

POPULAR SCIENCE AND POLITICAL THOUGHT CONVERGE: COLONIAL SURVIVAL BECOMES COLONIAL REVIVAL, 1830-1910

HARVEY GREEN

...an ideal parlor ... is not following a fantastic fashion of to-day which will be a barbarism of tomorrow; it is not a foolish or unmeaning mania for flax and spinning wheels and other garret lumber, but an intelligent selection of furniture whose intrinsic worth we shall not tire of...¹

The complaints of domestic advisors are perhaps the most certain indicators of a mass phenomenon in the American home. But even if Dora Stoddard's characterization of "The Ideal Parlor" had not appeared in the February 16, 1889 issue of *Good Housekeeping*, observant students of American culture would know of the existence of this popular enthusiasm for the forms and designs of colonial America from the large number of surviving artifacts of the late nineteenth century. The colonial revival was part of an ideological synthesis of popular scientific, social and demographic realities of the late nineteenth century. The artifacts of this particular style, and the re-use of eighteenth-century objects in new surroundings are prime fragments of historical information because they embody some of the complex interrelationships of the entire culture: that is, their popularity indicates that they touched a responsive chord in the world-view of those who chose to live with them. By elucidating the nature of that world-view we can better understand the manner in which form and ideology intersect.

The colonial revival as cultural phenomenon is in part more correctly perceived as a colonial survival. This is especially true if colonial revival is considered to encompass an enthusiasm for the people and relics of the American Revolution. If the term is so defined, then the continuity of thought and action raises the related issues of the particular manner and meaning of expression within the broader context of social and intellectual history.

Popular interest in the American Revolution has been continuous since the publication of Hugh Henry Breckinridge's *Battle of Bunker Hill* in 1776. Russel Blaine Nye cites twenty-one plays about the Revolution that were published between 1820 and 1860.² A similar enthusiasm can be found in American fiction of the ante-bellum era. These novels have not endured as imaginative literature, but they were a successful genre in their own time, and therefore indicators of common concerns and

patterns of culture. In our earnest appreciation of Cooper, Melville, Hawthorne and other American authors of lasting significance, we have forgotten the likes of John Neal, George Tucker and George Lippard: yet they were, in their time, perhaps more important. In 1823, Neal, for example, churned out the popular *Seventy-Six* in twenty-nine days, and followed it with the equally successful *Randolph*, which he wrote in thirty-six days.³ Like Tucker, Neal wrote lengthy, convoluted and highly moralistic tales of the men and events of the great struggle against England. Essentially paeans to American nationalism, the works reflect the real or wished-for self-pride of the early years of the republic as well as a growing attempt to reassert national unity as the sectional crisis became more intense. Lippard, however, was a writer of a different order. Described by Michael Kammen as a "post-Christian, proto-Marxian, Christian mystic," Lippard cranked out numerous works of sensational fiction from 1844 (when he was 22) until his death in 1854. His *Blanche of Brandywine; or, September the Eleventh, 1777. A Romance of the Revolution* (1846), *Paul Ardenheim, the Monk of Wissahikon. A Romance of the American Revolution, 1776* (1848) and *Herbert Tracy; or, The Legend of the Black Rangers. A Romance of the Battlefield of Germantown* (1844) were patriotic and moralistic novels written and produced for the working class that bought them in great quantities.⁴

Images of Washington and other heroes and the events of the Revolution form a similar pattern of imaginative concern in the fine arts and domestic artifacts of the antebellum era. Paintings like John Trumbull's *The Declaration of Independence* (1888) and *The Surrender of Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown* (1820) were part of a tradition whose aim was to record the Revolution's significant events for future generations. The most famous depiction of this type is probably Emanuel Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851), although there were numerous paintings of the same subject, including those of Thomas Sully (1819), Edward Hicks (who painted at least six versions in the 1830s), George Caleb Bingham (1856-1871), as well as such derivative works as William T. Ranney's *Marion Crossing the Peedee* (1851). They were, in this sense, an answer to

John Adams' oft-quoted question to Jefferson: "Who shall write the history of the American Revolution? Who can write it? Who will ever be able to write it?"⁵

The unifying trait of these images and the literature of the Revolution is in their unabashed nationalism: they were celebrations of what were to the men and women of the early nineteenth century the positive characteristics of the great age of heroes and statesmen. Exclusionary only in the sense that they depicted the in-group, these renditions were optimistic, assertive and perhaps even aggressive. But the affirmation of identity can be taken on other, less positive aspects in their cultural situations. Thus while the visage of Washington continued to appear in paintings and on tablewares, coverlets and other domestic artifacts, the meaning of that image and the invocation of the founding fathers and mothers took on additional significance by the 1850s. (Fig. 1)

A popular publication of 1855, *The Wide-Awake Gift and Know-Nothing Token* (by "One of 'Em") demonstrates this shift in emphasis and meaning (Fig. 2). The front cover of the book shows a toga-clad figure of Washington, reminiscent of Horatio Grennough's sculpture of 1847, standing on a pedestal with a copy of the Constitution at his feet. The depiction of the Constitution rather than the Declaration of Independence is significant: in the 1850s the revolutionary implications of the latter document were less favored than the virtues of state-building and orderly government inherent in the former. The spine of the book carried an image of Liberty or Columbia kneeling with a flag and liberty cap. Thus the immediate visual impact of the book was familiar; both images carried the connotation of patriotism and national pride. The book's contents distinguish it from the proud assertions of the painters and novelists of the period. In addition to the expected patriotic entries in this collection of articles—"Washington's Farewell Address," "The Mayflower," "The Pilgrim Fathers" and "Fourth of July"—are "America for Americans," "Romanism and Liberty" and "The Silent Scourge." The "scourge," "bursting like a sudden earthquake wherever its fires are called to purge Freedom's palladium," that was to rescue American cities and the republic from "insolent, foreign-born brawlers ... and mobs"⁶ was the Know-Nothing party.

Primarily composed of middle-class professionals, artisans and laboring men, the Know-Nothings based their appeal on the American hostility to both immigrants and Roman Catholics that had grown more frequent since 1830. Citizens of Boston, for example, had attacked and burned a convent in 1834, and rumors of a "Popish plot" circulated in New York in the early 1830s. *The Confessions of Maria Monk*—an expose allegedly written by a woman who was incarcerated in a Montreal nunnery where she was forced "to live in the practice of criminal intercourse with priests" (the babies were subsequently baptized and strangled)—sold 300,000 copies between 1835 and 1860.

By 1855, the Know-Nothings had been joined by other naivist organizations: the Native American Association (established in 1837); the Order of United Americans, which had branches in sixteen states; the Sons of America, a Pennsylvania-based group; the Order of United American Mechanics; and the Junior Order of United American Mechanics. The emblem of the Junior Order appears on a whiskey flask of 1840s, indicating that while they hated Roman Catholics, they were as yet unwilling to make the equation of strong drink and Catholicism that the temperance crusaders and politicians of the post-Civil War era glibly held.

The Know-Nothings became a considerable political force. In 1854 they held all but two seats in the Massachusetts legislature, and two years later their candidates won six governorships—Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Maryland, Kentucky and Massachusetts. The Maryland election was particularly indicative of the hostility of the campaigns, since that state had had a significant Catholic minority since its establishment in the seventeenth century. The power of the party in Massachusetts is similarly explained by the concentration of Irish Catholic immigrants that came primarily to Boston and its environs after the famines of the 1830s. The Know-Nothings declined during the Civil War, but their ideas did not die; they were simply dormant until social conditions fanned embers into flame.

Like the *Wide-Awake Gift and Know-Nothing Token*, the party was dedicated to "Sons and daughters of America, as a token of filial affection for our common Mother, Whose Beauty, unlike that of other Mothers, increases with Her Years, and Her Strength with the Number of Her Children." The metaphor employed is significant; it is an early example of the use of political and scientific theory to buttress an ideology of exclusionism and hostility. To "be fruitful and multiply" is of course a Biblical invocation with which American Protestants living in an era of tumultuous religious revival were familiar. In America, this notion took on a special meaning, indicating at once a conception of this nation as God's favored kingdom and a secular equation of wealth and bounty with goodness and strength. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, images of cornucopiae, baskets of flowers and fruits, and visual references to commerce and production joined the rhetoric of America as the land of abundance and virtue to generate this optimistic vision of the new world and the new republic (Figs. 3, 4).

But it was not simply abundant material goods that were the keys to the American future in the world of nations. As the dedication in *The Wide-Awake Gift* makes clear, increase in population was also critical to the health of the republic. The fertility of American women (and men) was central and, in the 1850s, assumed. In the 1860 edition of his most popular book, *Christian Nurture*, Horace Bushnell

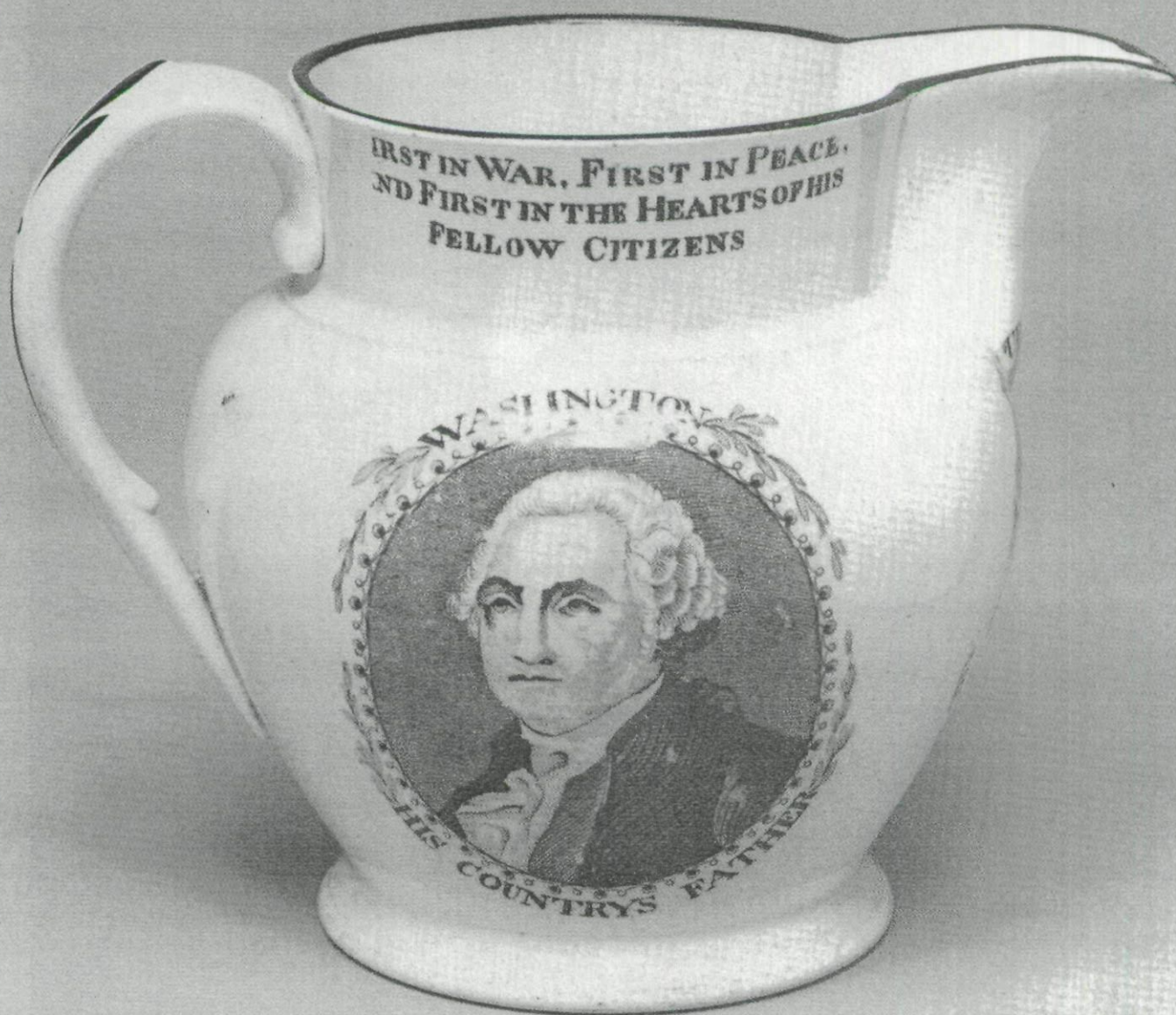


Fig. 1: Ceramic pitcher, manufactured by William Adams & Sons, Staffordshire, England. c. 1820-1830. Courtesy of the Margaret Woodbury Strong Museum.

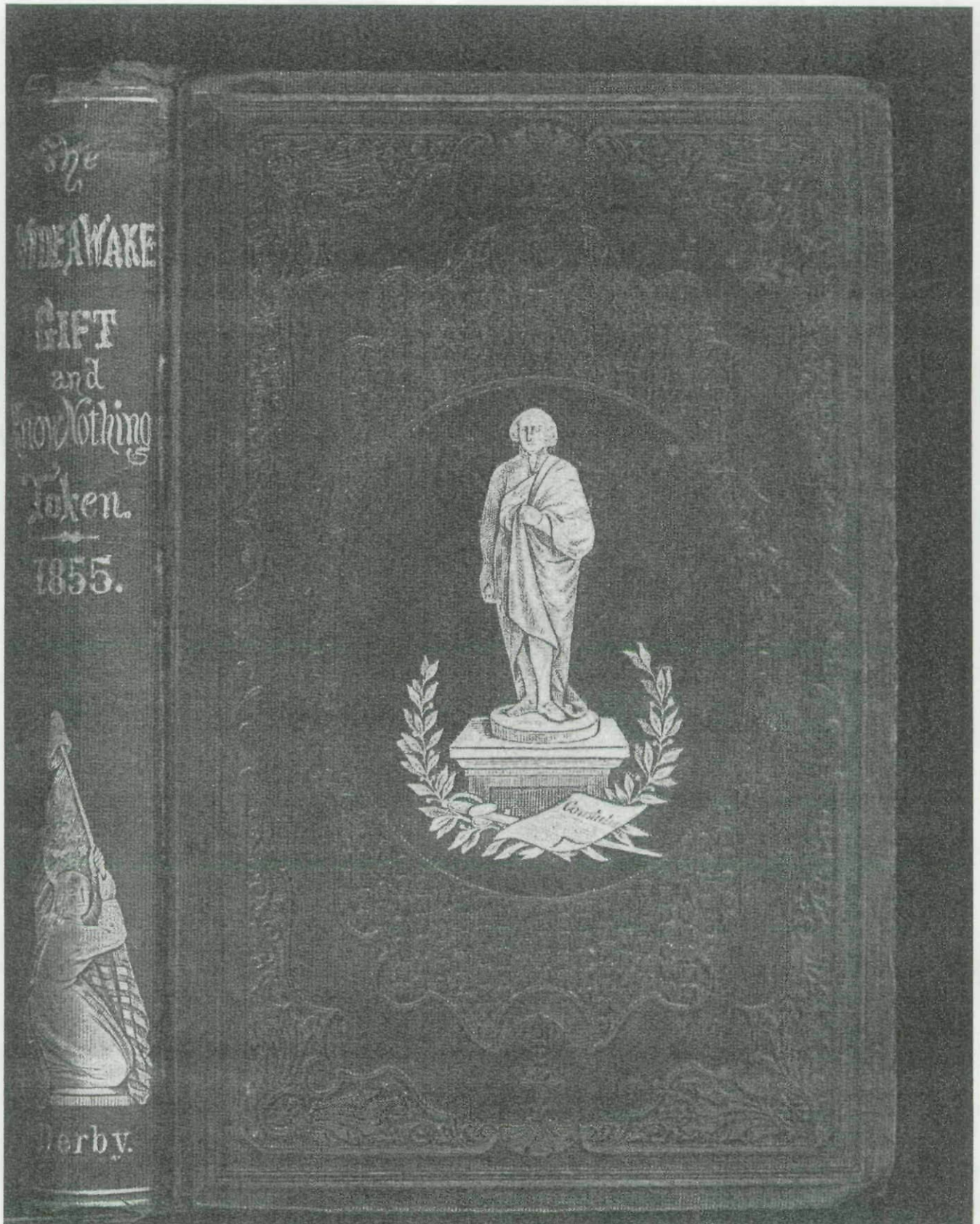


Figure 2: *The Wide-Awake Gift and Know-Nothing Token*, New York, 1855.

Courtesy of the Margaret Woodbury Strong Museum

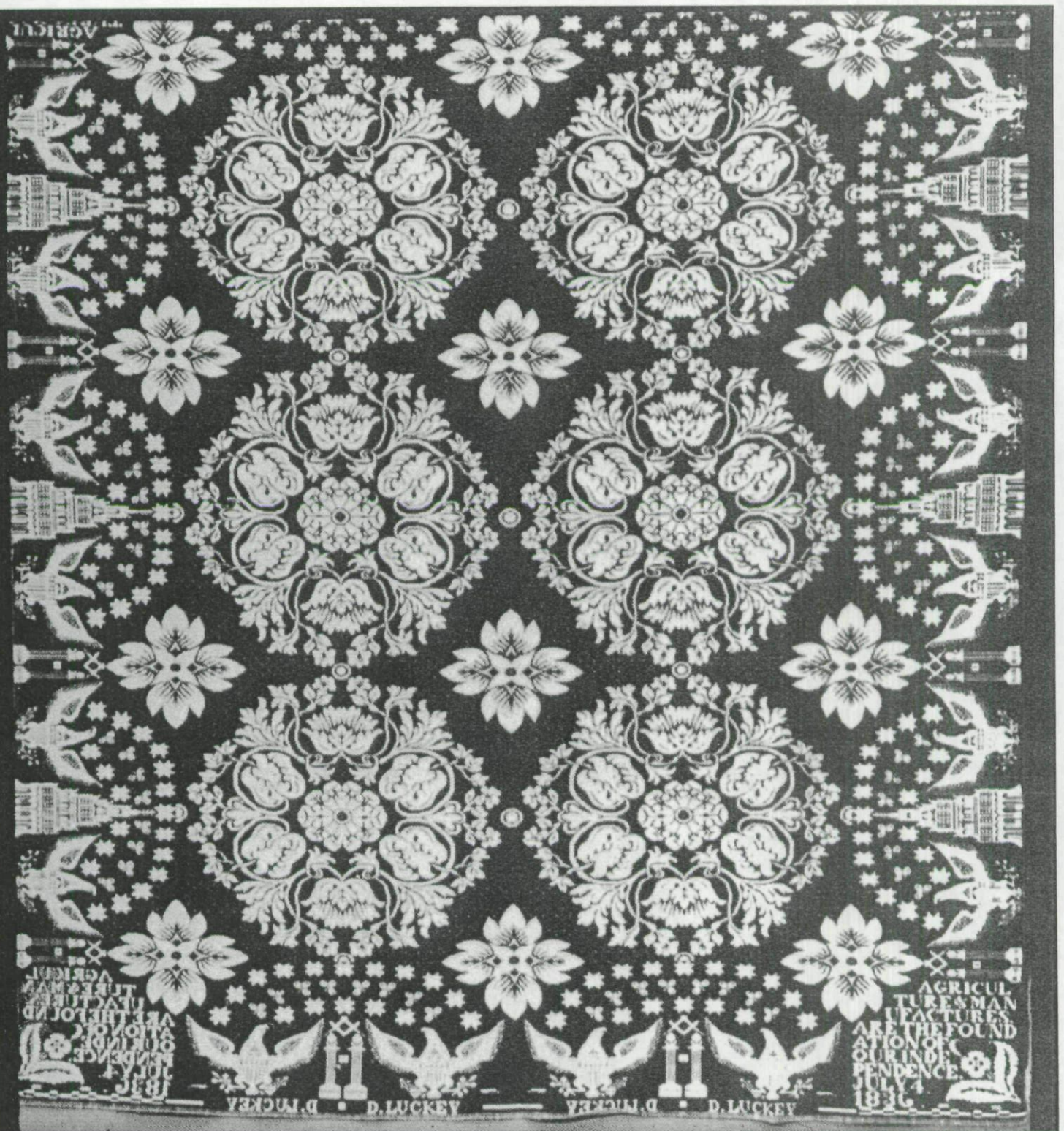


Figure 3: Jacquard Coverlet, woven by James Alexander in 1836. Woven into the corners of the coverlet is the sentence "Agriculture and Manufacturing are the foundation of the Republic."
Courtesy of the Margaret Woodbury Strong Museum





Figure 4: Painted wooden side chair, factory-made in the northeast between 1830 and 1850. Stenciled on to the back of this inexpensive chair is a cornucopia.

Courtesy of the Margaret Woodbury Strong Museum

articulated this widely-held belief, comforting his readers with his confidence in the ability of native American Anglo-Saxon stock to reproduce and increase its numbers to sufficiently outnumber foreign groups.⁷

Bushnell's optimism and concern for the Anglo-Saxon "stock" is typical of a pre-Darwinian interpretation of national groups and their traditions. Unlike commentators of the post-Civil War years, antebellum analysts used such terms as "stock" and "race" without physiological and genetic connotations; the nomenclature was roughly equivalent to "nationality." Thus the concept was in a certain sense secular; a tracing to and association with pre-Norman England as the font of American national identity. The *North American Review* and the *American Review* published articles entitled "The Anglo-Saxon Race" in 1848 and 1851, and George Perkins Marsh's *The Goths in New England* (1843) was a popular success, at least in the northeast. The continued sales of Sharon Turner's *History of the Anglo-Saxon Race* (first published in England between 1799 and 1806, in America in 1841), the prevalence of the Gothic revival style in home furnishings, and the enormous popularity of Sir Walter Scott's works attest to the unflagging interest in noble knights of England before the corruption of King John, the violence of Cromwell, and the tyranny of King George.⁸ (Fig. 5)

Antebellum racial nationalism was rooted in political and literary speculation, rather than in scientific theory. The publication of Darwin's research on the evolution of the species in 1859 changed everything. The full title of the work, *On the Origin of the Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, provides a fuller indication of both the method the scientist employed as well as his perceptions of the ramifications of his theory. In the United States, Darwinian theory rapidly became most familiar as "survival of the fittest," although the phrase was coined by Herbert Spencer, an analyst of social and economic relationships rather than those of flora and fauna. Nonetheless, "survival of the fittest" was not a massive corruption of Darwin: both he and Spencer had been strongly influenced by the English economist Thomas Malthus, who had posited a continual struggle among the ever-increasing population of the world for food that was not increasing as rapidly.⁹

Natural selection and the idea of survival of the fittest gained rapid popular acceptance in America.¹⁰ (Random variation and the ideas articulated in the *Descent of Man* were the controversial elements of Darwinian theory.) Darwin's ideas were made available to the public through lectures, newspaper articles and especially in E.L. Youmans' *Popular Science Monthly*. In language that made the theory accessible to the middle-class reader, Youmans began the initial number of his publication (May, 1872) with the first portion of a serialization of

Spencer's *The Study of Sociology*, a theoretical work detailing the methods and conclusions of a Darwinian interpretation of human society. *Popular Science Monthly* was a financial success, and Youmans was an unabashed supporter of both Darwin and Spencer. The extent of Youmans' success in marketing Spencer in America and an indication of the receptivity of American readers to his theories are revealed by publication figures for his works. When Youmans went to England in 1863, he discovered that almost no one had bought Spencer's works—an initial run of 750 copies of *Social Statics* had not sold out in the eleven years since its publication—but in the United States he was able to stimulate enough interest to sell over one-half million copies of Appleton's editions of Spencer's works by 1900.¹¹

For all of Youmans' skill as a marketing agent, it was the content of Spencerian and Darwinian thought that sold. The key to the success of these ideas in post-Civil War America lay in the ability of articulate critics to draw both optimistic and pessimistic conclusions from the work. Darwin himself summarized the former view in *The Descent of Man*:

... the wonderful progress of the United States as well as the character of the people are the results of natural selection; for the more energetic, restless, and courageous men from all parts of Europe have emigrated during the last ten or twelve generations to that great country and have there succeeded best.¹²

Spencerians as well as those more comfortable with Darwinian thought justified their optimism for the continued hegemony of the Anglo-Saxon branch of the human race because of two related beliefs: first, they were convinced that the hard life of emigration, settlement and frontier or farm existence had produced a sturdy stock of American natives; second, the very existence of the American was proof that "history shows us a struggle of races, and we who survive are ready enough to believe that the strongest survive because they are the best."¹³ Thus Anglo-Saxon culture was strong enough not only to survive the influx of new cultural forms but also to absorb the best parts of those cultures to produce an even more vital American.

These theories were in effect a perfect counterpart to the capitalist ideology of the immediate post-war years. Unrestricted immigration would provide a ready and compliant labor force which had no claim to any special rights other than to sell its labor in the marketplace that was itself characterized by the struggle for existence. If Darwin and Spencer were correct "... the increase of wealth favors the increase of population, so the latter reacts on the former by increasing the number of producers."¹⁴ Thus the argument ran: an already strong stock (nationality), tempered and further strengthened by the rigors of a transatlantic

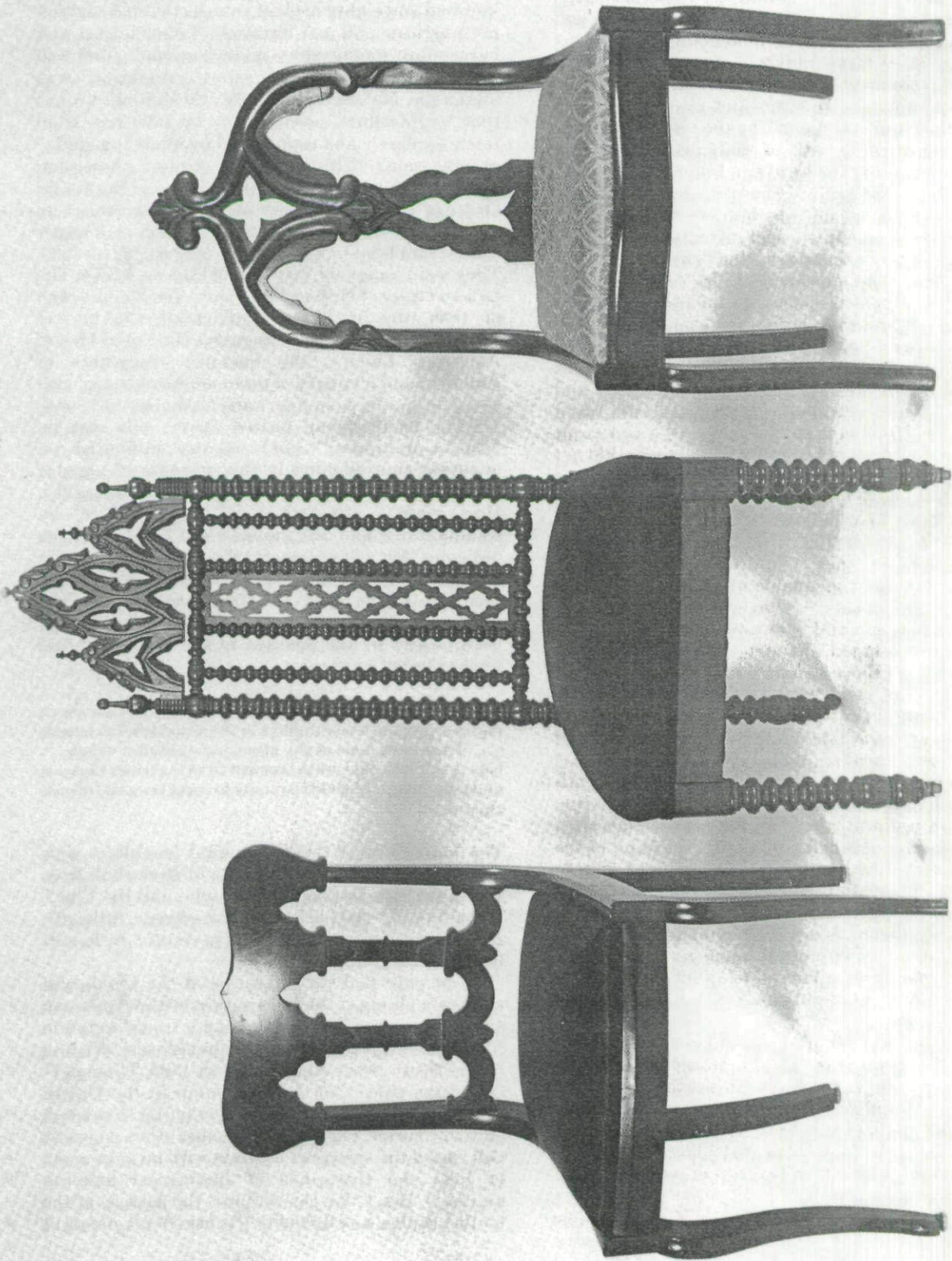


Figure 5: Three chairs in the gothic style. All were factory-made in the northeast between 1830 and 1860. Courtesy of the Margaret Woodbury Strong Museum

crossing and the frontier experience, would be modified (slightly) by the influx of still more hardy emigres, who in turn would be assimilated by the resident vital Anglo-Saxon culture. Having already proved their worth in the struggle for existence, Americans could look to the future struggle confident in the knowledge that they would triumph.

This set of ideas endured long after its initial period of popularity in the late 1860s and early 1870s. Yet disquieting information and events began to shake that confidence, until, by the late 1880s, there was a significant body of pessimistic and even fatalistic thought. The hard and bitter depression of 1873-1878 was the beginning of the new fault line. As the crisis deepened and the number of jobless and starving people mounted, sporadic violence erupted, primarily in large American cities. The cracks in the social structure became breaks in 1877, when a series of violent, bitter strikes between the railway owners and workers broke out across the country. Burning railway cars and pitched battles with state militias provoked the fear that class war was both imminent and potentially devastating for middle class and wealthy white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, and crystallized the idea that labor violence was a result of foreign influences that had not been and could not be assimilated into mainstream America. Learning about the riots by reading sensational stories in *Harper's* (Fig. 6) or in books like J.T. Headley's *The Great Riots* (1877) (Fig. 7) established Americans were convinced that "The railroad riots were instigated by men incapable of understanding our ideas and principles . . . Foreign demagogues have imported ideas and sentiments which have repeatedly deluged France in blood."¹⁵ The iconography of these visual presentations of the riots is one of chaos; civilization run amok.

The strife did not abate when the economy began to improve in the late 1870s. In the coal fields of Pennsylvania, strikes and violence were continuous throughout the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Immigrant strikebreakers were brought into the region beginning in 1874; their arrival met with violence and bloodshed, and finally rejection of the practice when the immigrants themselves began to organize. In 1886 the predominantly Hungarian coke workers struck, and the action was labelled the work of foreign radicals. Street railway employees struck in New York in March of the same year, prompting *Leslie's Illustrated Weekly* to print a full-page engraving of the battle between the police and the "mob." (Fig. 8)

The event that finally turned both the business community and mainstream organized labor (in the form of the Knights of Labor) against the immigrant was the bombing of the police in Chicago's Haymarket Square in 1886. Writing in one of the organs of the commercial establishment immediately after the Haymarket violence, one businessman claimed

I am no race-worshipper, but . . . if the master race of this

continent is subordinated to or overrun with the communistic and revolutionary races, it will be in grave danger of social disaster.¹⁶

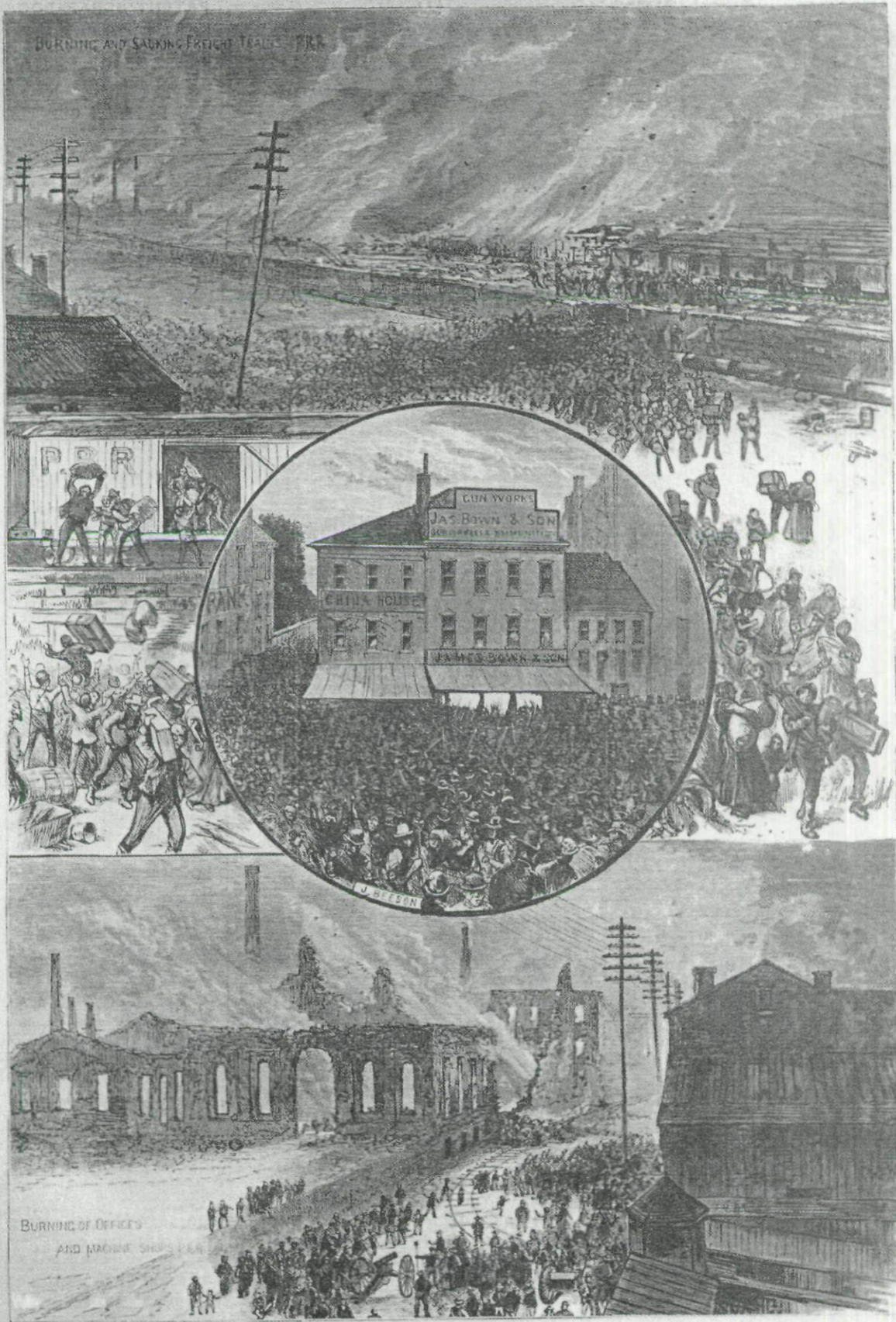
In less than a century "revolutionary" had come one hundred and eighty degrees from its favored position in American political discourse. Labor unrest and burgeoning immigrant populations had convinced Anglo-Saxon Americans that revolution was anathema. Nativist and overly anti-Catholic groups that had declined precipitously by 1860 rose from their dormancy and were joined by other "patriotic" organizations. The Order of United American Mechanics once again became active, and the Junior Order of United American Mechanics increased its membership from 15,000 in 1885 (which was larger than it had been in the 1850s) to over 60,000 by 1890. They were joined by The Red, White, and Blue, The United Order of Native Americans, The Minute Men of 1886 (the name itself indicating the bizarre turnabout of politics and identity), the Loyal Men of American Liberty, the Patriotic Daughters of America, and a variety of other smaller groups with equal antipathy to immigrants, Catholics and Jews.

The businessman quoted above, who was no "Race-worshipper," inadvertently indicated an apparent contradiction in the structure of popular thought about Darwinian theory and social reality. How could a "master race" be "overrun" by communards and revolutionaries? The language indicates that a fundamental change had occurred in both the application of Darwinian theory to the social situation and in the perception of the immigrant. Rather than sturdy Europeans who had been steeled by the passage to the new world and further tested by the environment,

The new immigrants are beaten men from beaten races; representing the worst failures in the struggle for existence . . . They have none of the ideas and aptitudes which . . . belong to those who are descended from the tribes that met under the oak trees of old Germany to make laws and choose chieftains.¹⁷

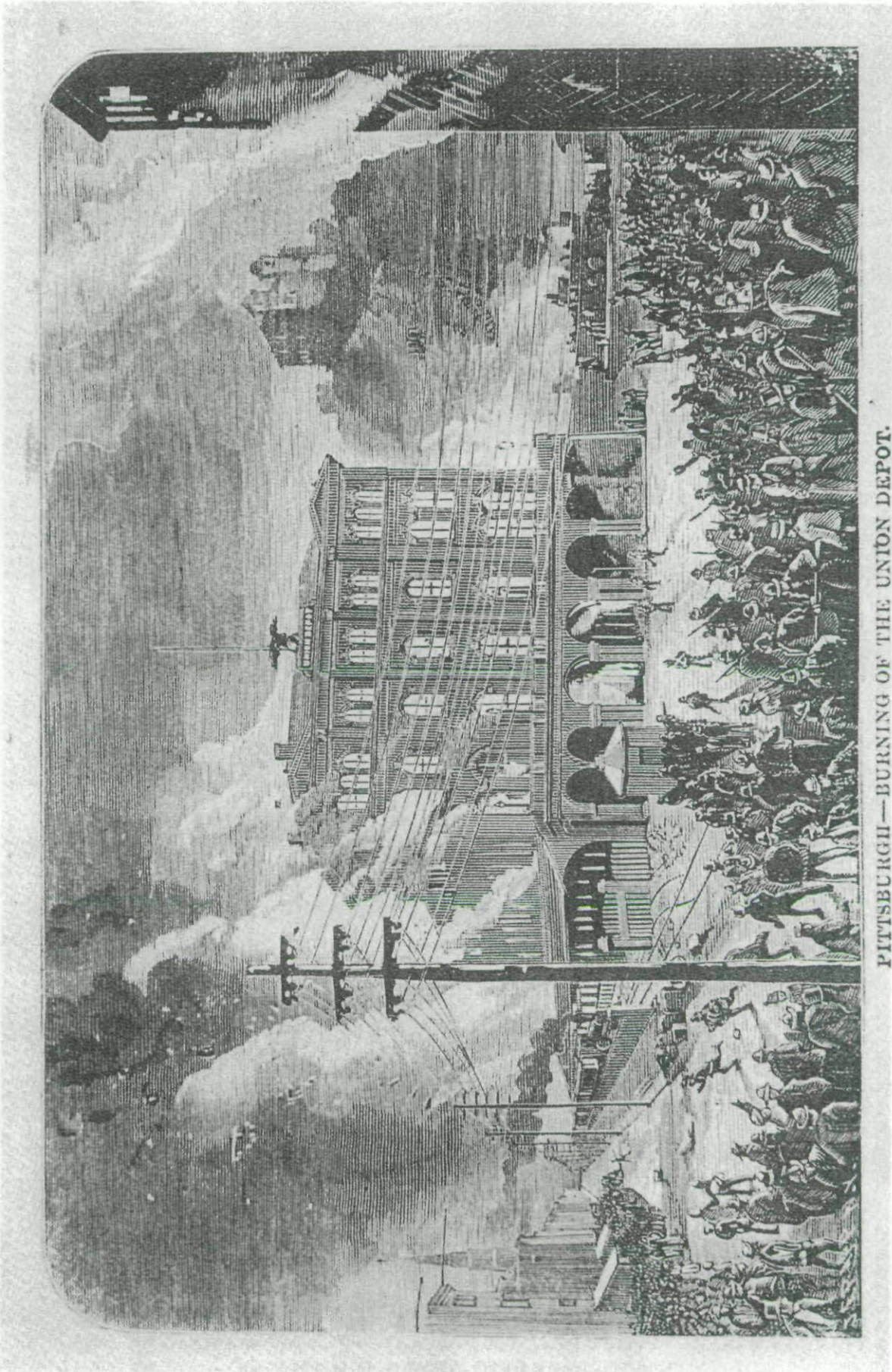
The anarchists of the Haymarket bombings were "rag-tag and bob-tail cutthroats of Beelzebub from the Rhine, the Danube, the Vistula, and the Elbe," "long-haired, wild-eyed, bad-smelling, atheistic, reckless foreign wretches, who never did an honest hour's work in their lives . . ." ¹⁸

Not only had the character of the immigrant evidently changed, but the nature of the American environment had also undergone a transformation that boded ill for the stability of the old order. Writing in the *North American Review* in 1886, Thomas P. Gill noted that "The public domain in the United States is now exhausted."¹⁹ Predating Frederick Jackson Turner's more famous paper by seven years, Gill raised the spectre of a nation with no more room to hold the thousands of newcomers arriving annually. Since, for Darwinians, the success of the United States was linked to the beneficial effects of



THE GREAT STRIKE—PITTSBURGH IN THE HANDS OF THE MOB.—DRAWN FROM SKETCHES BY J. W. ALEXANDER AND JACOB BEARDS.—[SEE PAGE 626.]

Figure 6: *Harper's Weekly* (August 11, 1877) "Pittsburgh in the Hands of the Mob."

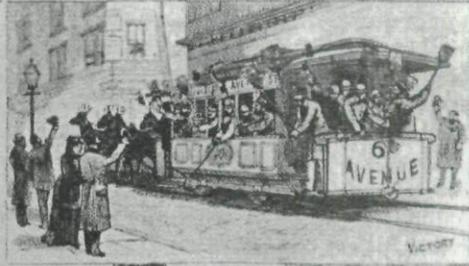


PITTSBURGH—BURNING OF THE UNION DEPOT.

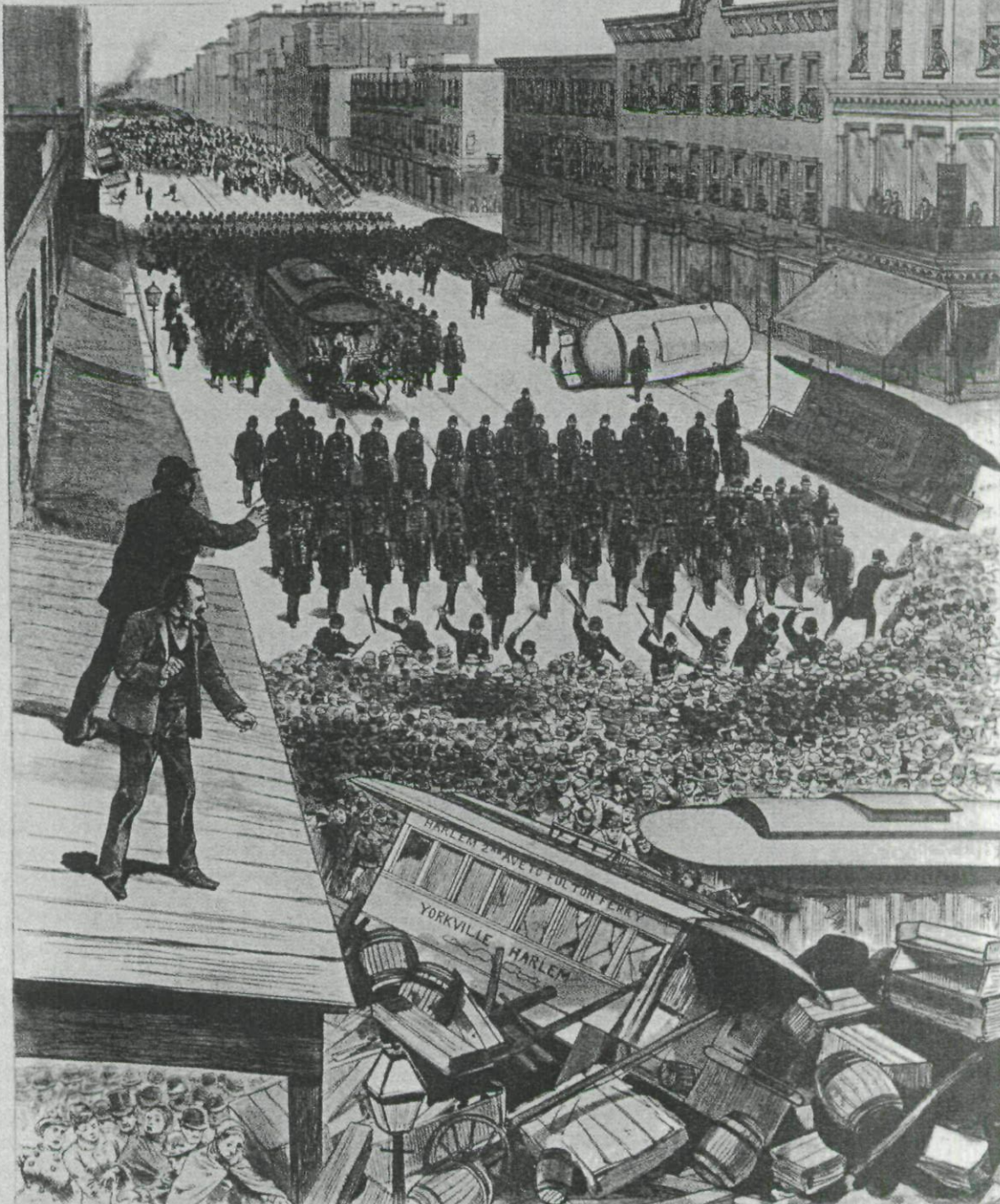
Figure 7: Frontispiece of J.T. Headley's *The Great Riots* (New York, 1877). Shows burning buildings, chaos.



JOHN A. MITCHELL, RAILROAD COMMISSIONER



VICTORY



THE GREAT STRIKE OF STREET-RAILWAY EMPLOYEES IN NEW YORK CITY, MARCH 30-31st.—SCENE IN GRAND STREET: THE POLICE 900 STRONG, ESCORTING A CAR OF THE DRY DOCK, EAST RIVER AND BATTERY RAILROAD COMPANY "ACROSS TOWN," MARCH 31st.

Fig. 8 Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, March 13, 1886. "The Great Strike of the Railway Employees, New York, New York." Shows barricaded streets, mobs of workers, policemen with guns on rooftops. Photo courtesy Margaret Woodbury Strong Museum.

the frontier and farm experience, the perception of an end to available free land suggested that those who were not the fittest could still survive in America, and by sheer force of number threaten the hegemony of the established natives. Writing in the late 1880s, one of the nation's most famous and popular historians, Hubert Howe Bancroft, asked "Old Americans": "Is this your boasted republicanism, a government by the people, for the people? Rather a government by wild Irishmen, for wild Irishmen, and self-serving labor leaders!"²⁰ Twenty-five years later, the refrain was unaltered, and enlarged. In William Roscoe Tanner's *Life and Letters of John Hay*, the pioneers of the Old Northwest territory are characterized as vastly superior to the "Irish bog-trotter, as illiterate and bigoted as the Calabrian peasant or the Russian serf . . . the pitiable offscourings from the capitols of Europe who in the late nineteenth century were seeking American shores."²¹

Because the American environment had changed, city people from Europe were now able to survive in America, which was itself becoming increasingly urbanized. Even if analysts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were incorrect about the urban or rural origins of immigrants of the pre-Civil War era, they thought that the bulk of the "old Americans" were of sturdy yeoman stock. This image is crucial to an understanding of the colonial revival: it is at root a profoundly anti-urban urge, a fabrication of the urban mind generations away from the rural reality. The further irony is that the material manifestations of the enthusiasm for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, either authentic antiques or late nineteenth-century reproductions, were in the main products of the city.

The change in the character of the immigrant was only part of the perceived challenge to the viability of Anglo-Saxon culture in America during the late nineteenth century. A healthy American majority could stave off the threats of a non-Protestant minority, but demographic patterns of the post-Civil War period seemed to call into question the assumption of a vigorous Anglo-Saxon society. The threat was from within as well as without. The 1880 census had revealed that the birth rate among white Anglo-Saxon Protestants had been steadily declining throughout the nineteenth century. Smaller families among this group were linked in part to the increase in apartment living, and city-living in general, but the root cause was believed to be deeper; it lay with the declining health of the old stock, particularly the women of the era.

Between 1848 and 1850, Elizabeth Ellet completed her three-volume study, *The Women of the American Revolution*. Ellet hoped to turn the attention of American readers from the founding fathers to the founding mothers, who gave "the nurture in the domestic sanctuary of that love of civil liberty which afterwards was kindled into a flame that shed light on the world."²² The significance of

the author's argument was not only in her assertion of the place of women in the colonial period, but in her conviction that the colonial woman was somehow superior to her nineteenth-century counterpart. This attitude became a constant refrain in both the popular advice and professional scientific literature of the late nineteenth century. In his *Lessons in Gynecology*, first published in 1879, Dr. William Goodell maintained that

Our great-grandmothers got their schooling during the winter months and let their brains lie fallow for the rest of the year. They knew less about Euclid and the classics than they did about housework. But they made good wives and mothers, and bore and nursed sturdy sons and buxom daughters, and plenty of them at that.²³

Contemporary scientific thought about the human body rested on the twin assumptions that there was a limited amount of energy in any individual, and that the physiological changes in a sexually maturing woman required an unusual quantity of that force. Thus women who studied too hard during their teens were thought to be diverting energy from genital development, thus risking damage to their reproductive organs.²⁴

The declining birth rate among Anglo-Saxon women was interpreted as a physiological and cultural failure made more critical both by the increasing number of immigrants and the alleged fecundity of the women from Eastern Europe or the Mediterranean. The stakes were high. "Shall [the western lands] be populated by our own children or by those of aliens? This is a question that our own women must answer; upon their loins depends the future destiny of the nation."²⁵ In a similarly frantic way, Reverend John Ellis, in *The Deterioration of the Puritan Stock and Its Causes* (1884), warned "It is perfectly clear that without a radical change in the religious ideas, education, habits, and customs of the natives, the present populations and their descendants will not rule that state a single generation."²⁶

Historians like Ellet and moral reformers of Ellis' cast were joined by another emerging power in cultural criticism during the late nineteenth century—the physician in the popular press. Women's magazines—*Demorest's*, *Godey's*, *Peterson's* and *The Household* were probably the most popular—carried regular columns with advice from maintaining the health of their readers. The advice was nearly always couched in terms of criticism for the woman of the present; *Demorest's*, for example, began their initial column, called "Sanitarian," with the stated goal of looking "at the causes for the alleged early decay of American beauty, and see in what ways it can be arrested."²⁷

Less supportive of women were the popular health advisors whose manuals of self-help and advice proliferated after the Civil War. One of the most important of these writers was J.H. Kellogg, a

Battle Creek, Michigan physician whose name is now associated with breakfast cereals. In his *Household Manual of Domestic Hygiene, Food, and Diet* (1882), Kellogg gravely opined that

The declining health and strength of American women has come to be a very common observation. Very few young ladies of the present day can compare with their grandmothers of the last generation in powers of physical endurance. Physicians generally acknowledge that at least three-fourths of their practice is derived from diseases of women.²⁸

Kellogg linked the decline of American women to a variety of causes: "fashionable dress, sedentary habits, late hours, bad diet, sexual sins, and too much drugging."²⁹

Men were not exempt from criticism about their physical condition and its ramifications for the race as a whole. In a paper delivered before the American Health Association in 1874, Frederick Sturgis had estimated that one of every eighteen residents of New York City suffered from syphilis. The "purity crusades" of the turn of the century were as much an effort to prevent the spread of the disease as an attack on the morals of the women who worked the streets. There was similar alarm expressed when the federal government revealed in 1900 that thirty per cent of American males could not meet the minimum physical requirements for military service, whereas only thirteen per cent had failed to qualify for service in the Union army between 1860 and 1865. Evidently there was little inquiry about relative standards of acceptance for military service in 1861 and 1900.

One broad conclusion drawn from this evidence of internal decay among the grandsons and granddaughters of the eighteenth century was that the White Anglo-Saxon "race" was hurtling along a path that would lead to "race suicide." Suicide was clearly the only way a "race" that judged itself superior could be defeated by more numerous but individually inferior groups. In 1901 Edwin A. Ross raised the spectre of race suicide in the article in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* entitled "The Causes of Race Superiority."³⁰ The idea was picked up by a more popular and much more bombastic figure, Theodore Roosevelt. The president was shrewd enough to know that he needed votes to win elections, so he refrained from publicly speaking about keeping the ratio of established white folks in a commanding position, and instead urged women to have bigger families.³¹

Getting pregnant for the president and the race probably did nothing to stimulate the production of little ones, but it did popularize the notion of "race suicide." Expressing the optimistic canon of an age that believed in progress, yet convinced that Anglo-Saxon society was decaying, A.K. Gardner noted in *Popular Science Monthly*: "it is acknowledged that the race down to its lowest strata of humanity is improving and improving, [but] the

same statement is not true respecting the higher classes. While the average stamina is greater, theirs is unquestionably deteriorated."³¹

The optimism of the Darwin-Spencer idea of survival of the fittest had given way to a profound pessimism about the future of the nation. Darwinian biology, by definition, was unconcerned with first causes; process was the critical dynamic. The theories of natural selection and random variation explicitly supported the idea that forms of life could become extinct should they cease to be the most fit to survive in the constant struggle for existence. Moreover, Darwin's stress on inheritance of certain traits over long periods of time was confused in the popular media with Lamarck's notion that acquired characteristics were passed on from generation to generation. Crime, for example, was considered like insanity; and moral "contagions" were treated in much the same way as diphtheria and chicken pox.³³ In "The Art of Preserving Health," a column in the August, 1880 issue of *The Household*, the author admits that "Immoral training and vicious associations are potent agencies in educating the young for a career of vice and crime, but bad blood is a co-operating cause of far greater power . . . The children of paupers generally inherit [sic] a lack of physical and mental vigor; the drunkard's son is often born with an unsatiable [sic] thirst for strong drink . . ."³⁴

Thus, as botanists and biologists continued to record the varieties of flora and fauna, so too sociologists and anthropologists found irresistible the urge similarly to analyze, group and codify what they perceived as the varieties of the human species. Their efforts, however, went beyond the obvious physical characteristic of skin color. They classified the various European groups by increasingly minute physiological differences which they thought to be significant indicators of human behavior. In so doing, they were able to provide what seemed irrefutable evidence that Anglo-Saxon and northern European groups were physiologically and genetically distinct from all other European groups living in the United States.

In much the same fashion, historians like Hubert Howe Bancroft and John Fiske (who was perhaps the most important popularizer of Darwin and Spencer among historians) embraced the models of science and sociology as theoretical frameworks for their interpretation of the course of history. Fiske traced his roots back to King Alfred, and like so many other Anglo-Saxon historians writing in turn-of-the-century America, he was convinced that the seeds of American democracy and greatness could be found in the ancient folk practices of the German tribes of the Black Forest. Bancroft, Herbert Baxter Adams and Frederick Jackson Turner subscribed to the notion that these "germs" of democratic practice travelled with the migrating Angles, Saxons and Jutes to England, where democratic government further flourished. From this fertile soil the

germinated seeds were carried to America by those hardy yeomen and women, where the more perfect union was formed.³⁵ Turner was perhaps the most explicit in his stress on the American environment, but all of these historians considered the colonial and revolutionary period America's Golden Age.

Natural history and national history thus became entwined in the popular enthusiasm for the individuals and artifacts of the Golden Age. Displays of colonial relics became fashionable after visitors to the Philadelphia Centennial encountered one of its most popular exhibits—the “colonial” kitchen. These relics appeared in the American home before “colonial” became a style of production goods, and the use of “old lumber” as a decorative device corresponds to the continuance of a strain of optimism about the ability of Anglo-Saxon culture to absorb the best aspects of those European immigrants fit enough to leave Europe and establish themselves on this side of the Atlantic. As a kind of secular religion, the popularity of colonial relics may signify a rejection of Darwinian theory or at least its general methodology. Since origins are irrelevant to the nexus of Darwin's concerns, the spinning wheel or other prized old thing may have been an assertion of beginning and a necessary reminder of permanence in an age which had learned that the earth was not created at one A.M. in 4004 B.C., but was in fact hundreds of thousands of years old.

The popular taste for the “colonial” extended beyond displays of actual items. Colonial as a style or theme in domestic artifacts manufactured in the late nineteenth century became a part of the American home after 1885. The climate of opinion favorable to this phenomenon had probably begun to move toward material manifestation with the Centennial exhibition, but it became more immediate when the culture reached the ideological temperature that crystallized both internal contradictions and the identity of the antagonists. The late 1880s were the critical years.

In about 1890, Bennett and Sloan, a Boston-based processed-food firm, issued a series of canned foods with two different brand names, and appropriate visual cues on the labels of the goods. One brand, “Pilgrim” foods, is a logical choice for a New England firm in the late nineteenth century. But the firm's companion brand, “Old Homestead,” seems less obvious. The image reproduced on this brand is of a matriarch and her daughters sitting on the front porch of a plantation house in the Old South, with ole Joe or somebody gently strumming the banjo. (Fig. 9) The significant point here is that Bennett and Sloan did not market “Pilgrim” products—with the image of a Pilgrim man and wife making their way to church in the snow—(Fig. 10) only in New England and Old Homestead vitles only in the South. Both were marketed throughout the northeast and into Virginia. By 1890 the Civil War was officially and culturally over; the events in the 1880s had welded together the elites and the

middle classes of North and South. Put another way, the bargain of 1877, in which Rutherford B. Hayes swiped the presidential election from Samuel Tilden in exchange for the removal of federal troops from the South, was more than a crooked political deal. It was a manifestation of the reunification of the sections that had been presaged by popular poetry and literature of the Centennial era.

James Russell Lowell's poem of 1875, “Under the Old Elm: Poem Read at Cambridge on the Hundredth Anniversary of Washington's Taking Command of the American Army, Third of July, 1775,” is perhaps the most literate of the pieces published in the period, an example of the reassertion of respect for those great southerners who had been essential to the Continental cause. The allusion to Washington is of course the safest of all references, but it is emblematic of the rebirth of a quest for Anglo-Saxon unity after the Civil War. The primary sentiments are nationalism and patriotism, as the date of the piece (1875) would suggest.

Never to see a nation born
Hath been given to a mortal man,
Unless to those on that summer morn,
Gazed silent when the great Virginian
Unsheathed the sword whose fatal flash
Shot union through the incoherent clash....³⁶

Washington was more than merely a great general, he was the unifier. Lowell's use of “union” in a time when it was an infinitely more powerful word than it is now is indicative of the poet's urge to affirm the continuity between North and South. It is an offering of national glory to the section that had attempted and failed to rend the more perfect union.

By 1915 this trend had reached its popular zenith in the release and enormous box-office success of D.W. Griffith's epic, *The Birth of a Nation*. Based on Thomas Dixon's viciously racist novel, *The Clansman* (1905), the film sympathetically portrayed the plight of southerners during and after the Civil War. The film's celebration of the Ku Klux Klan and stereotyped treatment of blacks provoked riots in many of the cities in which it was shown; its endorsement by the Virginia historian in the White House, Woodrow Wilson, further signified that North and South were again one.

Other forms of cultural expression in the post-1885 era demonstrate this profound shift toward elite reunification and the exclusion of ethnic “outsiders.” Winston Churchill's *Richard Carvel* (1899), Maurice Thompson's *Alice of Old Vincennes* (1900) and Paul Leicester Ford's *Janice Meredith* (1899), all immensely popular, combined affectionate descriptions of colonial minutiae, detailed genealogical tracings of heroes and heroines, and a thinly-veiled hostility to immigrants (especially Jews).³⁷ The early 1890s were also the years of a great genealogical craze, which found “old Americans” busily plowing through the archives of various

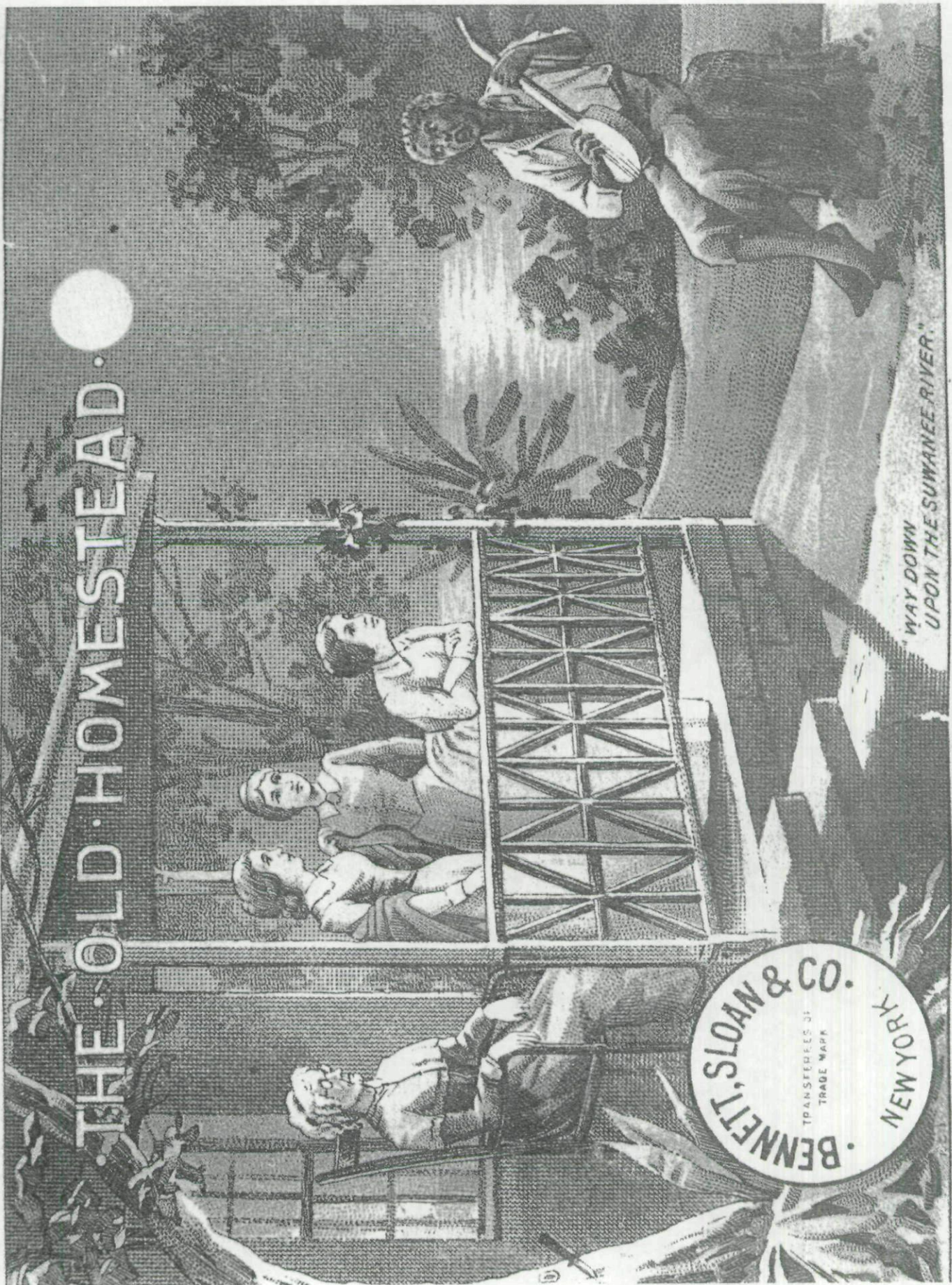


Figure 9: "Old Homestead," Foods. Tin can with label, Bennett and Sloan Manufacturing Company, ca. 1900. Copyrighted by Bennett and Sloan Manufacturing Company, New York, N.Y.



Fig. 10: "Pilgrim Strawberries." Tin can with label Bennett and Sloan Manufacturing Company, ca. 1890. Photo courtesy Margaret Woodbury Strong Museum.

public institutions to document their blood ties to the first settlers or the soldiers of the Revolution. Successful research and "good character" meant entry into such newly-created organizations as the Daughters and Sons of the American Revolution (established in 1890 and 1889, respectively), the Patriotic Sons of America (1891) or the dozen other such societies organized in the 1890s.³⁸

The fascination with genealogy and historical romance was part of a broader national interest in history. Academic historians enjoyed an enthusiasm for their works that had not been nor would again be characteristic of their profession. The most popular of all was John Fiske. Like other historians of his persuasion, he favored life in small New England towns such as Petersham, Massachusetts, "where neither Irishman nor Negro ever sets foot."³⁹ Fiske's popularity dovetailed neatly with the popular surge in genealogical research: in *Old Virginia and Her Neighbors* (1897) he detailed the linkage between genealogy, historical method and the proper state of society.

A hundred years ago, the most illustrious of Americans felt little interest in his ancestry; but with the keener historic sense and broader scientific interest of the present day, the importance of such matters is better appreciated.... By no possible ingenuity of constitution-making or legislation can a society made up of ruffians and boors be raised to the intellectual and moral level of society made up of well-bred merchants and yeomen, parsons, and lawyers.... It is, moreover, only when we habitually bear in mind the threads of individual relationship that connect one country with another, that we get a really firm and concrete grasp of history. Without genealogy the study of history is comparatively lifeless.⁴⁰

The "ruffians and boors" were the new immigrants.

In 1894 Fiske was elected president of the Immigration Restriction League, a group that had been that year formed by five attorneys from the offices of the eminent Boston lawyer Charles Warren. The aim of the group was to curtail the immigration of peoples from southern and eastern Europe, who by 1880 outnumbered emigres from the northern, or "nordic" areas of the continent. In true Darwinian fashion, Fiske characterized these less desirable newcomers as "beaten men from beaten races; representing the worst failures in the struggle for existence."⁴¹

Fiske's combination of Darwinian language with historical analysis was echoed by his Brahmin colleague and fellow member of the Immigration Restriction League, senator Henry Cabot Lodge, who had earned a Ph.D. at Harvard under another notable anti-semitic and restrictionist, Henry Adams. Lodge was convinced that "the waves of democracy have submerged the old and narrow lines within which the few sat apart, and the definition of a man's birth and ancestry have become more necessary. Moreover, Darwin and Galton have lived and written, and Mendel has been discovered and

revived, and the modern biologists have supervened, so that a man's origin has become a recognized part of his biographer's task."⁴² But Darwin and Mendel cared not for origins. Invoking natural selection or Mendel's theories of hereditary transmission as an argument for genealogy is to stand the great scientists on their heads, casting the political necessities of a particular interest group in the powerful language of science. History, as Warren Susman reminds us, responds to the ongoing ideologies of any particular period. Thus in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, historians wrote long hymns to the national myth of nationhood and great leaders, just as Francis Parkman had in the 1850s, and the New Deal historians would in the 1930s. The popular and academic historian's answer to times of upheaval has been (and is now) the song of patriot, usually in multi-volume form.⁴³

The other important form of ideological communication in the post-1890 era—domestic artifacts—informs us of still other meanings of the colonial revival. Both the actual material remains of the colonial period and colonial revival artifacts were used in the home to affirm the importance of women in the romance of the golden age. Relics and reproductions were emotional cues to the venerable grandmothers to which late nineteenth-century women were continually contrasted. The physiological "decline" of women and the accompanying threat to the Anglo-Saxon "race" were part of a broader conservative critique of women as nurturers of the children of the republic and keepers of the home. Suffrage for women and the beginnings of a movement out of the home into the commercial world were countered by the domestic aspect of the colonial revival. The veneration of "grandmother" was an antidote to the "new woman."

Our grandmothers—worthy companions of the Puritans—transformed the wool produced on the farm, and the flax, into fabrics, and garments even, by their skill, and their housework, few of them having "help." Those were the days of simplicity....⁴⁴

The incorporation of "grandmother's" spinning wheel in the decoration of a parlor, or the transfiguration of a wheel into a spinning-wheel chair (some of them emblazoned with such phrases as "our mothers"), furnishing the home with factory-made reproductions of colonial things or even the use of a "Colonial" brand goods identified the user, perhaps unconsciously, as one who sympathized with the ideals of that misty vision of the colonial woman, whose place, of course, was by the fire or in the kitchen. (Figs. 11, 12)

The colonial revival was, in the end, a cultural manifestation of the Protestant ethic of control. If Frederick Jackson Turner was correct about the nature of civilization—a thin veneer over the rough wood of savagery that the frontier stripped off—then



Fig. 11: Platform rocking chair made of spinning wheel parts, probably manufactured in Boston, Massachusetts, ca. 1890-1900. Painted on the middle of the chair back (which is the wheel from a spinning wheel): "Our Mother's." Photo courtesy Margaret Woodbury Strong Museum.



Fig. 12: Maple corner (triangular) chair, reproduction of a seventeenth-century chair; about 1900. Photo courtesy Margaret Woodbury Strong Museum.

the maintenance of order was not only critical, but also problematical. The labor violence of the post-Centennial era, especially that of the 1880s, suggested that the economic order was endangered by masses of rapidly-reproducing immigrants. State and federal statistics on prostitution, venereal disease, crime and insanity indicated that the sexual and moral order was similarly undermined, and the stirrings of women in the home for the vote or for acceptance in the professions that had traditionally been men's were interpreted by critics as an attack on the stability of family and male dominance. Reasserting the colonial past was an answer to this upheaval. In "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," Turner had lauded the frontier experience as a builder of democratic institutions, but his real reason for the address was the disappearance of free land. He was convinced that the frontier's significance was history.

The conviction that an era had ended was contemporaneous with a search for beginnings. The elevation of the men and women of the colonial and revolutionary era to mythic status revealed a profound discomfiture with both the reality and the urban industrial culture of the late nineteenth century and the ramifications of Darwinian theory. When events convinced Anglo-Saxon analysts of American culture that they might not automatically prevail in the struggle for existence, they responded by glorifying the past, utilizing the language of scientific Darwinism for political needs and ends.

Notes

- ¹Dora V. Stoddard, "The Ideal Parlor," *Good Housekeeping*, Vol. VIII, no. 8 (February 16, 1889), p. 181.
- ²Russel Blaine Nye, *The Unembarrassed Muse* (New York, 1970), p. 147.
- ³The best analysis of the place of the American Revolution in popular culture is Michael Kammen, *A Season of Youth* (New York, 1978).
- ⁴Roger Butterfield, "George Lippard and His Secret Brotherhood," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. LXXIX (July, 1955), pp. 285-309. See also Kammen, p. 156.
- ⁵John Adams to Thomas Jefferson and Thomas McKean, July 30, 1815.
- ⁶*The Wide-Awake Gift and Know-Nothing Token* (New York, 1855), p. 241.
- ⁷Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture* (New York, 1860).
- ⁸For a popular reference to Turner's works, see "A.H.H.," "Beds and Bedrooms," *The Household*, Vol. XIII, no. 3 (March, 1880), p. 52.
- ⁹Thomas Malthus, *Essay on Population* (London, 1798).
- ¹⁰Burt James Loewenberg, "Darwinism Comes to America, 1859-1900," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, Vol. 28, no. 3 (December, 1941), pp. 339-368.
- ¹¹James D. Hart, *The Popular Book: A History of American Literary Taste* (New York, 1950).
- ¹²Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (New York, 1898), pp. 144-145.
- ¹³D.H. Wheeler, "Natural Selection and Politics," *Popular Science Monthly*, Vol. III (1873), pp. 230-232.
- ¹⁴L. Dumont, "Civilization as Accumulated Force," *Popular Science Monthly*, Vol. I, no. 5 (September, 1872), p. 608.
- ¹⁵*New York Herald*, May 20, 1898, p. 6.
- ¹⁶*The Age of Steel*, quoted in *Public Opinion*, Vol. I (1886), p. 355.
- ¹⁷Francis A. Walker, *Discussions in Economics and Statistics* (New York, 1899), Vol. II, pp. 308-313, 317, 445-447.

¹⁸Quoted in John Higham, *Strangers in the Land* (New York, 1969), p. 54-55. This landmark book is an invaluable aid to anyone interested in the immigrant experience in America.

¹⁹Thomas P. Gill, "Landlordism in America," *North American Review*, Vol. CXLII (1886), p. 60.

²⁰Hubert Howe Bancroft, *Essays and Miscellany* (San Francisco, 1890), p. 52.

²¹William Roscoe Tanner, *Life and Letters of John Hay* (2 Volumes, Boston, 1915).

²²Elizabeth Ellet, *The Women of the American Revolution* (3 Volumes, New York, 1848-1850).

²³William Goodell, *Lessons in Gynecology* (Philadelphia, 1879), p. 358.

²⁴See, for example, John Wilbank, "Introductory Lesson for the Session, 1853-1854," Philadelphia College of Medicine, *Catalog* (Philadelphia, 1854), p. 7; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "From Puberty to Menopause: The Cycle of Femininity in Nineteenth-Century America," in Mary Hartman and Lois Banner, *Clio's Consciousness Raised* (New York, 1974), p. 26; S. Weir Mitchell, *Wear and Tear, or Hints for the Overworked* (Philadelphia, 1887), pp. 35-36.

²⁵Edward H. Clarke, *Sex in Education* (Boston, 1873), p. 63.

²⁶Reverend John Ellis, *The Deterioration of the Puritan Stock and Its Causes* (New York, 1884).

²⁷"Sanitarian," *Demorest's Monthly Magazine* (Vol. XXIII, no. 7 (May, 1887), p. 438.

²⁸John Harvey Kellogg, M.D., *Household Manual of Domestic Hygiene, Food, and Diet* (Battle Creek, Michigan, 1882), p. 120.

²⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 120-123.

³⁰Edwin A. Ross, "The Causes of Race Superiority," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, Vol. XVIII (1901), pp. 85-88. See also John Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, pp. 142-151.

³¹Higham, p. 147.

³²A.K. Gardner, M.D., "The Causes of Physical Degeneracy," *Popular Science Monthly*, Vol. I, no. 4 (August, 1872), pp. 482-491.

³³Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* (New York, 1965).

³⁴"The Art of Preserving Health," *The Household*, Vol. XIII, no. 8 (August, 1880), p. 177.

³⁵Barbara Miller Solomon, "The Anglo-Saxon Cult," in Cushing Strout, ed., *Intellectual History in America*, Vol. II (New York, 1968), pp. 281-38; Gilman Ostrander, "Turner and the Germ Theory," in Strout, pp. 39-46.

³⁶James Russell Lowell, "Under the Old Elm: Poem Read at Cambridge on the Hundredth Anniversary of Washington's Taking Command of the American Army, Third of July, 1775," *The Poetical Works of James Russell Lowell* (Boston, 1882), p. 415.

³⁷*Janice Meredith* sold 275,000 copies by 1901, two years after it was first issued. *Richard Carvel* sold 736,000 copies by 1945. The figures are from Kammen, *A Season of Youth*, p. 337, note 63. See also pp. 161-164 for a concise discussion of popular literature in this period.

³⁸John Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, p. 75.

³⁹Quoted in J.S. Clark, *Life and Letters of John Fiske* (2 Volumes, Boston, 1897), Volume II, p. 26.

⁴⁰John Fiske, *Old Virginia and Her Neighbors* (2 Volumes, Boston, 1897), Volume II, p. 26.

⁴¹J.S. Clark, *Life and Letters of John Fiske*, Volume I, p. 228.

⁴²Henry Cabot Lodge, *Early Memories* (New York, 1913), p. 3. Adams feared that *The North American Review*, which he edited, would "die on my hands and go to some Jew." (Henry Adams to Henry Cabot Lodge, in Washington Ford, ed., *Letters of Henry Adams* (2 Volumes, Boston, 1938), Volume I, p. 267.) Adams further contended that "anything these Jews [art dealers] touch is in some strange way vulgarized. One does not want it anymore." (*Letters*, Volume II, p. 233.)

⁴³Warren I. Susman, "History and the American Intellectual: Use of a Usable Past," in Hennig Cohen, ed., *The American Experience* (New York, 1968), pp. 84-105.

⁴⁴*The Bazar-Book of Decorum* (New York, 1870), p. 43.

Copyright of *Journal of American Culture* (01911813) is the property of Popular Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.