that have virtually paralyzed our federal government.

In 1782 Hector St. John de Crevecoeur famously asked and then answered the question, “What then is the American, this new man?”

¹ G. Orwell, “The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius” [1940]. In G. Orwell, *Why I Write*. New York: Penguin Books, 1984, p. 13.

He is either an European, or the descendant of an European, hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country. . . . *He* is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new modes of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. He becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our great *Alma Mater*.²

But he recognized, too, that there were emergent regional distinctions, for a few pages later he observed:

Exclusive of those general characteristics, each province has its own, founded on the government, climate, mode of husbandry, customs, and peculiarity of circumstances. Europeans submit insensibly to these great powers, and become in the course of a few generations, not only Americans in general, but either Pennsylvanians, Virginians, or provincials under some other name.³

He recognized as well that European attributes did not readily disappear: “[O]ut of twelve families of emigrants of each country, generally seven Scotch will succeed, nine German, and four Irish.” The Scotch, he said, were frugal but their wives didn’t work as hard as German wives. The Irish, on the other hand, drank a great deal, were quarrelsome and litigious, and were ignorant of husbandry.⁴ There were thus both regional and national differences among the population, all of which were subsumed under more general American characteristics.

Noah Webster took a far less benign view. Passing through Newburgh, New York, in 1782, the same year that Crèvecoeur published his letters, he stayed in an encampment where Revolutionary War soldiers were awaiting discharge. There, “instead of the joyous celebrations he expected . . . he heard a dizzying cacophony of languages and accents – Dutch, French, German, Swedish, Gaelic, and varieties of English that the Connecticut Calvinist from Yale had never heard before.”⁵ It was a veritable Tower of Babel, and he left with a sense of foreboding for the future of the nation, as well as a resolve to make American English more standardized for, he believed, only literacy and speech in a uniform language could unify the country.

² H. St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc. 1962 [1782], p. 43, emphases in original.

³ Crèvecoeur, *Letters*, *ibid.*, pp. 48–49.

⁴ Crèvecoeur, *Letters*, *ibid.*, p. 62.

⁵ H. G. Unger, *Noah Webster: The Life and Times of an American Patriot*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1998, p. 44.

A little more than one hundred years later, sounding much like Crevecoeur, Frederic Jackson Turner wrote of the importance of the frontier in American history:⁶

In the settlement of America we have to observe how European life entered the continent, and how America modified and developed that life and reacted on Europe. Our early history is the study of European germs developing in an American environment. Too exclusive attention has been paid by institutional students to the German origins, too little to the American factors. The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization. The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought . . . The fact is that here is a new product that is American.⁷

In this first famous essay, Turner had argued that “The economic and social characteristics of the frontier worked against sectionalism,”⁸ a position he was to modify though never repudiate in later essays.⁹ The modifications consisted in an increasing emphasis upon the importance of sectionalism (or regionalism) in American history and contemporary politics.¹⁰ True, Europeans did become Americans, but the cultures they brought with them, interacting with the physiographic conditions they found in the places to which they moved, created sectional differences that were akin to, but much weaker than, the differences among European nations. In a 1907 essay he wrote:

Geographical conditions and the stocks from which the people sprang are the most fundamental factors in shaping sectionalism. Of these the geographical influence is peculiarly important in forming a society like that of the United States, for it includes in its influence those factors of economic interests, as well as environmental conditions, that affect the psychology of a people.¹¹

⁶ F.J. Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1956 [1893]; H. N. Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*. New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1950, p. 292.

⁷ Turner, *Significance of the Frontier*, p. 4.

⁸ Turner, *Significance of the Frontier*, p. 27.

⁹ G. W. Pierson, “The frontier and American institutions: a criticism of the Turner theory.” In R. Hofstadter and S. M. Lipset, eds. *Turner and the Sociology of the Frontier*. New York: Basic Books, 1968 [1942], pp. 15–42.

¹⁰ F. J. Turner, *The Significance of Sections in American History*. Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1959 [1932]. See also the volume by Turner’s student, R. A. Billington, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier*. Third edition. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967, pp. 11 and chapters 16–19.

¹¹ F. J. Turner, “Is sectionalism dying away?” In Turner, *The Significance of Sections in American History*, pp. 287–314, p. 288f.

Two examples from more recent research will suffice. Carville Earle has proposed that between 1815 and 1860 expansion into the area stretching from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico and from the Appalachians to the 100th meridian led to a great increase in productivity that was attributable to the evolution of three specialized agricultural regions that were shaped by different climatic conditions as well as by railroad construction: the Cotton Belt in the South, the Corn Belt across the middle of the region, and the Wheat Belt in the North. “These staple crops, with their distinctive requirements for production and marketing, shaped the geographies of labor, rural settlement, urbanization, and commodity marketing in their respective regions.”¹²

Cotton required work over many more months than the other two crops and was well suited to coerced labor on plantations, for under these conditions slaves cost less than free labor. At the other extreme, wheat required fewer days of labor, which was concentrated in the summer over 10 days to 2 weeks instead of the 120 days spread over 8 months for cotton. Under these conditions, free laborers were more economical than slaves, for their work was needed for only a relatively short period. Corn was intermediate, requiring three to four months of labor and without the urgency of harvesting of wheat and cotton. Under these conditions, the cost of free labor was almost the same as the cost of slave labor. The different agricultural regimes obviously had political implications: in cotton-farming areas, slavery was favored; in wheat-growing areas free labor was favored; and in some – mostly southern – corn-farming areas slavery was supported, while in others free labor was favored. I wish to emphasize, however, the impact upon the establishment of towns and cities.

Because the labor supply was limited in the wheat-growing areas, the average farm had “50 to 70 acres in improved land and double or triple that amount in total acreage.”¹³ One consequence was that there was a large network of cities and market towns in the Wheat Belt: “For most rural workers the Wheat Belt represented a way station for migration, either westward to cheaper lands on the frontier or eastward to the region’s burgeoning towns and cities. The plight of the underemployed wheat laborer thus was a bonanza of cheap labor for the Wheat Belt’s urban entrepreneurs.”¹⁴ A similar pattern was observed in the Corn Belt, except

¹² C. Earle, “Beyond the Appalachians,” 1815–1860. In T. F. McIlwraith and E. K. Muller, eds. *North America: The Historical Geography of a Changing Continent*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001, pp. 165–188, p. 165.

¹³ Earle, “Beyond the Appalachians,” p. 181.

¹⁴ Earle, “Beyond the Appalachians,” p. 181.

south of the Ohio River where slaves were often used, but not in the Cotton Belt, where the landscape of towns, cities, and family farms of moderate size gave way to one “of plantations and small county towns.”¹⁵ According to this interpretation, the fewer towns in the South were due in large part to the absence of a surplus of free laborers. Thus, it was fundamentally the environmental conditions favoring particular crops in different areas that made one pattern of labor more economic than another, and that shaped the way settlement occurred.

A second, related, example regarding the establishment of towns has been described by Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick:

Watching the organization of the Old Northwest [Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois in the first half of the nineteenth century], county by county, we are struck by something which is not duplicated on our southern frontier [Mississippi and Alabama]: the appearance of teeming numbers of *small towns*. By this we mean, not the post-office hamlet with its fifty souls, but rather the market center which had two hundred or more people and was struggling to become bigger. It was a development quite automatic and logical in the Northwest. Cheap land and dear labor set fatal limits on wide-scale land engrossment . . . so that, for agriculture, subsistence and market farming, rather than extensive raising of staples, would largely be the rule in the thirties and forties [1830s and 1840s]. It was toward the town that an increasingly market-conscious population was orienting itself, not toward the plantation, nor to the cosmopolitan port city, nor yet to the crossroads courthouse.¹⁶

With respect to the Old Northwest, they argue that (1) because farms were of about the same size, the population tended to be economically relatively homogeneous and (2) the proliferation of small towns had a profound impact upon civic and associational life. Each small town had many positions to be filled, often by men who had not held such positions before, and for which there were many candidates. Indeed, there were five to six times as many towns per capita in the Old Northwest as there were in Alabama or Mississippi, and each town was a “promotion.”¹⁷

That is to say, men bought up choice lands on which to establish a town, to which population, capital, and businesses must be attracted. To make the town attractive to newcomers,

it must be a suitable place to live in; it must have stable government; lapses of law and order would be a reflection upon its peace. Schools and seminaries must be

¹⁵ Earle, “Beyond the Appalachians,” p. 182.

¹⁶ S. Elkins and E. McKittrick, “A meaning for Turner’s frontier: democracy in the Old Northwest.” In R. Hofstadter and S. M. Lipset, eds. *Turner and the Sociology of the Frontier*. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1968, pp. 120–151, p. 135.

¹⁷ Elkins and McKittrick, “A meaning for Turner’s frontier,” p. 136.

established. . . . Roads, bridges, canals, and banks were crucial for the nourishment of the town's enterprise. Civic services, churches, facilities of every sort, were urgently demanded. And the keynote, the watchword, the trumpet call, must be Opportunity.¹⁸

Unlike the Southwest, where land for the courthouse was purchased by the county commissioners, in the Northwest land was often donated by promoters in a bid to make their town the county seat. Thus, town-building was competitive and required the participation of its citizens in many different capacities in order to succeed. As a result, "Here was a society in which the setting up of institutions was a common experience."¹⁹ As we shall see in Chapter 1, regional differences in associational life persist into the present.

These two examples describe the impact that the environment and existing technology had on the kinds of agriculture practiced in different places and some of the consequences that resulted. They do not invoke the culture the settlers brought with them that may also have had an impact. Many writers have, however, invoked the attributes of settlers to explain regional differences. Among the regional characteristics that have been attributed to the cultures that various immigrant groups have brought to the United States are linguistic usages, house and church architectural styles, town-building and methods of laying out farms and settling the landscape, religious beliefs and practices, the value placed on learning and literacy, patterns of violence, and food preferences.²⁰

These and other characteristics are often treated in isolation, but several authors over the past 40 years have described different cultural regions that are defined by a congeries of characteristics. Wilbur Zelinsky, for instance, has defined five regions and multiple sub-regions.²¹ Raymond Gastil has identified 13.²² Joel Garreau has described 9,²³ Colin Woodard 11,²⁴

¹⁸ Elkins and McKittrick, "A meaning for Turner's frontier," p. 137.

¹⁹ Elkins and McKittrick, "A meaning for Turner's frontier," p. 138.

²⁰ D. H. Fischer and J. C. Kelly, *Bound Away: Virginia and the Westward Movement*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000, chapter 6.

²¹ W. Zelinsky, *The Cultural Geography of the United States*. Revised edition. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1992, p. 118.

²² R. Gastil, *Cultural Regions of the United States*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975, pp. 28f.

²³ J. Garreau, *The Nine Nations of North America*. New York: Avon Books, 1981.

²⁴ C. Woodard, *American Nations: A History of the Eleven Rival Regional Cultures of North America*. New York: Viking, 2011.

and David Hackett Fischer 7.²⁵ Some writers divide the South into the Tidewater, Appalachia, and the Deep South. Others consider the Spanish Southwest a distinct region. Still others divide the West into the Coast and inland regions. Though observers don't agree on all of the regional groupings, they do all agree with observers since the eighteenth century that there were and continue to be meaningful distinctions among New England, the Middle Atlantic settlements, and the South and their westward extensions. Here I wish to briefly describe some of the characteristics of these three regions that are most salient for my purposes in the following chapters, reserving a discussion of the Far Southwest for later.

New England was settled in the seventeenth century by Calvinists who came primarily from the southeast of England. They valued the good of the community over that of individual. They lived in towns that were governed by town meetings and where surveillance of community members was possible. Literacy was highly valued and schools were supported by towns. Calvinists believed that human beings were depraved, and that only the elect were admitted to the covenant with God.²⁶ These ideas changed during the Awakenings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when acceptance of Jesus as one's savior meant that anyone, not just the elect, could be saved.²⁷ But, along with individual salvation and personal reform (abstinence from alcohol, for instance), the Great Awakening in the first half of the nineteenth century in New England and its western extensions also meant social reform: communitarian religious experiments, teetotalism, abolition, and women's rights. The heartland of this movement was the so-called Burnt Over District of Western New York, but it extended westward to Ohio as well.²⁸

²⁵ D. H. Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989, pp. 887f.

²⁶ Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, pp. 23f.

²⁷ R. L. Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and the Social Order in Connecticut, 1690-1765*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967.

²⁸ W. R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1950; P. E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millenium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837*. New York: Hill & Wang, 1978; N. A. Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1822-1872*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984; L. K. Prichard, The Burned-over District reconsidered: A portent of evolving religious pluralism in the United States. *Social Science History* 8: 243-265, 1984; J. Wellman, Crossing over Cross: Whitney Cross's Burned-Over District as social history. *Reviews in American History* 17: 159-174, 1989.

New Englanders spread through western New York, northern Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and as far west as the Dakotas²⁹ and beyond to the Northwest Coast. Indeed, one of the religious sects that originated in the Burnt Over District – Mormonism – came to control an area of the Intermountain West that some geographers consider a separate regional culture.³⁰

A Congregational clergyman in the nineteenth century described the difference between Yankees in northern Ohio and Kentuckians further south:

They [Yankees] naturally unite themselves into corporate unions, and concentrate [*sic*] their strength for public works and purposes. They have the same desire for keeping up schools, for cultivating psalmody, for settling ministers, and attending upon religious worship; and unfortunately the same disposition to dogmatize, to settle, not only their own faith, but that of their neighbour, and to stand resolutely, and dispute fiercely, for the slightest shade of difference of religious opinion. In short, in the tone of conversation, the ways of thinking and expressing thought upon all subjects, in the strong exercise of social inclination, expressing itself in habits of neighbourhood, to form villages, and to live in them, in preference to that sequestered and isolated condition, which a Kentuckian, under the name of “range,” considers as one of the desirable circumstances of existence; in the thousand slight shades of manner, and union of which so strongly marks one people from another, and the details of which are too minute to be described, by most of these things, this [Ohio] is properly designated “the Yankee state.”³¹

The Kentuckians mentioned by Reverend Flint were among the wave of eighteenth century immigrants from the border country of northern England, lowland Scotland, and Ireland. They were warlike, clan-based people who had lived for 700 years (1040–1745) in a land of endemic violence fought over by the Scottish and English kings. During that period, “[E]very English monarch but three suffered a Scottish invasion, or became an invader in his turn.”³² Most of these border-folk entered North America through Philadelphia and then moved south and west in the southern highlands in a great swath from southern Pennsylvania to Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Missouri and parts of Oklahoma and Texas. Much of the land in Appalachia had been engrossed by wealthy

²⁹ Woodard, *American Nations*, p. 268.

³⁰ D. W. Meinig, *The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History*. Vol. 2, *Continental America, 1800–1867*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993, p. 231.

³¹ Quoted in G. McWhiney, *Cracker Culture: Celtic Ways in the Old South*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1988, pp. 268f.

³² Fishcher, *Albion's Seed*, p. 623.

landowners from elsewhere in the South, so many of the immigrants became squatters who moved readily from place to place. The very uneven distribution of land ownership meant that wealth inequality was extremely high.³³

They have been called crackers, hoosiers and red necks. Theirs was an oral culture that did not especially value literacy;³⁴ they placed great value on individual rights, on “elbow room” as Daniel Boone said,³⁵ and on freedom from intrusion by governments. Interpersonal violence was common. Settlements tended to be scattered, as Reverend Flint had observed, and political institutions were poorly developed. Though slave holding was not widespread in the highlands and many Whites had sided with the Union during the Civil War, their hatred of Yankee missionaries and government intervention forced them into an alliance with the plantation owners of the Deep South in the post-Civil War era that has persisted until now.

The Tidewater and Deep South were settled differently – the former by younger sons of Cavaliers as well as by indentured servants they imported, the latter by British colonists from Barbados, said to have been the most brutal slave regime in the Western Hemisphere. The cultural hearth of the Deep South was the Carolinas, that of the Tidewater was Virginia. Both were based upon coerced labor of African slaves working on plantations. In Carolina, a lucrative slave trade in local American Indians developed as well. Carolina had many more slaves as a proportion of the population than Virginia, apartheid was much more rigid and the laws enforcing it more draconian, and slave mortality was higher. It was the Carolina system, derived from the one in Barbados, that spread west all the way to southeastern Texas. Before the Civil War there were even aspirations to annex Cuba and Central American to expand the very profitable cotton plantation system.³⁶

It was a caste system dominated by an oligarchy of rich planters and sustained by an ideology of racial superiority. The wealthy sent their children to be educated privately or abroad so public education was neglected. And wealth inequality was very high.³⁷ Political institutions encouraging civic participation were few. Contrasting New England with the South, Tocqueville wrote in 1832:

³³ Fishcher, *Albion's Seed*, pp. 748–753.

³⁴ Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, p. 721; McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, chapter 8.

³⁵ Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, p. 782.

³⁶ Woodard, *American Nations*, chapters 7 and 18.

³⁷ Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, pp. 375–376.

Townships and a local activity exist in every state; but in no part of the confederation is a township to be met with precisely similar to those of New England. The more we descend towards the South, the less active does the business of the township or parish become; the number of magistrates, of functions, and of rights decreases; the population exercises a less immediate influence on affairs; town-meetings are less frequent, and the subjects of debate less numerous. The power of the elected magistrate is augmented, and that of the elector diminished, whilst the public spirit of the local community is less awakened and less influential.³⁸

The Middle Atlantic colonies – primarily Pennsylvania and Delaware but also including New Jersey – were thought by early observers to be intermediate between New England and the South, both geographically and socially. Settled initially by English Quakers who were soon joined by other groups, particularly German Pietists recruited by William Penn, the culture that evolved in the colony and its extensions in the Midwest was one in which different ethnic and national groups co-existed peaceably, wishing only to be left alone by each other and by the government.³⁹ Indeed, social order as defined by the Quakers did not require that everyone believe the same thing or belong to the same church. It meant instead mutual forbearance. People were forbidden to intrude upon the peace of others.⁴⁰

Social life was not as intense as in New England towns, encouraged by the settlement patterns that developed. Land holding was egalitarian, with settlements comprised of clusters of small farms scattered across the countryside.⁴¹

Literacy, too, was not valued as highly as in New England, but it was greater and more equally distributed than in the South.⁴² Quaker belief in the Inner Light of every individual “weakened the formal institutions of literacy”⁴³ and meant that immersion in books was seen as a diversion from the serious business of life.

These and other differences led E. Digby Baltzell to remark that “Massachusetts was an experiment in political democracy set within a hierarchical social structure, essentially a clerical theocracy; Pennsylvania very soon became a tolerant, secular, plutocratic society plagued by

³⁸ A. de Tocqueville: *Democracy in America*. Vol. 1. New York: Schocken Books, 1961, pp. 77–78.

³⁹ Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, p. 582.

⁴⁰ Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, p. 585.

⁴¹ Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, pp. 578–581.

⁴² Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, pp. 530–538.

⁴³ Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, p. 533.