

# THE PALIMPSEST

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## The National Scene in 1838\*

Martin Van Buren was President of the United States in 1838. When he entered the White House the previous year with the aid and blessing of Andrew Jackson, Victoria of England was in the first year of her reign; Louis Philippe was on the throne of France; Germany and Italy as we know them had not achieved unification; Japan was yet deep in medieval slumber. There were twenty-six States in the Federal Union, and the population was approaching the seventeen million to be reported in the census of 1840. Foreign immigration was on the way to becoming a major factor in the nation's life. Whereas less than 150,000 persons came to these shores between 1820 and 1830, approximately 600,000 were to arrive during the fourth decade of the century.

The American people were pressing eagerly into their marvelous West. By the opening of the

\*For a similar view of national conditions five years earlier, by the same author, see *THE PALIMPSEST* for February, 1933.

eighteen thirties, Ohio had more people than Massachusetts and Connecticut together. In 1838, Indiana and Illinois had been in the official family for two decades; Michigan had just entered. The Mississippi River had long since been reached and crossed. Louisiana became a State as early as 1812, Missouri in 1821, and Arkansas in 1836. In addition to its generous land policy, the Federal government was encouraging the westward migration with the construction of the National Road. It was in 1838 that Congress made the last appropriation for that famous highway. Altogether it cost the government nearly seven million dollars.

In the older sections of the country, urbanization was proceeding rapidly during the fourth decade of the nineteenth century. Between 1820 and 1840, cities containing upward of 8000 inhabitants increased in number from thirteen to forty-four. By 1840, New York had over 300,000 persons, Philadelphia over 220,000, New Orleans and Baltimore over 100,000 each, and Boston 95,000. Urban growth was the measure of the nation's industrialization. Factories were multiplying and the body of labor increasing. Massachusetts and Rhode Island were the centers of textile manufacture; New York and Pennsylvania of the iron industry. The total value of manufac-

tured products in 1840 was half a billion dollars.

Domestic commerce moved chiefly on water highways. Supplementing the rivers was an expanding network of canals. Railroads were still in their infancy though experiencing impressive growth. From twenty-three miles in 1830, railroad trackage increased to 2800 miles in 1840 as against a canal development in the latter year of 3320 miles. By this decade the domestic economic triangle was pronounced. The South was selling cotton to the East; the West was sending its surplus food products to the South; and the East was shipping its manufactured articles to both South and West.

Foreign commerce was of small volume in 1838. In that year, the nation's exports were valued at little more than \$100,000,000. Agricultural products accounted for eighty per cent of this total, three-fourths of these being cotton. Consequently, the amount of manufactured goods exported was very small. Imports in this year were valued at less than \$100,000,000. In reference to the future of American maritime commerce, it is worth noting that in 1838 the English coal-burning, wooden, side-wheel steamship *Great Western* crossed the Atlantic, and in spite of the stirring challenge of the American clipper ships some years later, the English proved to be more

far-sighted in resting their bid for ocean supremacy on steam.

A condition of economic distress prevailed in the United States a hundred years ago. If, on the one hand, the vast sweep of western land provided magnetic attraction for the settler, it also was an irresistible temptation to the speculator. The gulf between speculation and development steadily widened, and in 1836 President Jackson moved to check the disparity. His Specie Circular of that year required the use of gold and silver in payment for government land purchases, thus indirectly discrediting the masses of paper money that the banks, many of them wildcat institutions, had put in circulation. Nervous persons hurried to convert their paper holdings into specie, but since there was not nearly enough metal to make redemption, the banks were helpless before the demand. Panic, as economic depression and recession were called in those days, swept the country. Business firms went down with the banks in the crash; factories closed; prices soared. Labor suffered severely as unemployment spread and wages declined as much as fifty per cent. Labor unions, which by 1837 had achieved a membership of 300,000, received a setback the effects of which were felt for two decades. Poor Van Buren, like Cleveland in 1893, and Hoover in 1929, ar-

rived in time for the storm, and his administration was plagued by its misery.

A flurry of hostility disturbed the international affairs of the United States. In 1837 a rebellion broke out in Canada against British authority. There were "incidents" on the border between Maine and New Brunswick. Americans were accused of assisting the rebels. On the other hand, Canadian militia entered American waters and seized a ship which was operating in the service of the insurgents. In January, 1838, Van Buren sent General Winfield Scott to the scene of the trouble. A truce was eventually reached, and final settlement embodied in the Ashburton Treaty of 1842.

In the decade of the thirties the controversy between North and South was assuming distressing sharpness. During its earlier years, South Carolina's threat of nullification had been faced down by Andrew Jackson, though Congress yielded to the demand of the planters for a low tariff. But, cotton was on the march. Texas (which had seceded from Mexico in 1835, and witnessed the tragedy of the Alamo the following year) was pressing for annexation. Until the eighteen twenties, southern slaveowners had been at least half-apologetic for their labor system, but by 1838, John C. Calhoun of South Carolina was describing Negro bondage as "a positive good". There-

after, the pro-slavery argument grew passionate as servitude became more deeply entrenched in the land of cotton.

Equally intense was the movement at the North opposing slavery. In 1831 came William Lloyd Garrison breathing defiance in *The Liberator*, and fiercely declaring, "I will not equivocate . . . I will be heard." Anti-slavery organizations rapidly multiplied, and a stream of intemperate literature poured from their presses. Congress was deluged with petitions and memorials. The cause had its bloody martyrdom in 1837 when Elijah Lovejoy was shot down at Alton, Illinois. Two years later the office in Philadelphia where John Greenleaf Whittier was editing the *Pennsylvania Freeman*, was attacked and burned. In 1838 the underground railroad was formally organized in Philadelphia.

In the United States a hundred years ago, determined efforts were being made to broaden and democratize education. The New England effort of colonial days had not inspired imitation in the other sections, so that in the country as a whole education was largely a private matter, to be enjoyed by those who could afford to pay for it. Some free schools existed in the southern and middle States for the use of the children of the poor. But these labored under what in those days

was regarded as the stigma of charity, an attitude which militated against the emergence of the free school for all. Nevertheless, dynamic men were pressing for educational reform, notably Horace Mann in Massachusetts and Henry Barnard in Connecticut and Rhode Island.

The soil of the West was fertile for the growth of a democratic system of education. The famous Ordinance of 1787 had marked a promising beginning by providing for the reservation within each future township of one section of the public land for the support of schools. On the higher levels, too, education was democratically broadened as State universities emerged and spread across the country. Michigan wrote its university into the State constitution in 1835, and the University of Vermont was rechartered as a State institution in 1838. Missouri made provision for a State university in 1839.

This period witnessed the beginning of recognition of women's right to higher learning. Co-education became a practice at Oberlin College, Ohio, in 1833, and in 1836 a female seminary was established at Mount Holyoke, Massachusetts. Nine seminaries in Iowa, authorized in 1838, were to be open to students of both sexes.

Nor was adult education ignored by this eager generation. The free public library was a growing

institution; vocational courses were being given in the cities at mechanics' institutes; and the lyceum was spreading across the land. Appearing in the eighteen twenties, the lyceum had about 3000 local units by the middle thirties. There were State lyceum boards; and in 1839 was held a national lyceum convention. One of the very few of Abraham Lincoln's early speeches to be preserved was given in 1838 before a young men's lyceum in Springfield, Illinois.

The advance of mind and spirit in America was reflected in the literature of the period. Now came a promise for American letters that the future was to fulfill brilliantly. Irving and Cooper were already established. An edition of Bryant's collected poems appeared in 1832, and between 1834 and 1840 George Bancroft published the first three volumes of his history. Edgar Allan Poe was in the midst of his producing career, and, in 1838, went to Philadelphia to become editor of *The Gentleman's Magazine*. In the following year he published his *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*.

The thirties were an eventful decade in the life of Emerson. During the year 1837 he called Americans to a declaration of intellectual independence in his epochal Phi Beta Kappa address, "The American Scholar". Equally stirring was

his address in 1838 to the senior students of the Cambridge Divinity School urging independence from traditional creeds and religious orthodoxy. These were the years when the Transcendentalists were meeting together for discourse and disputation, and at the end of the decade *The Dial* was established, that the fruits of their symposia might not be lost.

Hawthorne came quietly into print in 1837 with *Twice Told Tales*. In 1838, Longfellow began publishing lyrics in the *Knickerbocker Magazine* which were reprinted in his first volume of poems in 1839 as *Voices of the Night*. At the opening of the thirties, Whittier published his *Legends of New England*, and volumes of poems in 1837 and 1838. In the latter year he went to Philadelphia to edit the *Pennsylvania Freeman*. Through the thirties, too, Whittier was writing and publishing anti-slavery verses later to be gathered into a volume as *Voices of Freedom*. Beyond the writing of books, newspapers were multiplying in number and circulation; the decade saw the beginning of the *New York Sun* and the *New York Herald*.

By the eighteen thirties the first generation of painters that could pretend to competence had passed from the scene. Copley died in 1815, West in 1820, and Stuart in 1828. But the number of American-born artists was increasing and, though

European influences were still strong, native feeling was becoming more perceptible. Portraiture was yet the pronounced form of painting. Chester Harding of Massachusetts was in such demand as a portraitist that the aging Stuart asked, "How rages the Harding fever?" Henry Inman settled in Philadelphia and, in 1838, earned by his art nearly \$9000. William Sidney Mount varied portraiture with *genre* studies: his "Raffling for the Goose" and the "Power of Music" are still able to endure close technical scrutiny, and stimulate great emotional pleasure. The promise of deeper native feeling was in the Hudson River School of landscape painters.

Society in early nineteenth century America was not without musical appreciation. Folk songs of the English, Dutch, Germans, and Scotch were sung. Moved to lament or ecstasy by slavery or religion, the Negro bondsmen developed words and melody that could not fail to arrest the attention of white society. Church and choral music was already conspicuous. Opera was getting a start in the Italian Opera House of New York City, opened in 1833 and destroyed by fire in 1839. Interesting was the immediate controversy over the question whether opera should be sung in English or Italian, with the majority demanding English.

The level of American culture was more gratifying to Americans themselves than to critics abroad, but at least one Englishman was constructively interested in the intellectual harvest of the years. It was in 1838 that Congress accepted the munificent gift of one hundred thousand pounds from James Smithson, providing for "an establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men." The result was the creation of the Smithsonian Institution.

By 1838, American society was becoming impressed with the magnificence of its heritage and the splendid prospect of the future. A tide of elation was rising in the national heart. Soon would be heard the surging chant of "manifest destiny". Not many yet could hear the low rumble of gathering tragedy — the rising storm of "irrepressible conflict". And no one, not even himself, dreamed of the significance of Abraham Lincoln who, at this midway point of his life, was a member of the Illinois legislature, and just establishing himself in his residence at Springfield.

HARRISON JOHN THORNTON