

Back Matters

WHS and the Spirit of Frederick Jackson Turner

Nestled humbly within one of the imposing library-bound volumes of the *Proceedings* of the Wisconsin Historical Society can be found the very first printing of what is generally acknowledged to be the most powerful and controversial explanation of American development ever written. I'm referring to Frederick Jackson Turner's essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," first delivered in July 1893 at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago and reprised six months later in Madison for the forty-first annual meeting of the Society. Its unassuming appearances in 1894 in both the *Proceedings* and a separately published Society pamphlet constitute the earliest printings of what Turner's biographer Allan G. Bogue has called "the most celebrated scholarly paper ever presented by an American historian or social scientist." Historian Albert L. Hurtado has written that "no other American historian has haunted the professional imagination like Frederick Jackson Turner." If that is so, the Wisconsin Historical Society's part in engendering that spirit and keeping it alive cannot be overestimated.

The quotation from Bogue about the celebrity of Turner's essay, for example, doesn't come from his biography but appears instead in *A Wisconsin Fifteen: Fifteen Notable Titles from the Library Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin* (1998), the latest of numerous books, articles, and reviews that have come from the Society and have dealt in some way with Turner and his work. While Turner's extraordinary influence on the writing of American history would have been hard to predict at the time the Society published its earliest versions of what came to be known as his "frontier thesis," there is no doubt that these publications did their part to bring the essay to the attention of many.

Another Wisconsin Historical Society Press offering, *Frederick Jackson Turner: Wisconsin's Historian of the Frontier*, contains Turner's frontier essay as well as writings by historians Martin Ridge and Ray Allen Billington and Society librarian James P. Danky. In his essay for the volume, Danky explains that the Society's first published versions of Turner's essay "served not only to document and publicize the work of the Society but were also a medium of exchange with other libraries and learned societies around the world." The Society



and the young University of Wisconsin professor were partners in disseminating the ideas that would shape the study of American history for the next century.

The Society is justifiably proud of its association with Frederick Jackson Turner, and Turner gave the Society a good deal of credit for his success. After he became famous for his work in western history, Turner received numerous offers to chair history departments in prestigious universities from Berkeley to Cambridge, and he became adept at the game

of using these offers to improve his position in Wisconsin. In an article that appeared in this magazine in 1988, E. David Cronon described an attempt by Woodrow Wilson and Princeton to recruit Turner in 1896; one of the primary reasons Turner provided Wilson for not leaving Madison was his attachment to the Society's library. "A century ago," writes Cronon, "he clearly put a higher value on something we all too often take for granted today—the rich research collections of the library and archives."

In this issue Allan Bogue continues the story of the ongoing efforts to lure Turner away from Madison and his beloved library, describing Turner's agonizing decision to leave in 1909 for a position at Harvard. The article revolves around a recently discovered letter from Turner, which was acquired by the Society archives in 1999 and was not available when Bogue was researching his biography. According to Bogue, as pressure mounted from the Board of Regents for Turner to give up some of the gains he had made by leveraging his numerous offers from other institutions, he finally realized that the time had come to move on. After justifying this move in this letter, he says: "I am not worrying much about successors. The library, in the long run, will win a strong man who will use the riches to advantage."

Since Turner's day the Society's collections have, indeed, attracted their share of talented scholars to Wisconsin, and they have also served those of us who might not be quite so talented as well, when we just want to learn more about our ancestors or the town in which we live. If, as Cronon said, the Society and its collections are often taken for granted, now is the time, more than ever, for us to be conscious of their value.

—J. Kent Calder