

Excerpts from Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” 1893

In a recent bulletin of the Superintendent of the Census for 1890 appear these significant words: “Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line. In the discussion of its extent, its westward movement, etc., it can not, therefore, any longer have a place in the census reports.” This brief official statement marks the closing of a great historic movement. Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.

The advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lines. . . .

. . . . Since the days when the fleet of Columbus sailed into the waters of the New World, America has been another name for opportunity, and the people of the United States have taken their tone, from...expansion. . . . The American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise. But never again will such gifts of free land offer themselves. . . .

Discussion questions:

1. According to Turner, what is significant about the frontier? What has it done for Americans as people?
2. What impact will the “closure” of the frontier have for Americans, according to Turner?
3. How do Turner’s views compare to what we know of Americans views about the environment, land and opportunity in the 19th century?