

Defining America: Frederick Jackson Turner and the Disappearing Frontier

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Teaching Traditional American History Program

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<http://www.chillihistoryproject.com/>

Lesson Overview: In this lesson students are introduced to Frederick Jackson Turner and how early Census data, when combined visually with maps, effectively demonstrated the end of the frontier. By discussing Turner's essay and his methods, students learn why this was a significant turning point for America. Students also learn how to display data visually by developing a series of shaded maps using Census data to show the moving frontier.

Objectives: After completing this lesson the student will be able to:

- (1) interpret statistical data;
- (2) create visual illustrations using data to show population changes over time;
- (3) explain how cultures can be affected by changes in demographics by comparing statistical representations of data with changes in cultural behavior.

Materials:

NOTE: for background, teachers may wish to read Frederick Jackson Turner's article: "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (chapter one of Turner's book *The Frontier in American History*). This is available on the web at <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/TURNER/chapter1.html>.

- Quotes on America and an introduction to Turner and his essay (supplied in Handout 1).
- Population and population density data for each state from the 1st census in 1790 through 1900 (supplied in Handout 2).
- Crayons or colored pencils in varying shades of one color (for example, light blue, blue, and deep blue).

- 12 maps for each student or group of students of the continental United States showing present outlines of states. (For a wonderful site for printing free, customizable maps, go to: <http://nationalatlas.gov/natlas/Natlasstart.asp>.)

Class Time: Approximately 2-3 50-minute class periods. Length can adjusted based on use of individual vs group work, or by assigning the map exercises to be done outside class time as homework.

Teacher Input:

1. Begin a whole-class discussion on this prompt: “When people in other countries describe us as Americans, what characteristics do they say we have?” Write the characteristics on the board as students brainstorm. Then add the following qualities to the list (if they aren’t already there) and point out that many foreigners attribute these characteristics to Americans:

individualistic (antipathetic to authority)	optimistic
disrespectful of tradition	mobile
adaptive	wasteful
generous	egalitarian
coarse (rude)	self-reliant

Ask, “If we assume these are true American characteristics, then our culture is very different from others in the world. How did we get to be this way?” Point out that a historian named Frederick Jackson Turner believed he knew the answer: Up until about 1890, *America had a vast frontier*.

Activity:

1. (For individuals or small groups): Distribute copies of Handout 1. Give students time to complete and discuss the quote activity. Then read with them the introduction to Turner and his famous essay. Point out that before 1893, Americans thought of the frontier as a line of settlement moving steadily westward. Is that the way Americans really migrated? Turner wondered about this and used US Census data to find out.

2. Tell the students that they will be analyzing data much as Turner did in formulating his ideas on the frontier. For each individual or small group, distribute copies of Handout 2 and 12 US maps. Students should use the US Census data in Handout 2 to show a progression of migration in America..

3. Have students label each map with one of the census years from 1790 onward (1790, 1800, 1810 and so forth to 1900).
4. Conduct a discussion with the students to ensure understanding of the state data on population density by covering the following topics:
 - How does the data vary over time?
 - How does it vary by state?
 - What is population density?
 - Why are some states missing data?
5. Assign colors to different ranges of population density. For example, use light blue for 2 - 8; blue for 9 - 32; and dark blue for 33 and higher. Leave areas with less than 2 people per square mile uncolored.
6. On the first outline map (for 1790) color each state according to its population density as an example for the class.
7. Have students color the other maps in the same way for each census from 1800 to 1900. If you have divided the class into pairs or small groups, the students may split the maps among themselves.

Questions for review:

- Describe the overall progression of American migration. Was there ever a line of settlement in America? If so, how long did it exist?
- What regions of the country saw the fastest settlement? The slowest?
- Why were some areas settled faster than others?
- What conflicts arose because of this migration?
- How did the frontier help create American cultural characteristics?

Closure:

Use this lesson as transition into the period of Indian Wars following the Civil War. Students will gain an understanding of why the last armed resistance by Native Americans to white emigration occurred in the central plains.

Assessment:

Neatness, thoroughness and accuracy in the shading of the maps should be considered when assessing this assignment.

Upon completing the maps, students should write a summary of their findings. Their summary should address the following points listed in Questions for Review.

Extension:

The exercise could be made more challenging by having students conduct research on the internet to find the census data instead of providing it. In addition, students could read and analyze Turner's essay directly.

Students could use the information provided, visual representations of data and additional research to write a short research paper.

References:

Historical census data of the U.S. can be found on the web at:
<http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census/>

Graphics:



Frederick Jackson Turner

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Handout 1

Directions: Read each quote about America. Under each quote, write at least one characteristic of Americans the quote describes.

America makes prodigious mistakes, America has colossal faults, but one thing cannot be denied: America is always on the move. She may be going to Hell, of course, but at least she isn't standing still. **E.E. (Edward E.) Cummings** 1894-1962, American Poet

I would rather have a nod from an American, than a snuff-box from an emperor.
Lord Byron 1788-1824, British Poet

America is the only nation in history which, miraculously, has gone directly from barbarism to degeneration without the usual interval of civilization. **Georges Clemenceau** 1841-1929, French Statesman

America's greatest strength, and its greatest weakness, is our belief in second chances, our belief that we can always start over, that things can be made better. **Anthony Walton**

In the United States there is more space where nobody is than where anybody is. That is what makes America what it is. **Gertrude Stein**, *The Geographical History of America* (1936).

Directions: Read the following passage. Then answer the questions based on your reading and your previous knowledge.

An Introduction to Frederick Jackson Turner

1893 - The Chicago World's Fair hosted some serious academic meetings. The American Historical Association held meetings at the Fair. At one of the meetings, a young professor named Frederick Jackson Turner presented a paper that he titled, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." Turner tried to explain why the United States had developed differently from European societies. He was particularly interested in explaining why America was so much more egalitarian than Europe. His explanation was that the frontier had acted as a safety valve to prevent trouble. He also thought that the frontier was an environment that rewarded a particular set of character traits, such as coarseness, strength, inquisitiveness, and self-reliance.

Turner was making two somewhat tangential points as well. The Census Bureau has recently mentioned in a report about the 1890 census that it was no longer possible to draw a “frontier line” on the Census Bureau map of the United States. Settlements, both large and small, so thoroughly dotted the map that the “frontier line” was no longer a meaningful idea. Turner claimed in his paper that the frontier had been so important in shaping the American character and directing the course of American history that the frontier’s absence could not help but change America dramatically.

Second, and easiest for modern viewers to miss, is that Turner was actually staking out territory on the “academic frontier” and claiming it for his own. The words “American History” attract no notice today because practically everyone in America takes courses in high school and college with exactly that title. But in 1893 that was not the case. History did not yet include “American History” – the United States was just too young and unimportant. “History,” as Turner himself had learned it at Johns Hopkins University and elsewhere, was about ancient Greece, the Roman Empire, feudal Europe, and the rise of republics and monarchies in Europe. Proper historians had little interest in thirteen small rebellious colonies that had broken loose from the British Empire less than a century before Turner was born. Turner was part of a new group of young historians who “de-colonize” history in America by turning the focus of the discipline on America itself: “American History.”

<http://www.pbs.org/fmc/timeline/efrontieressay.htm>

1. Turner called the frontier a “safety valve.” What does a safety valve do?

2. How could the frontier have acted as a safety valve for America? _____

3. What was Turner’s viewpoint about the frontier? _____

4. Turner is credited with creating a new kind of history—American History. Why was there no focus on American History before Turner? _____

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Handout 2

Population Density of States, 1790 to 1900

Source:
Historical Statistics of the United States, series A 196
Census Bureau, 1976, Washington, DC: Government
Printing Office

State and year	Resident population in thousands	Resident population Per square mile of land area
Alabama		
1900	1829	35.7
1890	1513	29.5
1880	1263	24.6
1870	997	19.4
1860	964	18.8
1850	772	15
1840	591	11.5
1830	310	6
1820	128	2.5
Alaska		
1900	64	0.1
Arizona		
1900	123	1.1
1890	88	0.8
1880	40	0.4
1870	10	0.1
Arkansas		
1900	1312	25
1890	1128	21.5
1880	803	15.3
1870	484	9.2
1860	435	8.3
1850	210	4
1840	98	1.9
1830	30	0.6
1820	14	0.1
California		
1900		9.5

1890		7.8
1880		5.5
1870		3.6
1860		2.4
1850		0.6
Colorado		
1900	540	5.2
1890	413	4
1880	194	1.9
1870	40	0.4
1860	34	0.3
Connecticut		
1900	908	188.5
1890	746	154.8
1880	623	129.2
1870	537	111.5
1860	460	95.5
1850	371	76.9
1840	310	64.3
1830	298	61.8
1820	275	57.1
1810	262	54.3
1800	251	52.1
1790	238	49.4
Delaware		
1900	185	94
1890	168	85.7
1880	147	74.6
1870	125	63.6
1860	112	57.1
1850	92	46.6
1840	78	39.7
1830	77	39.1
1820	73	37
1810	73	37
1800	64	32.7
1790	59	30.1
Dist. of Columbia		
1900	279	4645.3
1890	230	3972.3
1880	178	3062.5
1870	132	2270.7
1860	75	1294.5
1850	52	891.2
1840	34	485.7
1830	30	442.6
1820	23	367.1
1810	15	266.9
1800	8	156.6
Florida		
1900	529	9.6
1890	391	7.1
1880	269	4.9

1870	188	3.4
1860	140	2.6
1850	87	1.6
1840	54	1
1830	35	0.6
Georgia		
1900	2216	37.7
1890	1837	31.3
1880	1542	26.3
1870	1184	20.2
1860	1057	18
1850	906	15.4
1840	691	11.8
1830	517	8.8
1820	341	5.8
1810	252	4.3
1800	163	1.5
1790	83	0.6
Hawaii		
1900	154	24
Idaho		
1900	162	1.9
1890	89	1.1
1880	33	0.4
1870	15	0.2
Illinois		
1900	4822	86.1
1890	3826	68.3
1880	3078	55
1870	2540	45.4
1860	1712	30.6
1850	851	15.2
1840	476	8.5
1830	157	2.8
1820	55	1
1810	12	0.1
Indiana		
1900	2516	70.1
1890	2192	61.1
1880	1978	55.1
1870	1681	46.8
1860	1350	37.6
1850	988	27.5
1840	686	19.1
1830	343	9.6
1820	147	4.1
1810	25	0.6
1800	6	0.1
Iowa		
1900	2232	40.2
1890	1912	34.4
1880	1625	29.2

1870	1194	21.5
1860	675	12.1
1850	192	3.5
1840	43	0.2

Kansas

1900	1470	18
1890	1428	17.5
1880	996	12.2
1870	364	4.5
1860	107	1.3

Kentucky

1900	2147	53.4
1890	1859	46.3
1880	1649	41
1870	1321	32.9
1860	1156	28.8
1850	982	24.4
1840	780	19.4
1830	688	17.1
1820	564	14
1810	407	10.1
1800	221	5.5
1790	74	1.8

Louisiana

1900	1382	30.4
1890	1119	24.6
1880	940	20.7
1870	727	16
1860	708	15.6
1850	518	11.4
1840	352	7.8
1830	216	4.8
1820	153	3.4
1810	77	2.2

Maine

1900	694	23.2
1890	661	22.1
1880	649	21.7
1870	627	21
1860	628	21
1850	583	19.5
1840	502	16.8
1830	399	13.4
1820	298	10
1810	229	7.7
1800	152	5.1
1790	97	3.2

Maryland

1900	1188	119.5
1890	1042	104.9
1880	935	94
1870	781	78.6
1860	687	69.1

1850	583	58.6
1840	470	47.3
1830	447	45
1820	407	41
1810	381	38.3
1800	342	34.4
1790	320	32

Massachusetts

1900	2805	349
1890	2239	278.5
1880	1783	221.8
1870	1457	181.3
1860	1231	153.1
1850	995	123.7
1840	738	91.7
1830	610	75.9
1820	523	65.1
1810	472	58.7
1800	423	52.6
1790	379	47.1

Michigan

1900	2421	42.1
1890	2094	36.4
1880	1637	28.5
1870	1184	20.6
1860	749	13
1850	398	6.9
1840	212	3.7
1830	32	0.2
1820	9	0.1
1810	5	0.1

Minnesota

1900	1751	21.7
1890	1310	16.2
1880	781	9.7
1870	440	5.4
1860	172	2.1
1850	6	0.1

Mississippi

1900	1551	33.5
1890	1290	27.8
1880	1132	24.4
1870	828	17.9
1860	791	17.1
1850	607	13.1
1840	376	8.1
1830	137	2.9
1820	75	1.6
1810	31	0.4
1800	8	0.3

Missouri

1900	3107	45.2
1890	2679	39

1880	2168	31.6
1870	1721	25
1860	1182	17.2
1850	682	9.9
1840	384	5.6
1830	140	2.1
1820	67	1
Montana		
1900	243	1.7
1890	143	1
1880	39	0.3
1870	21	0.1
Nebraska		
1900	1066	13.9
1890	1063	13.8
1880	452	5.9
1870	123	1.6
1860	29	0.2
Nevada		
1900	42	0.4
1890	47	0.4
1880	62	0.6
1870	42	0.4
1860	7	0.1
New Hampshire		
1900	412	45.6
1890	377	41.7
1880	347	38.4
1870	318	35.2
1860	326	36.1
1850	318	35.2
1840	285	31.5
1830	269	29.8
1820	244	27
1810	214	23.7
1800	184	20.4
1790	142	15.7
New Jersey		
1900	1884	250.7
1890	1445	192.3
1880	1131	150.5
1870	906	120.6
1860	672	89.4
1850	490	65.2
1840	373	49.7
1830	321	42.7
1820	278	36.9
1810	246	32.7
1800	211	28.1
1790	184	24.5
New Mexico		
1900	195	1.6

1890	160	1.3
1880	120	1
1870	92	0.7
1860	94	0.4
1850	62	0.3

New York

1900	7269	152.5
1890	6003	126
1880	5083	106.7
1870	4383	92
1860	3881	81.4
1850	3097	65
1840	2429	51
1830	1919	40.3
1820	1373	28.8
1810	959	20.1
1800	589	12.4
1790	340	7.1

North
Carolina

1900	1894	38.9
1890	1618	33.2
1880	1400	28.7
1870	1071	22
1860	993	20.4
1850	869	17.8
1840	753	15.5
1830	738	15.1
1820	639	13.1
1810	556	11.4
1800	478	9.8
1790	394	8.1

North Dakota

1900	319	4.5
1890	191	2.7
1880	37	0.9
1870	2	0.1

Ohio

1900	4158	102.1
1890	3672	90.1
1880	3198	78.5
1870	2665	65.4
1860	2340	57.4
1850	1980	48.6
1840	1519	37.3
1830	938	23.3
1820	581	14.5
1810	231	5.7
1800	45	1.1

Oklahoma

1900	790	11.4
1890	259	3.7

Oregon		
1900	414	4.3
1890	318	3.3
1880	175	1.8
1870	91	1
1860	52	0.5
1850	12	0.1

Pennsylvania		
1900	6302	140.6
1890	5258	117.3
1880	4283	95.5
1870	3522	78.6
1860	2906	64.8
1850	2312	51.6
1840	1724	38.5
1830	1348	30.1
1820	1049	23.4
1810	810	18.1
1800	602	13.4
1790	434	9.7

Rhode Island		
1900	429	401.6
1890	346	323.8
1880	277	259.2
1870	217	203.7
1860	175	163.7
1850	148	138.3
1840	109	102
1830	97	91.1
1820	83	77.8
1810	77	72.1
1800	69	64.8
1790	69	64.5

South Carolina		
1900	1340	44
1890	1151	37.7
1880	996	32.6
1870	706	23.1
1860	704	23.1
1850	669	21.9
1840	594	19.5
1830	581	19.1
1820	503	16.5
1810	415	13.6
1800	346	11.3
1790	249	8.2

South Dakota		
1900	402	5.2
1890	349	4.5
1880	98	
1870	12	

(part of Dakota Territory in 1870 and 1880)

Tennessee

1900	2021	48.5
1890	1768	42.4
1880	1542	37
1870	1259	30.2
1860	1110	26.6
1850	1003	24.1
1840	829	19.9
1830	682	16.4
1820	423	10.1
1810	262	6.3
1800	106	2.5
1790	36	0.8

Texas

1900	3049	11.6
1890	2236	8.5
1880	1592	6.1
1870	819	3.1
1860	604	2.3
1850	213	0.8

Utah

1900	277	3.4
1890	211	2.6
1880	144	1.8
1870	87	1.1
1860	40	0.3
1850	11	0.1

Vermont

1900	344	37.7
1890	332	36.4
1880	332	36.4
1870	331	36.2
1860	315	34.5
1850	314	34.4
1840	292	32
1830	281	30.8
1820	236	25.9
1810	218	23.9
1800	154	16.9
1790	85	9.4

Virginia

1900	1854	46.1
1890	1656	41.1
1880	1513	37.6
1870	1225	30.4
1860	1220	24.8
1850	1119	22.1
1840	1025	19.3
1830	1044	18.9
1820	938	16.6
1810	878	15.2
1800	808	13.7
1790	692	11.6

Washington

1900	518	7.8
1890	357	5.3
1880	75	1.1
1870	24	0.4
1860	12	0.1
1850	1	

West Virginia

1900	959	39.9
1890	763	31.8
1880	618	25.7
1870	442	18.4
1860	377	
1850	302	
1840	225	
1830	177	
1820	137	
1810	105	
1800	79	
1790	56	

(Part of Virginia until the Civil War)

Wisconsin

1900	2069	37.4
1890	1693	30.6
1880	1315	23.8
1870	1055	19.1
1860	776	14
1850	305	5.5
1840	31	0.4

Wyoming

1900	93	0.9
1890	63	0.6
1880	21	0.2
1870	9	0.1