

Conceptions of Time
in the History of Childhood:
A Study of Intergenerational Perceptions
of Life on the Early New York Frontier

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I

History is about time. This is especially true of the history of childhood insofar as it deals with the interrelation of generations over time. It involves both time past and time to come, posing the questions “Where have we been?” and “Where might we be going?” The main themes that this study seeks to explore are how different generations perceived the world in which they lived, and how these perceptions may be considered as ideas inherent in the passage of time. Intergenerational perceptions here refer to people’s recognitions, ideas, and attitudes inherited from an earlier generation, and then passed on to the next generation.

In its examination of this theme, this paper focuses on those perceptions held by generations of early settlers who inhabited the frontier of New York State. In these early years the state served as a central staging ground for much of the settlement of the rest of the country, in many cases combining the spirit of eastern urbanization with the processes of western expansion and homogenization on its frontiers in particular.¹ The following paragraphs examine what ideas and conceptions frontier dwellers held towards nature and society, as well as how they handed these down to the generations which succeeded them. As part of

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discussing intergenerational perceptions, this study also considers how these frontier people interpreted, or recognized the age in which they lived. This recognition of age is also an idea of time in its broader meaning, and is analyzed at the end of this paper.

Environmental historian William Cronon begins his 1992 article, "A Place for Stories," by quoting the following sentences from Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983): "Children, only animals live entirely in the Here and Now. Only nature knows neither memory nor history. But man—let me offer you a definition—is the only telling animal. Whenever he goes he wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting market-buoys and trail-signs of stories. He has to go on telling stories."² In environmental history neither nature nor the universe tell stories; men do. "Men" in this case does not refer to historians, but rather to the people who occupied the periods of time that historians describe. The question of what kinds of stories are narrated in environmental history depends on the social and political views of the people who tell them. These stories influence historians' narratives. Historians do not invent them.³ As the word "children" in the quote above connotes, these narratives represent tales to be handed down to successive generations, who then retell those stories for the following generations thereafter.

In light of the above, this paper firstly illustrates what kinds of ideas toward nature and native Americans are to be found in the narratives of people on the New York frontier, and how these were passed on to children, or subsequent generations. Secondly, the subject of school education on the frontier is discussed. Schooling is directly related to intergenerational perceptions in that it is the embodiment of teachers and parents, as older generations, communicating certain ideas to younger generations in an organized manner. How children were made to acquire knowledge on the frontier, and what type of school education was handed down to them are questions of particular interest.

Intergenerational perceptions may be discussed in terms of a variety of other aspects as well. As space is limited, however, this paper concentrates on the passing on of ideas of frontier environment and education from one generation to the next as its theme. As pointed out previously, people's narratives are of far more importance than any other stories, and therefore stories narrated by frontier people themselves will be quoted from as much as possible.⁴

II

Possibly the greatest single activity in the evolution of the rural landscape of the United States has been the clearing of the forest. One tends to think that forests in early America were mainly located in the Rocky Mountain states, but in fact over four-fifths, the greatest bulk of American forests, lay east of the Great Plains. The extent of the original forests is impressive enough, but its at first gradual and then highly accelerated denudation is as equally striking. In 1614 when the first houses were built in Albany and on Manhattan Island, the territory which would thereafter constitute New York State, forest dominated the landscape throughout its entirety. Even by the late 18th century the area was still a silent, unbroken wilderness of primeval forest which, in grandeur and undeveloped wealth, was unsurpassed in all the regions of the Atlantic coast.⁵ The Otsego area, the primary geographic focus of this paper, is located in the central part of the state. Otsego was opened up to settlers in 1786 by William Cooper, father of the well known novelist James Fenimore Cooper.

What sort of experiences did the first settlers have in facing the natural environment and in encountering native Americans in this forest, and how did they pass on such experiences to children in their narratives? In a small book or rather pamphlet entitled *Stories of Early Settlers in the Wilderness* printed in 1837, many experiences of settlers' children in Otsego are described, with the tales of youth dominating almost all of the work's pages.⁶ Many of the descriptions of young people's experiences suggest, moreover, that the stories are told in order to pass on those experiences, and lessons, to following generations of younger readers. Tales describing terrifying images of the forest and the dangers abiding within, such as encounters with wild animals, account for the first group of narratives sampled and discussed below.

The peopling of New York in the century following the American Revolution represents a dramatic story of settlement on one of the nation's earliest frontiers, where the dominance of New England traditions served to forge the cultural landscape of that part of New York settled after the war. Author Joseph Priest writes of his mother's early years in his work, "The Life of Mrs. Priest in the Woods of the Susquehanna." (Otsego is located on the upper Susquehanna River.) Priest relates that immediately following the close of the Revolutionary War, when Mrs.

Priest is about fifteen years of age, a spirit of emigration toward the western wilderness prevails among the people of the New England states. Her family shares in this general impulse, and so it is that her father sells his farm and prepares to relocate to the banks of the wild Susquehanna.⁷

Before he actually moves the family, however, he takes the precaution of going to explore the new lands in advance. On this journey he is accompanied by Mrs. Priest's eldest brother, then a lad of about 12 years. Passing through deep and vast woods they come upon a place on the Hudson called Catskill, where a few families had already settled. From here in order to reach Otsego they must enter the woods proper, though it is considered dangerous to penetrate that distance without a guide. There are little or no traces of human industry to mark the way; it is an almost unbroken wilderness.⁸ What they saw and experienced is written as follows:

There runs a gloomy gulf, the haunt of wolves, bears, panthers, at that times [sic], as well as of deer and some few [sic] elk. . . . The hour of midnight had arrived . . . when the shrill but loud and terrifying scream of some animal awoke the slumberers [sic] from their dreams. . . . The agility of this creature (panthers) is not exceeded by any other animal of the whole earth. . . .⁹

When Mrs. Priest commences her own journey at 15 years of age on Nov. 11, 1784, she encounters the same environment as that which her father and elder brother had met before. As Priest relates her impressions:

In the morning, on awaking in the midst of trees and brush wood, my feelings, Mrs. Priest says, were vastly different from any sensations ever before experienced. Here thought I great nature dwelt, in all her wilderness, seated on her own primeval hills . . . while all around fogs and gloom held their place of horror. No sound disturbed her state, save the rush of winds, the roar of thunder, the wild brant's scream in her airy flight, howl of beasts, and the yells of the Indians.¹⁰

Priest also narrates stories about the experiences of other children on the frontier. The first such story tells of a boy's fright on encountering a bear in the woods on his way to school:

. . . [H]is first sensation was a stupifying [sic] terror, but this gave way in a moment to thoughts of flight; this was soon abandoned, from a recollection that his father had told him that if he ever met a bear in the woods he must by no means run or halloo, as then inevitable death would follow. . . .¹¹

At length, however, the bear turns suddenly away from him and departs.

The tale goes on to depict this poor boy running home, crying and screaming to show all the signs of terror such that a story might inspire in the mind of a child. The second story that Priest relates is about a 14-year-old boy who, on his way to the fields for a load of grain, suddenly comes within a hair's breadth of the horrid claws of a massive panther. With both flesh and the hair on his head in motion from pure terror, the boy somehow manages to safely avoid the danger.¹² The boy featured in Priest's third story, however, is not as fortunate:

A boy of about ten years old, in passing through the enclosure perceived a large panther, crouching here and there about the horses. . . . He now began to try to drive it away, by shouting and throwing sticks at it. By this time the father of the boy had seen from the house what was going on, and immediately halloed to the child to come away, or he would be torn to pieces,—while he sprang into the house for his rifle. . . . But before he had come near enough to fire on the panther, he saw its dreadful spring, and heard one scream of his child. He knew that all was over. . . .¹³

There are many other narratives about the terrifying dread and dangers that frontier children experienced available to the researcher in the form of frequent newspaper accounts as well.¹⁴ To gain insight into how children themselves remembered life in the frontier environment, however, autobiographies written by former frontier children about their childhoods provide a rich source of information.¹⁵ Unfortunately, however, a lack of women's autobiographies describing early frontier life from female perspectives limits this study to the consideration of only boy's recollection. One such young boy, Levi Beardsley moved to the upper Susquehanna with his family at the age of 5 years in 1790, and describes the nature of the forests as follows:

. . . if the blast was violent, there was the loud resounding roar through the branches; giving the incontestable proof that the stormy king could invigorate those gentle gales and convert them to the more stern exhibitions of storm and tempest. . . .¹⁶

He continues, describing the abundance of wolves in the area:

One of the first things for the safety of the sheep, was to build a fold or place where they could be kept at night, safe from the depredations of wolves, whose nocturnal howlings on the hills, east of the lake could be heard almost every night during that season.¹⁷

Henry Wright, who came to the frontier with his family in 1800 at the

age of 4, also remembers the darkness of the forests and ruggedness of the terrain. As he states in his memoirs:

. . . it was a narrow, deep ravine, and a road ran along on the brow of the steep hill that led down to it. That seemed to me, as a child, the embodiment of all that was gloomy and appalling. When eight or nine years old, I have rode through those woods, on the margin of that terrible ravine, in darkness in which eyes were useless. . . .¹⁸

He continues, recalling the tales that abounded in his childhood about the dangers to be found in the woods and their connection to life at the time. They were, in his words:

. . . stories of encounters with wild beasts, of dark nights spent in woods, and of hair-breadth escapes from the wild dangers of wading and swimming rivers, crossing mountain torrents; stories of children strayed or lost, or torn to pieces, or starved to death in the woods; these, and the like stories, relating to the actual, living world around us. . . .¹⁹

Considering the quotations above, it may seem that frontier people continually confronted nature, and invariably tried to conquer it.²⁰ Restated in a way more closely related to the theme of this paper, these tales of danger and conquest may seem to have been the only stories, or perceptions about nature, that settlers handed down to younger generations. In point of fact, however, the narratives shared among generations are not restricted to an only adversarial relationship with the natural environment; more perspectives are presented. For instance in *Stories of Early Settlers in the Wilderness*, the author tells readers of the beauty and abundance of nature along with its potential hardships and devastation. Moreover, he informs readers that settlers didn't feel compelled to confront nature at all times but rather felt embraced and supported by it. For example after illustrating how "ten thousand blossoms" in May and June "decked the earth," the author not only lists the names of many kinds of flowers, but also describes them in moving words:

The mountain laurel has become the emblem of honor, and as such, in ancient times encircled the brows of kings and heroes, because it is an ever-green. . . . The wild lily of the hills, meadows and marshes attracts the eye, impressed the mind a solitary yet tender emotion. This flower has been copied in gold and silver work, wrought to adorn palaces, and to crown with beauty. . . .²¹

The author goes on to write about the natural beauty and richness of his

environment by describing various nut trees such as the butternut, the chestnut, the walnut, and the beechnut. There are also a multitude of berries described of which the whortleberry is featured chiefly along with the blackberry, the raspberry, and the gooseberry.²² In addition to the plants, birds and fishes are also shown as being abundant:

Innumerable birds caroled [sic] from the budding branches of woods. . . . Of such is the pigeon, countless millions of which came flying on the winds. . . . The mountain partridge was heard to drum, with beating wings, which quiver in the wind not less rapid than those of the burnished hummingbird, the sound of which is heard afar, the only drummer of the wilds. . . . [T]he Susquehanna abounded with shad, from the sea. These migratory waves sought the still deep waters of Otsego lake, where to hide their incipient millions, embryo children of the shad, for another year's generation. . . .²³

In his *Reminiscences*, Beardsley reflects on how this natural beauty and abundance was absorbed by the minds of children of his age at the time:

I shall never forget the freshness and beauty of the forest, after winter had passed away. The spring flowers were everywhere in bloom. . . . [T]hose only who have resided in a new country, where forest scenery in all its richness and beauty is presented to the view, can realize how strongly those recollections are impressed on the mind.²⁴

On the same topic, Wright recollects the impact of the frontier on his younger self:

I was a child—my thoughts and feelings were those of a child; but then and there I received impressions of God. . . . My young heart felt that the woods, the winds that moaned through their tops, the darkness, the blue sky, the moon and stars, were the works of that unseen Hand. . . .²⁵

What is apparent in these extracts is that nature, as it is perceived by children's minds, corresponds very closely to that described by the author of *Stories of Early Settlers in the Wilderness*. This correlation also applies to narratives involving native Americans encountered by the first settlers on the New York frontier. In *The Stories of Early Settlers*, settlers' narratives of native Americans portray rather hostile images of both barbarity and grandeur. Of the two narratives the author relates on this subject, one concerns itself with Brant, chief of the Mohawks. Perhaps indicative of the author's recognition and perception of his age, the leader's character is depicted as being fierce and terrible. This portrayal is

most clear at the end of the narrative where the author relates a magazine article about a grand masked ball held by English nobles to which Brant is invited:

In the above account, as given from the English Magazine, we see in all its majesty and terror, the fierce and unconquerable grandeur of the native savage; . . . in an instant, when he imagined his honor was assailed even by the simple touch of a Turk's finger, he burst as an angry meteor in the heaven, and would have split down the Turk with the edge of his gleaming tomahawk, had not one of the nobles . . . stepped in between them. . . .²⁶

This negative portrayal of native Americans is also apparent in the other Indian story, which deals with the Massacre of Wyoming, PA during the Revolution. The results of this battle are well known to have been disastrous for the non-natives: no less one hundred and fifty people were killed, and orphaning some six hundred children. The author also sketches the barbarity of one tribal leader, who at one point during the battle, killed even a mere child of about fifteen years. After telling this chilling story, he adds the following description of a so-termed "White Indian" taken from the battlefield as a child and raised as a native American:

At this time, (namely, the battle of Wyoming,) among many of the young children which [sic] were carried away by the Indians, there was one who when he was grown up, became a chief of one of the tribes, and was well known by the name of *Corn Planter*, on the Allegany reservation. He was noted for his opposition to the introduction of Christianity among the Indians, and of their being educated. It is said he was the child of an Irish family. . . . He was as radically an Indian savage as those who are born such, no way different from the other Indians in a love of their mode of life.²⁷

Insofar as opposition to Christianity and education were not valued highly at the time, similar narratives as well as ones which are more favorable to such "White Indians," and native Americans in general, may also be found in records of boyhood memories. Both Beardsley and Wright recollect stories of native American torture and burnings; of Indian tomahawks and scalping-knives, but at the same time they do include stories offering the contrary perspective of admiration as well. As Beardsley recalls:

It is no marvel to me, that the red man sighs for forest life, where, without restraints, imposed by laws and customs of civilized society, he roams free as air he breathes.²⁸

Wright, for his part, offers his thoughts having described a scene one summer morning where a party of Indians visits his family's home to ask for something to eat, and his parents kindly treat them to breakfast:

When I was but ten or twelve years old, I thought, and still think that professedly civilized and Christian whites have been far more revengeful, unjust and murderous to the Indians of America, than those Indians have been to them.²⁹

From the above it may be concluded that although the people on the early New York frontier do cast frightening images of the forest as an enemy to be conquered, and consider wild animals and savage Indians to be dangers of that forest, these are not the only images and knowledge that the settlers narrate and hand down to younger generations. The natural beauty and abundance of the forest as well as more humane representations of native Americans do indeed find a place in the inheritance of their children as well.

It is important to bear in mind that this period is chronologically placed in the midst of a transition from enlightenment views of nature to romantic perspectives. Here, settlers' occasionally incongruous depictions of nature and native Americans to some extent, moreover, may be placed within the context of this transition. Also noteworthy is that this change of predominant attitude is not a sudden eruption ideas; rather, it is a gradual fermentation of ideas that had been circulating for a long period. Hostility and repugnance toward the forest does remain, however, as the bulk of the population was still confronting and clearing it. Gradually, though, the forest begins to find new champions among those who appreciate its aesthetic values and even associate its primitive, primordial conditions with the work of God. An early expression of romanticism in America may be seen in the writing of Chateaubriand, a European, although before the end of the 18th century few Americans had discovered primitivism. That said, a number of writers in America do begin to extol the simple, moral life of the forests in the period following the Revolution, and by the 1830s this sentimentalism develops into a literary genre in its own right.³⁰ In this way, it seems reasonable to interpret settlers' seemingly contradictory attitudes toward nature from this context of transition in the way nature is viewed.

III

During planting and harvest periods on the frontier it was necessary to employ child labor, making school attendance very erratic. There were also what may arguably be termed some primitive aspects of education on the frontier such as the apprenticeship system, a more practical form of education which continued as part of frontier life. While this scheme did produce skilled craftsmen, it often exacted an awful price in human misery. Young apprentices, torn from their parental homes and bound to serve a master for a period of years, sometimes suffered mental anguish. This fact is reflected in frequent newspaper advertisements reporting that apprentices had run away.³¹ One such notice reads as follows:

Three Cents Rewards

Ran away from the subscriber on Friday the 15th inst. an indented apprentice girl named Adelina Hoag, about 15 years of age, whoever will return said apprentice to the subscriber shall receive the above rewards and no charge. All persons are strictly forbid harboring or trusting her on penalty of the law, as no debts she may contract will be paid by me after this date.

John A. Cronkhite November 16, 1816³²

Judging from the scenario described above, one may be tempted to assume that the level of education was so low that children were provided with only rudimentary knowledge of “the three R’s” along with how to generally conduct themselves in society. It might also be inferred that the first settlers of the New York frontier did not offer adequate schooling to children in such a rural area, especially when compared to the level of education available on the Atlantic Seaboard. The validity of these suppositions is, however, questionable. A close examination of school textbooks and notebooks in use during this period reveals to a clearer extent what level of education frontier settlers expected of, and provided to their children. As the preface to a textbook entitled *The Columbian Reader, the 2nd Edition*, printed in Otsego County in 1811 asserts:

The art of Reading and Speaking with propriety and elegance is so desirable an attainment, that no pains or expence [sic] ought to be spared to inculcate in the minds of youth its elementary principles. Too much attention, therefore, cannot be bestowed by parents, and others to whom the education of youth is confided, in procuring good and useful books for their improvement and instruction. An excellent writer has very truly remarked, that a various education is a better inheritance for children than a great estate.³³

As expressed in the last sentence above, people of the frontier considered education to be an important endowment for the next generation, outweighing even real estate in value. Although the ideas contained in this preface are, in part, a means of self-promotion for the publisher, one must acknowledge the general enthusiasm expressed for education even on the frontier. This enthusiasm is further indicated in that the unexpected success of the first edition of the book, which sold nearly 4,000 copies, prompted a second edition of 12,000 copies, corroborating the frontier's zeal for education.³⁴

In the first chapter of *The Columbian Reader*, it becomes evident whether or not this text was simply an elementary reading primer for backwoods children. In a passage concerning rules and mannerisms for reading and speaking, tone of voice and verbal intonation are analyzed, and stressed in a way that seems quite detailed:

2 . . . The voice ought to be relieved at every stop; slightly at a comma, more leisurely at a semicolon, or colon, and completely at a period.

7 Every person has three pitches in his voice; the High, the Middle, and the Low one. The high, is that which he uses in calling aloud to some person at a distance. The low is, when he approaches to a whisper. The middle is, that which he employs in common conversation. . . .

14 The following sentence may have as many different significations as there are words in it, varying the emphasis. "*Shall you walk abroad to-day?*" . . .³⁵

As may be seen from the above, this book seems to imply a level of instruction quite above the rudimentary level which one might expect in a text produced for frontier children.

Another book entitled *Juvenile Poems, or the Alphabet in Verse* is also found in use at frontier schools in and around 1810 for, as the title indicates, learning the alphabet through poems. Compared to *the New England Primer*, which was strongly based on the Bible, one notices some distinct thematic differences in the text as illustrated by the following sample poems:

<p><Ant> How wisely and frugal The little Ant plies! Come hither, yet sluggards, And learn to be wise.</p>	<p><Key> To deek [sic] the golden glitt'ring store, A smith thekey [sic] invented: Many there are who thirst for more, Scarce one that is contented.</p>
<p><Purse> Here you behold a purse of gold,</p>	

All rich and dazzling to the sight,
 Yet let not vice your minds intice [sic]
 To take in gold too much delight.³⁶

It is clear that these examples contain secular content concerning frugality, worldly desires, and money matters, all of which are related to material wealth or the market economy.

Such reading textbooks demonstrate to a certain extent the spectrum of content dealt with in elementary education conducted on the New York frontier. Another example which clarifies what was expected of frontier youth is an arithmetic notebook titled *Joseph Peck's Arithmetic*, used by a frontier child named Joseph Peck in 1803.³⁷ Beautifully and neatly handwritten, this notebook is divided into five parts: numeration, addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division. On looking through the arithmetic itself, it comes as a surprise that frontier children learned quite complicated mathematics involving large numbers with many digits. For example, the "numeration table" on the first page includes the term "hundreds of thousands of millions," which would yield a twelve-digit number. In the section on addition, there are some exercises requiring students to add five four-figure numbers, which is by no means a simple calculation for children.³⁸

It is a curious question as to why older generations had their children learn such complicated arithmetic which seems somewhat unnecessary in their daily lives. Before delving further into the question of what settlers expected their children to learn and why, another enlightening section of this notebook should be examined. Among headings such as "United States Money," "English Money," "Troy Weight," "Avoirdupois Weight," "Long Measure," "Square Measure," "Time," "French Division of Time," and so on, headings concerning money are the most numerous. Under the heading, "United States Money," the following explanation of American currency is offered:

Compound addition teaches how to find the total sum of any numbers of different denomination. 10 mills = 1 cent, 10 cents = 1 dime, 10 dimes = 1 dollar, 10 dollars = 1 eagle.

Eagles	Dollars	Dime	Cents	Mills	Dollars	Cents
127	5	3	9	8	2128	17
326	9	2	8	7	5672	12
—	—	—	—	—	—	—
—	—	—	—	—	—	—
1514	2	7	6	0	26846	55 ³⁹

There are similar money-related exercises on pages dealing with the reduction of fractions, explained as “the changing of a number from one name to another, without altering the value.” A page with the heading, “Question to exercise addition,” makes use of the following example:

Money was first made of gold & silver eight hundred and ninety four years before Christ. How long has money been in use to this date 1802? $894 + 1802 \rightarrow$ answer . . . 2696 years⁴⁰

It may be interpreted that the attention given to money-related concerns, weights and measures, and complex arithmetic involving large numbers were all considered by older generations to be indispensable knowledge for children in the context of a market economy. Older generations, that is, may be seen as attempting to prepare their offspring for participation in a capitalist economic system. The need of preparing children for such participation becomes clearer upon considering the social and economic conditions on the frontier. At that time, even barter was not a simple exchange of one substance for another, on the spot. It was usually a recorded credit transaction. Similarly, dealings in land were matters of written record. A people could, if they had to, take the word of the local storekeeper on what was the condition of their accounts. They could, if they had to, take the word of substantial men, who held town or county office, on what were the terms of their deeds to land.⁴¹

As in Part II, Wright’s and Beardsley’s recollections illustrate how children responded to their parents’ and teachers’ expectations which appear in the schoolbooks quoted above. Such accounts also demonstrate the quality of the educational content actually taught in frontier schools. Wright recalls his school days:

During the period of my childhood—from about five to twelve years of age—I was kept at school, on an average, about eight months per year; about five months in summer . . . and the other months in winter. In spite of the disgusting and untoward circumstances attending the schools and manner of teaching, I became fond of going to school and of study. . . .⁴²

Beardsley describes his own thoughts on his schooldays and touches on the content of what he and his fellows learned as follows:

Better progress was made in education than could have been expected, and nearly all of mine was obtained in such schools I have described. I could always read and spell as well, and I thought a little better than any in school, and when put to my arithmetic, went directly ahead of all competitors. . . .⁴³

I did indeed learn to spell, to read and write my native language, and also to know common Arithmetic—and this was important; but no geography, no grammar, no astronomy, was taught there.⁴⁴

The boys' recollections concerning the subject matter of their education is, again, roughly consistent with the content of the textbooks referred to earlier.

Parents on the frontier seem to have been very enthusiastic about setting up schools in support of their children's education. As Beardsley further recalls:

After six or seven families had settled within striking distance, it was decided that a school house must be built, and a summer school started for the children. The house must be near water, and must be built where it would best accommodate its patrons. . . . [T]he neighbors made a bee, came together, cut away the underbrush, and the trees, that were near enough to endanger the house.⁴⁵

The story of the establishment of a common school system on the New York frontier demonstrates how primary school education started and spread statewide. Speaking to the relative strengths of the system, *History of the Common School System of the State of New York*, published in 1871, praises it as follows:

The common school system of the state of New York, as it now exists, is believed to be, with perhaps the single exception of that of Massachusetts, the most perfect and comprehensive in its outlines, and the most practical in its details, of any to be found in Europe or America.⁴⁶

While it is true here that the author Samuel Randall writes these lines from the standpoint of a former superintendent of common schools in New York, one must bear in mind the chaotic past of this school system which had seen its share of both triumph and failure.

The primary education system in the state began immediately after the Revolution and diffused steadily. At the opening session of 1795, Gov. Clinton initiated a movement for the organization of a common school system by a strong recommendation, and a committee of the Assembly was appointed to take into consideration that portion of the Governor's message relating to the establishment of common schools throughout the State. On the basis of this simple organization the foundations of the common school system were originally laid. The system was, however, essentially abandoned in short order as the act which had appropriated it in 1795 expired, and the support previously enjoyed by its proponents

was lacking. Among the most prominent advocates of the common school system in the legislature during this period was Jedidiah Peck, from Otsego County. He is generally given credit for reestablishing the system on a permanent foundation, after a sustained twelve-year struggle in both branches of the state legislature.⁴⁷ A summary of the “Common School Act,” passed in 1811, appears in the *Otsego Herald* on March 21, 1812:

The outline of the plan, suggested by the commissioners, are briefly stated: That several towns in the State, be divided into school districts by three commissioners, elected by the citizens, qualified to vote for town officers: That trustees be elected in each district, to whom shall be confided the care and superintendance [sic] of the school to be established therein: That the interest of the school fund be divided among the different counties and towns according to their respective population. . . .⁴⁸

The fact that a man such as Jedidiah Peck, who was from a frontier county, became a leader of the statewide school movement stresses the notion that frontier people were indeed very much involved in the establishment of educational systems. That is, settlers may be viewed as having been no less zealous about the education of the next generation than urban people. Their enthusiasm in this area may also be interpreted as evidence of their hope that their children could manage to live in the world of capitalism which had begun to diffuse among even frontier areas. This historical perspective makes it clear, moreover, that the spread of organized education on the frontier was closely linked with the development of economic activity.⁴⁹

During the early days of the Republic, a series of changes which set the stage for the rise of capitalism in America served to form links among politics, economy, and society. Although analyzing the roots of capitalism is outside the scope of this paper, the frontier was by no means irrelevant to its birth. In this sense, when settlers moved to Otsego County to start their frontier lives during this transitional period for the young Republic, they contributed significantly to the creation of a modern capitalist America.⁵⁰

IV

The short story “Rip Van Winkle,” written by Washington Irving in 1818 describing the lives of people living in the New York frontier’s

Hudson River Valley and Catskill Mountains, is familiar to most school children in America. This allegory is perhaps the most significant piece of fiction which reveals the meaning of the multi-faceted transition which took place during this period. In this well-known narrative, Rip sleeps through the American Revolution and the many accompanying social changes that take place in its wake. In addition to the obvious changes which occur during Rip's slumber, a change in people's recognition of the age and times themselves also occurs. It was a transformation from a world that Irving thought to be lost, to a new world that he despised.

Whether Irving liked it or not, this transformation was a profound social change which is shown in the story as affecting family patterns and children's experiences. The first thing Rip does after waking is to seek out his family. He discovers, however, that his house is "gone to decay" as a result of his wife's recent death. He also finds that his son and daughter have each matured in their own different ways. He must also awake to confront the reality that fundamental changes in family patterns have occurred in terms of the average number of children per family and children's daily lives. Although his case was a fantastical one, Irving's symbolic story clearly reflects and represents the cultural paradigm shift perceived by many at this time.⁵¹ One generation's perception of the world and recognition of age and time are passed on and inherited by the next, but are not to be spared revision by their new proprietors.

Intergenerational perceptions of the frontier environment, the native Americans who populated it, as well as people's perceptions of education on the frontier outlined earlier in this paper may be interpreted as aspects of this transitional period. As mentioned before, this transition includes the development of romantic views of nature and the rise of capitalism. In such changing times, the people of the New York frontier lived their lives and passed on their ideas to subsequent generations, demonstrating how their own experiences and actions and those of their descendants were directly influenced by the way they recognized the age in which they lived, invariably transforming with the passage of time.

It must be borne in mind, moreover, that a frontier is by definition temporary, doomed to extinction probably within the space of a generation. The frontier family, then, is necessarily an ephemeral, perhaps a paradoxical, institution. It is the essence of the family to link together at least two generations: parents and children. By the time the children of youthful pioneers came of age, however, they would inherit a settled commu-

nity rather than the wilderness recalled by their fathers and mothers. The sons and daughters of the first settlers could not expect to duplicate the family arrangements and generational perceptions under which they themselves had been reared.⁵² The intergenerational perceptions and ideas held by people living on the New York frontier moved and changed naturally with the passing of time; the documented accounts explored in this paper offer brief glimpses into this inherently vanishing historical phenomenon.

NOTES

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¹ Daniel Calhoun, *The Intelligence of a People* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), x-xi; Andrew Cayton, "The Early National Period," *Encyclopedia of American Social History*, Vol. I (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993), 90.

² William Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," *Journal of American History* 78 (March 1992), 1347.

³ *Ibid.*, 1368.

⁴ A number of quotations have already been presented in Shigeo Fujimoto, "Toubu henkyo no kodomo no seikatsu [Children's Lives in Eastern Frontier]," *Amerikashi no naka no kodomo [Childhood in American History]* (Tokyo: Sairyusya, 2002), 151-183.

⁵ Michael Williams, *Americans and Their Forests: A Historical Geography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 3-4; William F. Fox, *History of the Lumber Industry in the State of New York* (Harrison, NY: Harbor Hill Books, 1976), 9.

⁶ Josiah Priest, *Stories of Early Settlers in the Wilderness: Embracing the Life of Mrs. Priest, Late of Otsego County N.Y. with Various and Interesting Accounts of Others* (Albany, NY: J. Munsell, 1837).

⁷ David P. Davenport, "The Yankee Settlement of New York, 1783-1820," *Genealogical Journal* 17 (1988/1989), 63.

⁸ Priest, *Stories of Early Settlers*, 9-10.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹² *Ibid.*, 33-34.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁴ See *Otsego Herald*, the first newspaper in Cooperstown published from 1795 to 1821. Microfilm copies held by author.

¹⁵ There are two biographies: The first is Levi Beardsley's *Reminiscences; Personal and Other Incidents, Early Settlement of Otsego County; Notices and Anecdotes of Public Men; Judicial and Legal and Legislative Matters; Field Sports Dissertations* (New York: Charles Vinten, 1852). The other is Henry Clark Wright's *Human Life Illustrated in My Individual Experience as a Child, a Youth, and a Man* (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1849). Quotations from the latter are derived from Louis C. Jones, ed., *Growing Up in Cooper Country: Boyhood Recollections of the New York Frontier* (Syracuse:

Syracuse University Press, 1965), in which Wright's childhood recollections extracted from his autobiography are contained.

¹⁶ Beardsley, *Reminiscences*, 30.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 21–22.

¹⁸ Jones, ed., *Growing up in Cooper Country*, 111.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 112.

²⁰ Whether settlers conquered forests for reasons of profit or they were hostile to forests because they threatened settlers with death and devastation, the author sees no effective difference between the two insofar as the point that settlers always confronted the natural environment is concerned. Louis S. Warren, ed., *American Environmental History* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Co., 2003), 101; Alan Taylor, "Wasty Ways: Stories of Early Settlement," 102–118. In works by W. Cooper and J.F. Cooper, there are many descriptions which tell of settlers' destructive actions toward nature. William Cooper, *Guide into the Wilderness; or, the History of the First Settlers in the Western Counties of New York, with Useful Instructions to Future Settlers* (Cooperstown, 1986, repr. of Dublin, 1810); James Fenimore Cooper, *The Pioneers, or the Sources of the Susquehanna; A Descriptive Tale*, ed. James Franklin Beard (Albany, 1980, crit. ed. of New York, 1823) [translated by Murayama Kiyohiko, *Kaitakushatachi* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2002)].

²¹ Priest, *Stories of Early Settlers*, 21.

²² *Ibid.*, 22.

²³ *Ibid.*, 22–23.

²⁴ Beardsley, *Reminiscences*, 29–30.

²⁵ Jones, ed., *Growing up in Cooper Country*, 108.

²⁶ Priest, *Stories of Early Settlers*, 18.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁸ Beardsley, *Reminiscences*, 30.

²⁹ Jones, ed., *Growing Up in Cooper Country*, 159.

³⁰ Williams, *Americans and Their Forests*, 14–15.

³¹ James A. Frost, *Life on the Upper Susquehanna, 1783–1860* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1951), 37.

³² *Otsego Herald*, December 5, 1816.

³³ *The Columbian Reader; Containing a New Choice Collection of Descriptive, Argumentative, Pathetic, Humorous, and Entertaining Pieces*, 2nd edition (Otsego, NY: H.&E. Phinney, Jun, 1811), 3.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 5, 7.

³⁶ *Juvenile Poems or the Alphabet in Verse; Designed for the Environment of All Good Boys and Girls, and Others* (New Haven, CT: Zidrey's Press, 1810), 5, 14, 19.

³⁷ Joseph Peck, *Joseph Peck's Arithmetic* (MS. in New York State Historical Association, 1803).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1, 3.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴¹ Calhoun, *The Intelligence of a People*, 36–37.

⁴² Jones, ed., *Growing up in Cooper Country*, 115–116.

⁴³ Beardsley, *Reminiscences*, 60.

⁴⁴ Jones, ed., *Growing up in Cooper Country*, 116.

⁴⁵ Beardsley, *Reminiscences*, 57.

⁴⁶ Samuel Randall, *History of the Common School of the State of New York* (New York: Ivison, Blackmen, Taylor & Co., 1871), 1. The term “common school” as used in this book describes the diverse forms of primary education available to children in the early 19th century.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 6, 9–10.

⁴⁸ *Otsego Herald*, March 21, 1812.

⁴⁹ For insights concerning the influence of the frontier or rural areas on common schools, see Edward H. Reisner, *The Evolution of the Common School* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1930), Chapter 14 “The Frontier and Democracy in American Education”; Donald H. Parkerson and Jo Ann Parkerson, *The Emergence of the Common School in the U.S. Countryside* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1998), Chapter 2 “The Tap Roots of the Common School.”

⁵⁰ Paul A. Gilje, “The Early Republic: An Introduction,” *Magazine of History* 14 (Winter 2000), 5.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 4; Washington Irving, “Rip Van Winkle,” *Sketch Book* (1818); Robert Wells, “While Rip Napped: Social Change in Late Eighteenth Century New York,” *New York History* (January 1990), 5–13.

⁵² Mary Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: the Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790–1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 20.