Cincinnati a Queen City?
Only on the Frontier
DAVID S. STRADLING

While perhaps not as famous as “Call me Ishmael,” a memorable line opens Richard C. Wade’s seminal work: “The towns were the spearheads of the frontier.” That simple declarative sentence threw into question everything historians thought they knew about how the frontier worked. Frederick Jackson Turner’s conception of the frontier, so central to how Americans thought of themselves and their nation’s history, was clearly flawed. Rarely does a single book so quickly and thoroughly change the way historians think. The book’s influence derived from two factors: Wade’s evidence, so powerful and abundant that his radical declaration seemed incontrovertible; and Wade’s straightforward writing, as evidenced by the appearance of his thesis in the very first sentence, which made everything he wrote seem matter-of-fact.

I first read this opening sentence—and all those that followed it—thirty years after Wade had written The Urban Frontier. I was as taken by the book as previous generations of historians had been. I found it so revelatory that I even remember where I was while reading it. The book introduced me to urban history, and it introduced me as well to one of the founding tenets of the field: cities have been integral to the development of this nation, even in its earliest decades and even on its frontiers.

Undoubtedly one of the reasons that Wade’s work so struck me was its attention to my hometown, Cincinnati. This was the first serious

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treatment of Cincinnati’s history by an outsider that I had read, and, given my pride in the Queen City, I felt rather pleased. Having grown up in a shrinking city whose politicians and boosters increasingly found it necessary to defend Cincinnati as a bona fide urban center, as a place that still mattered, I found it refreshing to come upon a book that set out to prove that Cincinnati counted as a city. To support his thesis regarding the centrality of cities on the frontier, Wade gathered every bit of evidence that might be mustered in support of the idea that even infant Cincinnati was urban. According to *The Urban Frontier*, by 1830 Cincinnatians had built a Queen City along the Ohio River, with a thriving economy and a rich, urbane culture.

But there is a problem, and not a small one. If Cincinnati was clearly a city forty years after its founding, it was not one when Matthias Denman and a group of other investors commenced their settlement, initially called Losantiville, in 1788. Denman founded what he hoped would become a city—laying out and naming streets, hammering stakes in the ground, sending new maps to the printers, placing advertisements back East—but declaring that a city exists does not make it so. Wade knew this, and he devoted the bulk of *The Urban Frontier* to attempting to convince readers that the five aspiring cities he studied, including Cincinnati, were in fact urban.

**WHAT CONSTITUTES A CITY?**

The kind of evidence that Wade gathered and the manner in which he categorized it tell us a great deal about how he, and many other historians of his era, thought about cities. Curiously, economics play a relatively insignificant role in the discussion. Chapter 2 describes the “economic base” of the city, focusing on river travel and trade, and on the development of Cincinnati as “the Great Emporium of the West.”1 Wade discusses early breweries and iron manufacturing, too, but he does almost nothing by way of measuring or explaining the city’s role in the development of the frontier. Agriculture is nearly as invisible in *The Urban Frontier* as cities were in Frederick Jackson Turner’s *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (1894). Wade tells us nothing about the importance of urban manufacturing as compared to

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rural manufacturing, perhaps because a map of Ohio’s turn-of-the-nineteenth-century grist mills and saw mills would have revealed development along waterways in towns and in the countryside. This was an era when economic activity was remarkably diffuse, in even the most urbanized regions, let alone on the frontier.

Of course, as the region filled with farmers, they would need merchants to buy their surpluses and to sell them goods; they would need banks and mills. As the landscape filled with farms, it would also fill
with villages. Denman hoped that his village would be among those that thrived, although most never became substantial cities. The long list of failures includes North Bend, founded by John Cleves Symmes, who had purchased a million acres of land along the Ohio, stretching between the Great and Little Miami Rivers. Symmes, and the many other speculators who laid out town sites, understood the importance of villages to an agricultural society. Driven by the profit motive, these men also understood that rapidly growing towns were the best places to make a fortune, because such sites allowed them to sell their land in many smaller parcels at considerably higher prices.

Wade was unconcerned with Cincinnati's wider economic connections, except those up and down the Ohio River, to and from larger and more distant ports. His approach ignored the rural hinterlands and thus heightened his assertion that these cities grew in a western wilderness. An analysis of the city-country relationship on the frontier awaited the attention of William Cronon, whose *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (1990) goes beyond Wade's argument to reveal precisely how cities were essential to the frontier process, following all those economic connections that Wade so scrupulously avoided. Interestingly, although he plowed in fields cleared by Wade thirty years earlier, Cronon says essentially nothing about *The Urban Frontier*, instead taking on Turner's frontier thesis, which had survived multiple historiographical blows over the years. Like Wade, Cronon argues that frontier history makes no sense without a discussion of cities, but unlike Wade, he makes his argument by imbedding the city in the process of regional growth. Here the ties between city and country—most of them economic—become critical to understanding how the frontier developed over time and how Chicago became the metropolis of the Midwest. Ironically, Wade had included in his book a wonderful quote from *Pictures of Cincinnati* (1815) by early booster and polymath Daniel Drake, who anticipated Cronon's argument. "The relations of a town with the surrounding country, are an essential part of its history," Drake wrote, "and cannot be understood without studying both." One hopes that in the near future a scholar of Wade's or Cronon's talents will undertake such a project for Cincinnati.²

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Since Wade’s economic evidence in support of urbanism was not especially strong, he needed another approach. After a brief discussion of charters and the legal foundation of frontier cities and their states, Wade begins a long description of the “Emergence of Urban Problems.” These were mostly problems of governance, related to the lack of municipal authority. Here we find out that as late as 1815 Cincinnati had no paved roads, and that people complained of pigs and manure in the streets. Cincinnati lacked a night patrol until after 1825, and street lighting was haphazard. Residents used outhouses, with private vaults storing human waste throughout the community. Wade’s larger point is that cities only slowly gained the municipal authority to solve the problems of urban growth, but at the same time he reminds us just how similar these places remained to the many smaller communities in their hinterlands. Unpaved roads and wandering pigs were not specifically urban problems, obviously. In fact, during this long discussion, the reader might begin to wonder what constitutes a city.

But then in a separate chapter Wade treats the most familiar urban problem—the growing differentiation of the population and the development of what Drake euphemistically called “moral diversity.” The stratifying social structure meant an “increasing number of the needy.”3 The Benevolent Society was so overwhelmed by 1815, Wade notes, that it declared that the city needed a poor house. Just as troubling, the young city’s river economy created a floating population of men, fond of strong drink and quick to fight. Saloons, gambling, and prostitution clustered near the waterfront. Surely these particular social wills were evidence of urbanity.

Wade’s discussion of an expanding population of dependent poor and the growth of vice are just prelude to his presentation of his favored evidence of urbanity. Frontier cities were urban, he writes, because they served as cultural centers. In a chapter entitled “The Better Life,” Wade describes the myriad ways in which every one of his frontier cities made tentative progress in its cultural development. Wade tells us about theaters and night patrols and fire departments. Cincinnati had all kinds of schools, perhaps the best in the region. There were churches, museums, libraries, and, that most urban institution of all, newspapers. By 1820, Cincinnati had the most newspapers in the region—“seven weeklies,

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3Wade, The Urban Frontier, 104.
two dailies, a literary monthly, a medical journal, and even a magazine for teenagers.” In the same year, Drake founded his Western Museum, which he hoped would advance scientific understanding in his city. Poor support for the museum led to its intellectual deterioration, Wade tells us, as it added “oddities, freaks, and wax models to meet the competition of a neighboring commercial museum.” Indeed, as he describes many of the city’s early cultural offerings, Wade reveals just how much Cincinnati must have felt like an outpost, far removed from the cultural centers of the East. The city had theater, but one newspaper noted that in 1827 support for drama was so slim that “last winter and spring the Players absolutely starved.” Some of the harshest criticism came from Englishwoman Frances Trollope, whose observations of her (briefly) adopted home consistently called into question the Queen City’s urbane-ity. The consummate snob, Trollope complained of the theater, where “[m]en came into the lower tier of boxes without coats, and I have seen shirt sleeves tucked up to the shoulder.” Worse yet, “the spitting was incessant,” and “the mixed smell of onions and whisky” made the crowd nearly unbearable. We do not need Trollope to confirm that Cincinnati was no London, and that to those familiar with the great metropolis the Queen City was evidently backwoods. Throughout his discussion, Wade makes clear the hard, halting work of making a city urbane.⁴

ONLY ON THE FRONTIER

Wade’s discussion of these developing cultural institutions adds weight to his argument concerning the urban frontier, but tracking Cincinnati’s cultural evolution may not tell us enough about the growth of the city overall. Indeed, the easiest way to describe a city is with population figures. In 1810, twenty-two years after its founding, Cincinnati had a population of just over 2,500, the threshold figure that the Census Bureau has long used to define an urban place. At that point, Cincinnati—Ohio’s largest city—contained just a little more than 1 percent of the state’s population. It was the 46th largest city in the nation, and just 3 percent of the size of the largest, New York City. Even after another twenty years of growth, Cincinnati’s population had not yet reached 25,000. Its growth can seem meteoric when expressed in per-

⁴Ibid., 251, 260, 257, 259.
centages, such as that in the 1820s Cincinnati grew by more than 250 percent. But in the time it took Cincinnati to gain 25,000 residents, the state of Ohio gained nearly one million, meaning that by 1830 Cincinnati constituted less than 3 percent of the state’s population. And, in an indication of the frontier’s movement beyond Ohio, in the years since Cincinnati’s founding Indiana had gained 343,000 residents, none of whom lived in a community larger than 2,500. Figures like these might make us wonder about Wade’s assertion that “towns were the spearheads of the frontier.”

To truly understand the urban frontier, however, we must move beyond the numbers and consider how migrants and travelers perceived these young midwestern cities in their settings. Early settlers might well have thought of the cluster of wooden buildings around Fort Washington as the seat of civilization in the Northwest Territory. After days of drifting down the river, seeing little more than occasional curls of smoke, travelers knew instantly that even nascent Cincinnati was very different from what surrounded it. As early as 1797, one observer called it “the metropolis of the north-western territory.” At the time, the community had fewer than 750 residents. Only on the frontier might a
village of 750 serve as a metropolis. By the 1820s, travelers regularly expressed surprise at what they saw as they rounded the river's bend: church spires and brick buildings; civilization's redoubt. Even if most streets were unpaved, they were at least straight, a sure sign of urbanity in a wilderness of meandering roadways and river ways. Only on the frontier might a town of fewer than 25,000 residents pass for a Queen City. This is why we need to understand Cincinnati's hinterland of farms and forests to understand the city itself.

THE PROBLEM OF TELEOLOGY

If just founding a city were evidence enough that towns were the spearheads of the frontier, then Wade could have selected Marietta as one of his subjects. The first permanent settlement in the Northwest Territories, Marietta served as base of the Ohio Company’s effort to settle eastern Ohio. Alternately, Wade might have chosen Schoenbrunn, the Moravian missionary settlement founded in 1772, which gained both the first school and the first Christian church in the Ohio Territory. Wade might also have included Chillicothe, eight years younger than Cincinnati, which did not grow as quickly but became the state's first capital in 1803. It seems unlikely that a history of villages like these would have convinced readers that Turner had shortchanged cities in his depiction of the frontier. Wade chose instead to study only settlements that grew into substantial cities. Villages that failed to thrive, like North Bend or Schoenbrunn, played no role in his urban frontier. His selective inclusion of Ohio Valley cities begs the question: How important is our knowledge of Cincinnati's long-term growth to our perception of it as a city—even at birth when it had no paved streets and just two thousand residents?

Perhaps the most important proof of Wade's assertion that young Cincinnati was indeed urban is the city's sustained growth. Cincinnati continued to grow along with its region for 150 years, eventually developing into a city of 500,000 people by the mid-1900s. In the early 1800s, settlers and speculators peered into the future with remarkably strong expectations of growth. Their blend of wishful thinking and reasonable expectation helps to explain why even small settlements took on the air of urbanity on the frontier. The expectation and anticipation of change were essential parts of frontier culture, in aspiring cities and on recently cleared fields. Wade exploited these expectations of growth in his attack on Turner's teleological portrait of the frontier—an inevitable sequence
of stages of development, progressing from natives, hunters, and trappers to extensive farming, then intensive farming, and finally urban growth. Ironically, Wade’s own teleology turned, putting cities first and treating all speculative town sites as though they possessed the potential to become substantial cities.

Despite the problem of teleology, Wade’s book has remained interpretively sound for fifty years. Modern readers might wish that he had said more about Native Americans and women, especially, but his prose remains remarkably fresh after all these years. One must conclude that Wade’s work remains so alive mostly because he was right. By 1830, as Wade concluded, the rise of these five cities “had driven a broad wedge of urbanism into Western life.”5 By then, Cincinnati was the nation’s eighth largest city and, in fact, the Queen City of the West.

BEYOND THE URBAN FRONTIER

Curiously, Wade’s book did not inspire a spate of work on Cincinnati’s early decades. Perhaps he was so convincing that young scholars thought the matter closed. Indeed, the only significant monograph on the early decades of the Queen City is Daniel Aaron’s Cincinnati: Queen City of the West, 1819-1838, which did not see publication until 1992, although Aaron had completed the work in 1942, well before Wade began The Urban Frontier. Aaron’s dissertation shared important commonalities with Wade’s, suggesting that the time was right for a reversal of Turner’s conception of the frontier. In search of urban culture on the frontier of the early 1800s, Aaron determined that “all roads seemed to point to Cincinnati, the economic and cultural center of the Ohio Valley.” Unlike Wade, Aaron took on Turner directly and openly, noting that erroneous clichés had been attached to frontier settlers, clichés that emphasized Turner’s beloved “individualism, enterprise, egalitarianism, self-confidence, and a variety of other absolutes,” as Aaron summarized them. Like Wade, Aaron looked to culture to describe “the urban West,” which he likened to “urban islands in a sea of wilderness.” Aaron’s Cincinnati is a community full of associations and cooperation: “benefit associations, singing societies, museums, and circuses,” the stuff of urban life and evidence of communal sensibilities.

5Ibid., 341.
This was a powerful refutation of Turner and his image of Americans as thriving individualists.6

The Urban Frontier clearly had much in common with Aaron’s earlier work, which remained unknown to Wade as he wrote, but Cincinnati historiography after 1959 moved away from the frontier. Queen City Heritage, Ohio Valley History, and other publications of the Cincinnati Historical Society contain surprisingly few references to The Urban Frontier, even in articles concerned with the city’s settlement and early decades. If The Urban Frontier had a significant impact on the historiography of Cincinnati, it is difficult to tell from footnotes, let alone from the topics scholars pursued. Most Cincinnati historians have instead focused on the decades after Wade’s narrative ends, decades of rapid growth and urban evolution. Among the most important of these works is Steven J. Ross’s Workers on the Edge: Work, Leisure, and Politics in Industrializing Cincinnati, 1788-1890 (1985). Unlike Wade, Ross is primarily concerned with economics, especially those of the working class, and his early chapters describe “The Age of the Artisan,” a romantic era when workers controlled their own destinies because they possessed valuable skills. For

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6Daniel Aaron, Cincinnati: Queen City of the West, 1819-1838 (Columbus, Ohio, 1992), xxiii, 1-6.
Ross, Cincinnati was “the republican City on a Hill,” where both the economy and democracy worked “on behalf of the commonwealth of all citizens.” In his telling, Cincinnati’s frontier location retarded the growth of urban problems, especially those related to social inequality. The citizenry, according to Ross, was wary of manufacturing, mindful of Thomas Jefferson’s warning that great cities would be destructive of American democracy. A very compact city, easily escaped on foot or boat, Cincinnati might seem the New England ideal, where “early residents were forced to achieve a mutual awareness and understanding of the conditions of daily life among various classes.” Ross emphasizes residents’ egalitarian and mutualistic tendencies, and claims that everyone “cooperated in the growth of the city.” Young Cincinnati could hardly have been more different than the conflicted, industrial city it would become later in the century. Wade and Ross, working in support of very different theses, described very different places.7

Not surprisingly, over the last forty years most scholarly work on Cincinnati has focused on the twentieth century. The most influential monograph has been Zane L. Miller’s Boss Cox’s Cincinnati: Urban Politics in the Progressive Era (1968), derived from Miller’s University of Chicago dissertation completed under the guidance of Richard Wade and edited by Wade for Oxford’s Urban Life in America series. Miller was among the first historians to question the dominant interpretation of the urban boss system as wholly corrupt and inefficient. Miller’s considerable influence on Cincinnati historiography came not just through this groundbreaking work, but also through several important works that followed, including Suburb: Neighborhood and Community in Forest Park, Ohio, 1935-1976 (1981), which narrated the distinctive history of an intentionally racially integrated and comprehensively planned postwar suburb; and Changing Plans for America’s Inner Cities: Cincinnati’s Over-the-Rhine and Twentieth-Century Urbanism (1998), which traced the history of Cincinnati’s most infamous ghetto as a means of analyzing how people thought about the city.8

Miller would have had a dominant influence on Cincinnati historiography solely as a scholar, but his role as teacher and mentor at the University of Cincinnati has greatly broadened that influence. Over the course of thirty-some years, Miller directed a host of dissertations, most of them on the twentieth century, and many of them addressing his favorite issues: housing, planning, and suburbanization. Robert B. Fairbanks’ *Making Better Citizens: Housing Reform and the Community Development Strategy in Cincinnati, 1890-1960* (1988) is one result of that mentorship; more recently, his students published *Making Sense of the City: Local Government, Civic Culture, and Community Life in Urban America* (2001), a festschrift in honor of Miller edited by Fairbanks and Patricia Mooney-Melvin. Following Miller’s lead, most of his students exhibited deep interest in shifting ideas about the city, especially as expressed in how Cincinnatians planned for the future. Wade’s influence in this body of work comes not through the specific message of *The Urban Frontier*, but in the general principles of scholarly excellence Wade taught Miller through their life-long relationship.9

The most recent monographic treatment of Cincinnati history is Nikki M. Taylor’s *Frontiers of Freedom: Cincinnati’s Black Community, 1802-1868* (2005).10 Tellingly, Taylor takes Wade’s argument as a given. The book begins in 1802, and in Taylor’s depiction Cincinnati appears to be a city already, born with the original sins of its mixed parentage—a racial code reflective of the South, the racial segregation common of the North, and the violence one would expect to find in the West. The urban qualities in Taylor’s Cincinnati are very similar to Wade’s. It has an increasingly diverse population and the concomitant conflict. Like Wade, Taylor searches for success in the growth of cultural institutions, especially churches and schools. Taylor’s and Wade’s books, written nearly fifty years apart, have so much in common that we are reminded of just how prescient Wade really was. The once iconoclastic *Urban Frontier* has become received wisdom.

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Taylor’s book may also point to an agenda for the future: historians should investigate the mixed parentage of the young Cincinnati. In what way was Cincinnati a southern city when most of its residents came from the mid-Atlantic? How was it a northern city at the same time, when it so clearly looked south for profit and west to its future? How long could Cincinnati remain western as it watched the frontier move farther and farther away? Most important: how did all these connections to places distant—and the many more connections that tied the young city to the Miami and Licking valleys—make Cincinnati the Queen City of a new American region, the Ohio Valley? This agenda replicates Turner’s professional trajectory from the study of the frontier to the issue of regions in American history, but it is also represents a logical next step—a very tardy next step—leading from Wade’s groundbreaking work. Wade put cities on the frontier, where they belonged. Historians must now tell us more about how young cities like Cincinnati helped create the regions in which they grew.