

Chapter 1

The Beginnings of Western Urbanism

The towns were the spearheads of the frontier. Planted far in advance of the line of settlement, they held the West for the approaching population. Indeed, in 1763, when the British threw the Proclamation Line along the Appalachians to stop the flow of settlers, a French merchant company prepared to survey the streets of St. Louis, a thousand miles through the wilderness. Whether as part of the activity of the French and Spanish from New Orleans or of the English and Americans operating from the Atlantic seaboard, the establishment of towns preceded the breaking of soil in the transmontane west.

Ever since European nations had laid claim to the New World, the area beyond the mountains had been an arena of contention among the great powers. Though merely the haunt of Indian and animal, this region was coveted for its natural richness and strategic location. French, British, Spanish, and American interests mingled and crossed, and no matter which power had formal title to the area, the others never ceased to intrigue for its possession. While the British population filled up the coastal region, the French spun a loose web of forts and fur-trading posts in the Ohio and Mississippi valleys. However, by the treaties of Fontainebleau of 1762 and of Paris a year later, French claims were replaced by Spanish and British titles which divided the West at the Mississippi River. It was in this context of imperial rivalry that such Western cities as St. Louis and Pittsburgh had their origins.

The first towns in the central portion of the Ohio Valley are younger than those on its eastern and western flanks. Until the American Revolution this area was sealed off from settlement by

Indian hostility and British imperial policy. Colonies on the coast had claims in the Ohio and Kentucky regions, but marauding tribes made any attempt to occupy them perilous. The redmen hunted in the lands just west of the strategic gaps in the mountains and resisted the movement of whites into them. The British hoped to reduce friction by keeping the colonists east of the Proclamation Line until Indian titles could be removed. But it was hard to enforce this plan, for settlers hungered to get across the mountains and resented any efforts to stop them. The Revolution was fought in part to free the frontier from this confinement. As soon as the shooting began, Americans pushed into the "dark and bloody" grounds, opening up Kentucky and paving the way for the founding of Louisville and Lexington.

North of the Ohio, the Indians were powerful enough even after the Revolution to resist the advance of settlement. In addition, British influence, always stronger here than south of the river, lingered on, creating unrest whenever possible. The new American government made attempts to pacify the natives with treaties, but these were seldom honored, and guerilla warfare continued. Indeed, it was not until Anthony Wayne's victory at Fallen Timbers and the Treaty of Greenville that followed in 1795 that Ohio was safe for immigration. Meanwhile, the Continental Congress tried to infuse some order into the occupation process through the Ordinance of 1785 providing for a government survey previous to the sale of land. Before federal agents could complete their jobs, however, thin ribbons of population moved down the Ohio River and Cincinnati was born.

In a single generation this whole transmontane region was opened to settlement. In the process towns grew up along the waterways and in the heart of fertile farm areas. The names of many of these — such as Rising Sun, Vevay, and Town of America — were soon forgotten, but others — like Pittsburgh, St. Louis, and Cincinnati — became familiar words. This growth of urbanism was an important part of the occupation of the West, and it provided the central experience of many settlers who crossed the mountains in search of new homes. The story of Western urbanism begins, however, not

where one might expect, at the foot of the Appalachians, but rather in the remoteness of the Mississippi Valley.



There were already a few French villages in the Mississippi basin in 1763 when the Governor of Louisiana granted the New Orleans firm of Maxent, Laclede and Company an eight-year monopoly of trade with the Indians of the Missouri. On the west side of the river was Ste. Genevieve, and on the east, Cahokia and Kaskaskia. As a result of the Treaty of Paris, the latter were now on British soil. Sieur D'Abbadie, the French Governor, was, however, unaware of the secret treaty of the year before by which the region west of the river was ceded to Spain. In granting trade privileges he hoped to regain for France the fur trade of Upper Louisiana which had been badly disorganized by the war. The project looked promising. Colonel Antoine Maxent, one of the richest merchants in New Orleans, supplied the company's financial strength, and Pierre Laclede Ligest became its agent in the field.

In the fall of 1763 Laclede and a large company of men went up the Mississippi to find a site for the headquarters of the new enterprise. Ste. Genevieve was discarded because it was too far from the mouth of the Missouri, and its banks were constantly endangered by flood waters. After some initial trading with the Indians, Laclede moved north seeking a permanent location. When he came to the spot where St. Louis now stands, he was delighted. He later told associates that he had found a position "which might become, hereafter, one of the finest cities in America."¹ Early the following February he sent Auguste Chouteau, then only fourteen years old, with thirty men to the site of the new settlement.

Laclede's choice for a town site was superb. St. Louis was built on a limestone bluff that juts up from the bank of the Mississippi. This was the first elevated spot south of the junction of the three great rivers, Missouri, Illinois, and Mississippi. Not only was the

¹ A. Chouteau, "Narrative of the Settlement of St. Louis," in J. F. McDermott, ed., *The Early Histories of St. Louis* (St. Louis, 1952), 48.

situation free from flood water, but the land behind it rose gently toward the west, providing a natural drainage system. Timber was plentiful, and the hinterland contained grassy tracts admirably suited for farmland. In addition to these natural advantages, St. Louis was strategically located astride the British lines to the rich fur regions of the interior.

Laclede not only chose the site for the new town, but was also its first city planner. On joining Chouteau in April 1764, he put his ideas on paper. The simple gridiron pattern with a public plaza on the waterfront derived from New Orleans, where Laclede had spent the previous decade. In the original sketch, a tract 300 feet deep along the river was reserved for public use, though this land was later sold. The town faced the stream and was only three streets deep, but it ran a considerable distance along the Mississippi. Short cross streets intersected the three "avenues" to establish a regular block system. Each block was 240 by 300 feet, except three central units which were 300 feet square.²

The town's growth justified early optimism. By 1780 it had become the focus of Spanish activity in the Mississippi and Missouri area. As the capital of Upper Louisiana, it was a garrison town and the residence of Spanish officialdom; as the center of the fur trade, it became a kind of rendezvous for hunters, boatmen, and agents of the fur companies. Hence, as soon as Spain sided with the rebellious Americans, the British launched a bloody but unsuccessful assault on St. Louis. Probably 100 casualties were suffered in a community which numbered less than 700. Although the invaders never returned, the town remained in a state of semi-preparedness until the end of the war.³

In the twenty years between the end of the American Revolution and the cession of Louisiana, St. Louis grew very slowly. At the turn of the century it had only 925 inhabitants, including 268 slaves. Indeed, the areas around the town grew more rapidly than St. Louis

²C. E. Peterson, *Colonial St. Louis, Building a Creole Capital* (St. Louis, 1949), 3-7 and notes.

³J. B. Musick, *St. Louis As a Fortified Town* (St. Louis, 1941), 11; 41; 66.

itself. A liberal Spanish policy granted land free to almost all comers, exempting them from taxation. Under these terms the farm regions behind St. Louis filled up very quickly with Americans. The town, however, remained small and intensely French. When the United States took possession in 1804, two-thirds of the people were cousins of one another.⁴

Spanish rule did little to disturb French customs. Ordinances issued from New Orleans were few, and generally dealt with relations between the town and the Spanish garrison.⁵ Land grants were made verbally by the Governor, contracts were sealed by a grip of the hand, and family and religion controlled social arrangements.⁶ Life was gay and relaxed, at least for the more wealthy. Dancing and parties abounded. Amos Stoddard, the first American representative in St. Louis, found this active social life a little trying. "Nothing ever restrains them from this amusement," he complained, "which usually commences early in the evening, and is seldom suspended till late the next morning."⁷ As the symbol of new authority, Stoddard was entertained by St. Louis's leading families. To return this hospitality in the local fashion cost the government of the United States \$622.75.⁸

Though St. Louis was small and most of its citizens were untutored, it was not unsophisticated. From the very first days this frontier town had a substantial group of well educated and highly literate men, most of whom had been schooled in Europe or Canada. They were familiar with much of the new writing of the Enlightenment and brought to the wilderness the tastes and attainments of men of culture. For example, Laclede was a graduate of the Univer-

⁴J. T. Scharf, *History of St. Louis City and County* (Philadelphia, 1883), I, 309; 308; 178.

⁵L. Houck, *The Spanish Regime in Missouri* (Chicago, 1909), I.

⁶The legal system was so informal that Amos Stoddard, the first American authority in St. Louis, complained to his superior that "it is an endless task to find out the laws and steady maxims of the last Spanish Government." A. A. Stoddard to W. C. C. Claiborne and J. Wilkinson, March 26, 1804, Stoddard MSS (Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis).

⁷Quoted in Scharf, *St. Louis*, I, 310.

⁸Stoddard to Benham, June 16, 1804, Stoddard MSS.

sity of Toulouse in France; Madam Marie Louise Chouteau, the *grande dame* of St. Louis society, was educated at the Ursuline convent in New Orleans; and Charles Gratiot, one of the most prominent merchants of the town, studied in Switzerland, London, and Montreal. They were not only educated themselves but many insisted that their children have the same opportunities. Bernard Pratte sent his sons to seminaries in Canada, most of the young Gratiots attended Catholic College in Bardstown, Kentucky, and Auguste Pierre Chouteau and Charles Gratiot, Jr., graduated from West Point in 1806.⁹

The cultural level of early St. Louis can be measured not only by the background of the men who came there, but by the libraries they brought with them. Silvestre Labbadie, who was probably the richest man in town when he died in 1794, owned over 200 volumes, which included 89 different titles. Dr. Antoine Saugrain, the town's most distinguished physician, had over 300 volumes. One of the Spanish officials, Charles De Hault Delassus, brought with him an extensive library of over 150 books, and Auguste Chouteau, though but a boy when he came to St. Louis, accumulated 170 titles before he died. At the time of the transfer of Louisiana there were between 2,000 and 3,000 volumes, not including duplicates, in this infant town of less than 700 whites.¹⁰

Though St. Louis's ruling group was refined, it contained few dynamic leaders. The fur trade, which was the town's most impor-

⁹ When the inhabitants took the oath of allegiance to Spain, 40 out of the 70 adults could not sign their names. Later, in 1775, less than half the church members of St. Louis were able to sign a contract. J. F. McDermott, *Private Libraries in Creole St. Louis* (Baltimore, 1938), 12-13; 14; 15.

¹⁰ McDermott, *Private Libraries*, 21. These books comprehended a wide range of learning. Scientific and historical subjects made up about half the titles; 12 per cent were religious; novels, poetry and literary criticism comprised another 20 per cent; and the rest were concerned with political, philosophical or commercial subjects. It is interesting to note that in a town overwhelmingly Catholic, Auguste Chouteau's library included a great many books on the Index. See McDermott, *Private Libraries*, 22; also J. F. McDermott, "Voltaire and the Freethinkers of Early St. Louis," *Revue de littérature comparée*, XVI (1936), 723.

tant business, declined in the latter days of Spanish possession. Throughout the eighties and nineties the fur lands to the northwest were overrun by British traders and trappers. This encroachment was so rapid that in 1793 the Lieutenant-Governor of Louisiana sponsored the formation of a Board of Trade in St. Louis composed of leading merchants whose object was to regulate Spanish activities and exclude the interlopers. In the next year St. Louis interests formed the Missouri Company for the purpose of penetrating the Upper Missouri, wresting the area from the British, and appropriating to themselves the trade with the Indians. The company sent some expeditions up the Missouri, but its efforts failed to halt the British or provide St. Louis with any economic stimulus.¹¹

When the Americans came to take possession of the town in 1804, it had scarcely 1,000 inhabitants. Nearly a quarter were slaves; the rest were a curious mixture of gentlemen and hunters, merchants and trappers, boatmen and one-time soldiers. An early citizen summed up the first forty years' experience of this urban outpost:

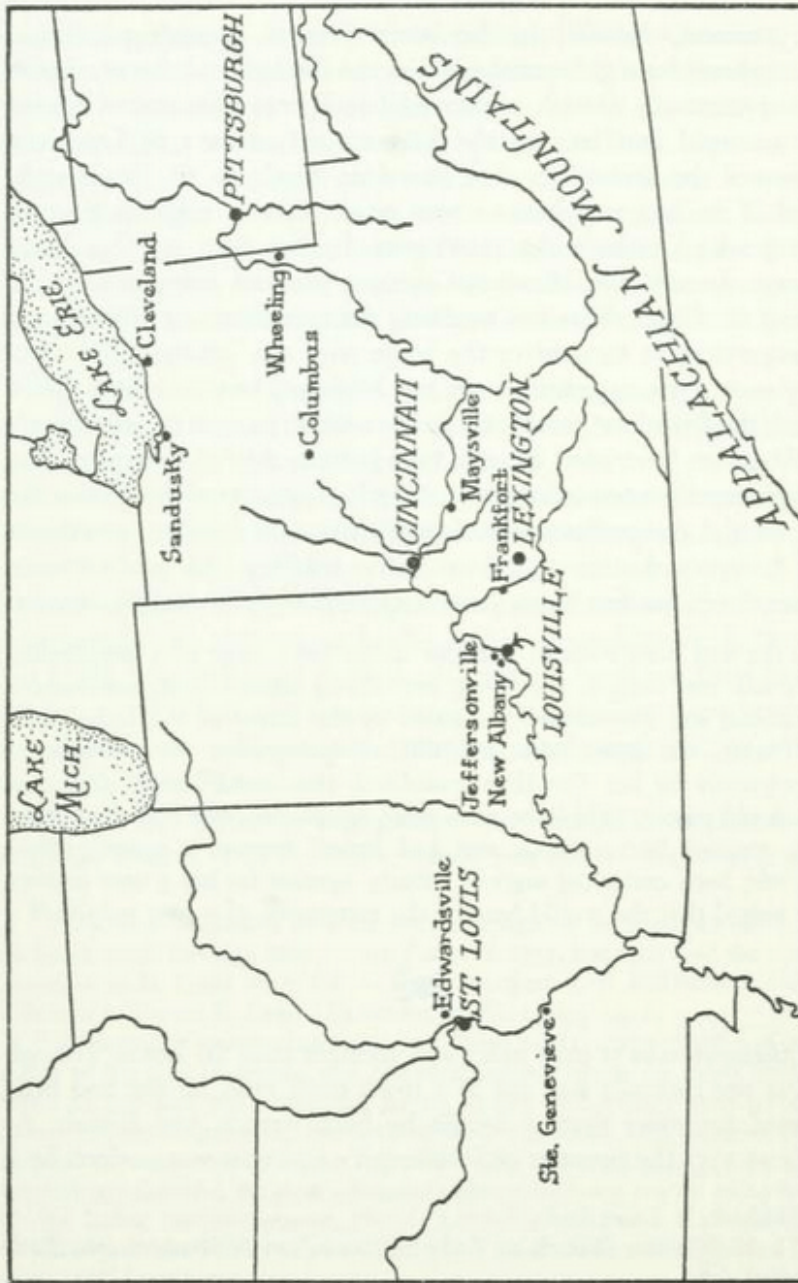
. . . she was born French; but, put under the charge of a stepmother, her cradle was hung in the forest, her infancy stunted by its unavoidable privations, and her maturity retarded by the terror of the Indian yell. Her youth was more calm, but still not prosperous. . . . Abandoned subsequently by her Castillian guardians, she found herself reclaimed by her old parent, only to be once more repudiated. She had then, however, attained her majority, and had herself become a parent, whose children, born under the aegis of Liberty, opened for her a new destiny, and vowed that she would become the metropolis of a new empire.¹²



Pittsburgh was at once older and younger than St. Louis. Though it was not formally laid out as a town until 1764, its site had been coveted for more than a decade by both French and British. As early as 1753 the promise of Pittsburgh's situation was noticed by a

¹¹ Musick, *St. Louis*, 82-83.

¹² J. N. Nicollet, "Sketch of Early St. Louis," in McDermott, ed., *Early Histories*, 133.



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young Virginian, George Washington, who had been sent to the upper Ohio by his governor to warn the French to get out of the area. When he arrived at the point where the Monongahela and Allegheny join to form the Ohio River, he quickly sized up its importance.

I spent some Time in viewing the Rivers, and the Land in the Fork; which I think extremely well situated for a Fort, as it has absolute command of both Rivers. The Land at the Point is 20 or 25 Feet above the common surface of the Water; and a considerable Bottom of flat, well-timbered Land all around it, [is] very convenient for Building.¹⁸

The French agreed on this estimate, and since they had the greater force on the scene at the moment, they prepared to build there. However, in the next year a small detachment of British soldiers hastily threw up a log fort at the union of the rivers, which they named Fort King George. In less than a month the French arrived to take over. No contest ensued, for the British were hopelessly outnumbered and readily retreated eastward. For four years afterward the French flag flew over this strategic outpost, and Fort Duquesne was raised as a physical reminder to Indians and enemies.

Ten years of intermittent warfare followed. Pittsburgh, which was the key to the whole Upper Ohio region, changed to British hands in 1758 and remained so under the terms of the Treaty of Paris. But guerilla warfare with the Indians continued. The latter saw their historic hunting grounds falling to the whites and made a supreme effort to halt this process. Under the leadership of Pontiac, the Indians rose against the British all along the frontier, and before any successful counterattack could be launched, every fortified post but Detroit and Fort Pitt had capitulated. For months even these two places were isolated. Only a concerted effort brought the uprising to an end and made western Pennsylvania safe for settlement.

In this unsettled and harassed period Pittsburgh could grow only slowly. The collection of cabins and huts that grew up outside the fort during the struggle between France and Great Britain was de-

¹⁸G. Washington, "Journal of George Washington," in J. W. Harpster, ed., *Pen Pictures of Early Western Pennsylvania* (Pittsburgh, 1938), 17.

stroyed during the Indian raids. Settlers to the east either found protection in Pittsburgh or hurried back across the mountains to safety. This temporary dispersal of population cleared the way for the orderly planning of the town. After the siege of Fort Pitt was lifted in 1764, Colonel John Campbell laid out four squares on the Monongahela River, bringing Pittsburgh its first and basic town plan. Though modest in scope, it determined the orientation of the town's future development.

No place in the West seemed more certain to be the site of a great city. Nature itself had made the suggestion unmistakably. At Pittsburgh two rivers join to make the Ohio, the central waterway of the trans-Appalachian West. The Allegheny River reaches 325 miles up into the heart of the fertile lake plains of New York and Pennsylvania; the Monongahela drains the incredibly rich iron and coal country of West Virginia. Where they meet was a flat triangular plain, bounded on the east by two heavily foliated hills, and on the north and south, across the rivers, by sharp green escarpments 200 yards high. In this shaggy amphitheater Pittsburgh was placed. Here were all the classic requirements for a great city: water power, coal and iron, ready access to farm lands, and a market area of almost limitless extent.

Notwithstanding these obvious advantages, the town's development proved slow. When Washington returned to Pittsburgh in 1770, it had only two log houses and was "inhabited by Indian traders, etca." The return of troops during the Revolution increased activity in the region but brought few permanent settlers. This beginning was so feeble that it clouded the prophetic powers of a junketing Congressman, Arthur Lee, who proclaimed in 1784 that "the place, *I believe*, will never be very considerable. . . . [It] is inhabited almost entirely by Scots and Irish, who live in paltry log-houses, and are as dirty as in the north of Ireland, or even Scotland." More accurate was the appraisal of another traveler, a German doctor, in the previous year. "However little to be regarded this place is now, from its advantageous site it must be that Pittsburgh will in the future become an important depot for the inland trade."¹⁴

¹⁴ "We lodgd in what is called the Town," which he estimated had about

Though Pittsburgh's early growth was not rapid, by 1784 building had already begun beyond the lines of the old Campbell survey. In that year the Penns hired George Wood and Thomas Viceroy to make a second plat. This one laid out the whole area from the old fort at the western point to Grant Street on the eastern edge of town. For fifty years this survey — with a few small additions — was the basic plan of Pittsburgh. Wood and Viceroy probably wanted to change some of the details of Campbell's work, but they consistently found that usage made innovations impossible.¹⁵ Originally the town faced the Monongahela, which carried most of the trade and immigration. The new survey kept this orientation and used that river as a base for a plan that was shaped like a right triangle. Penn Street, which ran parallel to the Allegheny, was the hypotenuse of this figure; Grant Street on the east connected the two rivers, joining the Monongahela at right angles. This plan was not as regular as that of St. Louis. The streets varied substantially in width, and the triangular pattern created some irregular blocks. A public square, called "the Diamond," was reserved for the court house and market place. The original lots were generous, 60 feet wide and 240 feet deep, allowing space for a garden and stable in the rear.

In the eighties and nineties Pittsburgh attracted an increasing number of permanent residents. The census of 1790 listed only 376 inhabitants, but by the end of the next decade the population had increased fourfold, numbering 1,565. As important, however, as this numerical growth, was the kind of people who settled in Pittsburgh. The town was still composed largely of traders and transients who had no stake in its development. "They take this for a resting place or halfway house and think it vain to waste their labor making improvements . . . because, next year they shall go down the river." Yet among the newcomers were also men of capacity, energy and

twenty houses. *The Diaries of George Washington, 1748-1799*, J. C. Fitzpatrick, ed. (Boston, 1925), I (1748-1770), 410; A. Lee, "Journal of Arthur Lee," Harpster, ed., *Pen Pictures*, 157; J. D. Schoepf, "Travels of Johann David Schoepf," in Harpster, ed., *Pen Pictures*, 136.

¹⁵ J. N. Boucher, *A Century and a Half of Pittsburgh and Her People* (Pittsburgh, 1908), I, 275.

cultivation, who came to Pittsburgh not to sojourn but to build. One of these was John Scull, a young newspaperman from the neighboring town of Washington, who established the *Pittsburgh Gazette* in 1786. Another was the West's most distinguished literary figure, Hugh Henry Brackenridge, the town's first "booster." To this element Pittsburgh represented new opportunity, "a place of great manufactory. Indeed the greatest on the continent or perhaps in the world."¹⁶

The flood of immigration brought not only new townsmen but also the beginnings of Pittsburgh's commercial development. Local merchants outfitted settlers as they moved into the interior. In a single year, 1794, 13,000 stopped at "the point," some for weeks.¹⁷ Federal troops operating against the Indians and whisky rebels were stationed in town, requiring supplies and provisions in large amounts.¹⁸ And, increasingly, Pittsburghers prospered as middlemen in a mounting trade between Philadelphia and Baltimore in the East and the new settlements in the Ohio Valley.¹⁹

A growing population and expanding economic activity created a demand for some measure of home rule. In 1794 the state legislature gave Pittsburgh the legal status of a borough with the same power as that granted to Reading in 1783. This charter provided for the election of a dozen officials, who were charged with promoting "rule order and good government in said town." Before this, local government had consisted of town meetings irregularly called and informally conducted. One in 1787 authorized the building of a public market and laid down the rules for its conduct. Another discussed the ratification of the Federal Constitution, and

¹⁶ United States Census Office, 1st Census, 1790, 45; 2nd Census, 1800, 2d; *Pittsburgh Gazette*, March 17, 1787; August 22, 1786.

¹⁷ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, February 7, 1795.

¹⁸ "The whole of the Federal Army was now at this place, except about 1500 who were left at Washington—The number now at Pittsburgh was calculated at 12 or 13,000." J. Elliot, "The Journal of James Elliot," in Harpster, ed., *Pen Pictures*, 172; G. T. Fleming, *History of Pittsburgh and Its Environs* (New York, 1922), II, 46.

¹⁹ C. Reiser, *Pittsburgh's Commercial Development, 1800-1850* (Harrisburg, 1951), 2.

still another drew up a petition for borough status.²⁰ But by 1800 local affairs in Pittsburgh were on a more regular basis, and the powers of its officers, at first inexpertly wielded, later became instruments of civic development.

Pittsburgh's first decades had been exciting ones. Though it was a mere outpost in the wilderness, great powers had contended for it. Like St. Louis, it had flown three flags, learned to live with garrisons, and narrowly escaped destruction by the Indians. None of this had been conducive to town growth. But in the last decades of the eighteenth century a measure of peace had been established in the Upper Ohio, and development was possible. Settlers came, trade and commerce expanded, and a charter gave this "headquarters of Indian traders" the dignity of a borough. A weekly newspaper, regular mail service, and a constant stream of travelers kept alive contacts with the rest of the nation across the mountains. Pittsburghers even found time for some of the lighter things of life. As one of them observed in 1786,

It must appear like enchantment to a stranger . . . to see, all at once, and almost on the verge of the inhabited globe, a town with smoking chimnies, halls lighted up with splendor, ladies and gentlemen assembled, various music, and the mazes of the dance. He may suppose it to be the effect of magic, or that he is come into a new world where there is all the refinement of the former, and more benevolence of heart.²¹



From Pittsburgh the Ohio flows almost a thousand miles to the Mississippi. In the whole course to New Orleans and the Gulf of Mexico the Falls at Louisville offers the only major obstruction. Here a limestone ridge running obliquely through the river created a violent stretch of rapids which imperiled shipping. The descent was only 25 feet in two miles, but at low water the churning could be

²⁰ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, May 17, 1794; *Pittsburgh Gazette*, March 10, 1787; November 17, 1781; February 15, 1794.

²¹ D. McClure, "Diary of David McClure," in Harpster, ed., *Pen Pictures*, 119; H. H. Brackenridge, *Gazette Publications* (Pittsburgh, 1786), 19.

heard a half mile up the stream. Three "chutes" through the rocks permitted experienced boatmen to pass over when the river was high, but in the late summer months no one who knew the terror of the Falls would risk it.²² Few doubted that somewhere around the rapids a city would grow up to facilitate the transshipment of men and goods around this hazard. Louisville was both the first and the most successful effort to meet this need.

There were four possible town sites at the Falls. Ultimately settlements were made on all of them—two on each side of the river, at either end of the rapids. Louisville's supremacy resulted in large degree from natural advantages over its rivals. Resting on a broad rich plain that stretched along the river, it was the center of a promising farm area.²³ In addition, Louisville had a harbor located at the mouth of Bear Grass Creek where it entered the Ohio on the east side of the town. This commodious and sheltered inlet kept barges, keels, and flatboats from being sucked into the falling waters. Portland, at the western end of the Falls on the Kentucky side, was victimized by the river itself which twisted sharply southward at the foot of the rapids, cutting off the hinterland. The Indiana sites were hemmed in by "knobs" that, rising steeply behind the river, obstructed contact with the interior. Louisville's substantial natural advantages were emphasized by the pattern of immigration. Kentucky was settled many years before Indiana, and by the time towns could grow on the northern bank of the river, Louisville had appropriated most of the trade.

The Falls of the Ohio were familiar to trappers and traders throughout the eighteenth century, yet no permanent settlement was made near them until 1778. In that year George Rogers Clark established a post at Louisville as a base for military expeditions against the British farther west. He brought with him about twenty families,

²² G. Imlay, *A Topographical Description of the Western Territory of North America* (3rd edn., London, 1797), 34. A good map of the Falls can be found opposite page 33.

²³ "Perhaps no city in the universe is supported by a more fertile and productive soil than Louisville." H. McMurtrie, *Sketches of Louisville* (Louisville, 1819), 55; 11.

who spent the first year on Corn Island at the foot of the future town site. Under the protection of crude fortifications, these pioneers moved onto the mainland the next spring. The winter of 1779–80 was Louisville's "starving time," when the intense cold and lack of food almost wiped out the infant village. But in the spring 300 boats came to the Falls, bringing supplies and more families. The next year saw the influx of a large number of unmarried women, the "necessary consequence" of which was "the rapid and wonderful increase of population."²⁴ Clark had long viewed the Falls as the key to the Northwest, and in 1782 he built Fort Nelson at Louisville to secure his position against counterattacks from the British or raids by the Indians. With this protection the people went about the business of building the town.

The first problem was to get a clear right to the land. In 1779 the town had been surveyed and laid out under the authority of the Court of Kentucky County, trustees had been elected, improvements and building had been begun, but land titles were still vague. The inhabitants appealed to the Virginia Assembly, saying that "at great risque and expense" they had "removed to this remote part of the state [*sic*]," but that uncertainty of ownership "prevents some from settling here that are so inclined." The land on which Louisville was established had been granted in 1773 to John Conolly for his services to the colony during the French and Indian War. During the Revolution he sided with the king, however, and Virginia declared that by this act he had forfeited his right. Consequently, in 1780 the state, in response to Louisville's petition, turned the tract over to the town, investing the title in trustees appointed by the Assembly. In this manner Louisville became its own proprietor, with possession of the entire town site. The total grant was one thousand acres. Under the terms of the act the trustees were empowered to lay off the land in half-acre lots and sell them for "the best price that can be had." Each purchaser agreed to build "a dwelling house, sixteen feet by twenty, at least, with a brick or stone chimney" within two years of the date of sale. Those already

²⁴ B. Casseday, *The History of Louisville From its Earliest Settlement Till the Year 1852* (Louisville, 1852), 59.

on the land had the first opportunity to buy, and any disputes were to be settled by the trustees.²⁵

Armed with this charter, the trustees ordered a new survey and laid out a town in half-acre lots along the lines of the 1779 map.²⁶ The plat was long and narrow, running twelve blocks along the river but only six away from it. A slip of ground 180 feet wide stretching the whole length of the town along Jefferson Street was reserved for a public promenade. Within the decade, however, the trustees broke up this park area and sold most of it. A little later, in 1783, there was an attempt to keep thirty feet along the river as "a common street," but soon this too passed into private hands.²⁷ By 1800 the town had disposed of nearly all its land, though a few scattered plots remained. This surrender of public ground has haunted Louisvillians ever since, for it left the heart of the city without parks, indeed without even land for market houses and public buildings. Mulling over this lost opportunity, the city's first historian lamented in 1819,

Had the first, or Main street, been laid off so as to have extended 90 feet from the brink of the second bank, forming an avenue in front of the town, and had no houses been permitted to exist north of that avenue . . . Louisville would have exhibited a *coup d'oeil*, surpassed, in point of beauty, by few in the world. As it is the town has turned its back on the varied and interesting prospect presented by the Ohio and its Falls.²⁸

²⁵ J. J. Robertson, ed., *Petitions of the Early Inhabitants of Kentucky to the General Assembly of Virginia, 1769-1792* (Filson Club, Publications, No. 27, Louisville, 1914), 53-54; *Collection of the Acts of Virginia and Kentucky Relative to Louisville and Portland, with the Charters of the City of Louisville and the Amendments Thereto* (Louisville, 1839), 4.

²⁶ There were many surveys made of Louisville, the first by Captain William C. Bullitt in 1773. Most of the early maps have disappeared. The official plat was by Jared Brooks in 1812. Town of Louisville, Trustees Book, 1781-1827 (MSS, Filson Club Library, Louisville), January 31, 1812.

²⁷ H. Ford and K. Ford, *History of the Ohio Falls Cities and Their Counties* (Cleveland, 1882), I, 178; Louisville, Trustees Book, June 27, 1783.

²⁸ McMurtrie, *Sketches of Louisville*, 115. General George Rogers Clark had suggested such a plan in 1779. R. T. Durrett, *The Centenary of Louis-*

Louisville was situated high enough above the Ohio to escape the danger of floods. But behind the town the ground was marshy and low, containing many ponds. During the wet season that area resembled an archipelago, with islands rising out of small lakes. One pool was large enough for the owner to stock it with fish, another was used for skating in the winter, and on summer evenings the early settlers generally resorted to them. Such indeed was their attachment to the little lakes that many resisted the town's attempt to drain them. Yet the ponds were a constant source of disease, and gave Louisville the reputation of being the "Graveyard of the Ohio." From the beginning, travelers commented on the sickliness of the residents, and in 1788 an epidemic almost knocked out the entire garrison.²⁹

Though it attained the dignity of a town in 1780, Louisville grew very slowly during the next two decades. The Indians, who constantly raided the settlement from their forest fastness across the river, proved the primary obstacle to expansion. In 1783 Colonel William Fleming found the place "almost deserted of Inhabitants, the few left depending chiefly on the garrison." But that same year offered signs of stability. Daniel Broadhead brought the first goods from Philadelphia, and the State of Virginia established a land office there. A decade later Louisville had over "two hundred good houses," and a traveler predicted that "there is no doubt but it will soon be a flourishing town."³⁰ The census listed only 359 inhabitants in 1800, yet estimates by visitors ran as high as 800. The difference probably lay in the fact that travelers based their estimates on the number of people who lived in sight of town rather than within its official boundaries.³¹ The settlement not only grew, but took on some of the graces of comfortable living as well. Parties

ville (Filson Club, Publications, No. 27, Louisville, 1893), 41n. See also L. Collins, *Historical Sketches of Kentucky* (Cincinnati, 1848), 358.

²⁹ Casseday, *Louisville*, 49; W. Fleming, in N. D. Mereness, ed., "Journal," *Travels in the American Colonies* (New York, 1916), 621; see J. Morse, *The American Gazetteer* (2nd edn., New York, 1798), 286.

³⁰ Fleming, "Journal," 633; Imlay, *Western Territory*, 35.

³¹ United States Census, 1800, 2P; Casseday, *Louisville*, 108.

and games were common, a Mr. Nickle opened a dancing school, and Hector St. John de Crevecoeur noted that many of the men wore silk stockings and the women sported parasols.³² Though life was still largely unpolished, by the turn of the century broadcloth was gaining on buckskin in Louisville.



St. Louis, Pittsburgh and Louisville were built on rivers; their ambitions of growth and prosperity rested on water-borne commerce. By contrast, Lexington was the only considerable community in the West remote from a navigable stream. The Kentucky River, which formed a crescent around the town, was at least ten miles away, and a branch of the Elkhorn which cut through Lexington was never navigable and usually dry in the summer. Set on the Blue Grass, this frontier metropolis bestrode the arteries of overland trade and migration and served as the central depot for the surrounding country, which an early traveler described as an "earthly elysium." Though many believed with Victor Collot that "as this town has no navigation, . . . its increase will not be great," Lexington was by 1800 the "Philadelphia of Kentucky" and the largest city in the West.³³

Hunters and explorers very early crossed the ground on which the town later stood, and in 1775 a group of them, who had paused at a nearby spring, named the place Lexington, since they had just received word of the opening battle of the American Revolution. The first permanent settlement came four years later, when Robert Patterson and some twenty-five companions erected a blockhouse there. For three years the town was a wilderness fortress, "the forlorn hope of advancing civilization." Indian fighting was incessant

³² S. S. Forman, *Narrative of a Journey down the Ohio and the Mississippi in 1789-90*, L. C. Draper, ed. (Cincinnati, 1888), 40; Durrett, *Louisville*, 96; Ford and Ford, *Falls Cities*, I, 184.

³³ *The American Museum*, XI (1792), 12; V. Collot, *A Journey in North America* (Reprints of Rare Americana, No. 4, Florence, Italy, 1924), I, 103; L. Condit, "Journal of a Trip to Kentucky in 1795," *Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society*, n.s. IV (1919), 120.

and bloody, and by 1782 became so serious that the few inhabitants of Lexington appealed to the Governor of Virginia:

We can scarcely behold a spot of Earth but what reminds us of the fall of some fellow adventurer massacred by Savage bands. . . . In short, sir, our settlement, hitherto formed at the Expence of Treasure & much Blood seems to decline, & if something is not speedily done, we doubt will wholly be depopulated.³⁴

Before the petition could reach the capital, however, the redmen made a supreme effort at the battle of Blue Licks to throw the whites from central Kentucky. The tribesmen were badly beaten and dispersed, which left the region reasonably secure and ensured the town's orderly growth.

Even during these hazardous days of guerilla warfare, the settlers surveyed the town and in 1781 asked Virginia's General Assembly for ownership of this "still . . . unappropriated and unclaimed land." The petitioners pointed out that "they were induced to expect a Grant of Six hundred & forty acres, in confidence of which" they had laid off a town and elected trustees.³⁵ The state responded by giving 640 acres and confirming the town's purchase of 70 additional acres from John Floyd. Hence, like Louisville, Lexington became its own proprietor, with title to the entire townsite.

With the application for land the trustees also submitted their original survey. This plat laid off the town in one-third-acre lots, which were to be granted to any free white male resident of Lexington over twenty-one years old. "Not less than 30 acres" were reserved for public use.³⁶ The regular gridiron pattern was adopted, with three streets running north of the branch of the Elkhorn and roughly parallel with it, and seven cross streets making the grid

³⁴ G. W. Ranck, *History of Lexington, Its Early Annals and Recent Progress* (Cincinnati, 1872), 24; quoted in B. Mayo, "Lexington, Frontier Metropolis," in E. F. Goldman, ed., *Historiography and Urbanization* (Baltimore, 1941), 25.

³⁵ *Petitions*, Robertson, ed., 60; 61.

³⁶ Town of Lexington, Trustees Book, 1781-1830 (MSS, City Hall, Lexington), March 26, 1781.

design. The streets were narrow, most being fifty feet, though the three larger ones were eighty-two feet. The center of the town contained only eighty-seven in-lots and a two-acre public square. But stretching north and east of town were five- and ten-acre out-lots which gave ample room for expansion.

As soon as Indian depredations ceased, the town grew. By 1790 it had 835 inhabitants, and was "reckoned the capital of Kentucky." Three years later Collot estimated that there were "from three to four hundred houses," and in 1798 a local census counted 1,475 townsmen, including 360 Negro slaves. By the end of the century Lexington's population of 1,795 handily exceeded Pittsburgh's and was more than twice as large as Cincinnati's.³⁷ In the course of its first two decades the military outpost comprising a stockade and a few cabins had mushroomed into the most important town in the West.

Lexington thrived on trade. For twenty years it was the major distributing point for men and goods heading for western Kentucky or Tennessee. Streams of overland migrants stopped here, buying everything needed for building a home and for bringing in the first crops. Later, when the land was taken up, the rising metropolis supplied most Kentuckians with merchandise from Eastern cities.³⁸ In addition, Lexington became the dispatching center for country produce that sought markets outside, especially in New Orleans. The latter trade began in 1787 when James Wilkinson took the first boatloads to Louisiana, opening up to Kentucky and its commercial mart an immensely lucrative exchange. Only faint beginnings of manufacturing were visible in the nineties; as yet, most Lexingtonians owed their livelihood to expanding trade opportunities.

³⁷ Imlay, *Western Territory*, 185; J. Morse, *The American Universal Geography* (3rd edn., London, 1797), 566; Collot, *Journey*, 103; Lexington, Trustees Book, May 9, 1798; United States Census, 1800 2P.

³⁸ Francois André Michaux noted in 1802 that "the majority of the inhabitants of Kentucky trade with Lexington merchants." "Travels to the West of the Alleghany Mountains, in the State of Ohio, Kentucky, Tennessee," by R. G. Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels, 1748-1848* (Cleveland, 1904), III, 202n.

Life in Lexington was noisy and hectic, reflecting its entrepôt origins and functions. Immigrants trekked into town, spent a night or so, bought what they could carry, and left, making room for the next wagon trains. Farmers hawked foodstuffs at the Cheapside market, purchased in the stores, and ate and drank at the Sign of the Buffalo, the Sheaf of Wheat, or the Indian Queen. For a time Lexington was Kentucky's political capital, and the legislators swarmed about the courthouse and taxed the budding city's housing facilities to the limit. The pace of this life contrasted so sharply with that of the countryside that travelers often exaggerated the size and business of the town.

Lexington was not only the mercantile center of the West but its social and cultural leader as well. By 1800 the town government had removed "the sheep and hog pens" from the streets and begun their paving, fire protection had been put on an organized basis, and a primitive police force had been established. As early as 1788 the town set aside a plot of ground for "erecting . . . a Latin and English Schoolhouse," and in 1799 Transylvania Academy became the first university (in name, at least) in the West. Two newspapers, a public library, debating clubs, musical and drama societies, and a half-dozen churches provided Lexingtonians with a cultural fare almost as varied as that beyond the mountains. For those whose taste was less elevated, the choice was still wide—billiards and longbullets, jockey clubs and horse racing, dancing and "free Nancy's" bawdy house.³⁹

In no other area in the West was the difference between town and country so marked at the turn of the century as in the Blue Grass. "ARISTEDES," writing in the *Kentucky Gazette*, observed that in Lexington the merchant lived in a fashion unknown in rural regions. "His dwelling, his equipage, his apparent amount of his stock in trade, the improvements that surround him, and his domestic conveniences bear the aspect of a flourishing opulence." When a young farm boy, Robert McAfee, came to the metropolis for the

³⁹ Lexington, Trustees Book, December 12, 1782; October 21, 1793; June 7, 1791; November 22, 1796; April 7, 1800; November 22, 1796; March 17, 1788; December 23, 1797.

first time in 1794, he was so awed by the luxurious carpeting in the Breckenridge mansion that he hesitated to walk on it. Indeed the contrast was observable to the traveler even before Lexington came into sight. In 1806 Fortescue Cuming wrote of the outskirts of town, "The country had insensibly assumed the appearance of an approach to a city."⁴⁰



Nature seemed to have created the sites of Louisville and Pittsburgh as the nurseries of great cities; but her intentions were less clear in the case of Cincinnati. In fact, the "Queen City" was the second or third choice of the early settlers. Both Columbia, at the mouth of the Little Miami, and North Bend, near the Great Miami, were settled before the first houses were built at Cincinnati. The advantages of Cincinnati's situation proved more obvious after the city grew than before the location was decided upon. The "bottom" was too often flooded, and creeks entering the town at both ends created pools of stagnant water which might carry disease. The commercial prospects, however, were encouraging. Across the Ohio was the mouth of the Licking River, which reached into the rich heart of the Blue Grass, and behind the town lay the farm lands of Ohio and Indiana, whose products would have to be processed and shipped. These considerations brought the first inhabitants to Cincinnati in December, 1788.

It was not Ohio's first town. That distinction belongs to Marietta, which a company of New England veterans founded a year earlier at the mouth of the Muskingum. Cincinnati owed its origin to the political influence of a New Jersey judge, congressman, and speculator, John Cleves Symmes, who dislodged from Congress a million acres between the Miami rivers in 1788 for a relatively small sum. The first immigrants landed that same year on the eastern edge

⁴⁰ *Kentucky Gazette*, September 20, 1803; R. B. McAfee, "Life and Times of Robert B. McAfee Written by Himself," *Register of the Kentucky State Historical Society*, XXV (1927), 128; F. Cuming, "Sketches of a Tour to the Western Country," in Thwaites, ed., *Western Travels*, IV, 181.

of Symmes's purchase, erected a fort, and called the village Columbia. The leader of this little band of thirty, Benjamin Stites, laid out "the squares and streets for a great city." By 1790 there were fifty cabins, a mill, a church, and a school. But nearly every year the river, swollen with spring, covered the settlement, forcing even the garrison to vacate. Within a few years Columbia declined, many of its inhabitants moving down the river a few miles to the more promising situation of Cincinnati. Thus, ironically, the "Queen City," one of the most flood-afflicted spots in the valley, was the beneficiary of the drowning of an infant neighbor.⁴¹

In 1788 Symmes sold the site of Cincinnati and the land around it to Matthias Denman, who later formed a partnership with Robert Peterson and John Filson, both Kentuckians and veteran town builders. The new proprietors made a preliminary visit to their purchase in September, but no lasting settlement was made. Filson began a survey of the town, but one day he wandered off into the woods, never to be seen again. In December the partners, with Israel Ludlow replacing Filson, returned with about twenty others to reside permanently. After a few cabins had been erected, Ludlow surveyed and laid out the town, marking the course of the streets on the trees. The embryo metropolis was called Losantiville, a curious mixture of Greek, Latin and French — L-os-ante-ville — meaning "village opposite the mouth" of the Licking. This name underlines the importance of that river in the selection of the site. The founders hoped to tap the increasing prosperity of Kentucky. Indeed, Denman's interest in the whole project stemmed from his desire to run a ferry across the Ohio to the Licking's mouth. The name of Cincinnati, taken from the society of veterans, quickly replaced the original, and by the early nineties appeared on all legal documents. But the spelling was not secure, for Symmes in-

⁴¹ Quoted in C. T. Greve, *Centennial History of Cincinnati* (Chicago, 1904), I, 179; B. W. Bond, Jr., ed., *The Symmes Correspondence* (New York, 1926), 62; for the decline of Columbia, see also D. Drake, *Natural and Statistical View of Cincinnati and the Miami Country* (Cincinnati, 1815), 37; J. Burnet, *Notes on the Northwest Territory* (Cincinnati, 1847), 46.

sisted on the ending "ta" instead of "ti," and even submitted the issue to the "literati of Jersey" for decision.⁴²

Cincinnati rested on a plain of about four square miles, which was ringed about by heavily forested highlands. The townsite embraced two levels. The lower one, or the "bottom," was a narrow belt of land, two hundred feet wide at Deer Creek on the eastern edge of town, and spreading out to eight hundred feet near Mill Creek to the west. Being only seven feet above the normal high-water mark of the river, this low land was imperiled by floods almost every spring. In addition, the "bottom" tilted to the northwest, creating a pocket where water collected in idle ponds which posed a constant sanitation problem. The second level, called the "hill," rose sharply fifty feet above the first bank, forming a mile-wide table which sloped back gently to the base of the highland crescent. From the river, early Cincinnati looked like a green and open theater carved out of the hills.⁴³

Ludlow laid out the town in a regular grid pattern, six blocks along the river and seven away from it. The plan used Philadelphia for a model, since its author "was well acquainted" with it. The streets were 66 feet wide, and each block was divided into eight lots, 99 by 198 feet, except those between Second and Third streets, which were smaller. Behind the town, the out-lots, which ran back to the highlands, were divided into four-acre tracts. Only a small strip was reserved for a common, and there was "not a single alley, court or diagonal." As in most frontier towns, regularity of plan was thought more important than beauty or utility. Francis Baily, who passed through Cincinnati in 1797, complained, "If they had made one of their principal streets to face the river, and the other at the brow of the second bank . . . the whole town would

⁴² Greve, *Cincinnati*, I, 155; on June 17, 1791, Symmes wrote to Jonathan Dayton in Jersey, "You have your Witherspoons and Smiths, and indeed abound in characters in whose decision I shall fully acquiesce." *Symmes Correspondence*, Bond, ed., 142.

⁴³ For a good topographical description of Cincinnati, see D. Drake, "Notices Concerning Cincinnati," Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio, *Quarterly Publications*, III (1908).

have presented a noble appearance from the river." He also noticed the "inconvenience" of laying a symmetrical plan over a highly irregular terrain whose main feature, the second level, did not run parallel to the river.⁴⁴

Cincinnati's first years were precarious. The Indians had not yet been pacified; indeed, they had turned back several army attempts to subdue them. They raided the Miami district so often that Kentuckians grimly referred to it as "the slaughter house." In 1792 Fort Washington was built at Cincinnati as the pivotal outpost in the war against the savages. During these years the "Queen City" was a garrison town, and friction between military and civilian interests dominated its life. This hostility even spilled over into violence before the commander and the settlers reached an amicable arrangement.⁴⁵ The major problem was the dissolute life of the soldiers, who went on frolics in the town, leaving great damage in their wake. William Henry Harrison, who came to Fort Washington in 1791 as an ensign, was shocked at the behavior of the troops. "I . . . saw more drunken men in forty-eight hours succeeding my arrival at Cincinnati than I had in all my previous life"; and Lewis Condict thought it "the most debauched place I ever saw."⁴⁶

But the military brought benefits as well as trouble. In these crucial years they not only served as a shield against the Indians, but also gave a great economic stimulus to the town.⁴⁷ All major opera-

⁴⁴ D. Drake, "Dr. Drake's Memoir of the Miami Country, 1779-1794," Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio, *Quarterly Publication*, XVIII (1923), 58; Drake, *Statistical View*, 130; Francis Baily, *Journal of a Tour in Unsettled Parts of North America, in 1796 & 1797* (London, 1856), 227ff.

⁴⁵ J. H. Perkins, *Annals of the West: Embracing a Concise Account of the Principal Events Which Have Occurred in the Western States and Territories* (Cincinnati, 1846), 306; Greve, *Cincinnati*, I, 224-25.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Rufus King, *Ohio, First Fruits of the Ordinance of 1787* (Boston, 1888), 214-5. Not all officers took such a dim view of life in Fort Washington; one confided to a friend, "We have taken quarters at Mimson's tavern, where we live in clover," 215; Condict, "Journal," 119.

⁴⁷ Cincinnati not only contained a permanent garrison but was also the rendezvous for troops moving west. For example, in December, 1793, 600 men stopped off for a week; in July of the next year 600 more stayed for ten days, and in December, 1794, 600 more "passed through this place."

tions against tribes in the north originated in Cincinnati, and the merchants threw upon supplying the troops. With Wayne's success at Fallen Timbers in 1794 the power of the Indians was broken. Gradually the army was reduced, the fort dismantled, and the land sold.

Despite the problems raised by the Indians and the armed forces, Cincinnati grew rapidly. In the fall of 1790 Symmes, whose own town of North Bend was struggling to be born, admitted that "the advantage is prodigious which this town is gaining over North Bend, upwards of forty framed and hewed-log two story houses have been and are building since last spring, one builder sets an example for another, and the place already assumes the appearance of a town of some respect." In that year it gained recognition as the most considerable settlement in the territory when the seat of government was established there. Seven years later there were "three or four hundred houses, mostly frame-built," and Francis Baily called it "the metropolis of the north-western territory." At the beginning of the new century Cincinnati had a population of "about seven hundred and fifty."⁴⁸

Most Cincinnatians engaged in commerce either with the army or with the more than fourteen thousand inhabitants of Hamilton County. The town was the "grand depot" for produce that went down the river to New Orleans as well as for Eastern merchandise distributed throughout the Miami area. By 1802 the Mississippi trade had become so important that the newspapers published New Orleans and Natchez prices.⁴⁹ Ties with the East were maintained by a constant flow of goods and settlers coming down the Ohio. Because of Cincinnati's position at the northern bend of the river, many immigrants heading for the interior disembarked there, giving the young city the atmosphere of a large hotel.

Though life in Cincinnati in its first decade was both hard and

Centinel of the North-western Territory, December 14, 1793; February 15, 1794; July 12, 1794; *Western Spy*, July 30, 1800.

⁴⁸ *Symmes Correspondence*, 135; Baily, *Journal*, 228; *Cincinnati Directory for 1819* (Cincinnati, 1819), 29.

⁴⁹ *Western Spy*, May 6, 1801; Baily, *Journal*, 228.

dangerous, its people found time for cultivation and relaxation. As early as 1792 an Englishman began a school for about thirty students, and several more soon followed. *The Centinel of the North-western Territory*, a newspaper founded by James Maxwell in 1793, brought news of the outside world. In 1801 an amateur theater group presented "The Poor Soldier" and "Peeping Tom of Coventry," which opened with an original prologue apologizing for the unpretentious beginnings of the drama in Cincinnati:

No practis'd actor have here your passions charms,
Nor magic brush the vary'd scen'ry warms;
Our house, our equipage, are all but rude,
And little, faith, but our intentions good.⁵⁰

Parties and balls were so common that the newspaper warned that local dancing schools had become "nurseries of dalliance, frippery and folly" to which "the most important and solemn considerations are daily sacrificed." A traveler who stopped at this urban outpost around the turn of the century remembered "hearing the harmonies of Gluck and Haydn, and the reports of champagne bottles," which "transported the guests from the wilds of the Northwestern Territory into the Lucullian feasts of the European aristocracy."⁵¹



Though Western cities were settled from different parts of the continent, their planning showed remarkable similarities. All were laid out in a regular checkerboard pattern with straight streets crossing at right angles. The major inspiration for this approach was Philadelphia, though St. Louis, which derived from New Orleans, adopted the same kind of design. This system had practical advantages. It simplified the problems of surveying and minimized legal disputes over lot boundaries. It also gave at least the illusion of orderliness which settlers associated with cities they had known in the East. But the significance of this rectangular format lay deeper.

⁵⁰ *Western Spy*, October 10, 1801.

⁵¹ Quoted in Greve, *Cincinnati*, I, 364; 365.

It represented the difference between town organization and country life. "Curved lines, you know," observed Daniel Drake, "symbolize the country, straight lines the city."⁵² Early planners connected regularity in design with cities, and refused to make any deviation, even when the configuration of the terrain suggested it.

The shortcomings of this grid pattern were evident to contemporaries. Francis Baily noticed that "oftentimes it is a sacrifice of beauty to prejudice." No allowance was made for irregular contours of the townsite, or of the face of the surrounding country. "It not unfrequently happens that a hill opposes itself in the middle of a street, or that a rivulet crosses it three or four times, thereby rendering its appearance very disgusting, and its passage very inconvenient." It would have been better if the plan accommodated itself to the terrain. "If they would fix upon all the eminences upon the site as so many central spots from which the streets were to proceed like rays from a centre, and make all other minor streets subservient to these, . . . they might preserve an uniformity, a cleanliness, and agreeable prospect." Thus a town could "preserve the straight line, and yet avoid that disgusting appearance which many of the new towns in America make." Baily was greatly impressed by the planning of Washington and thought that it presented a better model than Philadelphia.⁵³

Robert Stubbs maintained the same view. Speaking of Cincinnati, he complained of the "want of spacious alleys, open courts and squares, diagonal streets, public walks and reserves for public buildings," and protested against "the dull monotony inseparable from designs devoid of variety." Henry Marie Brackenridge was so disturbed by St. Louis's plat that he wished "that as happened to Detroit, a conflagration would seize it and burn it to the ground" so that a new design could be adopted.⁵⁴

⁵² Quoted in Greve, *Cincinnati*, I, 349.

⁵³ Baily, *Journal*, 226-27.

⁵⁴ R. Stubbs, *The Ohio Almanac, 1810* (Cincinnati, 1810), unfolioed; *Missouri Gazette*, October 11, 1810. On June 11, 1805, the whole town of Detroit was destroyed by fire. When it was rebuilt it was patterned after Washington. F. C. Bald, *Detroit's First American Decade, 1796-1805* (Ann Arbor, 1948), 240-43.

Part of the legacy of early town plans was the paucity of public space. Original reserves were skimpy, and even those were quickly broken into. The initial mistakes were not irrevocable, but the policy of most of these places in their first years aggravated the inadequacy. Hoping to attract inhabitants, the young cities were inattentive to future need and often sacrificed civic elbow-room by the sale of public ground. Lexington was successful in protecting its lots, but the others soon found themselves buying back land for public buildings, markets, wharves, and later for parks. There was some protest against this tendency to alienate town lots, but it did not become organized or effective until the late 1820's, after most of the damage had been done.

Another striking conformity in early city plans was the relationship of town and river. All these settlements, except Lexington, were on waterways, deriving their importance and prosperity from water connections. Early planners, for that reason, made the river the central street, so to speak, in their design. Plats tended to be long rather than wide, allowing maximum access to the water. The names of the main streets reflected this orientation: nearly every city had its Water or Front street. But soon the waterfront became commercialized. Wharving, warehousing, and shipping interests bought up the landings and the ground behind them, while residential building retreated inland. Soon travelers coming down the river spoke of the business of a city, not its beauty.

Since early plans did not reserve much land along the waterfront, its despoilment was almost inevitable. When Brackenridge reached St. Louis in 1810 this process had already begun. "But surely," he complained, "for the sake of business, of health, of promenade, there should have been no encroachment on the margin of the noble stream. This defect is much to be lamented, more especially as it is beyond the power of correction." McMurtrie said that the failure of early surveys to protect the waterfront meant that Louisville "has turned its back . . . on the varied and interesting prospect" of the Ohio. Even more caustic was Moses Austin's judgment: "Louis Ville by nature is beautiful but the handy work of Man has insted of improving destroy'd the works of Nature and made it a detestable

place."⁵⁵ Western townsites were chosen for their commercial promise, not beauty, and it is not surprising that early plans mirrored that predilection.



Not all the towns founded in the trans-Allegheny West in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries became large cities. Many never developed much beyond a survey and an advertisement. Others, after promising beginnings, slackened, and settled down to slow and unspectacular development. Still others rode a cycle of boom and decline, leaving behind a grim story of deserted mills, dilapidated buildings, and aging people—the West's first harvest of ghost towns. Most of these enterprises were mere eddies in the westward flow of urban culture, but at flood tide it was often hard to distinguish the eddies from the main stream. All seemed promising to at least some people, and their hopes were an important part of the atmosphere in which immigration took place.

From the time the West was first opened to settlement, it was the scene of not only land speculation, but intense city speculation as well. Men in the East with surplus capital scanned maps looking for likely spots to establish a town, usually at the junction of two rivers, or sometimes at the center of fertile farm districts. Their information often came from a traveler's account, or from personal contact with someone who had been across the mountains. They bought up land, laid it out into lots, gave the place a name, and waited for the development of the region to appreciate its value. Looking back over this period, one observer spoke of the "*city-making mania*" that caused everyone to go about "anticipating flourishing cities in vision, at the mouth of every creek and Bayou." Though many people engaged in this speculation, few profited from it. Even those who were fortunate in their choice of sites realized little gain in the long run. James Hall believed that "town making has

⁵⁵ *Missouri Gazette*, October 11, 1810; McMurtrie, *Sketches of Louisville*, 115; M. Austin, "A Memorandum of M. Austin's Journey . . . 1796-1797," *American Historical Review*, V (1899-1900), 527.

not generally proved profitable. Of the vast number of towns which have been founded, but a small minority have prospered, nor do we think that, as a general rule, the founders of these have been greatly enriched by their prosperity."⁵⁶

For three decades urban speculation raged throughout the new country from Western Pennsylvania to Missouri. To proprietors, the prospects seemed boundless. As early as 1787 New Athens was "established at the confluence of those majestic rivers, the Mississippi and Missouri, . . . on perhaps the most desirable spot in the known world." It offered settlers not only a "perfect situation" but complete freedom of religion as well. To sketch adequately so bright a future, the founders turned to verse:

Again shall Athens bid her columns rise,
Again her lofty turrets reach the skies,
Science again shall find a safe retreat,
And commerce here as in a centre meet.⁵⁷

In the same manner, New Lisbon confidently asserted that its location at the middle fork of the Beaver River in Ohio "is exceeded by none in the Western Country." On Swan Creek at Lake Erie, Port Lawrence claimed that its "natural advantages . . . seem to have been designed for the great *depot* of the north-west." Palermo, Kentucky, looked forward not only to a commercial future as an Ohio River town, but its "inexhaustible coal mine" assured that it would "become one of the greatest places on the whole river for steam works." The classic example of city speculation, however, was the Town of America, located at the junction of the Ohio and Mississippi. "The mind is . . . free to expatiate upon the advantages of this situation," the proprietors wrote, "and the undersigned can leave it to any man of sense and candor to say whether any point upon our continent has ever presented a fairer prospect of a greater inland commercial city." A rich back country and unimpeded ac-

⁵⁶ *Missouri Republican*, August 29, 1825; J. Hall, *The West: Its Commerce and Navigation* (Cincinnati, 1848), 227.

⁵⁷ *American Museum*, V (1789), 284.

cess to New Orleans made it "difficult to assign a reason why this town should not in a few years rank with the first in America."⁵⁸

By the second decade of the nineteenth century the propaganda of the speculators had become formalized. Newspapers throughout the country ran notices proclaiming the matchless situation of the proposed city. A detailed and sympathetic description of the surrounding country and rivers followed; then settlers were urged to buy quickly before the price of town lots began to skyrocket. The "town-making mania" became so prevalent that many grew cynical. The *Augusta Chronicle* ran an advertisement, widely copied throughout the West, satirizing the whole process. The editor observed that "notwithstanding nearly all the lands on the banks of the several watercourses have been laid off and offered for sale as town lots," still there are people "who may be prevailed on to become rich, provided it can be done without much trouble." The "City of Skunksburgh" seemed to offer every opportunity for both settler and speculator.

This charming place, better known as Log-Hall, heretofore the residence of *Fiddler Billy*, is situated in Wilks county, not far from the junction of Pickett's main spring branch, and a Western fork, called the Slough, which runs in the rainy season, and washes the confines of Farnsworth's lower hog pens. This noble stream, by the use of *proper* and *sufficient* means, may be made navigable to the sea. It abounds in delicate minnows, a variety of terrapins, and its frogs, which, in size, voice, and movement, are inferior to none. . . . A noble bluff of 18 inches commands the harbor, and affords a most advantageous situation for defensive military works. This bluff slopes off into nearly a level, diversified only by the gentle undulations of surface, as will give a sufficient elevation for the princial public edifices. Commodious and picturesque positions will be therefore reserved for the Exchange and City Hall, a church, one Gymnastic and one Polytechnic foundation, one Olympic and two Dramatic theatres, an Equestrian circus, an observatory, two marine and two Foundling Hospitals, and in the most com-

⁵⁸ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, August 26, 1803; *Mercury* (Pittsburgh), September 12, 1817; *Pittsburgh Gazette*, October 15, 1809; *Pittsburgh Gazette*, October 15, 1809.

mercial part of the city will be a reservation for seventeen banks, to each of which may be attached a lunatic Hospital. . . .

The future advantages of this situation is now impossible to calculate; but already it is the emporium of all the water mellons, ground pease, and suck collars, and all the brooms, chickens, and baskets, that are bought and sold among the before mentioned places, in the course of commerce. To mercantile men, however, a mere statement of its geographical position is deemed sufficient, without comment. It stands on about the middle ground between Baltimore and Orleans, Charleston and Nickajak, Savannah and Coweta, Knoxville and St. Mary's, Salisbury and Cusseta, and between Little Heil on the Altamaha, and Telfico block house. A line of Velocipede stages will be immediately established from Skunksburgh straight through the O-ke-fin-o-cau Swamp, to the southernmost point of the Florida peninsula; and, as soon as a canal shall be cut through the rocky mountains, there will be direct communication with the Columbia river, and thence to the Pacific Ocean. Then opens a theatre of trade bounded only by the Universe!

ANDREW AIRCASTLE
THEORY M'VISION
L. MOONLIGHT, Jr., & Co.
*Proprietors*⁵⁹

By the twenties the West was littered with ambitious towns that never grew. Much of this speculation was fanciful. "The Gentlemen who had fixed on a spot in the wilderness, and marked out the boundaries of a city, disdained, of course, the idea of building a 'castle in the air'—he was looking forward to something more *solid*—he could not doubt his own taste or his own judgment—the wilderness was to blossom, and his city to be peopled—before pay-day would come."⁶⁰

In retrospect it would be easy to account for the failure of each. Some were too easily inundated at high water, others too remote from a navigable stream, and still others were too close to already successful towns. James Hall, however, penetrated to the heart of the matter: "It requires the united influence of many individuals and

⁵⁹ *Liberty Hall* (Cincinnati), October 1, 1819.

⁶⁰ *Louisville Public Advertiser*, August 20, 1823.

various interests and the concurrence of a diversity of circumstances, to give impulse to the healthy growth of a town; so that while, on the one hand, it is almost impossible to foresee such a combination of events," on the other, their occurrence is essential.

We have in our eye a notable instance of this kind. At the junction of two noble rivers, upon a spot which, as presented upon the map, seems to combine every advantage, a city of noble dimensions has been laid out. An engineer of high reputation has been induced to give the sanction of his name to the scheme; plats beautifully executed have been circulated industriously, and immense sums of money are supposed to have been collected abroad, for shares of this magnificent city, which, after being owned by several successive companies, and puffed for many years, is the residence only of frogs and mosquitoes, while hundreds of towns have grown up within the same period without effort.⁶¹

Most of this town planting was abortive; but the failures were nevertheless important. They not only illustrate the extensive city speculation of the period, but also help to reveal the nature of much of the immigration moving westward. Many settlers came across the mountains in search of promising towns as well as good land. Their inducements were not so much fertile soil as opportunities in infant cities. It was to these people that hopeful enterprisers addressed their propaganda. Daniel Drake, who was among the earliest urbanites of the frontier, later observed,

It is worthy of remark, that those who made these beginnings of settlement, projected towns, which they anticipated would grow into cities . . . and we may see in this origin, one of the elements of the prevalent tendency to rear up towns in advance of the country which has ever since characterized Ohio. The followers of the first pioneers, like themselves had a taste for commerce and the mechanic arts, which cannot be gratified without the construction of cities.

Proprietors competed for these urban migrants who came from "those portions of the Union which cherish and build up cities."⁶² The preference of some settlers for towns was so great that in 1787

⁶¹ Hall, *The West*, 227-28.

⁶² Drake, "Memoir," 58.

Lexington petitioned the Virginia legislature for incorporation, to "be an inducement to well disposed persons, artizans and mechanics who from motives of convenience do prefer a Town life."⁶³

By 1800 the urban pattern of the West had been established. Environment and circumstances had chosen some cities and discarded others. Many new towns would rise later, but every major metropolis in the transmontane region, with the exception of Chicago, Milwaukee, and Indianapolis, had its beginnings in the eighteenth century. Even many of the lake towns, whose dynamic growth belongs to a later period, were established by the turn of the century. Of course, all these cities were still young and small, but a wedge of urbanism had been driven into the backwoods. Where only two decades earlier Indians had ranged through hunting grounds, now could be found newspapers, schools, libraries, theaters, churches, local governments, and police. Merchandise from Europe and luxuries from the Orient landed at town wharves where they met the produce of nearby farmers waiting shipment down the rivers to New Orleans. Travelers were awed by this sudden transformation of the Western wilderness. Yet even these promising beginnings did not presage the remarkable development of the next fifteen years.

⁶³ *Petitions*, Robertson, ed., 106.