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Dreaming the Metropolis

Patterns on a Prairie Landscape

Before the city, there was the land. Go back just over a century and a half to the place that became Chicago, and our familiar distinction between city and country vanishes. At the mouth of the river where the city would one day stand, small human settlements came and went, but their inhabitants would no more have used the word “urban” to describe the place than the word “rural.” Without those words, there could be no city here, not until people came who could dream city dreams in the midst of a cityless landscape. Chicago remained a gathering place like so many other gathering places scattered between the Great Lakes and the Rocky Mountains. What most distinguished it were the wild garlic plants that grew amid the grasses and sedges of its low-lying prairie. From them, it had gained its name: Chigagou, “the wild-garlic place.”¹

And yet if the boundary between city and country had no meaning here, that did not imply that this was a world without borders. Far from it. The city’s history may have begun in the human dreams that prophesied its rise, but those dreams laid their foundations on solid earth, tracing their destiny onto the land’s own patterns.

The natural feature that first defined Chicago’s location was the river. In the long expanse of Lake Michigan’s southern shoreline, this sluggish waterway provided one of the few sheltered spots for vessels seeking harbor. The sandbar at its mouth blocked storm surges and protected the waters behind from wind and waves. Sailors would welcome the relief it offered from the lake’s angrier moods. Those traveling by canoe found in it a boundary between open and flowing waters, with their different

rhythms of paddles and movement. It was also a passage into the interior. About a mile from its mouth, two prairie streams converged to form the main channel. Neither was much of a river. But less than half a dozen miles from the lake, the south fork found its source on a low wet ridge that for several months of the year flooded to become almost an open marsh. East of that ridge, water flowed down to the lake and on to the St. Lawrence River; west of the ridge, water flowed south to the Mississippi. Although barely fifteen feet higher than Lake Michigan, the ridge sat atop one of the chief natural boundaries of North America, separating the two greatest watersheds east of the Rocky Mountains. By canoeing across it—as was possible without even portaging during wet seasons of the year—one could paddle halfway across the continent, from the North Atlantic to the Gulf of Mexico.²

The ridge signified more than just a boundary between watersheds. Thirteen thousand years earlier, it had been part of the terminal moraine at the edge of the great Ice Age glaciers as they began their long retreat to the north. As such, it marked another, much older boundary between ice and land. Although the glaciers had long since vanished, they had altered everything in their path. Far to the north, on the ancient rocks that would become northern Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan, the ice stripped the land of its soil, leaving it badly drained and not very fertile. Grinding southward, the glaciers gouged out tiny ponds and enormous lakes, finally depositing immense loads of soil and gravel wherever they paused in their advances and retreats. Illinois and Iowa, southern Wisconsin and Minnesota, and Chicago itself were all blessed with these Ice Age gifts from the north. As winds blew across the great outwash plains on the margins of the ice sheets, dust storms lifted fine-grained sediments and deposited them as rich loess soil on many of the region's hillsides. Then, as the glaciers disappeared, enormous volumes of water released from their melting ice carved new routes for the major watercourses of the region, creating or reshaping rivers as different as the Chicago, the Wisconsin, and the Mississippi.³

In the wake of the glaciers, the climate warmed and winter snows ceased to accumulate. Specialized communities of plants, each adapted to a different set of habitats, moved northward with the warmer weather, as did the animals that lived in their midst. Near the glacier's edge, retreating with it, were the lichens and low grasses of the arctic tundra. Behind them came spruces and other coniferous trees that ruled the landscape for thousands of years until they too moved north, to be followed by the broad-leaved oaks and hickories of the deciduous forest. And to the west, where the climate became drier and fires burned so regularly that trees could not keep a toehold, the tall grasses of the prairies moved in to make

their home.⁴ These postglacial migrations defined the region's vegetational geography. Three of the continent's most important biotic communities met each other in the lands north and west of Lake Michigan. Chicago stood in the borderland between the western prairies and eastern oak-hickory forests, and the lake gave it access to the white pines and other coniferous trees of the north woods. Grasslands and hardwood and softwood forests were all within reach.⁵

Before Chicago gained its version of the line separating city from country, the lands around it already carried a complex set of natural markers, each with its own meaning and story: gravel and stone, rivers and lakes, clay and loess, grasses and trees, flock and herd. The glaciers had given this landscape its flatness, its fertility, and its easiest corridors of movement. Chicago held proof of their passage in the morainal ridges, the great lake, and the wet prairie at the mouth of the river. Glaciers, bedrocks, and plant communities had together inscribed thousands of square miles with other, subtler divisions—between glaciated and unglaciated regions, between well and poorly drained watersheds, between fertile and less fertile soils, between eastward- and southward-flowing rivers, between grasslands and forests. Each of these natural legacies left patterns on the land, and each would have a part in shaping the history of Chicago and its region.

And yet none of these patterns matter to human history until we ask how the people whose lives they touched understood their significance. By using the landscape, giving names to it, and calling it home, people selected the features that mattered most to them, and drew their mental maps accordingly. Once they had labeled those maps in a particular way—identifying the muddy river flowing through the prairie grasses as a place where long-leaved plants with sweet bulbous roots might be gathered for food—natural and cultural landscapes began to shade into and reshape one another.

In that mutual reshaping, the city's history begins. As early as 1833, when the local Indians signed away their last claims to the area, the dream of Chicago's metropolitan future was cast like a net over the wide territory that nineteenth-century Americans came to know as the Great West. At its farthest extension, the region reached from the waters and forests of the Great Lakes across the treeless grasslands of Illinois and Iowa, to the lands beyond the Missouri where the Plains made their long dry rise toward the mountains, to the Rockies themselves and beyond. Glaciers and grasses alike had left these lands among the richest (and sometimes poorest) in all of North America. Chicago would eventually be the linchpin that would connect them to each other and to the rest of the world. As the city grew, it altered the way people perceived the region so as to make

everything seem centered upon itself and its remarkable growth. By the second half of the nineteenth century, Chicago would stand as the greatest metropolis in the continent's interior, with all the Great West in some measure a part of its hinterland and empire.

For the city to play that role, however, the land had first to be redefined and reordered; as so often before in American history, such reordering required a conquest. Indians had been using the land along the Chicago River for centuries. Its first non-Indian occupant was a mulatto trader from Quebec, Jean Baptiste Point du Sable, who established a fur-trading post there in the 1770s.⁶ The U.S. Army built Fort Dearborn near the mouth of the river in 1803; nine years later, the inhabitants of the fort were killed in a famous massacre by Potawatomi allies of the British at the start of the War of 1812.⁷ The army rebuilt Fort Dearborn in 1816, whereupon it quickly became a center for a trade largely dominated on the U.S. side by the American Fur Company. Over the next decade and a half, the tiny settlement, with its military stockade and wooden cabins, outwardly appeared Euroamerican. But the lands around it were still largely Indian, with several Potawatomi communities living in the vicinity and regularly mingling with the traders.

Chicago itself was a polyglot world of Indian, French, British, and American cultures tied to a vast trading network that was no less Indian than European. Its inhabitants, like other people in the region, gained their living by a mixture of Indian and Euroamerican land practices: raising corn, stalking game, keeping livestock, gathering wild plants, and fishing the prairie streams. In all these activities, the natural patterns of the land offered clues about where and how best to earn a living. Much of what villagers ate came from nearby. They also traded at the fort and fur posts, exchanging corn, flour, skins, jewelry, pipestone, dried meat, fish, and alcohol, as they had been doing for half a century and more. But even at its height the fur trade still occurred in an elaborate social context—mediated always by gift giving, celebrations, and complex negotiations—that Indian communities controlled as much as Europeans did. Marriages between Indian families and European traders produced offspring who played key roles in these exchange relationships, and their mixed parentage symbolized the hybrid cultural universe that had emerged in the region.⁸

By 1830, signs of change loomed from several directions. Illinois had been a state for a dozen years, though most of its American settlements were still well to the south, in the farming areas upstream from St. Louis on the Illinois and Mississippi rivers. Lead mining had emerged as a major economic activity to the west, in the hill country around Galena and Dubuque. Indians and traders in such places had lost their old centrality

to the economy.⁹ But in Chicago itself, the Potawatomi still controlled much of the land around the village, where they met the many peoples with whom they traded: Sacs, Foxes, French, Ottawas, English, Chippewas, Americans, and others. Although there were growing rumors that Chicago might become the terminus of a canal linking Lake Michigan to the Illinois River, life continued much as it had in the past. Villagers and their many visitors serviced the paychecks and contracts of the garrison at Fort Dearborn, brought skins to the fur post on the opposite side of the river, frequented the local taverns, and conducted their annual subsistence within the mingled rituals and celebrations of Potawatomi and French Catholic cultural life. Most of the one to two hundred village residents were French or Potawatomi or both, living in ramshackle cabins scattered along the river. People lived well and had every reason to hope that so comfortable a marketplace might continue indefinitely as a small but prosperous center for trade.¹⁰

Unfortunately for the villagers, the end of this world came quickly, and from an unexpected source that had little to do with local Potawatomi and other residents. On April 5, 1832, a group of Sac, Fox, and Kickapoo Indians under the leadership of the Sac chief Black Hawk crossed the Mississippi from Iowa in a futile effort to reclaim lands in western Illinois that they had lost to the United States under a treaty of doubtful legality signed in 1804. Black Hawk and his people had been living on their ancestral lands along the east bank of the Mississippi River for more than two decades before pressure from arriving American settlers persuaded the United States to enforce the terms of the treaty. The result was the last significant Indian uprising in Illinois.

Denying the validity of the 1804 treaty, Black Hawk declared that "*land cannot be sold.*" As long as he and his people continued to use it, he said, they would retain their "right to the soil"; not even they themselves had the power to alienate it, since their lives and the land's were one. Black Hawk's people had lived by wandering across a broad landscape in their movements between cropland and hunt, a practice that fit poorly with American notions of bounded property. Like many Indians before and after him, Black Hawk defended his homeland with an argument that made no sense to American ears: "Nothing," he said, "can be sold, but such things as can be carried away."¹¹ An American government long committed to surveying and selling the lands of its "public domain" was not about to be convinced, and moved against Black Hawk accordingly. After raiding a small settlement in Illinois, Black Hawk's band of perhaps two thousand fled before an American military force over twice its size. The final defeat came on August 2, 1832, at the Battle of Bad Axe, when Illinois militiamen gunned down dozens of Indians—men, women, and

children—who were trying to cross back to the western side of the Mississippi.¹²

Chicago played no part in Black Hawk's objectives and was far removed from the actual fighting. But the war nonetheless marked a sea change for the village. Soldiers who had mustered from as far away as New York, Virginia, and Louisiana sent back glowing reports about the fertility of the Illinois prairies, and spurred a wave of immigration to the region around Chicago.¹³ By the spring of 1833, half a year after Black Hawk's defeat, the town's population had more than doubled. The demographic change brought a cultural and economic revolution. Newly arrived American townspeople soon outnumbered the French and Potawatomi inhabitants who had previously dominated village life, and the local economy began to revolve around the larger and wealthier immigrant group. Before long, the land in and around Chicago was owned and occupied by a predominantly Yankee community.¹⁴

Responding to Black Hawk's defeat and to the anxieties of new settlers, the U.S. government moved to consolidate its control of remaining Indian territory in Illinois, most of which was held by Potawatomis who had taken no part in the uprising. Vulnerable because of the war but driving the best bargains they could, the Potawatomis negotiated a series of treaties ceding the lands they held around Chicago.¹⁵ By 1833, almost all that remained to them was a tract of about five million acres in northeastern Illinois and southeastern Wisconsin. In August of that year, the U.S. Indian agent at Chicago sent out runners announcing that this too would have to be sold.¹⁶

In response, most of the remaining Indians of the region began to gather at Chicago; by the middle of September, no fewer than six thousand of them had encamped on the prairies surrounding the village. When told that "their Great Father in Washington had heard that they wished to sell their land," they denied the euphemism by replying that "their Great Father in Washington must have seen a bad bird which had told him a lie, for that far from wishing to sell their land, they wished to keep it."¹⁷ If the Potawatomis were to give up their homelands, they wanted no misunderstanding about the forced nature of the sale. For two weeks, they remained on the outskirts of the village, living off government rations, gaming on the prairie, enjoying the free-flowing alcohol, and mixing with the various birds of passage—grog sellers, grocers, Indian traders, land speculators, gamblers, thieves—who made it their business to profit from such goings-on. One visitor described the scene as "a general fair," while another remarked that "the village was in an uproar from morning to night, and from night to morning." And the curious thing, he said, was that "the whites seemed . . . more pagan than the red men."¹⁸

The treaties—two of them—were finally signed on September 26 and 27, 1833. Although they were long clouded with scandal because of the large sums of money they allotted to individual Indian agents and traders in the Chicago area—many of them Potawatomis of mixed French and Indian parentage—they nonetheless became the legal basis for American possession of a major part of Chicago's immediate hinterland.¹⁹ Within two or three years, the government forced most of the Potawatomis to move from northern Illinois to new homes on the far side of the Mississippi. Even the Chicago traders who had thought to throw in their lot with the Americans found themselves exiled from their former home.

The final moments of the 1833 negotiations thus carried a heavy symbolism that was clearly visible to those who attended. Charles Latrobe, an English traveler present at the treaty signing, described the moment at sunset as the U.S. commissioners faced west and the Indians faced east, the one looking toward the lands they had just acquired, the other toward the lake and homes they would soon be abandoning. "The glorious light of the setting sun streaming in under the low roof of the Council-House," wrote Latrobe, "fell full on the countenances of the former as they faced the West—while the pale light of the East, hardly lighted up the dark and painted lineaments of the poor Indians, whose souls evidently clung to their birth-right in that quarter."²⁰ The hybrid cultural universe of Indians and Euroamericans that had existed in the Chicago area for decades was finally to be shattered by different conceptions of property and real estate.

Black Hawk had been wrong that land could not be sold, and the Americans immediately set out to prove his error with a vengeance. During the next three years, the village of a few hundred grew to nearly four thousand.²¹ At the same time, Chicago's real estate became some of the most highly valued in the nation. The mid-1830s saw the most intense land speculation in American history, with Chicago at the center of the vortex.²² Believing Chicago was about to become the terminus of a major canal, land agents and speculators flooded into town, buying and selling not only the empty lots along its ill-marked streets but also the surrounding grasslands which the Indians had recently abandoned. Stories abounded of men who bought land for one or two hundred dollars in the morning and sold it for several thousand before the sun set.²³ Lots that had sold for \$33 in 1829 were going for \$100,000 by 1836.²⁴ Such prices bore no relation to any current economic reality. Only wild hopes for the future could lead people to pay so much for vacant lots in a town where the most promising economic activity consisted of nothing more substantial than buying and selling real estate. Speculators dreamed of what the land might someday be, and gambled immense sums on their faith in a

rising market. As the British traveler Harriet Martineau remarked, it was as if "some prevalent mania infected the whole people."²⁵

When the bubble burst in 1837 and the banks called in loans that had little more than hope as their collateral, people who had counted themselves millionaires teetered on the edge of bankruptcy. The real estate market collapsed, so it became almost impossible to sell land at any price. One visitor said of Chicago's inhabitants that "they possessed at present the means of earning their subsistence, but little more," and so, "having lost all their capital, and being obliged . . . to begin the world again, they endeavoured to be content."²⁶ The great boom years had carried Chicago ever so speedily away from its Indian past and toward the urban future on which the speculators had based their investments; but the end of the boom left the town stranded with its promise largely unfulfilled. Business slowed to a near standstill in the general collapse of prices, and the city's growth followed suit. It was as if the town had gone into hibernation.

Although plat maps showed the grid of city streets extending four miles along the lakeshore and out into the prairie, Chicago's actual buildings in 1837 concentrated in the small business district on the south side of the river, and in the equally small well-to-do residential quarter on the north side. Rope-drawn ferries provided the principal link between the two halves of town. No block was entirely built up, and one did not have to walk more than a few minutes to be out on the prairie. Residents could still hunt wolves within earshot of city center during the 1830s.²⁷ A few buildings, including the finer of the town's fifteen hotels, offered elegant quarters, but most were hurried affairs thrown up at the height of the real estate speculation. The place possessed five churches, three Protestant and two Catholic, but the Unitarians could not yet afford a building and had to hold their meetings in a local tavern.²⁸ None of the streets was paved, and many still showed "the green turf of the prairie grass in their centre" when rain or snow had not turned everything to mud.²⁹ Many families continued to use pails to draw their water supply directly from the river.³⁰ The town served as a trade center for the growing number of local farmers and, like most frontier communities, depended heavily on selling supplies to travelers and arriving immigrants.

Little of this changed in the immediate future. After such dramatic early signs of growth, Chicagoans found it all too frustrating to watch the boom grind to a halt. And yet those who had lost their money in the collapse had little choice but to keep their land, earn a living as best they could, and hope their luck would change. They waited a long time. Another decade passed before Chicago began to fulfill the destiny speculators had dreamed for it during the mad years of the land rush.

Booster Dreams

And what was Chicago's destiny?

To answer that question is to confront much of the history of America's Great West in the nineteenth century. At Chicago's famous Columbian Exposition of 1893—an event which many interpreted as the fulfillment of the city's destiny—the historian Frederick Jackson Turner proposed for the first time his famous frontier thesis as an explanation of why the West had developed as it had. In offering what became a ruling paradigm of American history for the next half century, Turner delineated one standard version of Chicago's destiny. He argued that the different Wests of the United States had recapitulated the social evolution of human civilization as Europeans and easterners repeatedly encountered the “zone” of “free land” and “primitive savagery”—what he called “the frontier”—that was the source of American energy, individualism, and political democracy. Chicago was one end product of that evolution.

For Turner, the sequential phases of the frontier constituted a palimpsest that could be read “like a huge page in the history of society.” The frontier, he wrote,

begins with the Indian and the hunter; it goes on to tell of the disintegration of savagery by the entrance of the trader, the pathfinder of civilization; we read the annals of the pastoral stage in ranch life; the exploitation of the soil by the raising of unrotated crops of corn and wheat in sparsely settled farming communities; the intensive culture of the denser farm settlement; and finally the manufacturing organization with city and factory system.³¹

Turner never explained the mechanism whereby these stages succeeded each other, probably because they so closely matched his nineteenth-century notions of social evolution. For him and his contemporaries, it seemed quite “natural” that Indians and fur traders should prepare the way for cattle ranchers, and they for subsistence farmers, and they for complex farming communities. After all, human society had supposedly followed this same path. Only at the end of this Darwinian sequence would come an industrial city like Chicago, which as the ultimate expression of nineteenth-century progress stood as both the achievement and the antithesis of the frontier.

Whatever the merits of the Turner thesis—and both its strengths and weaknesses have profoundly shaped American historical thought—it fits poorly with the world of Chicago in the 1830s.³² Turner would probably

have interpreted the American Fur Company's trading post on the Chicago River as a "pathfinder of civilization" paving the way for "the disintegration of savagery," but it seems most unlikely that the French or Potawatomi traders would have described it that way. Neither the post nor the fur trade necessitated the treaties of 1833, which quickly destroyed them both. The forced migration of the Potawatomis was the product not of natural progress but of political choice, supported by the organized violence of an expansionist society. Moreover, the subsequent land craze posed an even greater difficulty for Turner's theory of frontier development. Chicago's population exploded after 1833 without bothering much about a pastoral stage, a settlement of pioneering subsistence farmers, or even an agricultural community at all. The town's speculators gambled on an *urban* future, staking fortunes on land they hoped would soon lie at the heart of a great city. Explaining their vision of Chicago's "destiny" means reading Turner backward, for their theory of frontier growth apparently *began* with the city instead of ending with it.

The speculators' urban dream extended to many more places than just Chicago. The land craze of the 1830s was nationwide, part of an upward swing in the business cycle and a dramatic easing of admittedly shaky credit in the wake of Andrew Jackson's victorious assault on the Second Bank of the United States. As real estate prices skyrocketed, they fueled a manic search for new places in which to invest.³³ Joseph Bales-tier, a Chicago attorney who had done well for himself just by processing land titles during the craze, recalled in 1840 how the speculators had remapped—and redreamed—the Old Northwest until they had nearly covered it with "a chain almost unbroken of suppositious villages and cities. The whole land seemed staked out and peopled on paper."³⁴ Speculators looking for big profits invested in townsites, which always sold at much higher prices than mere agricultural land. Fictive lots on fictive streets in fictive towns became the basis for thousands of transactions whose only justification was a dubious idea expressed on an overly optimistic map. With wonderful irony, Bales-tier described how speculators scoured the countryside for any site that might conceivably serve as the seed of a future city. If they could find a stream, no matter how muddy or shallow or small, flowing into Lake Michigan—here was the future harbor from which all else would grow:

Then the miserable waste of sand and fens which lay unconscious of its glory on the shore of the lake, was suddenly elevated into a mighty city, with a projected harbor and light-house, railroads and canals, and in a short time the circumjacent lands were sold in lots 50 feet by 100. . . . Not the puniest brook on the shore of Lake Michigan was suffered to remain

without a city at its mouth, and whoever will travel around that lake shall find many a mighty mart staked out in spots suitable only for the habitations of wild beasts.³⁵

Chicago began the 1830s as just such a site. The Chicago River may have been more than a puny brook, but it was rather less than a great waterway: short, shallow, with no current to speak of, and far better suited to canoes than to sailing ships. A visitor in 1848 called it “a sluggish, slimy stream, too lazy to clean itself.”³⁶ It nonetheless had two great virtues. One was its harbor: bad as it might be, it was still the best available on the southern shore of Lake Michigan in the 250 miles between St. Joseph, Michigan, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin.³⁷ The writer Caroline Kirkland was only slightly exaggerating when she called it “the best harbor on Lake Michigan” and the “worst harbor and smallest river any great commercial city ever lived on.”³⁸ Equally important was the river’s nearness to the divide between the Great Lakes and Mississippi watersheds. If investors could arrange to dig a canal across the glacial moraine at this point, an inland ship passage between New York and New Orleans might at last be possible. As early as 1814, *Niles’ Weekly Register* in Baltimore had predicted that a canal at Chicago would make Illinois “the seat of an immense commerce; and a market for the commodities of all regions.” “What a route!” its editor exclaimed. “How stupendous the idea!”³⁹ Thirteen years later, Congress granted land to the state of Illinois to build the canal. Although nearly a decade passed before construction began, the first mapping of city lots in Chicago, in 1830, was a direct consequence of the canal surveys. So was the speculative boom that followed.⁴⁰

No place would benefit more from a canal than Chicago, a fact that speculators were quick to grasp—and exaggerate. “Almost every person I met,” reported a skeptical Scottish visitor, “regarded Chicago as the germ of an immense city. . . .”⁴¹ One typical example was Charles Butler, a New York real estate investor who visited the area a month before the Potawatomi treaty was signed. After deciding that Chicago’s prospects looked good, Butler spent \$100,000 to buy 150 acres—1,000 city lots—on the north side of the river. By Chicago standards, the purchase was on the conservative side, and the paper value of Butler’s lots soon rose much higher. When his brother-in-law, William B. Ogden, arrived in 1835 to look after the investment, he could scarcely believe the prices people were paying for land. Chicago speculators, he said, had become “crazy and visionary,” and “he could not see where the value lay nor what it was that justified the payment of such prices.”⁴²

Still, Butler and those like him were not to be dissuaded, and even Ogden eventually underwent a monumental change of mind. Apparently

deciding that Chicago offered good investment opportunities after all, he soon became its first mayor and a key investor in the railroad enterprises that finally assured the city's success. Such people saw Chicago in their mind's eye not as it was but as it could be: a metropolis of continental significance. "This is *the most important point* in the great west for missionary effort," Butler wrote in one of the earliest passages linking Chicago to the favorite nineteenth-century name for its hinterland. "It is a concentrating & diffusive point: it is at the head of navigation & of course a great commercial point. It has a very extensive back country extending to the Mississippi & rich beyond calculation. . . ."43 What could be more certain than real estate investments at a site so clearly marked for greatness?

Modern readers must beware lest their knowledge of the future lead them to be too impressed by Butler's prescience. His enthusiasm for the quiet little trading post that was also—rather astonishingly—"*the most important point* in the great west" was not noticeably different from that of other investors who erected cities out of swampy air at dozens of other sites on the shores of the Great Lakes. Some of those places—Buffalo, Cleveland, Toledo—went on to become major cities; most did not. That Butler's prophecy came true should obscure neither its unlikely good luck nor its similarity to equally enthusiastic but unlucky claims for scores of other would-be "great commercial points."⁴⁴ Indeed, we should care less about Butler's accuracy than about how utterly conventional his predictions were. He and his fellow speculators all believed that cities were the keys to the Great West. And since their reasons for this belief were anything but academic, they sought to discover why some cities grew and not others, so that intelligent investors could profit accordingly.

In the speculators' dreams lay the urban promise—and the urban imperative—of frontier settlement and investment. The search for the great western cities of the future drove nearly all nineteenth-century townsite speculation, and the accompanying rhetoric always inclined toward enthusiastic exaggeration and self-interested promotion. But not all was fantasy. The "boosters," as they came to be known, expounded serious theories of economic growth that dominated nineteenth-century thinking about frontier development.⁴⁵ Although Jesup W. Scott and William Gilpin were better known than most who wrote about urban growth in the West, no one person could claim authorship of the booster theories themselves, which quickly became the common intellectual property of speculators, newspaper editors, merchants, and chambers of commerce throughout the West. Taken as a group, the boosters offered a surprisingly coherent model of urban and regional growth. Unlike Turner, they saw the engine of western development in the symbiotic relationship between cities and their surrounding countrysides. So powerful was their

vision that it became a self-fulfilling prophecy. When the Potawatomis and the U.S. commissioners faced each other at Chicago in 1833, they expressed their cultural differences in the way they saw the landscape that stretched before them in the light of the setting sun. One saw the apparition of a great city upon it, while the other did not. To understand how so many nineteenth-century Americans came to share that urban vision is to discover much about their dreams for themselves and for the Great West.⁴⁶

In the first place, the boosters felt confident that the West would produce great cities and even a future metropolis, though they argued about where such places would be. For them, the apparition that hovered over Chicago's 1833 treaty negotiations was a true prophecy, not a ghost. A writer in the 1890s captured this feeling by saying of early Chicago that "the place was pregnant with certainty."⁴⁷ Boosters sought to make their visions come true by conveying just this certainty to investors and merchants who might set up shop in the place being promoted. Almost always they identified a list of supposed "natural advantages" that would make the future metropolis a natural outgrowth of its region. Boosters believed that climate, soils, vegetation, transportation routes, and other features of the landscape all pointed toward key locations that nature had designated for urban greatness. When the newspaper editor William Bross sought in 1880 to analyze "Chicago and the Sources of Her Past and Future Growth," he began by asserting, "Nature, it is believed, or, to speak more reverently, He who is the Author of Nature, selected the site of this great city . . . and hence her future will not be subject to those causes which have paralyzed or destroyed many of the cities of past ages."⁴⁸ In the practical eyes of people seeking profitable investments, nature became the world's most reliable real estate broker.

What better guarantee of profit and prosperity could one want? If a city's growth was assured by nature or—better yet—ordained by God, then only a fool could doubt its future promise. No mere human power could alter the forces that compelled its growth.⁴⁹ Moreover, if one could identify these forces in advance, one could predict with certainty their effects—and the success of investments based on them. "I shall assume that a city is an organism," wrote Jesup W. Scott, "springing from natural laws as inevitably as any other organism, and governed, invariably, in its origin and growth, by these laws."⁵⁰ Scott, who became one of the most influential booster theorists from the 1840s to the 1880s, joined with Louis Sullivan and with other boosters in seeing the city as nature's highest creation. In stark contrast to Robert Herrick's antinatural image of a city "made of man" stood the boosters' implication that human labor was less important than nature in spurring a city's growth. As one writer put it

in describing Chicago's urban promise, "nothing remained for man to do, but to gather up the gifts so profusely showered upon him."⁵¹ Nature's Metropolis would almost build itself.

According to booster theories, the natural advantages that created cities ranged from the trivial to the cosmic but generally fell into three broad categories. The first included all the resources of the region which would center its trade on the city. The second comprised the transportation routes that would guide those resources to their natural marketplace. And the third, rather mysteriously, consisted of global climatic forces which had historically created great urban civilizations elsewhere in the world and which now, supposedly, were starting to operate in North America. These three sets of natural advantages would converge to promote a city's growth—or so the theory ran.

The boosters usually began their arguments by identifying all aspects of the region—fertile soils, forests of commercial timber, mines, coal-fields, waterpower sites—that might become "resources" contributing to urban growth. The importance of such resources seemed so obvious that many boosters simply listed them and assumed that providence—nature's or God's—would send them flowing toward the future city. Jesup Scott, for instance, believed that the Great Lakes had been designed by no less an architect than God "to give them the utmost availability for purposes of trade," their waters extending from the heart of the continent and the northern limits of agriculture to the great markets of the Atlantic. The region's natural endowments were proof that God had "diversified" the land's "surface with hills, vales, and plains, and clothed them alternately with fine groves of timber, and beautiful meadows of grass and flowers." Scott's description may have been poetic, but his conclusions were wholly utilitarian. The forests would supply timber for buildings and cordwood for fuel. The meadows would become pastures and fields that would send grain, meat, and dairy products to the city. And beneath it all, "the minerals of nearly every geological era, and of every kind, which has been made tributary to man's comfort and civilization" were "properly distributed."⁵² In his vision of a "properly distributed" landscape, Scott revealed just how completely he and other Americans had remapped the natural terrain of the Great West since the days when Potawatomis had gathered to collect wild garlic plants on the banks of the Chicago River.

But regional resources represented only the *potential* for economic development and urban growth. By themselves, they indicated little about which cities would benefit from exploiting those resources. And so the boosters, having satisfied themselves that nature would produce a great city somewhere, turned next to natural transportation routes to

show where it would be located. Here theory turned to more practical ends. Virtually all boosters had some vested interest in promoting the growth of one particular city, so they usually became cheerleaders for the places where they resided and owned real estate. When they theorized about which transportation routes would funnel regional resource flows, they naturally chose routes that led to their own city's doorstep.

The talisman that lent authority to such arguments was almost always an actual map of North America. William Bross advised those who read his predictions about Chicago's future growth that "the latest and best map of the United States should be before the reader while perusing this paper."⁵³ Upon consulting such a map, readers would instantly see that the natural arrangement of waterways—rivers, harbors, and potential canal routes—suggested only a limited set of places destined to be major cities. "Let our readers look upon any well drawn map of this continent," intoned Chicago's *American Railway Times* in 1852, "and note the position of Chicago." Anyone who could read such a map should be able to see Chicago's "natural capabilities for drawing almost the entire trade" of the region between the Great Lakes and the Rocky Mountains.⁵⁴ By concentrating the region's wealth, the natural avenues of commerce would create the city.

Chicago's claim to natural transportation advantages lay principally in its harbor and canal corridor, neither of which extended very far to the west, and certainly not to the Rocky Mountains. Probably for this reason, Chicago boosters rarely stressed natural transportation advantages as much as boosters in other cities. In fact, if waterway geography were the determinant of urban growth, the major inland city would surely be St. Louis, an argument which boosters in that city never tired of making. Located at the confluence of two of the continent's greatest rivers, the Mississippi and the Missouri, St. Louis could reasonably expect to draw resources from the entire country to its north and west. Pressing their advantage, its boosters often carried the waterway argument to extreme lengths. "The laws of trade ultimately enforce obedience," wrote Logan Uriah Reavis, the most prominent of St. Louis's urban prophets. "The title of the Mississippi river to the commerce of this valley is attested with the Divine signature. The productions of the West will be borne to the tide-water through channels which the Architect of nature formed"—and so St. Louis would be the city to aid these "productions" in their journey.⁵⁵ How Chicagoans answered such arguments is the subject of the next chapter.

Boosters not content to project urban greatness on the basis of resources and transportation alone could appeal to one more group of "natural advantages." Following the writings of the German geographer

Alexander von Humboldt on world climate, several western boosters argued that great civilizations—and the great cities that went with them—were possible only within a narrow global band arranged around a mean annual isotherm of about fifty degrees Fahrenheit. Why? Because the white races who would build such civilizations retained their civilized superiority only in a temperate climate that challenged them with extremes of hot and cold. The climatic theory of urban growth rested on racist assumptions about human biology which asserted that the dark-skinned peoples of the tropics were incapable of cultural progress.⁵⁶

The most famous booster to rely on this argument was William Gilpin, whose chief claim to fame lay in having served an abbreviated term as the first governor of Colorado.⁵⁷ Gilpin's eloquence on behalf of what he called the Isothermal Zodiac wandered off into mysticism as he referred to the "perpetual and instinctive pressure" that tended to "condense population" along an "axis of intensity" which contained all the great cities of the world.⁵⁸ By presenting maps that traced the isotherm of fifty-two degrees Fahrenheit across North America, Gilpin mustered evidence that the next world city would be located at "Centropolis," which he placed in the vicinity of modern-day Kansas City. (Other boosters of course chose isotherms that were conveniently nearer to their own cities.) So powerful were the mystical natural forces of climate and topography that any rivals would "contend in vain" to supplant Centropolis. Or so ran Gilpin's argument. But the Isothermal Zodiac encompassed such an inconveniently broad region—most of the United States fell within it—that boosters had to work overtime to make it serve the interests of any particular city. Gilpin alone rested the major part of his theory upon it.⁵⁹ Chicago's boosters seem never to have much bothered with it.

For all boosters, cities had their roots in natural phenomena but ultimately grew because, for whatever reason, people chose to migrate to them. The demographic pull of cities suggested yet another theoretical basis for predicting urban growth. Cities were like stars or planets, with gravitational fields that attracted people and trade like miniature solar systems. If this was true, then perhaps one could use the Newtonian theory of gravitation to understand their reach and influence. The strongest advocate of this "gravitational" theory of cities was an obscure figure in Cincinnati named S. H. Goodin, whose remarkable essay "Cincinnati—Its Destiny" in many ways anticipated the model of urban growth—central place theory—that has dominated twentieth-century thought about this subject.

"The law of gravitation or centralization," wrote Goodin, "or, as some designated it, the serial law, is known to be one of the laws of nature."⁶⁰ This "law" predicted that as frontier migrants displaced In-

dian communities in the West, new villages would emerge to serve the surrounding territory, attracting more than their share of population and trade. Such villages represented what Goodin called "the first circle in the serial law," and were followed by subsequent circles, each marking a higher stage of urban progress. People in these villages, wrote Goodin,

desire intercourse one with another, so a road is made from village to village; but one improves faster than the others, some local advantage is the cause; then all the other villages construct their roads to it, and this makes the second circle. But among these villages of larger growth, one better situated than the rest advances with more rapidity, and the city soon stands in the centre of the third circle."⁶¹

Translated, Goodin's argument suggested that rural populations clustered around small villages, which clustered in turn around larger towns, which clustered in turn around still larger cities. Cities were the stars around which town and country satellites would come to orbit.⁶² But the gravitational forces producing this urban solar system had not yet finished their work. For Goodin, the existing cities of the West—Cincinnati, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, Chicago, and others—were all "competing cities of the same grade of circles," and one more stage had yet to be achieved. "*The next circle beyond,*" he prophesied, "*is a central city—a city which shall have all these cities as satellites or outposts—Where shall that city stand?*"⁶³

The great central metropolis: where would it be? No question more excited booster imaginations. All asked it in one form or another, and all answered with their own prophecy. For the boosters, "civilizing" the frontier—Turner's process—was scarcely more important than linking new communities to the emerging metropolis. Indeed, these seemingly separate processes were not merely parallel but identical: the growing countryside would create its central city, and vice versa. The metropolis would sit at the center of an immense circle within which would live most of the American population. Metropolitan location might ultimately depend on the geography of resources and waterways, but its more immediate cause was the spatial arrangement of human beings. As the Great West became ever more densely settled, the geographical center of the country's population would drift gradually westward, until finally it came to rest at the central city.

On this theory, boosters of a quantitative bent decided that careful study of population movements as recorded in the census, along with business and trade statistics, would reveal the location of the new western metropolis. No one made more diligent efforts at such study than Toledo's Jesup W. Scott.⁶⁴ For over three decades, starting in the 1840s,

Scott gathered a vast array of statistical evidence demonstrating the westward movement of American population, the flow of regional trade, and the more rapid growth of cities in the West as compared with those in the East. Although he never stated his argument in quite such abstract terms as S. H. Goodin, the two agreed on the importance of demographic trends for understanding urban growth. For Scott, cities grew in tandem with the increasing size and density of regional population. Geography was secondary to population increase, channeling rather than creating the underlying demographic pressures that led cities to expand. "The great city of America," he wrote, "will be in the midst of, and not far from, the centre of the great *population* of America."⁶⁵

Unlike Gilpin, Scott was no mystic. He believed that cities grew principally for economic reasons: their main activity was to serve as marketplaces for their regions. Because people favor markets to which they have easiest access, he predicted that "the centre of trade in this country is likely to follow the centre of population."⁶⁶ Contrary to those who believed that eastern and European exports fueled western economic growth, Scott was confident that *domestic* trade was far more important. "As our internal commerce is more than ten times as great as our foreign commerce, and is increasing more rapidly," he reasoned, "it is plain that it will have the chief agency in building the future and permanent capital city of the continent."⁶⁷ As western trade and population grew, the mercantile activities of western cities would increase accordingly, and so would their manufacturing. Already they were growing more quickly than the eastern cities they would eventually surpass.

With all of his statistics, Scott sought to prove that these various phenomena were well under way in the Great West. He published article after article with long tables showing the growth rates of American cities and projecting them forward in time. Taking the 1840s as a base, he calculated that New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, all in their period of greatest expansion, needed about a dozen years to double their populations. In the West, on the other hand, Cincinnati and Toledo needed only six years to perform the same feat. St. Louis doubled in four years, and Chicago in three and a half.⁶⁸ Scott read such numbers as evidence of a shifting balance of power in the United States: "In the aggregate," he concluded, "our internal cities, depending for their growth on internal trade and home manufacture, increase three times as fast as the exterior cities. . . ."⁶⁹ He failed to note that small places can always double their size more easily than large ones for simple reasons of fractional arithmetic. But he was nonetheless right that cities in the West were expanding in trade and population much more rapidly than older cities in the East.

Scott's statistics led back to the great booster question. Just as western

cities grew more quickly as a group, so too would one of them grow more quickly than the rest. Which would it be? In trying to identify that city, Scott linked his demographic arguments with booster theories of natural advantage. The great city would lie near the middle of the central valley where most Americans would ultimately dwell. It would have numerous and abundant resources in its hinterland. It would be at the location furnishing the widest access to the region as a whole, which meant that it would be on the Great Lakes, not a river. "River cities," he claimed, "gather in productions from the surrounding districts which seek an eastern market through lake harbors. . . ." Cities on the lakes could gather the products of several river valleys and so offered a wider field for trade.⁷⁰ The lake city that gave access to the most extensive group of river cities would grow most quickly. Lake, harbor, canal, and a fertile well-populated backcountry: these ingredients led to urban greatness, and Scott was quite sure that only two cities possessed them. "Chicago and Toledo," he wrote, "are believed to be the true claimants for this high destiny."⁷¹ Not even the methodical Scott could finally resist the impulse to name his own hometown as the likely seat of future grandeur, though his analysis seemed in many ways to favor Chicago.

Metropolis and Empire

The "high destiny" of the western city: whether the boosters resorted to geographical determinism, or theorized about climatic influences on civilization, or traced imaginary circles of population on maps of North America, they always returned at last to destiny. In their eyes, nature would combine with the progress of human population to call forth a metropolis to lead the Great West. This shared vision had led Charles Butler and Jesup Scott, writing four decades apart, to the same prophecy about Chicago's future. Butler's "*most important point* in the great west" became Scott's "*ultimate* great city," but both men were convinced that the future of the West was inseparable from that of its central city. They agreed with all other boosters on this point—if not about Chicago itself—because they shared a sense of what urban greatness meant. The triumphant cities of the past, stretching back to classical antiquity, had achieved lasting fame among later generations because their destiny had been an imperial one. What Scott called "the ultimate crowning city" would achieve comparable fame by making all of North America—indeed, all the world—its empire.

Empire: its metaphors form the very core of booster rhetoric. For American patriots of the nineteenth century, the line from Bishop Berke-

ley's famous poem was less a cliché than an incantation: "Westward the course of empire takes its way."⁷² In popular conceptions of history, empire's westward course had begun in Asia with the Chinese and then moved sequentially through "the Indian, the Persian, the Grecian, the Roman, the Spanish, the British," and, finally, the American empire that would emerge in the New World.⁷³ The sequence of empires necessarily implied a sequence of cities, and so the boosters, in describing their own communities, repeatedly invoked a jumbled handful of classical sites: Babylon, Thebes, Athens, Alexandria, Carthage, Constantinople, and, more frequently than any other, Rome. "In ancient times," wrote a Chicago newspaperman in the 1880s, "all roads led to Rome; in modern times all roads lead to Chicago."⁷⁴

Such references to classical sites may often have been little more than rhetorical flourishes, but they nonetheless suggest the boosters' imperial cast of mind. When writers spoke of Chicago as "the Rome that is to be of the new world" or "the Rome of the railroads," they were reaching for a metaphor that lent their city the grandeur of past urban empires.⁷⁵ One task of such rhetoric was to suggest that Chicago had already surpassed its midwestern rivals. For example, the cover of an 1887 Chicago guidebook presented a cartoon chariot race entitled the "Great Contest for Supremacy." The backdrop for the race was "The World's Amphitheatre," a structure which distinctly recalled the Colosseum in Rome. In distant third place, riding a chariot pulled by black horses, was a somewhat dumpy and comic figure labeled Cincinnati; in second place, a black charioteer pulled by four black horses carried a banner for St. Louis; and easily in first place, a white rider, driving a chariot marked Progress and pulled by four white horses, proudly bore Chicago's banner.⁷⁶ As Rome had triumphed over its ancient rivals, so too would Chicago.

Classical allusions suggested other messages as well. Just as history had progressed from empire to empire, so the emerging cities of inland America would surpass in grandeur the older cities of Europe and the American East. When Logan Reavis wrote that "Rome despised the barbarians, and the barbarians conquered Rome," he intended his readers to see that the westward rise and fall of empire would be an appropriate fate for easterners who held western aspirations in contempt. Waxing ever more eloquent as his argument proceeded, he concluded in a passage rife with the stock imagery of imperial decay and rebirth. "Civilization," he said,

like the ostrich in its flight, throws sand upon everything behind her; and before many cycles shall have completed their rounds sentimental pilgrims from the humming cities of the Pacific coast will be seen where

Boston, Philadelphia, and New York now stand, viewing in moonlight contemplation, with the melancholy owl, traces of the Athens, the Carthage, and the Babel of the Western hemisphere.⁷⁷

We will never know what Reavis thought the condition of St. Louis would be when New York and other eastern cities lay in ruins, but San Francisco would apparently produce America's Gibbon. Passages like this one can easily seem comic, and the boosters themselves probably did not take them very seriously. But they surely did not think it silly to view American history through the epic lens of classical civilization, or to imagine that the grandeur of St. Louis or Chicago might someday, in the not too distant future, equal Rome's. To believe otherwise was to doubt the high destiny of America itself.

American boosters saw London as the current seat of world empire, heir to Rome's throne, but they also believed that New York would soon win that title for itself.⁷⁸ Many thought that the most important factor creating the next imperial metropolis would be the western trade of North America and that New York's primacy depended on such trade.⁷⁹ An Albany newspaper editor predicted, "A city sustained by that trade, can never languish. . . . [It] must be far greater than even Alexandria or Thebes."⁸⁰ New York had dug the Erie Canal to make itself the metropolis of the Great West, and had thereby earned itself the nickname Empire City. "Throw away the West," wrote one observer, "and no city on the coast could become the 'empire.'" ⁸¹

To cast doubt on the permanence of New York's hegemony, western boosters theorized that a new "central city" would ultimately emerge as the chief agent of internal commerce. But few expected the next stage of the imperial cycle to occur in the nineteenth century. Quick as they were to compare their city to Rome, Chicago boosters usually became quite circumspect in writing about New York. Indeed, when predicting the future primacy of their own city, they generally failed to mention the eastern metropolis at all. Perhaps the classical allusions were a way of implying what might otherwise have seemed outrageous or silly: if Rome could rise and fall, so might New York, but there was no need to say so explicitly. The serial forms of empire were easiest to believe in when viewed at the safe distance of thousands of miles and thousands of years.⁸²

The imperial metaphor which cropped up most frequently in booster prose, whether applied to New York or Chicago, described the "tributary" countryside that would give the metropolis its empire. In 1857, the *Chicago Magazine* reported an estimate that "700,000 square miles of Western territory" was or would be "partially tributary" to Chicago.⁸³ The word "tributary" conjured up the image of a great river, gathering

the waters of its many branches and concentrating them at its mouth. Read in this way, it recalled the doctrine of natural advantages.⁸⁴ But the metaphor also suggested that the countryside would pay tribute to Chicago as Gaul had paid tribute to Rome. After a visit to Chicago in 1867, the journalist James Parton had written that "every acre with which it could put itself into easy communication must pay tribute to it forever."⁸⁵ Like Rome, Chicago's imperial future would arise from the wealth flowing into its coffers from the territory around it. Most who wrote about the city sooner or later resorted to such language.

One might have thought that a good republican would recoil from any metaphor that described a parasitic imperial capital imposing its rule and binding its colonies to enforced tribute, but this never seems to have troubled the boosters. If there was a contradiction between the American faith in republican democracy and the boosters' affection for imperial metaphors, few noticed it at the time. Instead, the boosters embraced the common American notion that free commerce and an enlightened democratic government would together create an expanding empire in which there were no subjects, only citizens. At least in theory, people joined the Republic by choice, and they would trade with its metropolis in much the same way. America's cities had grown by *commercial* power, not the tyrannical power of the state. Commerce was a two-way street in a manner that imperial taxes could never be, so city and country in America need not reproduce their ancient enmity. The booster vision of imperial destiny presupposed no exploitation. William Gilpin could thus wax eloquent on behalf of America's various "empires"—"the empire of our *continental* geography," "the empire of our *free* people," the empires of American politics, society, religion, and industry—and then proclaim them reconciled in "mutual concord, self-sustained: unlimited expansion: perpetual buoyancy, and perpetual life!"⁸⁶

Gilpin went further than others in his rhetorical exuberance, but most boosters, like most nineteenth-century Americans, sought to strip empire of its dangerous connotations and leave only its epic grandeur. Because the central city of the Republic would attain its status by commerce rather than by military might, it had no need to play tyrant and so could escape the moral corruption that had been Rome's fate. The Indians might not have agreed that Americans had built their empire without violence, but boosters were not thinking about Indians when they described America's imperial promise. In 1846, Cincinnati's James Hall referred to commerce as "a mighty conqueror, more powerful than an army with banners," through whose agency "a vast region" had been "overrun and subdued." The proof of America's unique destiny, he said, was that "the conquests of the warlike Emperor have vanished . . . while a commercial people,

using only pacific means, have gained an empire whose breadth and wealth might satisfy the ambition of even a Napoleon."⁸⁷ Conquest of this kind, so the theory went, expanded the national sphere of interest with mutually beneficial ties that joined all parts of the empire in free trade and liberal democracy.

Perceiving America as a commercial empire allowed boosters and others to believe that the flow of "tribute" among its various parts enriched all and impoverished none. The progress of cities and their rural areas opened markets that enabled both to prosper. Although the countryside did pay tribute that allowed a city like Chicago to grow, the exchange was anything but a zero-sum game. After all, if rural areas failed to become tributary to a metropolis, they would have no market and could only languish. Under such circumstances, commercial "conquest" yielded happy results for conqueror and conquered alike.

Chicago boosters offered a similar argument about their city's relation to potential urban rivals. Because Chicago's wealth and preeminence had been guaranteed by nature, they said, it did not need to compete with other western cities.⁸⁸ In fact, they hoped that all areas of the city's vast hinterland would enjoy the fruits of progress, since Chicago could only benefit from the general prosperity. Its leading booster, John Wright, expressed this feeling in 1869 when he announced that Chicago's motto should be "Room for them and us." The city, he said,

is no monopolist; and instead of desiring to see other cities, either on lake or on river, dwindling like stars to leave her a glittering sun, she rejoices in the truth that we constitute no ordinary nation, but a constellation of sovereign, free and independent States, which fact of art itself tends to create many centres, while nature, in these immense vallies of thousands of miles, has ordained sites for many great cities. Because Chicago is sure of being chiefest, it is her interest and ambition that her own section should have several chief cities.⁸⁹

William Bross offered a similar argument when he suggested that cities ranging from Milwaukee to St. Louis to Denver misunderstood their own best interests in trying to compete with Chicago. Chicago had "not a particle of jealousy in her nature," and encouraged them to improve themselves to the utmost. "Bless you, friends," he chuckled, "the more you prosper, the more you all will contribute to the wealth and the prosperity of Chicago."⁹⁰

Boosters in other cities might gnash their teeth at such condescension, but to a considerable extent they shared Bross's assumptions about metropolitan empire. Only their assessment of which city should become "the chiefest" differed.⁹¹ All believed that the Great West would rise as a

commercial hierarchy with its foundation in the rural countryside, and its ascending levels in village, town, and city. At the apex would stand the great central metropolis which was cause, effect, and emblem of its region's continuing prosperity. A favorite booster word for that central city was "emporium," a "great marketplace" that prospered on commerce but carried at least a false etymological echo of that other mystical word, "empire."⁹² By the end of the century, when Chicago was the second-largest city in the nation, with over a million and a half inhabitants, even the most die-hard champions of other places were willing to concede that it might have some special claim to being metropolis of the Great West. By then, at the place where wild garlic plants no longer grew, it almost seemed that America's urban empire had been achieved.

Reading Turner Backwards

Few people read the boosters anymore. Their unabashed optimism about progress and civilization has long since gone out of fashion, and their prose is alternately too dry and too baroque for modern tastes. But their chief historian, Charles Glaab, has rightly observed that "this kind of writing more than likely outweighs any other about the West. . . ."⁹³ The boosters expressed what many Americans believed—or wanted to believe—about the expansion and progress of the United States and its Great West. They offered seemingly rational arguments to reinforce the visionary faith that sustained many who lived and invested in the region. As a group, they present a strikingly consistent picture of how the western landscape would be absorbed into a commercial system revolving around a small number of urban centers. Natural advantage and the movement of human populations together determined how individual cities, towns, and villages would fit into that system. Many such places would prosper, said the boosters, but only one would emerge as the central city of the Great West. As the speculators of the 1830s dashed through the muddy streets around Fort Dearborn and paid fortunes for empty lots, some form of this vision was hovering before their eyes. Inflated prices may have reflected inflated dreams, but fifty years later a great city did in fact stand atop those lots. At least some part of the boosters' prophecy had actually come true.⁹⁴

The West of the great emporium and its satellites bore little outward resemblance to the West of Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier. In contrast to the boosters, Turner consistently chose to see the frontier as a rural place, the very isolation of which created its special role in the history of American democracy. Toward the end of his career, he looked

with some misgiving on the likelihood that there would be an "urban reinterpretation" of American history that might "minimize the frontier theme"—as if frontier history had little or nothing to do with cities.⁹⁵ For Turner and his followers, frontier development had been slow and evolutionary, with cities appearing only after a long period of rural agricultural growth. Cities marked the *end* of the frontier.⁹⁶ For the boosters, on the other hand, western cities could and did appear much more suddenly. They grew in tandem with the countryside and played crucial roles in encouraging settlement from a very early time. City and country formed a single commercial system, a single process of rural settlement and metropolitan economic growth. To speak of one without the other made little sense.

Turner, the historian, looked backward with some nostalgia from an urban-industrial world he feared was losing touch with its rural democratic roots. Men like Scott, Reavis, Gilpin, and Wright, promoters and prophets all, looked forward to an urban future they had as yet no reason to fear.⁹⁷ But different as their perspectives might be, there can be no question that Turner and the boosters were describing the same West and the same course of empire. So perhaps the frontier historian and the metropolitan prophets had more in common than appears at first glance. The boosters erected cities out of air and prophesied the appearance of great urban civilizations in the most unlikely places—towns possessing a few hundred inhabitants who had appeared the year before and who could disappear just as quickly. They wrote mainly about would-be cities, but they knew that none could survive without the rural hinterland whose "tribute" fueled urban growth. Turner wrote of frontier log cabins and sod houses as if they constituted a world unto themselves, but he also acknowledged that those who dwelt in such places needed to sell the fruits of their labors, so rural pioneers in many ways shared the boosters' hope for the future. "The pioneer," he wrote, "dreamed of continental conquests. . . . His vision saw beyond the dank swamp at the edge of the great lake to the lofty buildings and the jostling multitudes of a mighty city; beyond the rank, grass-clad prairie to the seas of golden grain. . . ."⁹⁸ When Turner spoke of the city that had arisen out of the swamp by the lake, describing the dreams of those who would dwell within its orbit, his words became indistinguishable from a booster's. He even chose the same city: Chicago, he wrote in 1901, was where "all the forces of the nation intersect."⁹⁹

The chief difference between Turner and the boosters hinges on a seemingly minor point: Turner's Chicago rose to power only as the frontier drew to a close, whereas the boosters' Chicago had been an intimate part of frontier settlement almost from the beginning. In this, the boost-

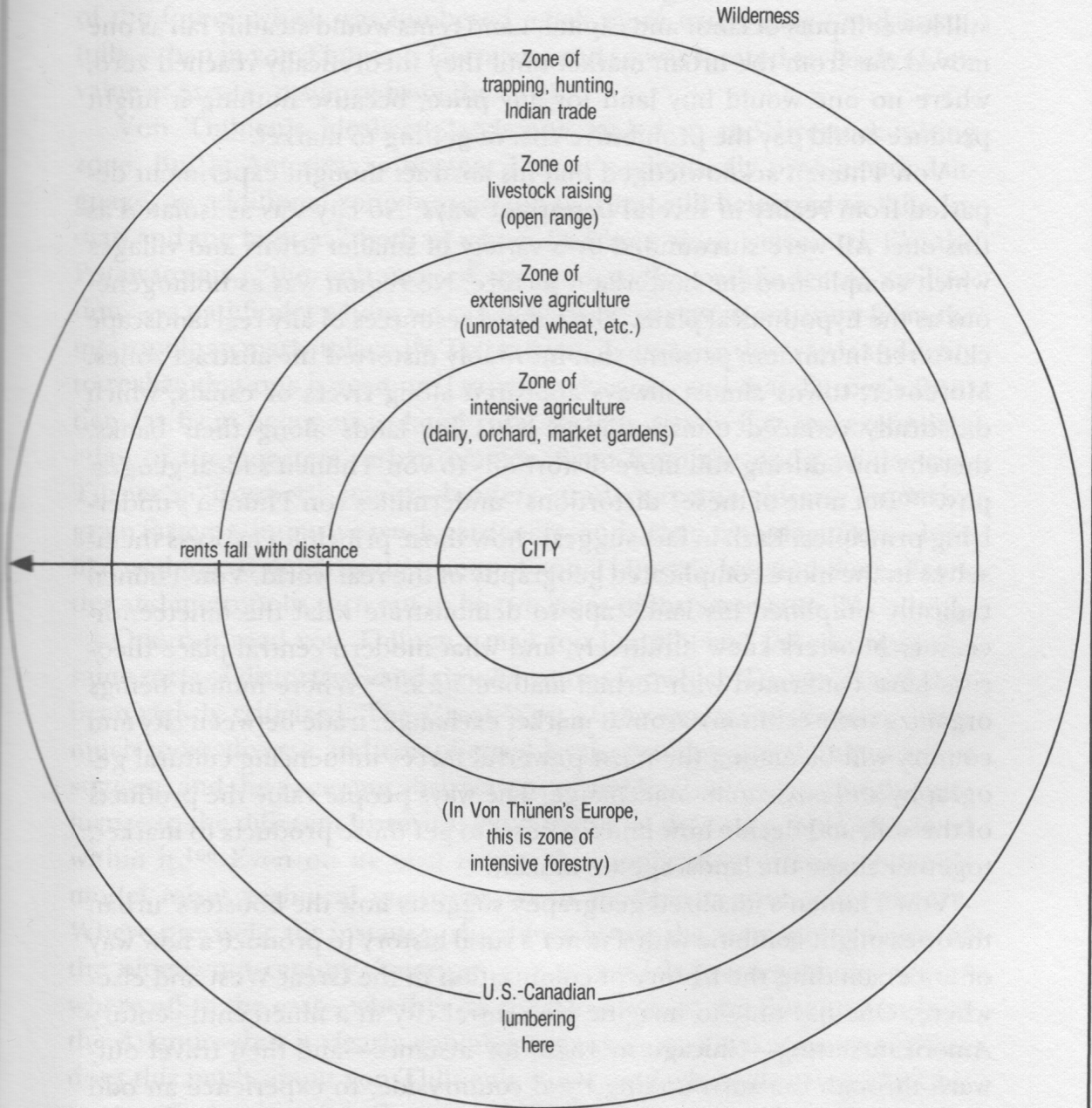
ers saw more clearly than the historian. When they argued that the city grew by drawing to itself the resources of an emerging region, they also implied that urban markets made rural development possible. "Chicago, the inevitable metropolis of the vigorous northwestern third of the prairie world," wrote James Parton in 1867, "has taken the lead in rendering the whole of it accessible."¹⁰⁰ Making a landscape "accessible" meant linking it to a market, which meant fostering regular exchange between city and country. Urban-rural commerce was the motor of frontier change, a fact which the boosters understood better than Turner.

In the twentieth century, the body of theory which analyzes urban-rural systems of the sort that both Turner and the boosters were trying to understand goes by the name of central place theory. Curiously, it traces its roots back to a contemporary of the boosters, writing in Germany at about the same time. Johann Heinrich von Thünen, an educated gentleman farmer in Mecklenburg, published the first edition of his book *The Isolated State* in 1826. In it, he tried to produce a rigorous mathematical description of the spatial relationships and economic linkages between city and country. Neither Turner nor the boosters appear to have read it, and yet it may offer a way to resolve the apparent differences between them.

Von Thünen proposed a simple thought experiment. If one imagined a completely isolated world, he said, in which a single city sat in the midst of an endless and uniformly fertile plain, certain regular patterns of agricultural activity would appear in the surrounding territory. What farmers could profitably raise at any given location would depend on two key variables: how much people in the city were willing to pay for different crops, and how much it cost to transport those crops to market. "With increasing distance from the Town," wrote von Thünen, "the land will progressively be given up to products cheap to transport in relation to their value."¹⁰¹

Von Thünen's abstract principles had strikingly concrete geographical consequences. A series of concentric agricultural zones would form around the town, each of which would support radically different farming activities. Nearest the town would be a zone producing crops so heavy, bulky, or perishable that no farmer living farther away could afford to ship them to market. Orchards, vegetable gardens, and dairies would dominate this first zone and raise the price of land—its "rent"—so high that less valuable crops would not be profitable there. Farther out, landowners in the second zone would devote themselves to intensive forestry, supplying the town with lumber and fuel. Beyond the forest, farmers would practice ever more extensive forms of agriculture, raising grain crops on lands where rents fell—along with labor and capital invest-

Von Thünen's Isolated State



ment—the farther out from town one went. This was the zone of wheat farming. Finally, distance from the city would raise transport costs so high that no grain crop could pay for its movement to market. Beyond that point, landowners would use their property for raising cattle and other livestock, thereby creating a zone of even more extensive land use, with still lower inputs of labor and capital. Land rents would steadily fall as one moved out from the urban market until they theoretically reached zero, where no one would buy land for any price, because nothing it might produce could pay the prohibitive cost of getting to market.

Von Thünen acknowledged that his abstract thought experiment departed from reality in several important ways. No city was as isolated as this one. All were surrounded by a variety of smaller towns and villages which complicated the hinterland picture. No region was as homogeneous as the hypothetical plain. The natural resources of any real landscape clustered in random patterns that inevitably distorted the abstract zones. Moreover, towns almost always appeared along rivers or canals, which drastically reduced transportation costs for lands along their banks, thereby introducing still more distortions to von Thünen's ideal geography.¹⁰² But none of these "distortions" undermines von Thünen's underlying principles. Each in fact suggests how those principles express themselves in the more complicated geography of the real world. Von Thünen radically simplified his landscape to demonstrate what the nineteenth-century boosters knew intuitively, and what modern central place theorists have confirmed with formal mathematics.¹⁰³ Where human beings organize their economy around market exchange, trade between city and country will be among the most powerful forces influencing cultural geography and environmental change. The ways people value the products of the soil, and decide how much it costs to get those products to market, together shape the landscape we inhabit.

Von Thünen's idealized geography suggests how the boosters' urban theories might combine with Turner's rural history to produce a new way of understanding the history of colonization in the Great West and elsewhere. One has only to imagine his central city in a nineteenth-century American setting—Chicago in 1870, for instance—and then travel outward through the surrounding rural countryside, to experience an odd sense of *déjà vu*. Leaving the city and its factories behind, one first passes through a zone containing densely populated farm settlements practicing intensive forms of agriculture. Truck gardens, dairies, and orchards dominate the landscape, with many signs that farmers are investing their profits in outbuildings, fences, fertilizers, and other technologies for "improving" agriculture. As one travels farther west, these intensive farms gradually give way to newer and more sparsely settled communities. They

practice more extensive agriculture, exploiting the prairie soil by raising unrotated crops of corn and wheat. Farther west still, these give way to the open range, where ranchers and cowboys raise animals rather than crops, on vast stretches of land with very few people and low capital investment. (This is also, in nineteenth-century North America, the zone of the forest, which was lumbered much more extensively—and wastefully—than in von Thünen's Germany, and so was located on lands of low value at greater distance from the city.)

Von Thünen's idealized landscape ended in the livestock-raising zone. But in America, to borrow Turner's admittedly problematic language, an additional zone beyond the pastoral still belonged to "the Indian and the hunter," both of whom had long since welcomed, like the Potawatomis, "the entrance of the trader, the pathfinder of civilization"—a pathfinder whom we can now recognize as an emissary from the metropolitan marketplace.¹⁰⁴ To read von Thünen in this way is suddenly to realize that one is reading Turner backwards, and that Turner's frontier, far from being an isolated rural society, was in fact the expanding edge of the boosters' urban empire. Seen from the midst of the city, Turner's "frontier" stages—hunters, traders, cattle raisers, extensive grain farmers, intensive truck gardeners, and urban manufacturers—look like nothing so much as the zones of von Thünen's Isolated State. Frontier and metropolis turn out to be two sides of the same coin.¹⁰⁵

One can read von Thünen's map too literally and fall victim to the same sorts of distortions and simplifications for which Turner's thesis has been rightly criticized. The Great West of the nineteenth century was a much more diverse and complicated landscape than these broad zones suggest, and the sweeping abstractions of an idealized geography do little justice to the different historical experiences of the real people who lived within it.¹⁰⁶ Even on its own terms, this application of von Thünen's model raises technical questions about modern central place theory. Where precisely, for instance, should we locate the metropolitan core of the nineteenth-century American city system? It presumably lay somewhere off to the east—whether on the American or the European side of the Atlantic—but it clearly contained many more cities than one. What does this imply about von Thünen's zones, and where do cities like Chicago or St. Louis or San Francisco fall within those zones?

I will return to such questions in the closing chapters of this book, but for now I would offer just two observations about von Thünen's geography. First, he reminds us that city and country are inextricably connected and that market relations profoundly mediate between them. A rural landscape which omits the city and an urban landscape which omits the country are radically incomplete as portraits of their shared world. The

zoned hinterland of the Isolated State may oversimplify the diverse realities of the Great West, but it nonetheless suggests the sorts of underlying market principles that have linked city with country to turn a natural landscape into a spatial economy. Chicago's story remains incomprehensible without some knowledge of von Thünen's principles. But—and this is the second point—von Thünen, like many modern central place theorists, made no effort to place his city-country system in *time*. The lone city in the midst of the featureless plain *had no history*, and so poses real problems when one tries to apply it to the extremely dynamic processes that reshaped city and country in the nineteenth-century West. As a historical explanation, the Isolated State is as wanting—and as teleological—as Turner's frontier.¹⁰⁷

The concrete example nearest at hand is the best case in point: von Thünen's zones, for all they may suggest about Chicago's later hinterland, shed little light on the city's explosive growth during the 1830s. In just three or four years, a tiny village suddenly increased its population twenty fold, the value of its land grew by a factor of three thousand, and boosters began to speak of it as a future metropolis.¹⁰⁸ Capitalists from the largest cities in Europe and America—London, New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and others—raced to invest in the would-be city. To understand these events, we have to combine von Thünen's abstract geography with the booster theories that persuaded New Yorkers like Charles Butler and William B. Ogden to invest substantial sums to help make Chicago's urban dream come true. Booster models of urban growth were nothing if not dynamic, for the simple reason that they sought to prevail on wealthy investors to turn predictions of urban greatness into self-fulfilling prophecies. "If our National Wheel of Commerce have its Hub immovably pivoted by Nature and by Art," wrote John Wright at the beginning of a 475-page book promoting Chicago, "should not every Business Man know it?"¹⁰⁹ Much as they might claim that the city's growth was "natural" and "inevitable," boosters knew that they were whistling in the dark if they failed to attract outside capital to make their prophecies come true.

Capital held one of the most important keys to metropolitan empire, which was why boosters wrote so many tracts making their case to potential investors. Repeatedly in the nineteenth century, western cities came into being when eastern capital created remote colonies in landscapes that as yet contained relatively few people. Movements of capital helped explain why large cities developed so much more quickly in the West than Turner's evolutionary frontier stages suggest. By linking frontier areas to an international system of cities, these centers of capital investment emerged as urban markets which drove the region's growth.¹¹⁰ Although

no booster would have put it quite so bluntly, the center of metropolitan empire—and of Turner's frontier—was the marketplace of modern capitalism. When Turner spoke of the frontier as “the outer edge of the wave,” what he unintentionally described was not some implicitly racist “meeting point between savagery and civilization” but the ongoing extension of market relations into the ways human beings used land—and each other—in the Great West.¹¹¹

Chicago had been a marketplace long before boosters proclaimed it a metropolis. Its Potawatomi and French inhabitants made it the focus of a thriving fur trade many decades before it reached the watershed of the 1830s. The Potawatomis had been shrewd traders who bargained well for wealth and power as they understood those things, linking themselves to distant urban markets to pursue their own cultural sense of the good life. These were no “savages,” noble or otherwise. They understood the market as it applied to such things as animal skins and alcohol and blankets and guns, and they had at least an equal hand with Euroamerican traders in dominating local trade before 1833. If the frontier was an expanding “wave” of market activity, they were well within its leading edge.

The Potawatomis had willingly attached themselves to the urban market for furs because it appeared to serve them as well as they served it. But what they did not understand—what they were not allowed to understand, not allowed to join, not allowed to resist—was the vision of empire behind that market, the vision that inspired those who flooded into Chicago during the 1830s hoping to make it the focus of a far more extensive metropolitan economy. The Potawatomis' own conception of the market did not extend to the lands on which they lived, at least not nearly so much as the people who supplanted them. They had little experience with how deeply land and its products could enter the marketplace, and they did not dream of how a hinterland territory could pay tribute to an imperial city.

If, then, we take 1833 as the beginning of Chicago's metropolitan story, the Indians' and boosters' different notions of land and empire marked a great cultural divide on human maps of the Great West in the 1830s. The nineteenth-century French political scientist Emile Boutmy wrote of Americans,

Their one primary and predominant object is to cultivate and settle these prairies, forests, and vast waste lands. The striking and peculiar characteristic of American society is, that it is not so much a democracy as a huge commercial company for the discovery, cultivation, and capitalization of its enormous territory. . . . The United States are primarily a commercial society . . . and only secondarily a nation. . . .¹¹²

Turner bridled at so irreverent a description of American life, but he admitted the truth of Boutmy's insight insofar as "the fundamental fact in regard to this new society was its relation to land."¹¹³ For many, if not most, Americans, "the discovery, cultivation, and capitalization" of land meant bringing it into the marketplace and attaching it to the metropolis. They might articulate their visions in terms quite different from those of the boosters' urban empire—speaking of freedom, or community, or family, or getting ahead in the world—but even these noneconomic dreams generally presupposed a growing commercial intercourse between city and country. Frontier and metropolis, and the ideas that lay behind them, would reshape the Great West together.

The Potawatomis finally sold their lands to the United States and moved west to prepare for their next encounter with American land hunger. The removal of these "dusky nuisances" fulfilled an imperial ideology that viewed the "idle and dissolute Indians" as "the first obstacle to the growth of Chicago."¹¹⁴ Henceforth the Potawatomis played only the most marginal roles in the marketplace they had once dominated. The proof of their tragedy is that the history of Chicago can be written from 1833 forward as if they had never lived there. But as we watch the speculators and their frantic efforts to start Chicago down the metropolitan path of its boosters, we would do well to remember that the place had once been occupied and possessed in a way that cherished no such visions of urban empire. At precisely the moment that Charles Butler imagined the little village to be "a great commercial point," he averted his eyes and the Indians disappeared. The dream would not contain them.

Turner averted his own eyes in much the same way when he defined his frontier as "the hither edge of free land."¹¹⁵ The land was not free but taken. Moreover, even if it became free in the moment that it passed from Indian control, it soon ceased to be free again as it entered the marketplace. Never again would it be without a price. Tallgrass prairies, oak openings, white pine forests, herds of bison, and the people who might choose to live amid these things: none would ever be the same again. As village became metropolis, so frontier became hinterland. The history of the Great West is a long dialogue between the place we call city and the place we call country. So perhaps the best vantage point from which to view that history is not with Turner, in the outermost of von Thünen's zones, but in the place where Turner himself said "all the forces of the nation intersect."¹¹⁶ Viewed from the banks of the Chicago River, the Great West is both an urban empire and a countryside transformed.