

Frederick Jackson Turner and the Frontier Thesis

Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, written in 1893 in an essay called, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," offered a new theory for explaining American History. It began:

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 areas 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 cannot 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.

One of the biggest problems with the Turner thesis is that Turner attributed a variety of traits to the frontier, but it is not always clear what he meant by the term frontier. Sometimes the frontier was a line of settlement, a zone where civilization and forest met. At other times it was the western part of the U.S., an abundance of natural resources, and a process or way of life for those actually participating in the settling of western lands.

The American frontier existed, for Turner, from the days of the earliest colonial settlements through the year 1890. Turner's essay is over twenty pages long. The major points are:

1. **The existence of the frontier led to the formation of a "composite nationality."** Turner believed that the pressures of frontier living forced the immigrating populations to abandon their native customs and adopt a new culture – the American culture – adapted to the frontier environment. Therefore, all Americans are basically alike because they share a common culture based on frontier experiences.
2. **The development of the frontier led to a decreasing dependence on England.** Turner believed that as the early Americans discovered the abundance of raw materials in their own land they no longer needed to depend on England's resources. This condition was one factor in the colonists' demand for political independence from England.
3. **The existence of a frontier motivated Americans to quickly develop their country.** Turner believed that most internal improvements (such as railroads, canals, and national roads) and significant inventions (such as barbed wire, deep plowing, and the repeating rifle) were developed as a result of America's desire to push the frontier westward. Turner believed that American development would have proceeded more slowly if the frontier had not existed.
4. **The frontier experience caused Americans to be more democratic than members of other societies.** Turner believed that the experience of having to cope with frontier pressures caused Americans to perceive other countrymen as equals.
5. **The existence of the frontier served as a "safety valve" for the discontents of society.** Turner believed that the existence of the frontier meant that any American dissatisfied with his or her life could always "go west" and start a new life. If this option were not available these people would need other outlets for their unhappiness. One result would be an increase in crime or societal tension.

Turner's Four Definitions of the Word Frontier

1. A zone where civilization and forest met
2. The western part of the U.S.
3. A process, a way of life for those actually participating in the settling of western lands
4. An abundance of natural resources

Directions: A number of historians have sought to find information that either supports or refutes the major principles of Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis. Below are some of the findings of these historians. Identify the principle of Turner's thesis to which each piece of information applies and determine whether the statement supports or refutes the principle.

Historian Findings	Principle	Supports	Refutes
1.) Pennsylvania, in 1776, wrote a constitution more radically democratic than those of most western states in subsequent years.			
2.) "Virtually all traits of Americans that Turner has ascribed to the influence of the frontier – independence, self-reliance, aggressiveness, and individualism – applied only to men."			
3.) Relatively high wages on the frontier had the effect of encouraging American employers to use machines, which, in turn, increased productivity, both industrial and agricultural.			
4.) The historian Fred Shannon noted that the census, especially after the Civil War, clearly showed that the largest migration of Americans was from the country to the city, and not the other way around.			
5.) With so much to be done in the raw communities of the West, there were simply not enough trained and traditionally accepted leaders to organize and manage the new settlements. Ordinary people had to come forward and pitch in.			
6.) In the state constitutions of the Ohio-Mississippi region – the so-called "valley of democracy" – the historian John Barnhart has found only a handful of clauses which could be called original with the west.			
7.) The Constitutions of Kentucky and Tennessee – the first transmontane states to enter the union – were both modeled after the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1790.			
8.) Forty-seven of the clauses in the Tennessee Constitution were taken from the constitution of PA and 19 from the constitution of NC.			
9.) Free land offered a chance for political and social experiment by peaceful means.			
10.) All through the 19 th century Americans believed that the West was a haven for the oppressed and a cornucopia for the ambitious. Even the noted economist, Lord John Maynard Keynes, noted that, "ideas, whether right or wrong, can exert enormous social influence."			
11.) The most democratic ideas expressed anywhere in European civilization before the 19 th century were those of a group called the Levellers in 17 th century England. They demanded universal manhood suffrage and a written constitution.			
12.) One English economic historian has traced to the high wages in the U.S., as a consequence of the frontier, the greater tendency toward acceptance of technological innovation here than in England during the 19 th century.			
13.) The Homestead Act was passed in 1862.			
14.) Between 1853-1872, some 20,000 homeless New York City children were placed in homes in the West.			
15.) The cost of starting a farm in the West of the 19 th century was in excess of a year and a half's income of the average urban worker.			
16.) One scholar has found that when Germans in colonial America moved into Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia, they differed markedly from the English colonists in farming methods, crops, and their labor system. The Germans			

selected clay loams in heavily wooded areas, while the English chose light, sandy uplands. Whereas the English girdled trees and farmed among the stumps, the fastidious Germans cleared the land completely and plowed deeply. The English, on the other hand merely scratched the soil and were appalled to see it run away in the rains.			
17.) Constitutions of the new southern and southwestern states in the early years of the 19 th century were conspicuous for their complete acceptance of human slavery.			
TOTALS			

Tally your results here:

Principle 1		Principle 2		Principle 3		Principle 4		Principle 5	
Support	Refute	Support	Refute	Support	Refute	Support	Refute	Support	Refute

Now write an opening paragraph with a thesis and contextualization which assesses the validity of Turner's thesis in explaining the origins of American democracy. Be sure to utilize the five (5) principles.