



“Richest and Best / Is the Wine of the West”: The Ohio River Valley and the Jewish Frontier

BY AMY HILL SHEVITZ

On July 3, 1825, the small Jewish community of Cincinnati, Ohio, sent a fund-raising letter to the long-established congregation in Charleston, South Carolina. Appealing for financial assistance in “the erection of a House to worship the God of our forefathers,” the Cincinnatians emphasized their spiritual closeness to other American Jews, who were all “children of the same family and faith,” and their physical distance, “separated as we are and scattered through the wilds of America.” “We are well assured,” they warned, “that many Jews are lost in this country from not being in the neighbourhood of a congregation[;] they often marry with Christians, and their posterity lose the true worship of God for ever.” The Charlestonians would be contributing not only to the growth of Judaism but also to the growth of America, the Cincinnatians pointed out. Claiming to be the only Jewish congregation in a five-hundred-mile radius (something of an exaggeration), they had “for the last four or five

years . . . congregated, where a few years before nothing was heard, but the howling of wild Beasts, and the more hideous cry of savage man.”¹

More than merely a dramatic fundraising scenario, this letter clearly expresses the early Cincinnati community’s consciousness of its pioneering role as Jews on America’s first “West.” The men who composed the letter had lived in cities, in Europe and in North America; their journeys down the Ohio River to Cincinnati, if no longer subject to the threat of Indian attack, were nonetheless long and rough. Cincinnati in 1825 was chronologically far beyond its beginnings as a military outpost, but it was still very far geographically and psychically from New York and Philadelphia, with their old, wealthy, and secure Jewish populations and institutions. The Ohio River Valley in 1825 was still a *Jewish* frontier, and the Cincinnatians’ letter conveys their awareness of living on the frontier—on the edge, a dangerous

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The title of this article is taken from the poem “Catawba Wine” (1854) by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: “For richest and best / Is the wine of the West, / That grows by the Beautiful River” (i.e., the Ohio, a designation inherited from the French explorers). Longfellow referred to Cincinnati’s nickname, Queen City of the West, in the final stanza: “And this song of the Vine, / This greeting of mine, / The winds and the birds shall deliver / To the Queens of the West, / In their garlands dressed, / On the banks of the Beautiful River.”

1. Representatives of the Hebrew Congregation in Cincinnati to The Elders of the Jewish Congregation at Charleston, Cincinnati, July 3, 1825, Bertram W. Korn Collection, American Jewish Archives (AJA), Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati.

place where both body and soul were still potentially in peril.

When we look at Jews in terms of American frontiers, we bring the reality of the frontier encounter (the process of social and political change through contact) into harmony with the ideation of the frontier encounter (the process of new identity formation through contact). In the nineteenth century, the Ohio River Valley was a Jewish frontier both social-structurally and psychologically, an important locus for the creation of American Jewish identity. In the growing towns of the Ohio Valley, European Jewish immigrants became American business-people, American bourgeois, American citizens, and American Jews.

In the original European usage, a frontier was simply a border between two peoples or lands. In late nineteenth-century America, in the hands of Frederick Jackson Turner, it became the border between something and nothing, between complex social organization and “free land.” Turner’s evolutionary model implied a neat sequence of events, layers of activities moving into an area, which cumulate to “civilization,” and at that point the frontier would “close.”² Modern scholars have developed a new, more comprehensive, more subtle understanding, wherein the frontier is perceived, in one 1981 definition, “not as a boundary or line, but as a territory or zone of interpenetration between two previously distinct societies.”³ This model of intercultural contact recognizes that there *is* something on both sides of a border; it recognizes both conquest and assimilation, and

acknowledges the experiences of many peoples. In its critique of “progress”, (which to Turner was the essence of the frontier movement) it is more ambiguous about how the frontier “opens” and how it “closes.”

Studies of the Ohio River Valley have contributed to this new understanding. Eric Hinderaker’s descriptions of the “interdependent and interpenetrated world” of British, French and Indian in the eighteenth-century Valley illustrate the dynamic nature of a frontier borderland in all its messiness and demonstrate how the Ohio River Valley was a borderland only gradually incorporated into an expanding metropolitan orbit.⁴ The trans-Appalachian West figures prominently in Gregory Nobles’ work, which defines frontier as “a region in which no culture, group, or government can claim effective control or hegemony over others.” The struggle for control appeared in different regions at different times: between English and Indians in seventeenth-century Massachusetts; among British, French, and Americans in the trans-Appalachian West in the eighteenth century; between Mexicans and Americans in Texas in the early nineteenth century; between Americans and Indians west of the Rockies in the later nineteenth century. Comparing these struggles, Nobles concludes that the frontier is neither “a place, [nor] even a frequently repeated, one-dimensional process of contact, settlement and development. It involves, rather, a much more complex process of mutual exchange.”⁵

Elizabeth Perkins takes a different tack by

2. Frederick Jackson Turner, *History, Frontier, and Section: Three Essays* (Albuquerque, 1993), 59, 88.

3. Patricia Nelson Limerick, article on “Frontier,” in Richard Wightman Fox and James T. Kloppenberg, eds., *A Companion to American Thought* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), 255–59. Quote from Howard Lamar and Leonard Thompson (1981) is on 257.

4. Eric Hinderaker, *Elusive Empires: Constructing Colonialism in the Ohio Valley, 1673–1800* (New York, 1997). Quote is on 45.

5. Gregory H. Nobles, *American Frontiers: Cultural Encounters and Continental Conquest* (New York, 1997). Quote is on 12.

delving into the psychic world of white settlers in the Revolutionary era Ohio River Valley. When settlers spoke about their experiences, they did not see themselves as being the periphery to a center. Their cognitive maps utilized metaphors of “in” and “out,” and once they had moved into the West, they saw themselves as being “in” American society, superimposed on a specific area of land. Despite the physical proximity, settlers defined Indians as “out” of society, showing that they understood themselves as occupiers. It was later generations who, by ignoring the Indian presence both in fact and in white settlers’ imaginations, made expansion a story of inevitable movement rather than of slow accretion of population and gradual incorporation into an ever-larger American orbit.⁶

For humans, space becomes place through our relationships with others; “landscape is [our] personal history made visible.” The frontier, then, is a place *and* a process of encounter, where individuals and groups cross into the physical space inhabited by others, inducing in both sides the adjustment of psychic space. Once one crosses the threshold of prior settlement and prior experience, new constructions of place as “an organized world of meaning” immediately begin. As a process, “frontier” crucially encompasses liminality, the experience of living on the threshold.⁷

In expansive terms, then, a frontier—a “West”—can exist on many levels, and the sense of being on/in the frontier can differ for different populations. The landscape certainly holds one meaning for the farmer and one for the hunter—

and yet another for the merchant.⁸ Race and ethnicity also shape the landscape’s meaning. Joe William Trotter describes how for African Americans, the Ohio River was a powerful symbol of their continuing encounter with the white Other, of their incomplete integration into America. The river “not only represented the boundary between slavery and freedom during the antebellum era, but the division between the Jim Crow South and the urban North during the industrial age.” Crossing the river symbolized a literal journey to freedom before the Civil War; in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it represented an economic, cultural, and psychic journey from peasant agriculture in the South to modernity in the North. For blacks, the Ohio River was a frontier, a place of liminality.⁹

Likewise, the Ohio River Valley was a Jewish frontier—a borderland—long after it ceased to be a national frontier. It was a place where Jews lived between the organized Jewish society of the Atlantic coast cities and a fearful (or delightful, depending on predilection) state of *galut*, exile from the Jewish people. In Ohio River Valley cities, Jews experienced their own frontier of Jewish-Gentile contact; through participation in the market and in the civic life of Valley cities and towns, they organized their personal landscape into a place they could call home.

Jacob Marcus applied the Turnerian theses to Jews in the final pages of his lengthy work, *The Colonial American Jew*. Most relevant to Marcus was Turner’s argument that the frontier, through the cultivation of democracy, created

6. Elizabeth Perkins, *Border Life: Experience and Memory in the Revolutionary Ohio Valley* (Chapel Hill, 1998).

7. Definition of “place” from Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: the Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis, 1977), 179, 157.

8. John Jakle discusses the variety of interpretations of the Ohio River Valley landscape, and the values they imply, in *Images of the Ohio Valley: A Historical Geography of Travel, 1740–1860* (New York, 1977).

9. Joe William Trotter, Jr., *River Jordan: African American Urban Life in the Ohio Valley* (Lexington, Ky., 1998). Quote is on xiii.

that new man which was the American. Likewise, Marcus argued, it created a new Jew. “The Jew *was* different here,” he wrote. “He had left the ‘ghetto’ to become a pioneer on the American ‘frontier’ If to be a frontiersman is to be a man who dares to hazard, then the Jews as a whole are America’s urban frontiersmen par excellence.”¹⁰

Though framing the issue in outdated terms, Marcus understood the basic dynamic of the encounter. Recently, Sander Gilman has gone further in suggesting an influence on Jews of the frontier as “a constructed, psychological space.” Throughout history, Gilman points out, Jews have been in perpetual encounter with other peoples, creating diverse models of accommodation and conflict—thus the evident appropriateness of the frontier model. Gilman challenges the traditional center-periphery model of Jewish history, which defines Diaspora—dispersion—as *galut*—exile; it does not adequately reflect the reality of Jewish experience. But Gilman is also uncomfortable with a re-centering interpretation that makes marginality in and of itself the hallmark of Jewish identity. There is no pure experience at a center or at a periphery; humans inhabit a “liminal space [where] all parties are forced to understand and define themselves in the light of their experience of the Other.” Thus, “it is at the real and at the imagined frontier that the shaping of Jewish identity does take place.”¹¹

As a physical frontier, the Ohio River Valley in the eighteenth century was host to a variety of influences. French, British, and Native Americans inhabited a world in which com-

merce along the linked waterways anchored by the Ohio created “networks of linked communities.”¹² The end of the Revolution and the acquisition of the trans-Appalachian West by the new United States unleashed waves of settlers into the Ohio Valley: Virginians, Kentuckians, New Englanders, New Yorkers, Pennsylvanians. The result of diverse influences and the ensuing cultural clashes was a hybrid culture that emerged in the Ohio Valley by 1825.¹³ Politically, the Ohio River could be a border between north and south, but culturally it was also a seam—or perhaps better, a blurred rather than a straight edge. The malleability of early Ohio Valley society gave many different peoples—including Jews—a role in its formation.

By the time white Americans began flooding into the Ohio River Valley in the 1750s, Jews had lived in North America for a century.¹⁴ Most of these migrants were not wealthy, but because legal restrictions dating to the Middle Ages prevented European Jews from entering economic fields other than trade, almost all had previous experience in market exchange. Some were Sephardim, descendants of Jews expelled from Spain in 1492, who had entered international trade in Holland or England. But “[t]he typical Jewish immigrant to eighteenth century America,” Jacob Marcus notes, “was a German who had been raised in a village or small town where Jews were characteristically peddlers, cattle dealers, shopkeepers, petty moneylenders and pawnbrokers, traders and brokers.”¹⁵ These Jews were aware of the economic expansion going on in Europe and of the developing Jewish role in this expansion. In

10. Jacob Rader Marcus, *The Colonial American Jew* (Detroit, 1970), 3: 1338–1340.

11. Sander L. Gilman and Milton Shain, *Jewries at the Frontier: Accommodation, Identity, Conflict* (Urbana, Ill., 1999), 1–25. Quotes are on 20, 21.

12. Hinderaker, *Elusive Empires*, 45.

13. James P. Miller, *The Genesis of Western Culture: The Upper Ohio Valley, 1820–1825* (New York, 1969), 42.

14. For background, see Eli Faber, *A Time for Planting: The First Migration, 1654–1820* (Baltimore, 1992).

15. Marcus, *Colonial American Jew*, 2:519.

America, they functioned as shopkeepers, merchants and shippers, roles vital to the colonies' development. Some Jewish merchants also ventured into trading on America's frontiers, linking the North American interior to Atlantic commerce. Opportunities soon presented themselves in the trans-Appalachian West. Long before actual Jewish settlement there, Jewish interests were involved; Jewish capital preceded Jewish individuals to the frontier.

The most active Jewish traders in the eighteenth-century Ohio River Valley were prominent merchant-capitalists based in Philadelphia and Lancaster, Pennsylvania, including Nathan Levy, David Franks, Joseph Simon, and Barnard and Michael Gratz. These merchants were involved (among many other endeavors) in most aspects of the western trade, but primarily with supplying the military and Indian traders. The frontier trade was a risky business, and these merchants regularly sustained losses from Indian raids on military and trading posts that they supplied.¹⁶ In 1793, Jacob Myers, a Gratz business associate (and probably a relative), advertised in the *Pittsburgh Gazette* the availability of river transport from Pittsburgh to Cincinnati. The best advertisement that could be made for his boats was their safety. Ohio River traffic in the 1790s still fell prey to guerilla attacks from Indians and to the predations of white outlaws. Myers' advertisement averred that he had "taken great pains to render the accommodations on board the boats as agreeable and convenient as they could

possibly be made," including the promise that "every person on board will be under Cover, made proof against rifle or musket balls [with] convenient portholes to fire out of." Likewise, "[c]onveniences [toilet facilities] are constructed in each boat so as to render landing unnecessary, as it might be at times attended with Danger."¹⁷

Eventually, Franks, Simon, and the Gratzes became owners of considerable acreage in the Ohio River Valley and became involved in the flurries of land speculation in the region. But only the Gratz family retained its land interests for the long term. By the early national period, the financial involvement of the colonial Jewish merchant families in the Ohio River Valley had essentially petered out. The merchants spent time in the region, keeping track of their various enterprises, but the Ohio Valley was not yet a place for acculturated, though religiously observant, Jews. These Jews were at home in the provincial European-derivative culture of America's eastern cities; they had a busy social circle and could take care for the proper education of their children. Most of them kept the dietary laws and observed Sabbath and the holidays carefully, practices for which residence in Philadelphia or another large city was more congenial. For these merchants, the frontier was a place to be exploited. Its land was a commodity, not a potential home. It would be newer immigrants who would build permanent Jewish communities in the Ohio Valley in the first half of the nineteenth century.¹⁸

In those decades, the Ohio River Valley was

16. For background on the Philadelphia Jewish community and these prominent merchants, see Edwin Wolf 2nd and Maxwell Whiteman, *The History of the Jews of Philadelphia from Colonial Times to the Age of Jackson* (Philadelphia, 1957).

17. Myers' advertisement, dated October 14, 1793, is reprinted in Allon Schoener, *The American Jewish Album, 1654 to the Present* (New York, 1983), 39. A similar advertisement dated November 2, 1793, is reprinted in William Vincent Byars, *B. and M. Gratz, Merchants in Philadelphia, 1754–1798: Papers of Interest to their Posterity and the Posterity of their Associates* (Jefferson City, Mo., 1916), 245–46.

18. Marcus, *Colonial American Jew*, 1:331, 2:757–58, 764; Sidney M. Fish, *Barnard and Michael Gratz: Their Lives and Times* (Lanham, Md., 1994), passim; Jacob Feldman, *The Jewish Experience in Western Pennsylvania: A History, 1755–1945* (Pittsburgh, 1986), 3–6.

integrated into the national framework through several interrelated mechanisms: political organization, the development of a market economy, and the growth of cities. Political integration was accomplished with the formation of new states: Kentucky in 1792, Ohio in 1803, Indiana in 1816, and Illinois in 1818. Old networks of Indian trade gave way to a burgeoning market economy. The Ohio River, and its links to the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers, created a “trade axis” connecting Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, and Louisville to St. Louis, Natchez, and New Orleans. Population grew and economic life diversified along this axis. The demands of the market economy for centralization and bureaucratization entailed the development of cities, as new transportation technologies, the development of manufacturing, and the spread of commercial agriculture all reinforced each other. Cities were critical to regional growth; by 1830, urban life was well-established along the river in Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, and Louisville. The rise of Cincinnati was particularly remarkable. With the coming of steamboat traffic, the city emerged as the most important commercial center of the Ohio River Valley; by 1830, it was the dominant city of the West, with a population of 25,000. In addition, numerous small towns served as regional centers for professional services and agricultural supply and trade.¹⁹

As the trans-Appalachian West grew in

commercial importance, bourgeois culture was increasingly powerful. “In no city of the Old Northwest,” assert historians Andrew Cayton and Peter Onuf, “did bourgeois values take hold as early or as fully as Cincinnati.” By 1825, as Cincinnati became a manufacturing as well as a regional market center, the Ohio River Valley gave birth to the nineteenth century’s classic liberal bourgeois society.²⁰ This society would be particularly receptive to America’s growing Jewish population.

The establishment of regional markets, the rise of urban centers on the river, and the beginning of Jewish settlement in the Ohio River Valley were linked phenomena. As the region became more urbanized, more economically integrated, and solidly wedded to the East Coast base of the American nation—that is, as its “frontier” character diminished—Jewish interests and regional opportunity coincided. In the colonial and early national eras, Richard Wade argues, “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.”²¹ Likewise, economically viable towns were “spearheads” of the Jewish frontier, “holding the West” and nurturing the creation of Jewish centers that could support a dispersed regional population. By 1830, the Ohio River Valley no longer seemed like a frontier to most white Americans. But for Jews in America, it was just coming into

19. Malcolm J. Rohrbough, *The Trans-Appalachian Frontier: People, Societies and Institutions, 1775–1850* (New York, 1978), 93–100; Richard C. Wade, *The Urban Frontier: The Rise of Western Cities, 1790–1830* (Urbana, Ill., 1996), 22–26; Darrel E. Bigham, “River of Opportunity: Economic Consequences of the Ohio,” in Robert L. Reid, ed., *Always a River: The Ohio River and the American Experience* (Bloomington, Ind., 1991), 138. The political implications of the market economy were critical: “to many development-minded Americans in the 1780s, properly regulated commercial exchange was the best means for cementing the union and thus of guaranteeing the survival of an extended republic.” Andrew R.L. Cayton and Peter S. Onuf, *The Midwest and the Nation: Rethinking the History of an American Region* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 9.

20. Cayton and Onuf, *The Midwest and the Nation*, 43–64. For a case study of the impact of market relations on social development, see Kim Gruenwald, “Marietta’s Example of a Settlement Pattern in the Ohio Country: A Reinterpretation,” *Ohio History*, 105 (Summer-Fall, 1996), 125–44.

21. Wade, *Urban Frontier*, 1. Wade’s use of this Turnerian phrase—a “line of settlement”—is misleading, but ultimately inconsequential to his larger discussion, which focuses on the dynamic of towns’ development after their establishment.

its own as a Jewish frontier.

At the same time, the condition of central European Jewry stimulated mass migration. Restrictions on Jewish residence, economic activity, and even marriage, were maintained well into the nineteenth century in many of the German states, creating greater poverty as the traditional agricultural economy shifted to an industrial, urban and commercial base. Even where Jews were civilly emancipated, anti-semitism remained strong or even increased. As word spread of the economic opportunities and religious tolerance available in the United States, more Jews became aware they had a new option: emigration.²² Jewish immigration to the United States quickened in the 1820s and accelerated dramatically in the 1830s. There were 4,000–6,000 Jews in the United States in 1830, 15,000 in 1840, 50,000 in 1850, and at least 125,000 by the start of the Civil War.²³

Being themselves on a frontier of world Jewry, perhaps it is not surprising that American Jews were not yet on the physical frontier of the nation. But the commercial frontier held increasing promise. In America, Jewish business expertise was, for the first time in a millennium, not merely tolerated as a necessary evil, at best, nor generally derided as sinful. The same commercial occupations that had been scorned by European Gentiles were avidly pursued by Gentile Americans. America's market expansion gave American Jews the chance for social acceptance through—not in spite of—their traditional occupations.

The physical and the psychic frontiers

coincided for the many young German Jewish immigrant men who became peddlers in the antebellum Ohio River Valley. Peddling was a particularly useful and viable business when a region's population was spread out in tiny villages and on isolated farms, yet within a few days' traveling distance of supply centers. A very small town might have a general store, but the supply of non-perishables like dry goods was most efficiently supplied through the peddler's occasional visit. As merchants, peddlers were the outermost edge of a complex distribution system. East coast importers and wholesalers shipped goods to merchants and manufacturers in regional centers like Cincinnati, who in turn provided goods directly to peddlers, to local retail outlets, and to retail outlets in smaller towns (who also supplied peddlers as well as selling directly).²⁴

The peddling life was a crash course in American culture, as the immigrant Jewish peddler struggled with the English language and spent weeks on the road, eating and sleeping in the unfamiliar surroundings of whichever farm he happened to be near. Though the presence of peddlers as a class might be prominent in descriptions of frontier life, their individual lives could slip through the fingers of posterity. One such was Moses Frank, who died in Gallipolis in 1834. His birthplace, birth date and date of immigration are unknown, and the legal record of his estate lists no heirs. Both his personal effects and his business capital were included in the estate list, an odd assortment of property that included five silver watches, two beaver skins,

22. Although this central European mass migration is often referred to as a "German" migration, it included Jews from other German-speaking and German-cultural areas, from Alsace in the west to Bohemia and western Poland (Poznań) in the east. For the background and experience of this migration, see Hasia Diner, *A Time for Gathering: The Second Migration, 1820–1880* (Baltimore, 1992).

23. Jonathan D. Sarna, ed., *The American Jewish Experience* (New York, 1997), 359.

24. Diner, *Time for Gathering*, 68; Avraham Barkai, *Branching Out: German-Jewish Immigration to the United States, 1820–1914* (New York, 1994), 58–59; Maxwell Whiteman, "Notions, Dry Goods, and Clothing: An Introduction to the Study of the Cincinnati Peddler," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 53 (April, 1963), 312–13.

one buffalo robe, fifteen shirt collars, one gourd, one shotgun, one trunk, and various items of personal clothing. He also left some cash in silver and gold coins, and a \$1000 “draft on the bank of the United States payable in new York to Morris Franck” [sic], perhaps a credit issued to him by a New York merchant as an advance for purchasing a stock of merchandise.²⁵

Other peddlers were “lost” in a different way. Hyman Lazarus was already forty years old when he emigrated from southern Germany in 1818. Basing himself in the river town of Marietta, Lazarus sold throughout the area before opening a store in the tiny Muskingum River town of Malta, where he married a Christian woman, raised Christian children, and was eventually buried in a Christian cemetery.²⁶

Although the peddling life meant that these Jewish men were often isolated on the road for weeks at a time, the overall structure of the trade kept them closely connected to the regional urban Jewish businesses that supplied their goods and credit and to the Jewish communities growing in the towns. On the road, the activities of peddling created connections between and among individuals and groups. They might meet at regional supply houses or hotels, preferably those run by Jewish merchants, such as Cohen’s Eagle Tavern in Chillicothe or Dryfuss’

Commercial Exchange and Eating Saloon in Portsmouth.²⁷ The orientation of the Jewish peddler was always toward the goal of a more stable life. Leaving the “adventure” of the road for a position as a clerk, manager, and ultimately, owner of a store in town, a young man could establish a permanent residence and create a family life, options which had been denied him in Germany.

From contemporary records, one can discern the trajectory of the Jewish rise from pack-peddling in the countryside to store ownership in the city, and the role of family and communal ties. Between mid-1840 and the end of 1853, some 440 individuals and partnerships registered for peddling licenses at the Jefferson County courthouse in Steubenville, Ohio. About 30 percent of these were Jews, obviously far out of proportion to their numbers in the general population. Working toward a specific goal, Jews rose more quickly than non-Jews in the local peddling hierarchy. In the early 1840s, when 40 percent of the peddlers in Jefferson County were Jews, almost all of those Jews (92 percent) were pack-peddlers, compared with 59 percent of non-Jews. By the early years of the next decade, though, when far fewer of the registered peddlers were Jews (25 percent), less than half (43 percent) were pack-peddlers—a

25. Estate of Moses (Morris) Frank, Journal and Wills Book, Volume D, p. 163, Gallia County (Ohio) Probate Court.

26. Richard Warren Welch, “The Assimilation of an Ethnic Group—The German-Jewish Peddlers in the Upper Ohio Valley, 1790–1840: A Study in Historical Geography” (Master’s thesis, Michigan State University, 1972) passim. Hyman Lazarus was Welch’s great-great-grandfather. Writing at the end of the nineteenth century, Lewis Dembitz (“Jewish Beginnings in Kentucky,” *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, 1 [1893], 8) and Rabbi David Philipson (“The Jewish Pioneers of the Ohio Valley,” *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, 8 [1900]), 43–44) told of many Jewish men with similar life stories.

27. Whiteman, “Notions, Dry Goods, and Clothing,” 309, 315 (quote). Dryfuss’ establishment is listed in *Williams’ Portsmouth City Directory for 1864–5* (Portsmouth, Ohio, 1864). Miller (*Genesis of Western Culture*, 20) mentions Cohen’s tavern, citing the Chillicothe *Scioto Gazette* of November 28, 1816. Despite his name, this Cohen’s Jewishness is open to doubt. According to Pat Medert, archivist of the McKell Library of the Ross County Historical Society, citing *Taverns and Hotels in Chillicothe, Ohio—1799–1850* by John R. Grabb. Thomas Cohen was a silversmith and watchmaker who came to Chillicothe from Lynchburg, Virginia, in 1815, and left in 1817. His father’s name was Jacob Cohen. Since the younger Cohen had a Christian given name, the elder Cohen was probably a Jew married to a non-Jewish woman who raised their children Christian (a not-uncommon occurrence in the colonial era).

decrease of 50 percent. For the non-Jews, the decrease was about 25 percent, to 56 percent pack-peddlers.²⁸

The experience of the Ballenberg brothers shows the importance of family and communal ties. In January 1841, Julius Ballenberg registered as a pack-peddler in Jefferson County, probably working for Marx Graf, a Jewish merchant in the town of Wheeling, Virginia (now West Virginia), across the Ohio River. A few years later, Julius and his brother Adolph opened a dry goods store in Wheeling, which they maintained into the mid-1850s. In 1850, Julius shows up again on the list of peddlers granted licenses in Jefferson County, but this time he has a one-horse wagon and soon a two-horse wagon. Recognizing the advantages of having a “traveling salesman,” the Ballenberg brothers combined two modes of marketing to extend the reach of their business. They remained in Wheeling at least until the middle of the Civil War. Julius Ballenberg was one of the founders of the cemetery and proto-congregation organized in Wheeling in 1849, along with several other peddlers who had been licensed in Jefferson County.²⁹

The transition to store ownership and a more stable life was aided by the existence of Jewish communities (even small ones) that could provide social and cultural security to immigrants. The organized Jewish community of Cincinnati was among those permanent cultural institutions in the West that by 1830 signaled the end of the frontier stage of the Ohio Valley’s history. Likewise, the city was a central site for

the construction of the Ohio River Valley as an “organized world of meaning” for Jews.

Cincinnati’s first identifiable Jew was the English-born Joseph Jonas, a watchmaker and silversmith in his mid-twenties, who immigrated in 1816 and arrived in Cincinnati in 1817. Like many immigrants, Jonas’ imaginings of America were inspired by books; he claimed that he had been influenced to settle in the Ohio River Valley by descriptions of the area which he had read as a young man. At least in his later years, he viewed his Jewish pioneering in terms analogous to the visions of the Puritans: Cincinnati, in “the Great West,” was “the new resting place for the scattered sons of Israel . . . [where] a great sanctuary should be erected . . .” Jonas was convinced that it would be possible to make a life as a Jew, even in such isolated circumstances, a conviction shared by many in new communities in the ensuing years of Jewish settlement throughout the expanding United States.³⁰ Jonas apparently accepted with good graces his status as a tourist site for curious local non-Jews: in a famous story, he was visited by a local Quaker, who, intrigued to meet a real, live Jew for the first time in her life, looked him over several times before declaring, “Thou art no different to other people.”³¹

Within a few years a number of other English and Dutch Jews settled in Cincinnati. Despite the lack of a traditional *minyán* (quorum), a small group held High Holidays services in the fall of 1819, starting the process of integrating Jewish psychic space into the physical space of the frontier. In the 1820s,

28. Data derived from lists reproduced in “Licenses to Travelling Merchants, Boat Stores, and Pedlars in Ohio, Taken from Records in the Jefferson County Court House, Steubenville, Ohio,” compiled by Mary E. Thomas (Reynoldsburg, Ohio: Research Unlimited, [n.d.]), Ohio Historical Society reference collection.

29. Harry Levi, “A Brief History of Congregation Leshem Shomayim, Wheeling, West Va.,” Wheeling, 1899, 8 (Wheeling, W.V.—Nearprint, AJA). The brothers may have gone to Cincinnati when they left Wheeling.

30. Jonas’s memoir is reprinted in Jacob Rader Marcus, ed., *Memoirs of American Jews, 1775–1865* (Philadelphia, 1955), 205–15, and in Morris Schappes, ed., *Documentary History of the Jews in the United States, 1654–1875* (New York, 1950), 223–35.

31. Philipson, “Jewish Pioneers of the Ohio Valley,” 49.

migrants from Germany supplemented the small community; in 1824, Cincinnati Jews organized a formal congregation, and in 1836, dedicated the first synagogue in the Old Northwest Territory. This was accomplished with generous financial support elicited from Charleston, S.C., and congregations in other American and English cities. The dramatic fundraising letter of 1825, offering vicarious participation in the expansion of Judaism and of the American West, was evidently effective. By mid-century, Cincinnati was the capital of Jewish America, and from there, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise pioneered another Jewish frontier, that of religious reform.³²

As social networks had ramified to create a stable society in the frontier Ohio Valley in the first few decades of the nineteenth century, so too in the subsequent few decades did Jewish social networks create the context for a permanent, post-frontier Jewish community. By the mid-1850s, several thousand Jews were pioneering the new mercantile frontier in the Ohio River Valley's many small towns, including Bellaire, Steubenville, Marietta, Gallipolis, Ironton, and Portsmouth. Almost all of these settlers were merchants, a large majority in the dry goods business.³³ They often settled with others from the same German or Alsatian

village. For instance, the first Jews in Gallipolis were Alsatian families from several towns and villages around Strasbourg; another group of Alsatian neighbors lived in Portsmouth. Both groups seemed to have arrived in a chain migration via Cincinnati.³⁴ As the leading city of the Ohio River Valley's Jewish frontier, Cincinnati was the hub through and around which Jews in the Valley created webs of regional connections serving their economic, social, and religious needs.

In Portsmouth, for example, Levi & Co. Clothiers was owned by a local man, Louis Levi, in partnership with Lazarus Bloch of Cincinnati. Similarly, with the firm of Friedman and Eisman ("Wholesale & Retail Clothing, Dry Goods, Boots, Shoes, Hats & Caps &c"), Morris Friedman resided in Cincinnati, while partner Leopold Eisman lived in Portsmouth and ran the store there. The latter firm astutely used the urban connection as a marketing tool, advertising in the *Portsmouth Times* that "[b]eing in immediate connection with our extensive establishment at 72 Pearl street, Cincinnati, we are enabled to sell at much lower rates."³⁵

Some of the family groups forming the core of small town communities coalesced after immigration in the flux of Cincinnati's large and fluid German Jewish immigrant community.

32. Philipson, "Jewish Pioneers of the Ohio Valley," 45–53.

33. Subscribers to the Cincinnati Jewish newspaper, the *Israelite*, included the Wise brothers of Ironton, and E. Frohman and Frederic Gutman of Steubenville (*Israelite* 1 [September 8, 1854]: 72; 1 [September 22, 1854]; 1 [February 2, 1855]: 240). For Bellaire: "Brief histories of all synagogues in the city of Wheeling [WV]," prepared by L[awrence] Good, 1989 (SC-12958, AJA). For Marietta: Citizenship papers of Charles and Samuel Coblenz, Journal of Court of Common Pleas, Washington County, Ohio, v. 10, p. 214, entry dated September 11, 1845. For Gallipolis: Henrietta Evans and Mary P. Wood, eds., *Early Gallia County Court Records, 1846–1899* (Gallipolis, 1984). A survey of the city directories for Portsmouth, Ohio, in 1858 and 1864 shows that virtually all Jews were in mercantile lines, mostly clothing and dry goods, but also groceries (including one butcher), cigars, and liquor (*Williams' Portsmouth Directory, City Guide, and Business Mirror*. Volume I, 1858–59 [Portsmouth: James Stephenson, 1858]; *Williams' Portsmouth City Directory for 1864–5*).

34. Greenlawn Cemetery census, Portsmouth, Ohio, Ohio Historical Society; Moch Family, Genealogies File, AJA; *Die Deborah*, September 5, 1862 [this was the German-language Jewish newspaper of Cincinnati]; Evans and Wood, *Early Gallia County Court Records*; *Gallipolis Daily Tribune*, September 17, 1900; *Gallipolis Bulletin*, April 22, 1868; *Gallipolis Journal*, March 4, 1869, 3.

35. *Williams' Portsmouth City Directory for 1864–5*; *Portsmouth Times*, October 22, 1864.

This seems to be the case with an extended family group that settled in Pomeroy in the late 1850s. Bernhardt (Bennett) Baer and Sophia Mayer married in Cincinnati in 1857 before coming to Pomeroy; having emigrated from different German states, they probably met in the city. So too, most probably, did August Mayer (Sophia's brother) and Mina Herzog.³⁶ A number of marriages were contracted between men from Gallipolis and women from Cincinnati: Harry Frank and Fanny Silverman in 1851; Aaron Cahn and Carlina Hellman in 1854; John Emsheimer and Rachel Gotz in 1861.³⁷

Economic life and social life were intertwined. Jacob Elsas, who arrived in the United States in 1838 at the age of 20, peddled throughout Pennsylvania, Virginia, Kentucky, and Ohio, before opening a dry-goods store in Portsmouth in 1842. Either in Philadelphia or Cincinnati, Elsas met the Fechheimer brothers, "a distinguished group of peddlers," in the description of one historian, and in 1845, he married their niece Jeannette. In 1848, Elsas closed his Portsmouth store to merge his business with that of his wife's family in Cincinnati, where he was a successful merchant and an important leader in both the Jewish and general communities.³⁸

Increasingly during the mid-nineteenth century, Jewish immigrants found it congenial to stay permanently in the Ohio River Valley's smaller towns. Their sense of being on the frontier gradually ebbed, as they became, over the years, an integral part of small-town society,

active in civic and social life. Both consciously—through their self-presentation—and unconsciously—through their daily activities as citizens and neighbors—American Jews participated in the reconceptualization of attitudes that took place when Jews and Gentiles met on the frontier of intercultural relations. Inhabiting a world of interdependent economic and social relations, they engaged in processes of mutual cultural exchange with the larger society, helping create a pluralistic America of which Jews could truly be a part, and at the same time creating a specifically American Jewish identity.

In the purely economic arena, integration was not always easy or pleasant. "The Jewish merchant, in small and large towns," historian Hasia Diner writes, "came to be identified with civic order and communal stability. Business prospered when order prevailed, and Jewish merchants aligned themselves with the local status quo."³⁹ But economic competition complicated these relationships, with Gentiles holding critical tools of power. One such tool was the credit reporting system maintained by R. G. Dun and Co., predecessor to Dun and Bradstreet. Founded in 1841, the firm used branch offices and local correspondents—businessmen, lawyers, and bankers—to collect information about merchants who were applying for credit from wholesalers. Occasionally the reports included hard data on a business's finances, but more often they were simply evaluations based on subjective impressions,

36. Collated from handwritten U.S. census ledgers for 1860, 1870, and 1880. Re Bennett and Sophia Baer: *Pomeroy Tribune-Telegraph*, April 8, 1903.

37. For Frank-Silverman: Obituary of Harry Frank, *Gallipolis Daily Tribune*, September 17, 1900. For Cahn-Hellman: Henrietta Evans and Mary P. Wood, eds., *Death Notices, Obituaries and Marriage Notices Taken from the Gallia County, Ohio, Newspapers, from 1825 to 1875*, (Gallipolis, 1986), 58 (item excerpted from *Gallipolis Journal*, February 9, 1854). For Emsheimer-Gotz: *Die Deborah* 7 (February 22, 1861), 136.

38. Biographical sketch of Jacob Elsas in *Vorstands-Bericht des Deutschen Pionier-Vereins von Cincinnati, Ohio* (Cincinnati, 1892), photocopy in Biographies File, AJA; Fechheimer Family—Nearprint File and Genealogies File, AJA.

39. Diner, *Time for Gathering*, 79.

local reputation, and even deliberate malice.⁴⁰

Local agents often mentioned a subject's Jewishness in their reports regardless of whether they gave a good or bad credit rating. This evaluation of Joseph Emsheimer of Portsmouth—"A Jew . . . small but regular business"—is typical. More often, though, the centuries-old stereotype of the unscrupulous Jew—Shylock—appears alongside a contradictory positive evaluation. An example is this remark about George Newberger of Ironton: "a Jew, but has the reputation of being hon[est]."⁴¹ But between the lines, there is sometimes a hint that a Gentile reconceptualization of Jews is underway. In the reports from several towns (Gallipolis, Ironton, and Marietta, for example), comments about a subject's Jewishness are far more common in the 1850s and 1860s than they are in the 1870s and 1880s. Comments in the later years tend to be about Jews who are new in town. Over the course of time, it seems, a Jewish merchant could "prove" himself.⁴²

The critical factor is that Jews were not only business competitors to small-town Gentiles, they were also allies in the business of civic advancement. Being part of a desirable class (merchants) in a classic bourgeois society, Jews in the Ohio River Valley had every reason to think they had a good chance at being accepted into society. And through a careful presentation of their updated, reformed Judaism, Jews could share with Gentiles their new understanding of Judaism as an *American* religion.

These processes were evident as Ohio Valley Jews began to establish congregations and build synagogues, thus publicly announcing their presence. In Portsmouth, for instance, a congregation of a dozen families formally constituted itself in September 1858 as "Kal a Kodesh [sic—Kahal ha-Kodesh] Beneh Abraham, or Holy Congregation of the Children of Abraham."⁴³ In December, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise of Cincinnati attended the dedication of the congregation's temporary synagogue, set up in space rented by the congregation in the Masonic building.

For Portsmouth Jews, Wise's attendance at the dedication was an opportunity to have an important figure—a rabbi from the big city—validate their presence and their project. They also no doubt realized that, as the religious anomaly in town, it behooved them to make their Judaism at least somewhat transparent to non-Jews, and dedication ceremonies were the perfect opportunity to open their doors and thereby dispel some of the mystery. For Wise, the event was an opportunity to present his vision of a modern, reformed American Judaism both to Jews, with the goal of attaching them to his goals, *and* to Gentiles, with the goal of enhancing the reputation of Jews and Judaism.

Wise had a missionary's zeal for his dream of an American Judaism. He was convinced of the essential compatibility of Jewishness—freed from the medieval encrustations created by persecution—and Americanness. The sad state

40. For an overview of the Dun manuscript reports, now housed at Baker Library of Harvard Business School (HBS), and a case study in their use, see Stephen G. Mostov, "Dun and Bradstreet Reports as a Source of Jewish Economic History: Cincinnati, 1840–1875," *American Jewish History*, 72, (March, 1983), 333–53. See also David Gerber, "Cutting Out Shylock: Elite Anti-Semitism and the Quest for Moral Order in the Mid-Nineteenth-Century Marketplace," in Gerber, ed., *Anti-Semitism in American History*, 201–32.

41. Ohio, Vol. 70, p. 96, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library, HBS (entry date is 1871) and Vol. 110, p. 84 (1858). Used by permission.

42. Ohio, Vol. 110 (Lawrence Co. 1853–1888), Vol. 70 (Gallia Co. 1849–1889), Vol. 193 and 194 (Washington Co. 1845–1888), R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library, HBS. For background and more context, see Louise Mayo, *The Ambivalent Image: Nineteenth Century America's Perception of the Jew* (Rutherford, N.J., 1988).

43. Certificate of Incorporation, Congregation Bene Abraham file, AJA.

of American Jews was the heritage of their experience in Europe; with “no self-respect, no pride left,” they were easily drawn into “a wretched imitation of Christian customs.” “The Jew must be Americanized,” Wise exhorted, “for every German word reminds him of the old disgrace The Jew must become an American in order to gain the proud self-consciousness of the free-born man.” With this new consciousness, with a “Jewish patriotism,” Wise fervently believed, American Jews would be the first in modern times truly free to release Judaism’s powerfully redemptive universal message into the world.⁴⁴

Wise gave several talks during his stay in Portsmouth. On Friday evening, he spoke to the Jews and urged the community to its mission: “to preserve and promulgate principles and doctrines of which the prophets tell us, that they are intended by Providence to redeem and unite humanity in light, truth, justice and freedom.” On Sunday evening, he addressed a general audience on “the influence of the dispersed Israel on the progress of civilization.”⁴⁵ Wise saw in these small congregations, in the small towns of the American heartland, the pioneers of the new American Judaism. Through integration into these typical American communities, they would recreate the image of the Jew: they would win acceptance from Gentiles as being demonstrably integral to the American scene, and cultivate pride in the Jewish contribution to America. Writing in the *Israelite* (the Cincinnati Jewish newspaper of which he was editor) just before his visit, Wise averred that it was in small towns like Portsmouth, those unique repositories

of American values, where Jews were not “too much absorbed in business and pleasure pursuits,” that American Judaism would flourish. In the small towns, he declared, American Jews were truly “wide awake for their religion.”⁴⁶

The Jewish community of Portsmouth deliberately positioned itself in the mainstream of the town’s life. As early as 1863, five years after its founding, the congregation was regularly listed in the local church directory on the front page of the *Portsmouth Times*. The dedication of a new meeting place, in September 1864, was designed to emphasize this integration, and the congregation placed a notice in the *Portsmouth Times* inviting “all the ministry and their congregations, the court, council, press, and the citizens generally” to the festivities.⁴⁷ The new synagogue was actually the old Masonic Hall in which the congregation had originally rented space. (They had purchased two-thirds of the building, with the Masons retaining the third floor.) A crowd joined the procession which carried the Torah scrolls to the synagogue from the Ronsheim home, which had served as temporary meeting place during building renovation: “A fine band of music at the front of the procession, four girls dressed in white, carrying the rods of a splendid kind of curtain [a *chuppah*, or wedding canopy], under which the law was carried by the two oldest members of the congregation, then again four girls dressed in red, white and blue, and a large number of Israelites, as well [as] a great many Christians [sic] proceeded then to the synagogue.” Whether or not there were in fact more

44. Isaac Mayer Wise, *Reminiscences* (Cincinnati, 1901), 330–32. Reform Judaism is now the denomination with which the largest number of American Jews identifies. It emphasizes the prophetic and ethical dimensions of Judaism while allowing for the attenuation of traditional ritual and liturgical practice in light of contemporary sensitivities. The best history is Michael Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (Detroit, 1988).

45. *Israelite*, December 24, 1858.

46. *Israelite*, November 26, 1858.

47. *Portsmouth Times*, September 10, 1864.

than five hundred people in attendance, as the rabbi, Judah Wechsler, claimed, it was a large crowd and a significant event.⁴⁸

Christians had donated to the Portsmouth congregation's building fund, and Jews would donate to church building funds, together expressing the importance of cultivating good neighborly relations as well as the importance of a generally religious American culture. Judaism did not have second-class status in that religious culture. The Presbyterian church's choir had provided the music for the synagogue dedication ceremonies, and in the public notice thanking them, the members of Bene Abraham declared that "we hail with joy and gladness the liberal and enlightened spirit manifested by these ladies and gentlemen, and hope the time is not far distant when we will all meet as brothers and sisters in one Great God, who has created us all." It was a fine statement of the universalism and optimism of the reformed American Judaism.⁴⁹

Perhaps the most remarkable indicator of the transition from Jewish frontier to new pluralistic society was the phenomenon of personal border-crossings in the form of conversions *to* Judaism. Historian Dana Evan Kaplan has found that by 1860, "intermarriage was creating an interest in and a need for conversions, and congregations were beginning to approve of them."⁵⁰ Indeed, in 1864, Judah Wechsler reported at some length

in the *Israelite* about a conversion he had performed in Portsmouth. The candidate was the fiancée of Dr. Daniel Mayer, an immigrant who had served as a Union Army surgeon in the Civil War. "An accomplished lady of Western Virginia, whose name was Ada Walker, renounced by her own free will, Christianity, and was for some time instructed in the principles of Judaism by me," Wechsler reported. He marveled at the fact that "Time has changed. While in former centuries there were recorded many conversions from Judaism to Christianity . . . we are now enabled to record quite the contrary. Hardly a week passes off without any conversions to Judaism."⁵¹

In the early national period, it was market relations within the Ohio Valley and between the Valley and the Atlantic seaboard cities that "closed" the Euro-Americans' frontier by decisively linking the region to the nation. Before the 1820s, Jewish merchants were on the eastern end of these links. As Jews moved into the west, they inhabited a frontier of new market encounters and new social, cultural, and religious interpenetrations. To many later American Jews, the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which applied Federal guarantees of religious freedom to the territory and its successor states, including those in the northern Ohio Valley, stood out as particularly significant

48. *Israelite*, October 7, 1864.

49. *Portsmouth Times*, October 1, 1864. Original resolution in: Congregation Bene Abraham, Minute Book 1863–1896 (Box X-54, AJA), entry dated September 20, 1864. The Portsmouth congregation was one of the first to join the Union of American Hebrew Congregations when it was founded under Wise's guidance in 1873: *Proceedings of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations: Volume I, 1873–1879* (Cincinnati, 1879), 8, 15. The UAHC became the congregational union of the Reform movement.

50. Dana Evan Kaplan, "Conversion to Judaism in Nineteenth-Century America: Early American Religious Reform and Changing Attitudes to Proselytism, 1846–1865" (Paper delivered at the Association for Jewish Studies Annual Meeting, Boston, 22 December 1997), 27. See also his "W.E. Todd's Attempt to Convert to Judaism and Study for the Reform Rabbinate in 1896," *American Jewish History*, 83 (December, 1995), 429–44; "Intermarriage and Conversion to Judaism in Early American Orthodoxy," *Tradition*, 31 (Summer, 1997), 39–51; and "The Determination of Jewish Identity below the Mason-Dixon Line: Crossing the Boundary from Gentile to Jew in the Nineteenth-Century American South," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 52 (Spring, 2001), 98–121.

51. *Israelite*, December 9, 1864.

to Jewish acceptance in America.⁵² But social and economic as well as legal change provided the context for Jewish community growth in the egalitarian climate of antebellum America. The diversity of religious groups in the Ohio River Valley made it one of “the first ‘testing ground[s]’ for religious pluralism in America.”⁵³ A frontier of religious and cultural pluralism emerged as the geographical frontier faded, as groups met and dealt in an expanding market society.

52. Stanley Chyet, “The Political Rights of the Jews in the United States: 1776–1840,” *American Jewish Archives*, (April, 1958), 14–75.

53. Hinderaker, *Elusive Empires*, 259.