THE RHETORICAL HERITAGE
OF FREDERICK JACKSON TURNER

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Ninety-three years ago a young man named Frederick Jackson Turner became a member of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters. Turner was at the time an instructor in rhetoric and oratory at the University of Wisconsin. He would later become Vice-President of the Academy for Letters and one of America's truly great historians. Turner's fame began with a speech he delivered in Chicago in 1893 entitled "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." The purpose of this paper is to identify and explore Turner's rhetorical heritage prior to that time.

The Rhetorical Environment at Portage

Portage, Wisconsin where Fred Turner grew up a hundred years ago was a rough and ready frontier community. Indians with their ponies and dogs came to town frequently to trade furs for paint and trinkets. Lumberjacks from the pineries of central Wisconsin "took over" the town on Saturday nights. The Bierhall of Carl Haertel was a haven for local Germans as well as the town club house. Pomeranian immigrants, Irish, Scots, Welsh, Norwegians and Swiss lived about Portage, along with a few Southerners and Negroes, some Englishmen and one or two Italians. Turner's parents were among the Yankee settlers from upstate New York who came in the 1850's.

In such a melting pot, not everyone could read or write English. But all could listen and speak when they had a mind to. The spoken

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1 Paper read at the Centennial Meeting of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, October 3, 1970. The author is former editor of the Academy Transactions and Professor of Speech, Ohio State University. Research for this paper was undertaken at the Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino, California under a grant from the Department of Speech, Ohio State University.

2 Authority for the above statements comes from the following sources: Transactions of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters, 7 (1883-87), 267; Biographical data dictated by Turner to his secretary, TU Box 57, Frederick Jackson Turner Papers, Henry E. Huntington Library; Merle Curti, "Frederick Jackson Turner" in Wisconsin Witness to Frederick Jackson Turner, O. Lawrence Burnette, Jr. comp. (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1961), p. 175. Turner served as an Academy Vice-President from 1896 to 1899 and remained a member of the organization until he left Wisconsin in 1910. The Council of the American Historical Association chose him as one of the two most eminent historians America has produced.

3 The above description of Portage is based upon an account Turner himself wrote to C. L. Skinner, March 15, 1922, reprinted in Burnette, Wisconsin Witness, pp. 65-6, and in p. xi introducing the same work.
word was not only the most common mode of communication; it was also the necessary instrument for education, progress and enlightenment. Indeed, probably no event of importance took place in Portage without some spokesman or other urging the populace to action or stronger belief.

Fred Turner was raised in a literate household. His mother had been a school teacher and came from a long line of preachers. His father was editor of the *Wisconsin State Register* and a pillar of the community who gave talks on local history and published several manuscripts in this field. Fred Turner early learned the importance of the printed word. As he wrote his future wife in later years, “I thank heaven that I have an imagination and a love of books, two things that have lifted me out of my surroundings at Portage. Life, in any case, is more or less coarse, and requires imagination to idealize it a bit, but this is especially so in such an environment as that in which my early life has been spent.”

Andrew Jackson Turner was much more than a literate parent. As editor of a small town newspaper, it was his duty to know what was going on in town, across the state, and throughout the nation. Contemporary affairs were part of the regular fare at mealtime in the Turner household. The elder Turner was also leader of the Republican party in Portage; he “went as delegate to state and national Republican conventions, assigned the candidates of his party to the varied nativities and towns of the county, as chairman of the Board of Supervisors, harmonized the rival tongues and interests of the various towns of the county, and helped to shepherd a very composite flock.” An expert hunter and fisherman, A. J. Turner often took Fred with him on his forays into the wilderness. As soon as he was allowed, Fred began to frequent the newspaper office and in time, his father let him set type for local news and edit an exchange column. As a high school student, he kept a scrapbook of newspaper clippings including texts of speeches and quotations from such prominent spokesmen as Emerson, Disraeli, Ingersoll, Webster and Schuyler Colfax. Fred was

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5 Turner to Caroline Mae Sherwood, August 24, 1887, TU Box B.
7 Burnette, *Wisconsin Witness*, “Turner’s Autobiographic Letter”, p. 66. Turner’s early experience working in a newspaper office was later to prove of great value in his work as a historian: “My practical experience in newspaper work, and in contact with politics through my father probably gave me a sense of realities which affected my work and my influence. I had to see the connections of many factors with the purely political. I couldn’t view things in the purely ‘academic’ way...” Turner to Merle Curti, August 8, 1928, reprinted extract, Wilbur R. Jacobs, *The Historical World of Frederick Jackson Turner With Selections From His Correspondence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), p. 6.
also among a half-dozen students to declaim on Memorial Day in 1877 and 1878.  

Not much is known about Turner’s day-to-day activities in these early years but we do have a document which reveals a good deal about his rhetorical development. In his senior year, Fred participated along with eighteen others in an oratory contest, held on graduation day. Fred won first place and his oration “The Power of the Press” was published soon after in his father’s newspaper.  

The first rule in public speaking is to choose a speech topic that interests you, and this Fred obviously did. A second rule is to speak in such a way as to interest your listeners. Fred Turner talked of native democracy, of the role of the press in educating everyone, not just a powerful elite as the Athenians did in ancient Greece. The want of education by the masses is shown by the recent rise in communism, Fred declared. Orators will continue to persuade their audiences but the press provides a new dimension, a larger audience. “The Press is an instrument of unspeakable good in the diffusion of education . . . as the freedom of the Press increases, so does the freedom of the people”—sentiments dear to the heart of Andrew Jackson Turner as well as his son. The speech also includes timely references to the Union Army, the Christian religion, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, and the Declaration of Independence. The people of Portage could easily identify with the young orator.  

By today’s standards, Fred’s oration would rank “above average” but not “superior.” What makes this speech significant is not its rhetorical excellence but its insight into a young mind. Journalism was Fred’s intended career. His faith in American democracy, Portage style, would be lifelong. And he would be an avid reader of books to his dying day. But above all else, Fred Turner excelled as a speaker in an age when oratory was usually a prompt and sure road to recognition and power. 

Rhetorical Experiences at Madison 

In the fall of 1878, Fred Turner matriculated at Madison. There he was exposed to two men who were to have a marked influence upon his life: President John Bascom, “a versatile scholar, and, for his day, a progressive thinker on social and economic issues,” and David B. Frankenberg, newly appointed professor of rhetoric and oratory. President Bascom preached the duty of University students to improve the state which made their higher edu-
cation possible, by using the information thus acquired for the public good.\textsuperscript{11} Professor Frankenuberger was the kind of instructor who taught individuals, not classes.\textsuperscript{12} Turner, who spent four highly successful years under his tutelage, described his rhetoric teacher as a man with a rare, questioning smile, glad expectancy, appealing sympathy, an instructor who sought only the best in his students. Frankenuberger encouraged and inspired, made helpful suggestions, and gave unstintingly of his time and energy. He was himself an unusually popular reader, lecturer and speaker, a lawyer, prominent Unitarian and staunch admirer of Emerson.\textsuperscript{13} In May of 1883, Fred Turner's oration entitled "The Poet of the Future" won the coveted Burrows Prize at the Junior Exhibition. A year later, at graduation, Turner's "Architecture Through Oppression" was chosen the best of eighteen orations delivered before a distinguished audience including the Governor, President Bascom, and members of the Board of Regents.\textsuperscript{14} In a day when skill in oratory and debate were widely admired, young Fred Turner, the shy, quiet youth from Portage, had found the key to success and self-confidence.

Turner did not debate at Wisconsin, probably for two reasons. In the summer of 1879, Fred became seriously ill and spent the following academic year recuperating at home. In those days at Madison, being on the debate squad was a four year proposition which included an intensive period of research and apprenticeship for the underclassmen.\textsuperscript{15} In so popular and competitive an activity, a student who missed a whole year usually missed out entirely. Secondly, Turner simply did not have a "logical mind";\textsuperscript{16} while he would have no trouble tackling the research on a question, his forte was imagination. Avery Craven put it this way: "There was something of the poet and much of the philosopher about Turner. He had the ability to see deep into the meaning of things and the power to catch the universals. This did not weaken his capacity for scientific research nor lessen his interest in details, but it did cause him to emphasize trends and flavors, to attempt to deal

\textsuperscript{11} Authority for the statements in this paragraph comes from the following sources: University of Wisconsin photoset L 18 14. Turner Papers; Burnette, Wisconsin Witness, "Frederick Jackson Turner", p. 178; Merle Curti and Vernon Carstensen, The University of Wisconsin: A History 1848-1925 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1949), 1, 344.

\textsuperscript{12} The portrait of Frankenuberger which follows is one Turner painted himself in a funeral eulogy to one of his favorite professors, TU Box 55.

\textsuperscript{13} Curti and Carstensen, University of Wisconsin, 1, 344.

\textsuperscript{14} Copies of both college orations appear in TU Box 84.

\textsuperscript{15} A revealing account of the seriousness with which students took their debate responsibilities in Turner's day appears in Curti and Carstensen, University of Wisconsin, 1, 433-8.

\textsuperscript{16} "Inviting us one day to consider the problem of sovereignty, he (Turner) quoted Austin's definition: said he couldn't understand it; admitted he wasn't blessed with the logical mind." Quoted in Carl Becker, "Frederick Jackson Turner", American Masters of Social Science, ed. by Howard Odum (New York: Henry Holt, 1927), p. 278.
with intangibles, to sweep over minor things in the effort to get at larger truths.”

That Turner respected the work done in debate is clear enough. An entry in his commonplace book, written apparently in September, 1887, includes notes for a speech to the debate society. Debate work is important, Turner told the undergraduates, because it helps one to be a ready speaker and exposes the student to much information he might otherwise miss. There is a danger, Turner told the squad, to acquiring glibness and getting into careless habits of enunciation and gesture. “Do not let the violence of debate carry you away from rules of graceful oratory—when form becomes more prominent than the idea—the effect is lost.” Don’t be prejudiced in important questions by reading on only one side and hearing the opposition in a spirit of antagonism. “Fight your side for all it is worth but hold your judgment in reservation.” “Young speakers are too apt to make their point as a dry resume.” “Use as few notes as possible.” Excellent advice today as when it was given over eighty years ago.

The thrills and excitement attending the return of a winning college orator in Turner’s day is nowhere more clearly documented than by Turner himself. Writing from Madison on May 3, 1879, Fred vividly describes the reception given Robert La Follette upon winning the state title at Beloit—an account Turner’s father later published.

Fred Turner’s own rhetorical talents were substantial. Each year his grades improved in Professor Frankenburger’s classes until at last he received a 98 in his senior year. Turner’s junior oration, “The Poet of the Future”, is a philosophical eulogy of modern science and modern democracy, replete with literary allusions. In his senior year he chose a simpler theme: that great architecture is built at the cost of great toil and evil. This final college effort is a more professional composition, the best rhetorical production of his three prize-winning orations.

Undoubtedly Turner’s sustained exposure to classical authors and his continuing work in journalism also contributed to his rhe-
torical development. At Madison, "he received a thorough classical training" and did honors work there; quite probably, Turner's sensitivity to literary style was cultivated in this way. For three of his four undergraduate years, Turner was associated with The Badger, the student newspaper. As a senior he intended to make journalism his lifetime career.

Turner's commonplace books reveal his growing awareness of style, metaphor, balance and epithet. Begun April 9, 1881, these student notebooks present a remarkable insight into the mind of a developing scholar. The materials included are varied indeed: quotations from books, essays, lectures and speeches; Greek and Latin translations; drafts of orations; lists of books Turner read, concerts, operas and lectures he attended; poetry and songs Turner composed; and random asides about philosophy and religion, ideas for essays and topics for orations. Turner's favorite author was Ralph Waldo Emerson; his picture appears on the back cover of the first commonplace book. While an extended analysis of these notebooks is not appropriate here, a listing of some of the speech-related themes may suffice to suggest the whole: here are quotations about talk, the spoken word, silence, the human voice, being understood, the role of character in men of intellect, elocution, modes of style and originality of thought, rhythm and meaning, figures of speech and eloquence. Here, indeed, is documentary proof of Turner's rhetorical heritage!

Tutor in Rhetoric and Oratory

The year following graduation Fred Turner turned his attention to journalism full-time, serving as correspondent for newspapers in Chicago and Milwaukee. He appears to have gotten on well enough, but something was missing; the career he dreamed of since boyhood was somehow unsatisfactory. At first, Turner thought the problem was one of locale and he toyed with the idea of joining Reuben Gold Thwaites in starting a paper out West. But actually the problem lay elsewhere. In his junior year at Madison Turner had his first exposure to college history with Professor

22 Burnette, Wisconsin Witness, "Frederick Jackson Turner", p. 178. In 1880 Turner was asked to tutor a college preparatory student in Greek by his former high school principal. W. G. Clough to Turner, September 7, 1880, TU Box 1.
23 Turner served at various times as exchange editor, secretary-treasurer, and president of the Badger Association. When Turner first joined, the paper was called The Campus; it received its new name in 1882. University of Wisconsin, University Archives, The Badger, Vols. 1-4.
24 According to Wilbur Jacobs, "the drafts of Turner's college orations sometimes read like preliminary versions of an essay on the frontier theory, for they deal with the rise of the common man, freedom, and social evolution." Historical World, pp. 8-9.
William Francis Allen; he was simply never the same thereafter. A revealing entry in Turner’s commonplace book at this time probably holds the key to his decision to make history his life work: “Science has revolutionized Zoology, Botany, etc. It must now take up recorded history and do the same by it. This I would like to do my little to aid, but find not the time. It is a very egotistical idea that haunts me that if I were to drop my detestable dishing up of newspaper flippancy, I could . . .” The sentence ends here.

But how could Turner earn a living while he pursued graduate work? There simply were no assistantships available in history. Rhetoric solved his financial problem now as it would frequently in the years to come.27 Professor Frankenburger arranged to have Fred appointed instructor in rhetoric and oratory. From the fall of 1885 to the end of the winter term, 1888, Fred Turner tutored over a thousand students in the communication skills he had himself so recently mastered.28

As a speech teacher, Turner was conscientious and content-oriented. He taught twelve hours of formal speech classes each week and listened to “rehearsals” an additional hour and a half daily. Sometimes his work was made easier when the majority of a new crop of students had earlier training; sometimes, harder because, as Fred put it, “to tell the truth none of the contestants are naturally very good declaimers.” When judges were overly long in rendering a decision in a speech contest on a hot day, Fred lectured them on their lack of consideration and thereby expedited matters. Turner preferred oratory to declamation “not being” he said “much of an elocutionary alchemist myself!”29

Like many another teacher of public speaking, Turner soon became a highly sensitive critic, reacting to speech communication wherever he found it. Whether it was poor preaching or the polished oratory Professor Allen took him to hear at a Harvard commencement, unenlightening papers read by fellow historians, President Bascom’s farewell address, or merely social conversation at a Madison soiree, the critical faculties of the speech teacher came into play.30

27 Turner had “champagne” tastes impossible to satisfy on existing income. Consequently he accepted dozens of speaking engagements, before and after 1893, to supplement his salary.
28 Turner Papers, University of Wisconsin photostat L 18 14, uncatalogued material—Turner’s instructional reports.
29 References to Turner’s experiences as a speech teacher appear in the following letters: Turner to his parents, September 23, 1885, TU Box A; Turner to Caroline Mae Sherwood, June 6, 1887; June 15, 1887, TU Box B.
30 References to Turner as speech critic appear in the following letters: Turner to Caroline Mae Sherwood, December 13, 1886, TU Box A; June 13, 1887, TU Box B; Turner to Mary O. Turner, June 30, 1887, TU Box B; Turner to William Francis Allen, December 31, 1888, TU Box 1; Turner to Caroline Mae Sherwood, May 15, 1887, TU Box B; May 5, 1887, TU Box A.
Not surprisingly, Turner was frequently called upon to speak himself. In 1885, he agreed to replace Professor Allen temporarily as “recent history” section leader for the Contemporary Club of the Unitarian Church. Later he lectured to this body on the fisheries question and with Professor Allen, on the history of the northwest. In 1887 Turner was chosen to give the address of welcome at his class reunion. On still another occasion he served as toastmaster at the annual dinner-dance of his social fraternity. As a doctoral student at Johns Hopkins in 1888–89 Turner was active in both chautauqua and extension work. Soon after his return from Baltimore, he was simply unable to satisfy all the requests he received for extension lectures throughout the state. Because Turner believed in the need for competent history teachers in the public schools, he found himself addressing teachers’ conventions from time to time. Frederick Jackson Turner mastered the platform as he would later master his profession.  

Turner in the Classroom  

Despite his many appearances off campus, it was in the classroom that Turner exerted his lasting impact. Turner’s rhetorical training is clearly a part of his approach to the teaching of history. In March of 1889, for example, he complained to Professor Allen that his freshman history students experienced difficulty in reporting the results of their research in class. In class, Turner himself dropped the role of polished lecturer to take up that of Socratic inquirer. As Sidney Packard, a former student recalls, “Turner was a poor lecturer in his classroom almost never getting very far from a small box of notes. When he did manage to get a few feet from those notes, or while he was on the way back to them after explaining a diagram or map, he was another man entirely and spoke with real eloquence and charm and addressed himself to large topics in an easy and relaxed manner. He seemed almost apologetic for so doing as soon as he got back to the notes.”

References to Turner’s speaking appear in the following sources: Turner to his parents, September 23, 1885, TU Box A; Turner to Caroline Mae Sherwood, May 11, 1887, TU Box A; Curti and Carstensen, University of Wisconsin, 1, 723; Turner to Caroline Mae Sherwood, May 27, 1887, TU Box A; Ray A. Billington, “Frederick Jackson Turner: Biography of a College Teacher” (unpublished manuscript Dr. Billington kindly permitted the author to examine in March, 1970); Turner to William Francis Allen, October 31, 1888, TU Box 1; March 14, 1889, TU Box 1; Turner to Herbert Baxter Adams, December 9, 1891, TU Box 1; January 18, 1892, TU Box 1; Curti and Carstensen, University of Wisconsin, 1, 642. In one rural Wisconsin community of six hundred inhabitants, Turner’s extension lectures attracted an audience of over two hundred people.

Turner Papers, student reminiscences, August 20, 1968, L 18 14, uncatalogued material; see also Jacobs, Turner’s Legacy, p. 14.
One should not assume that Turner went to class unprepared. Indeed, just the opposite was true. According to Ray A. Billington, Turner was never "guilty of using the yellowing notes of yester-year; every assignment was freshly prepared in endless hours of labor. This was illustrated in his last year of teaching in 1923-24. The lectures for his 'history of the West' were carefully recast, even though they had been given dozens of times and would never be given again. . . . Little wonder that a Harvard undergraduate told his tutor that the students learned more from Turner than from any other instructor, and on being asked why replied "Turner gives all his time to us, instead of spending it writing books and articles like others!"[34] What made Turner one of the great teachers of his time, Merle Curti maintains, is the fact that "he possessed the rare gift of inspiring students, of imbuing them with a deep love of his subject and a belief in its great importance."[35]

Along with many others, Carl Becker believed that a key ingredient in Turner's remarkable hold on others was his voice. Describing his first encounter with Turner as a college sophomore, Becker wrote "Haltingly I asked my foolish question, and was answered. The answer was nothing, the words were nothing, but the voice—the voice was everything: a voice not deep but full, rich, vibrant and musically cadenced; such a voice as you would never grow weary of, so warm and intimate and human it was. I cannot describe the voice. I know only that it laid on me a kind of magic spell which I could never break, and have never wanted to."[36] As Allyn Young, a prominent economist at Wisconsin and Harvard, wrote "My wife who is nearly blind and upon whom voice, therefore, makes a deep impression, has said that Turner has the most pleasantly modulated voice and the most winning manner of speech that she has ever heard."[37]

In his writing as well as his speech, Frederick Jackson Turner revealed his rhetorical heritage for all to see. Some commentators were fascinated by the "compelling power" of his metaphor; others with his poetic touch. A Harvard graduate student fresh in from southwestern Oklahoma was intrigued by Turner's ability to capture the spirit of the frontier West he had recently left: "I had lived so close to all these things that they were conditions..."
to be accepted as a matter of course. It had been impossible for me to see the forest for the trees, or the city for the houses. But Turner's lectures changed all this." Still others commented on Turner's philosophical insight and broad humanitarianism. Joseph Schafer summed it all up best when he wrote "Other things being equal, men and women prefer to work under a leader instinctively recognized as a supreme gentleman. But when, to that character, is added not only the profound historian and philosopher, but also the artist in speech and the poet in imaginative conception, even the unseeing feel the resulting blend as something strictly unique, to be enjoyed as a 'gift of the gods.'"

Three historians clearly perceive the rhetorical spirit of Turner's work. Ray A. Billington reports that Turner "enlisted an army of propagandists who preached the gospel of the frontier in classrooms and seminars throughout the land." John D. Hicks observed of Turner that "In his essays, most of which were written to be read aloud, he could rise to the heights of eloquence."

A final observation comes from one who knew Professor Turner better than anyone else: "My mother's ancestors were preachers! Is it strange that I preached of the frontier?"

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28 The various facets of Turner's rhetoric cited above are identified in the following sources: Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, ed. by Harold P. Simonson (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1963), pp. 9-16; Turner Papers, reminiscences of Merrill C. Mead, TU Box 57; Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians*, p. 73; Edward Everett Dale, "Memoirs of Frederick Jackson Turner", *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XXX, no. 3 (December 1943), 340, 342; Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, foreword by Ray A. Billington (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), p. xviii; Joseph Schafer, "Editorial Comment—Death of Professor Turner", *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, XV, no. 4 (June, 1932), 497. From the time he composed his junior oration, "The Poet of the Future", it was apparent that Turner was philosophically oriented, that he yearned to grasp the "significance of events and periods rather than merely capture their details. Fulmer Mood, "Turner's Formative Period" in Everett E. Edwards, *The Early Writings of Frederick Jackson Turner* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1933), p. 6; Becker, "Frederick Jackson Turner", p. 296. Such a mind could be strongly prophetic on occasion. Thus one of Turner's speeches in the 1920's "gloomily forecast what portended for America: population pressures; diminishing food supply; the exhaustion of forest, oil, and coal reserves; the threat of war; the horror of a dreaded 'chemist's bomb'. He also lamented in his addresses the increasing tendency toward conformity with an accompanying 'decline in self-confidence in America.'" Jacobs, *Turner's Legacy*, p. 42.


30 Review of Wilbur Jacobs, *The Historical World of Frederick Jackson Turner With Selections From His Correspondence*, by John D. Hicks, *Journal of American History*, LVI, no. 2, (September, 1968), 413. In 1920 for example Turner was persuaded to publish a collection of his essays under the title *The Frontier in American History*. Ray Billington wrote of this work in 1967, "no one volume has done more to reshape the writing of American history or to recast the popularly held image of the American past"; of the thirteen essays included, *nine were originally presented as speeches*. Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, foreword by R. A. Billington.