

# THE PALIMPSEST

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## The National Scene

Exactly one hundred years ago, in 1833, the American people completed the first half century of acknowledged and secure independence. By that time they had increased in number from between three and four million to over thirteen million. They were of English, German, and Scotch-Irish stock chiefly, with slight contributions of Dutch and French. This biologic enlargement of fifty years was almost entirely from natural causes, for foreign immigration of the post-revolutionary period was yet in slow and early tide, less than 150,000 having come from abroad between 1821 and 1830. The physical stage on which the American drama was unfolding was, because of the Louisiana and Florida purchases, more than twice as large in 1833 as it had been in 1783. The national domain covered an area of almost 1,800,000 square miles. Eleven new States had been admitted to the company of the



original thirteen, thus bringing the number to twenty-four, exactly half of the present aggregation.

Three phases of economic activity absorbed the energy of the people: agriculture, manufacture, and commerce, but the greatest of these was agriculture. The close of the colonial period had found over ninety per cent of the population either actually at work upon the land or living in small agricultural communities. This was still the case in 1833, and the situation did not change much in the next thirty years. Confined to the Atlantic plain during the colonial years, the agrarian empire had advanced deep into the Mississippi Valley by the opening of the third decade of the nineteenth century, and had even flung its outposts across the great river.

During the eighteen thirties manufacture was in process of transition from the home to the factory. There had been practically no distinction between agricultural and manufacturing economics in colonial times. For the most part the farmer was then not only a tiller of the soil but a jack-of-all-trades. Hard days in the field were followed by long nights in the farm kitchen making implements, furniture, shoes, and all articles and devices necessary to preserve life and to maintain a minimum of decency and comfort in a



near primitive environment. Relief had come to the communities as the specialized craftsman appeared, and to the countryside when he became itinerant, but the revival of individual skills did not disturb the domestic system. Craftsmanship was essentially a part of it. That system was to fall not before the craftsman but the machine.

In the middle thirties household manufacture was still of first importance in the industrial economy of the country, and continued active as long as frontier conditions prevailed. Yet the transition from handicraft to machine production was under way. The most vigorous response to the new techniques had been made by the textiles. The value of products made from cotton alone was estimated at \$26,000,000 in 1830, though the industrial records of the period are faulty and unreliable. Shoemaking had achieved a measure of mass production. Commercial grain milling, meat packing, lumber cutting, coal mining, distilling, leather work, and the exploitation of the metals — iron chiefly — were in process of expansion, though from their nature it is clear that some of these industries never had been literally domestic. The fact is that in 1833 much manufacture had to do with the extractives; "pure manufacture" had hardly more than crossed the threshold of the factory.



To provide for the flow of domestic commerce a transportation system was in process of evolution. Road construction was retarded by political antagonisms, but the Mississippi, Ohio, and Hudson rivers, together with many tributaries, were nature's provision for smooth interchange. Slowly and laboriously the natural waterways had been supplemented by a canal system that constituted a network of 1300 miles in 1830 and which was over 3300 miles in 1840. But the coming of the railroads set sharp limits to this form of capital investment. It was a dramatic decade for the new invention. From virtually nothing at all at the beginning, the trackage had expanded to almost 3000 miles when it closed. Sea-borne commerce was still in the hands of an able class of men that had inherited a notable maritime tradition from the colonial era. Encouraged by Congress, both foreign and coastwise trade was diligently pushed. Exports valued at \$72,000,000 and imports valued at \$63,000,000 witnessed to the favorable trade balance in 1830.

A labor movement existed in the United States by 1833. It had passed beyond the fraternal stage of colonial days as the widening divide between employer and worker became apparent. The twenties had seen the first effort to organize a modern trades union. In 1833 was founded the



General Trades Union of New York City. But these were local groupings. There was no national labor movement, and no appreciable bitterness between capital and labor. The machine was yet in its infancy and the West was a vast and inviting asylum for the discontented.

In 1833 the political tempest that had raged for a decade came to dramatic climax. The issues upon which the turbulent waters broke were personal, social, and sectional. There were too many giants in the land in those days: at least too many men of great ability who made the Presidency the dearest object of their desire and who, failing to achieve it, were wounded in pride and disheartened in purpose. These painful facts were reflected in the conflicting policies and embittered relations of John Q. Adams, Daniel Webster, Andrew Jackson, John C. Calhoun, and Henry Clay, to mention only the chief actors upon the stage. Andrew Jackson overcame his rivals and enjoyed an uproarious progress to the Executive Mansion in 1828, there to remain in secure tenure for eight years. His going thence was the visible evidence of successful social revolt. City workers and farmers had become vocal. Common men of East and West again, as in 1800, had assailed and carried the seats of the mighty. It was a sectional and social victory for the frontier.



But the line of political and sectional conflict was more acutely drawn between North and South. Two issues revealed it sharply by 1830: the tariff and slavery. Since 1816 the protective barriers had been rising. Though undisturbed in the day of high prices for cotton, southern planters increased their opposition inversely to the decline of cotton values. In 1832 furious South Carolinians repudiated the compact of federal union, refusing, as they saw it, to exalt the economic fortune of northern manufacturers at the expense of their own. South Carolina's extremism was thirty years too soon however. Nullification could win no such support in 1832 as could secession in 1860, and when Henry Clay put on the white robe of compromise in 1833 the passionate issue was composed by bargain and balance.

But as the tariff controversy subsided, slavery passion advanced. By 1833 cotton had achieved its *coup d'état* and at the South a new positivism was dissolving the ethical and material doubts about the slave system that the exhausted tobacco lands had induced. In the North, on the other hand, long indifference was giving way to increasing irritation as the two regional systems came more visibly into conflict. Certain northern groups were in open revolt. Garrison had been thundering in the *Emancipator* for two years.



Sharp issues of politics and economics were not the sole concern of Americans in 1833. The social structure was many-sided. Curious foreigners found it irritating or interesting according to personal disposition. Most found it provocative. Alexis de Tocqueville, stirred by the nature and achievements of the American democratic experiment, had just gone back to France to write his great work. After four years in America, Frances Trollope returned home to publish, in 1832, her scathing criticism of American ways, and to tell the world of the "total and universal want of manners, both in males and females . . . I very seldom, during my whole stay in the country, heard a sentence elegantly turned, and correctly pronounced from the lips of an American. There is always something either in the expression or the accent that jars the feelings and shocks the taste." Mrs. Trollope, however, did confess to some regard for the American intellect, but not so the Reverend Isaac Fidler whose judgment was that "There is hardly any village in England which does not possess residents of greater learning than in almost any large town in the United States." Happily, before the thirties ran out more generous appraisals were to be made by foreign visitors.

Without rationalization, a good case could be made for the dignity of the mind and manners of



America at this time. Social grace and clever conversation were in ample evidence in the polite circles of Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Richmond, and Charleston, and for many years a steady stream of intellectual stimulus had been flowing from numerous academic centers between Harvard and William and Mary, and from the younger colleges of the hinterland. The proof of personal and group culture might be found in every package of mail, and in newspapers and journals. The behavior of the boisterous throng that had accompanied "Old Hickory" to the capital was really not an index to the manners of all America.

Literature can not be said to have been in flower in the America of the thirties. These were years, however, of nurture and preparation for some who were to bring great credit and some glory to American letters during the next two decades. Emerson was thirty years old in 1833 and the year before had resigned his pastorate in Boston and gone abroad to meet great men as well as to seek relief from "the mouse gnawing in his chest". Nathaniel Hawthorne was twenty-nine, Longfellow and Whittier, twenty-six, Edgar Allen Poe and Oliver Wendell Holmes, twenty-four, Thoreau, sixteen, and James Russell Lowell, fourteen. Some of these already had tried their literary



wings. William Cullen Bryant had completed his poetic cycle and turned to journalism. James Fenimore Cooper's productivity was at full tide, so was that of Washington Irving, and William Gilmore Simms, though only twenty-seven, was giving promise of his literary fertility. John Pendleton Kennedy, and some others, were writing books that ought to be better known, and William Dunlap enriched the decade and obliged posterity with his *History of the American Theatre* and the *History of the Arts of Design in America*.

A tide of romanticism was running strong in American life in the eighteen thirties. It was manifest in political ideas and aspirations, in literature and religion, in the individualism of the frontier, in the recent Utopian venture at New Harmony, and that at Brook Farm at the end of the decade; in the sweeping force of humanitarian and reforming zeal that labored for the establishment of asylums, universal peace, prison reform, woman's rights, temperance, and the abolition of slavery.

The romantic spirit was powerfully marked in educational ideals and purposes. It was the second quarter of the nineteenth century that witnessed the fierce battle for a system of lower education involving public control of schools, support by taxation, compulsory attendance, and non-



sectarianism. Society divided upon this question as passionately as lately it has divided over Prohibition. In secondary education this was the period of the academy with its effort to broaden the base and nature of the curriculum. In higher education there was no relaxation of religious influence and control. Almost every one of the thirty-six colleges and universities established between 1830 and 1840 was the creation and concern of some church group.

Perhaps it was in religion that the romanticism of the period reached flood tide, expressing itself in metaphysical speculations, emotional ecstasies and multiplied interpretations. The romantic satisfactions of these were very great but the trend was highly centrifugal and worked havoc with the ideal of Christian unity. The body of the church was infinitely scattered. There were Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists, many times divided and subdivided within themselves. There were Catholics, Quakers, Dunkers, Rappists, Mormons, Mennonites, Campbellites, Millerites, Dutch Reformed, Unitarians, Universalists, and so on, almost endlessly. There was something for everyone: medieval mysticism, modern rationalism, ebullient emotionalism. The latter was particularly attractive and perhaps inevitable in an environment of sweeping distance,



slight settlement, and crushing loneliness. From such conditions the camp meeting evolved spontaneously, providing means for human fellowship and emotional release. That these often took rapturous and grotesque form in this period is not difficult to understand.

National consciousness, though not national unity, was present and growing in the American mind at this stage of the middle period. It found expression, certainly, in political events and, measurably, in educational experiment and literary performance. It was strong in frontier society. In 1832 Samuel F. Smith had made it vocal in "America". There was less looking back to old-world origins. Americans everywhere loved the rocks, the hills, and the prairies of their native land.

But not all things felt this impulse. The arts, for example, expressed it tardily. Of the painters John Singleton Copely and Benjamin West had gone to their graves nationally inert. Gilbert Stuart had exemplified a genius that owed more to America than to Europe, but Thomas Sully, through a long life that touched the Revolution at one end and Grant's second administration at the other, remained faithful to the English vogue. John Vanderlyn, though breaking with the English tradition, turned not to the American scene



but to France for inspiration. America was still without distinctive architecture unless the log cabin be considered such.

The American republic was in close touch with its origins in 1833. Washington had been in his grave only thirty-four years, John Adams and Jefferson only seven years. John Marshall was still among the living. But the young nation also was approaching its deepest trial and anguish. Ulysses Grant was attending school in Georgetown, Ohio. Both Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis were engaged in the military service of their country, and Abraham Lincoln was postmaster at New Salem, a strong youth of twenty-four. The fathers had not been long at rest, and future leaders and events were close at hand. From this year of curious placement one could see the receding light of the republic's natal star, and could hear the rumble of the gathering storm within whose fury the power of the nation to endure was to be fearfully tested.

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