

HISTORY MADE BY PLAIN MEN

During the comparatively short era of man's recorded history his story has been told from various view-points: some writers have approached the subject with the conviction that Religion is the key to History; another insists that civilization has moved along with the drum and the trumpet; a third that the State is the great central fact in history, agreeing with Freeman that history is past politics; Mr. Seligman has written on the economic interpretation of history;¹ while others have emphasized the biographical element — the Alexanders, the Charlemagnes, the Bismarcks, or the Gladstones.

This paper is an attempt to examine another force which permeates all the others, which is less tangible but omnipresent. This is the part played by Plain Men — those individuals not endowed with greatness or with power, whose spheres of operation are small and whose careers are not perpetuated in marble, in the national archives, or in the sifted products of historical study.

Hero-worship is a part of our moral nature which impels us to render our tributes of admiration and praise to those famous processions of statesmen, priests, poets, soldiers, and inventors that have passed by and on. Their achievements survive them in the laws, the morals, or the institutions which they were conspicuous in establishing or adorning. Pageants, holidays, celebrations, and monuments reveal this trait which is one of the qualities which makes for a noble personal or national welfare.²

¹ Seligman's *The Economic Interpretation of History* in the *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. XVI, p. 612.

² Storrs's *Contributions made to our National Development by Plain Men* in the *Annual Report of the American Historical Association*, 1896, Vol. I, pp. 37-63.

Interest in great men would alone be sufficient to perpetuate their names. Their thoughts, deeds, and example are such as to inspire, long after the actor has passed away. Of Admiral Nelson Mr. Robert Southey has said:³ "He has left us . . . a name and an example, which are at this hour inspiring hundreds of the youth of England: a name which is our pride, and an example which will continue to be our shield and our strength. Thus it is that the spirits of the great and the wise continue to live and to act after them: verifying, in this sense, the language of the old mythologist:

'For gods they are, through high Jove's counsels good,
Haunting the earth, the guardians of mankind.' "

Hence let no one attempt to disparage the achievements of those personages who have been in the fore of achievement nor to take from them the credit which is justly theirs. "Great men," Carlyle has said, "taken up in any way are profitable company."

But beyond question our homage and recognition should not stop here but should extend likewise to the quiet, unadorned and oft unheralded achievements of that unnumbered, unnamed army of world's workers designated here as Plain Men. These with fewer opportunities and with feebler powers have labored with industry, patience, and not infrequently with great effect in advancing the world's progress.

The mighty currents of history are after all formed by the great body of the people. The movers of the world are not Atlas and Archimedes but the units of mankind. The good rulers influence the varied interests of society somewhat as the mountains give direction to the wind. Statesmen, generals, priests, and rulers — these are the creatures

³ Southey's *The Life of Nelson*, p. 326. Edited by David Hannay. London: William Heinemann, 1897.

rather than the creators of civilization.⁴ Gladstone represents England; Napoleon, France; Luther is Germany, and Illinois gave us Abraham Lincoln.

Perhaps the most striking trait of the modern scientific method, suggests a modern historian, is an appreciation of the transcendent importance of the small, the inconspicuous, and the obscure. The historians of the old school neither saw nor had any interest in the common routine and humdrum of daily life. They were attracted to parliaments, kings, wars, treaties, territorial changes, and nobles rather than to the great mass of the plain people — how they lived, what they thought, how they worked and how their infinite number of units furnished the momentum for progress.

With these historians, continues this writer, "It was the startling and exceptional that caught their attention and which they found recorded in the sources on which they depended. They were like a geologist who should deal only with earthquakes and volcanoes, or, better still, a zoölogist, who should have no use for anything smaller than an elephant or less romantic in its habits than a phoenix or basilisk."⁵

Less calmly but perhaps more picturesquely another writer has stated it:

But a little while ago it was assumed that a nation which had not waded through centuries of blood had no history. To our more refined sensibilities, pictures of battle-field agonies, catalogues of death wounds, and barbarous atrocities are less congenial — I will not say less profitable — than to the ruder tastes of Homer's listeners or to the lover of King Arthur romances. Narratives of sieges and battles, of the discipline and movement of armies, and of international diplomacies; biographies of ministers and generals, the idiosyncracies of great men; pictures of court intrigues, dainty morsels of court scandals, recitations of the sayings of imbecile

⁴ Cf. Bancroft's *Essays and Miscellany*, Chapter V.

⁵ Robinson's *The New History*, pp. 48, 49.

monarchs, anecdotes of princes, the opinions of counsellors, or the tortuous ways of political factions — these are not all of history.⁶

Political institutions, rebellions, and crusades are but the more visible manifestations of the undercurrents of racial, economic, and religious forces. The forces of history-making are less tangible and more complex than are those in the physical world, and, since formation and progress are through individual units, social evolution is slow. The French Revolution was but the spectacular outburst of forces which were deep-seated, slow, and of long duration in the social structure of the common people of France. "Forms of government may be radically changed," says a writer in *Science*, "but the alignment of classes, subordination, legal traditions, religious, ethical and social ideals still remain inevitably to nullify or to modify the results of the newly-made structure of government."⁷

Such a conception of history — as a study of the social physics of the past — would record the progress as well as the doings of man, and would rescue the achievements and the memoirs of the "not-great" from their undue subordination to the abnormal, the unusual, and the picturesque.

In the career of Gurdon Saltonstall Hubbard is reflected a segment of the fur-trading era in Illinois.⁸ For about fifteen years this man was an Indian trader. Trading houses were established; trails were laid out; the good will and friendship of the Indians were cultivated; vast quantities of blankets, powder, whiskey, and tobacco were dis-

⁶ Bancroft's *Essays and Miscellany*, p. 79.

⁷ Carleton's *History-making Forces* in the *Popular Science Monthly*, Vol. LXXI, pp. 349-354.

⁸ This story of the fur-trading activities of Hubbard has been constructed from *The Autobiography of Gurdon Saltonstall Hubbard* which has been edited with an introduction by Miss Caroline M. McIlvaine, the Librarian of the Chicago Historical Society.

tributed, and in return the furs of mink, beaver, muskrat, fox, ermine, and lynx were bartered, canoed and portaged to Mackinaw, the great mart of the Upper Lakes fur trade and the headquarters of the American Fur Company. To follow and to witness some of the activities of this man's career as an Indian trader, may reveal a cross-sectional view of a vast business of the early Middle West.

Born in old Vermont in 1802 and entering the service of the American Fur Company at the age of sixteen, Hubbard illustrated the old saying that "Vermont is the most glorious spot on the face of this globe for a man to be born in, *provided* he emigrates when he is very young."⁹ Near Montreal, Canada, Hubbard joined the clerks, boatmen, and hunters of the company, and on May 13, 1818, with canoes heavily laden with goods for the Indian trade and to the melodies of Canadian boat songs the expedition began its ascent of the St. Lawrence.

Toronto was reached in about a month. From there the boats were hauled overland in ox-carts to Lake Simcoe and the journey then continued in canoes to Lake Huron. Coasting the northern shore of this great lake the canoes on July 4, 1818, arrived at Mackinaw. Here young Hubbard first saw the hosts of voyageurs, clerks, merchants, and officials of that mammoth corporation, the American Fur Company.

For a month Hubbard worked at counting great quantities of skins of mink, raccoon, wild cat, fox, and lynx, which had been collected by hundreds of traders and hunters from the vast area of the Great Lakes region. Hunting and trading expeditions soon set out for their winter quest for furs and young Hubbard was placed in a brigade destined for the upper part of Illinois.

This brigade of twelve boats left Mackinaw on September 30, 1818, and skirted the eastern shore of Lake Michigan in

⁹ Quoted in Johnson's *Stephen A. Douglas: A Study in American Politics*, p. 3.

a southerly direction. In three weeks Hubbard beheld Fort Dearborn. Here for a few days the boatmen rested; boats and canoes were repaired; and preparations for the southward journey were made.

As the expedition resumed its southerly course trading houses were established. The first was located near the present city of Hennepin and the next three miles below Lake Peoria. Paddling down the Illinois River and establishing posts every sixty miles on that stream the crew reached St. Louis on November 6, 1818. Here for two weeks Hubbard visited with relatives and friends and helped to stock the canoes with goods for the Indian trade in Illinois.

Hubbard had been placed in charge of the trading house near the mouth of the Bureau River. Here with a band of companion hunters he spent the winter of 1818-1819 and lived upon raccoon, bear, turkey, swan, goose, crane, and duck. Packs of Indian goods were sent to the Sacs on Rock River and to the Kickapoos on the Wabash and bartered for the rich peltries of these regions. Hunting trips also added to the stores of furs in the trading house.

In March, 1819, Hubbard's crew commenced its toilsome return journey to Mackinaw. Laden with the rich products of the season's trading and hunting and manned by veteran oarsmen the canoes were paddled and portaged toward the Mecca of the fur traders. Other outfits from the St. Joseph and the Calumet rivers joined the procession of boats which were given a hearty welcome when they arrived at Mackinaw in May, 1819.

For five or six weeks Hubbard with about a hundred others packed furs at Mackinaw. Dust and moths were removed from the skins, which were then counted, stretched, pressed, sorted, and invoiced. Then the neatly packed bundles of otter, mink, beaver, bear, or wolverine were

transferred to boats destined for the fur markets of the East and of Europe.

The next season Hubbard spent at the trading and hunting grounds on the Muskegon River in Michigan, from whence another cargo of peltries was sent to Mackinaw. In the following season he exploited the area of the Kalamazoo River Valley, being accompanied by three Canadians and one Indian.

Thus Hubbard spent winter after winter in the forests and on the streams, and at every spring returned to discharge his cargo at Mackinaw. For some time the Indians had known him as Pa-pa-ma-ta-be or the "Swift Walker". In 1824 he was given the general superintendence over the trading houses of the American Fur Company on the Illinois River.

Between Fort Dearborn and a point about one hundred and fifty miles south of the present town of Danville he laid out a path or road known as "Hubbard's Trail". On this route he established trading houses forty or fifty miles apart. To these posts goods for the Indian trade were carried from Fort Dearborn by pack horses and thus the slow and laborious transportation by boat was discontinued.

Annual visits to Mackinaw continued and during his career as a fur-trader his total number of trips to that point amounted to twenty-six. In 1827 he was made a special partner of the American Fur Company and in the next year bought out its entire interests in Illinois. For about five more years he prospered in the business of trading with the Indian tribes. But, after the disastrous defeat of the Sacs and Winnebagoes in the Black Hawk War in 1832, the Indians were forced to withdraw from Illinois to the reservations beyond the Mississippi. This event marks the end of the fur traffic in Illinois.

Hubbard's career, thus described, spans in the main the transition era from fur-trading to agriculture in Illinois, and exhibits the last stages of this primitive form of barter. Furthermore, his activities typify the initiative, the aggressiveness, and the efficiency of the American Fur Company in its control of the Indian trade on a large scale.

"Just what the American Fur Company meant to Illinois", declares a student of Hubbard's career, "it is difficult for us of the present to realize. But when we reflect that the few white settlements sprinkled here and there in the wilderness would have been practically out of touch with the world save for the river traffic carried on by this first of American 'trusts,' and when we remember that the Indians were held in check not so much by force as by the self-interest of trade, we conceive its import to our forebears, not merely from the trade standpoint, but from the human side as well."¹⁰

Few people have ever heard of Gershom Flagg, a pioneer of Illinois, whose career illustrates one of the currents of westward migration from New England in the forepart of the last century.¹¹ These streams of migration starting from the eastern seaboard regions widened and overflowed into the valleys of the Ohio, the Wabash, the Illinois, and the Mississippi. Gershom Flagg never won a battle, nor wrote a statute, nor sat in the Senate nor ran for President of the United States. Nevertheless, in the migration and settlement by this man there is typified that western expansion which made possible the construction of high-

¹⁰ Quoted from Miss McIlvaine's introduction to *The Autobiography of Gurdon Saltonstall Hubbard*, p. xi.

¹¹ For the materials from which this story of Gershom Flagg has been constructed the writer is indebted to the *Pioneer Letters of Gershom Flagg*. These *Letters* are skillfully edited, with introduction and notes, by Dr. Solon J. Buck of the University of Illinois and are published in the *Transactions of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 1910, pp. 139-183.

ways, the building of churches and schools, and the founding of American homes and Commonwealths. It will repay, it is believed, a few minutes time to associate with such a man who was a participant, an observer, and a describer.

Eight hundred and ninety-eight miles were covered by this youth of twenty-four in the fall of 1816 in the first section of his migration from Richland, Vermont, to Springfield, Ohio. Reaching Troy, New York, Flagg and his companion passed the old Dutch settlement of Schenectady and soon reached Utica. From the thirteen-year-old village of Rochester their road led to Niagara Falls, Buffalo, and then along the lake to the port of Erie. Pennsylvania was crossed; and in Ohio the villages of Cadiz, Cambridge, Zanesville, Lancaster, Columbus, and Urbana marked their route. The trip had taken forty-seven days at the rate of nineteen miles per day and Flagg explained, "We came a roundabout way I suppose but I think we took the best road."

Here in Champaign County, Ohio, Flagg remained for several months. Families of emigrants were arriving from New York, Vermont, and other States, penniless and without grain for their worn-out horses. "I believe Many people who come to this Country are greatly disappointed", he writes in one of his letters to Vermont. Hardships and high prices were inducing not a few families to move on to Indiana or Missouri. "The good thing[s] in this Country", he wrote, "are Plenty of Grain which makes large fat horses and Cattle Rich Land ready cleared, some Whiskey plenty of feed for Cattle, Plumbs, Peaches, Mellons, Deer, Wild turkies, Ducks, Rabits, quails, &c &c &c, little more Corn. The bad things are, Want of Stone, Want of timber for building, Bad Water, which will not Wash Bad Roads, ignorant people, Sick Milk, Sick Wheat, a plenty of Ague near the large streams Bad situation as to trade."

Again young Flagg looked to the westward from whence came reports of land surveys and sales, speculation, the founding of towns, and mineral riches. Describing the stimulation from these rumors, he wrote to his mother in Vermont in February of 1818: "the Missouri & Illinois fever Rages greatly in Ohio, Kentucky, & Tennessee and carries off thousand[s]. When I got to Ohio my Ohio fever began to turn but I soon caught the Missouri fever which is very catchin and carried me off."

In the summer of 1817 Flagg travelled the seventy-five miles from Springfield to Cincinnati. The Queen of the West was then a growing city of over 7000. Observing that the government land upon the Wabash was taken up and that the other Indiana lands were still held by the tribes of Indians, he decided to go on to St. Louis. In partnership with another young Vermonter he next purchased a flat-boat which they covered and stocked with provisions. Leaving the bustling city of Cincinnati on October 19, 1817, the boat floated down the Ohio River, past the Falls of the Ohio and the mouth of the Wabash, and reached Cairo — a distance of 645 miles from Cincinnati by water. Placing the chests and trunks on a keel-boat bound for St. Louis the two men covered the remaining distance of 174 miles on foot and reached that city on November 19, 1817.

St. Louis, this young pioneer found, was a place of thriving business activity. Brick and frame houses were being constructed; printing offices, banks, and a steam sawmill were in operation; corn, wheat, potatoes, beef, lumber, and brick were selling at high prices; labor was \$20 per month; board was \$3.50 to \$6.00 per week and town lots were selling from \$500 to \$3000 each.

Twenty-six miles east of St. Louis Flagg located 264 acres of land near what is now Edwardsville in the county of Madison, Illinois. Returning to the flourishing land

market at St. Louis, he was unable to secure employment as government land surveyor. In the previous winter (1816-1817) eighty surveying companies had monopolized his business and had surveyed several millions of acres. Furthermore, Flagg complained that the "Surveyor General has three or four Brothers with 15 or 20 other connections all surveyors."

Here upon his land this young farmer labored and prospered. Speculation and hard times came on but the thrifty pioneer lived upon "my earnings and not upon my credit or speculation". The oppressive heat of the summer of 1820 he describes in a non-terrestrial term; but in that season he plowed or broke more than 120 acres of new prairie with four yoke of oxen and with a man to drive them. Forty acres were fenced in and a log house was built. "We have pretty tight times here," he wrote the next year. "Most of the People are in debt for Land and many otherwise more than they can possibly pay." His market report for that year is as follows: corn, 12½ cents per bushel; wheat, 50 cents; flour, \$3.00 to \$3.50 per barrel; pork, \$2.50 to \$3.00 per barrel; and whiskey, \$.25 per gallon.

Political and religious conditions were noted by this pioneer. In 1824 he believed that the majority of the people in Illinois favored John Quincy Adams for President with Clay as a second choice. The next year he states that "our political squables and quarrels have subsided" and that the slavery question in Illinois had been settled forever. Referring in 1836 to the eastern solicitude for the spiritual welfare of the people in the Mississippi Valley when Bible societies and missionary enterprises were being projected, he wrote in a tone of some impatience: "I do not see but the cause flourishes as well here as in other places the people here contribute freely for the support of Preachers both in money and good living which is the main thing."

Possessing a clear title to 270 acres of land in 1821 Flagg continued to prosper. Four years later he speaks of his flourishing orchards of peach, cherry, and pear, besides several log buildings. In addition he possessed four yoke of oxen, three good ploughs, two wooden carts, sleds, a grindstone, two axes, shovels, hoes, etc. In June of 1825 he had purchased 1500 acres of valuable land for the unpaid taxes which amounted to \$103.00.

Confiding his financial rating, he wrote to his brother in 1821: "I owe \$56 dollars and have due to me \$110 from good men and have \$34 in cash on hand. I have twelve shirts six pair Pantaloons 6 vests ten cravats & handkerchiefs two roundabouts 4 pair stocking two pair shoes one Coat in Short I suppose my whole property to be worth about \$1500 in cash and now I suppose I have been particular enough on that subject at any rate I do not wish any one to see this letter except yourself."

For forty years, until his death in 1857, this man was a resident of Illinois, and, as in the case of thousands of other pioneers his neighborhood became a reservoir into which population from the east filtered. Of his eight younger brothers and sisters five followed him to Illinois — four settling in Madison County. His sister's family likewise removed to Illinois shortly after her death, and as late as 1850 one of his nephews from the East moved to Paw Paw, Illinois. "The descendants of these brothers and sisters", says Dr. Buck, "are now scattered all over the United States from Vermont to California and thus the history of this family typifies in a way the spread of the American people across the continent."¹²

In this spread of population over the continent the plain, aggressive Americans coming singly, in pairs, in families

¹² Quotation from Buck's introduction to the *Pioneer Letters of Gershom Flagg*.

and in colonies were the type which transplanted schools, churches, and town-meetings. As late as 1880 there were 12,588 citizens in Michigan who were natives of Vermont. The migratory spirit of these easterners had many years before passed into verse:

Come, all ye Yankee farmers who wish to change your lot,
Who've spunk enough to travel beyond your native spot,
And leave behind the village where Pa and Ma do stay,
Come follow me, and settle in Michigania,—
Yea, yea, yea, in Michigania.¹³

When the first public land sales began in this State at Burlington on November 19, 1838, land-hungry settlers from nearly every State in the Union were there. The Massachusetts Yankee was present to seize any bargain; the Kentuckian with his soft southern accent mingled with his brethren from South Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, and Tennessee; large numbers were gathered from Illinois, Ohio and Indiana; the Hadleys were registered from South Carolina; and besides there was present a considerable group of settlers who had but lately come from the District of Columbia.¹⁴

In the staid records of these land sales as preserved in Washington, D. C. appear descriptions of the tracts sold, the prices, the date, and the amount of sale. In the thousands of names there recorded one can find but very few names of men whose constituency of acquaintances or reputation was wider than the neighborhood or county from whence they had come. These were plain, uncelebrated men making history that was fundamental in State-building. Though the bidding in of a tract of 160 acres and its later settlement would seem to be acts divorced from any glamor

¹³ Quoted from Farmer's *History of Detroit and Michigan* in Mathews's *The Expansion of New England*, p. 227.

¹⁴ Pelzer's *Augustus Caesar Dodge*, pp. 55-61.

and romance they were of the highest importance in the life of the settler.¹⁵ To him they meant a livelihood, property security, and a Christian home.

It was estimated that for the public sales at Burlington between November, 1838, and June, 1840, ninety per cent of the lands sold fell into the hands of actual settlers. It is perhaps true that nowhere in the history of settlement and immigration can there be found a more democratic and sounder economic condition — a condition for which these plain settlers were the basis.

It is the common, average man who has furnished mass or collectivity. However great may have been the influence of a dominating personality there are whole fields of history where such influence is but slightly possible; as for example in customs, language, mythology, and sometimes in law and industry. Those designated as leaders must have an understanding of the will, the feelings, and the vague ideas of the social body of common people. In this wise strong personalities can push forward policies or creeds to a fuller clearness and a wider acceptance.¹⁶

Says Hegel in describing what he calls the "World-Historical Individuals": "Such individuals had no consciousness of the general Idea they were unfolding, while prosecuting those aims of theirs; on the contrary, they were practical, political men. But at the same time they were thinking men, who had an insight into the requirements of the time — *what was ripe for development.*"¹⁷

This is but another way of saying that laws — moral and

¹⁵ Cf. preface to Treat's *The National Land System 1785-1820*.

¹⁶ Cf. Dow's *Features of the New History: Apropos of Lamprecht's "Deutsche Geschichte"* in the *American Historical Review*, Vol. III, pp. 431-448, (435).

¹⁷ Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (Translated by J. Sibree, 1894), pp. 30, 31.

statutory — to be successful must have a measure of acceptance or approval from those units which make up the masses of the common people. As the Mississippi could not be, were it not for its tributaries, so Andrew Jackson's career would have been impossible but for the prejudices, ideals, and strength which arose from that stratum of society known as Western Democracy.

It has been stated that the essential factor in the building up of the British Empire has been the colonist rather than the colonel, the settler rather than the sergeant; the men who have wielded the spade and trowel rather than the sword and spear.¹⁸ So in the colonization of America it was by plain men from England, Holland, and France that ideals were transplanted and a new nation founded. And, it was by the hunters, fur-traders, tree-fellers, farmers, and miners who swarmed across the Mississippi River that the Louisiana territory was won for the United States rather than by the diplomats in Washington and Europe. It was by the unsuspected but irresistible powers of these plain folk that the Americanization of the Mississippi Valley was accomplished.¹⁹

The Middle West is preëminently the product of the plain people. "All through American history democracy

¹⁸ Pollard's *Factors in Modern History*, p. 239.

"Yet, with few exceptions, the writers of history, until a comparatively recent period, have written chiefly of wars and words, of soldiers and politicians, and have neglected the matters of more real moment to the seriously interested student of man — matters pertaining to his origin and development, to his daily life and pursuits, his migrations and colonies, his taboos, ceremonies, social culture, and religions."—Hanna's *The Wilderness Trail*, Vol. I, p. XIII.

¹⁹ Cf. Roosevelt's *The Winning of the West* (Standard Library Edition), Vol. IV, pp. 276, 281.

"The history of the occupation of the West is the story of a great pilgrimage. It is the record of a people always outstripping its leaders in wisdom, in energy and in foresight. A slave of politics, the American citizen has none the less always proved himself greater than politics or politicians."—Hough's *The Way to the West* (Bobbs-Merrill Edition, 1903), p. 2.

has been like a trade-wind, blowing over from the sunset. The young States of the Ohio Valley led in multiplying the number of elective offices, in introducing rapid rotation in office, in submitting State constitutions to popular ratification. Class bulwarks of colonial date were thus pounded to pieces by the surf of democratic sentiment from the West. Jeffersonian and Jacksonian Democracy, Lincoln Republicanism, Grangerism, Populism, Bryan Democracy, Roosevelt Republicanism — wave after wave has rolled seaward, loosing the East from its Old-World or 'first-family' or 'best-people' moorings. Some of these impulses were wrong-headed and died away, others prevailed, and the sum of these successful Western initiatives is what we offer to the world as the American political system."²⁰

A study and appreciation of the contributions made by Plain Men is a distinct phase of the newer history. It is a study of history from its understructure and foundations to its capitals and colonnades. "The real life of the American nation spreads throughout forty-eight commonwealths. It is lived in the very commonplaces of the shop, the factory, the store, the office, in the mine, and on the farm. Through the commonwealths the life and spirit of the nation are best expressed. And every local community, however humble, participates in the formation and expression of that life and spirit."²¹ And that is the history made by Plain Men.

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²⁰ Quoted from Ross's *The Middle West* in *The Century Magazine*, Vol. LXXXIII, No. 5, pp. 686-692.

²¹ Quoted from Shambaugh's *The West and the Pioneers* in the *Wisconsin State Historical Society Proceedings*, 1910, pp. 133-145.