

# THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN FRONTIER AND ITS RECORD IN LITERARY WORKS

**Retnowati**

English Department, Faculty of Humanities, BINUS University  
Jln. Kemanggisan Ilir III No. 45, Kemanggisan-Palmerah, Jakarta Barat 11480  
retnowati\_pareanom@yahoo.com

## ABSTRACT

*The spirit of frontier brought by the first settlers to America, has changed in American continent and it was differently applied by the American government, especially when it became the motivation behind the expansion and anexation. This American frontier became the motivation of the American government to rule over the world. In the history of the American expansion, the spirit of American frontier was recorded in the literary works such as poerty, film, and novel.*

**Keywords:** *American history, American frontier, literary works*

## ABSTRAK

*Semangat menembus perbatasan yang dibawa nenek moyang bangsa Amerika mengalami perubahan di benua Amerika. Semangat ini berada di balik alasan pemerintah Amerika untuk menganeksasi wilayah di sekitarnya. Semangat frontier ini menjadi motivasi bangsa Amerika untuk melakukan ekspansi bahkan ke seluruh dunia. Dalam sejarah bangsa Amerika, semangat frontier di balik ekspansi wilayah ini dicatat dalam karya sastra di Amerika, seperti puisi, film dan novel.*

**Kata kunci:** *sejarah Amerika, frontier Amerika, karya sastra*

## INTRODUCTION

The spirit of 'American frontier'—transcending Americans was firstly brought by the first settlers—the spirit of the first *frontier*. As commonly conceived in North America, the frontier was the line separaigh at any moment the settled regions from those as yet occupied; or it was the region on either side of that line (Adams, 1951: 350).

The arrival of European settlers especially the Anglo Saxons in America were transcended by their ancestors' frontier spirit. In the American history the frontier might be defined as a region where at a given time, the pioneering process was actually going on (Adams, 1951: 351).

Since the coming of Christopher Columbus upon New World in 1492, Europeans paid more attention to this continent. They came to the new world because of the motivation to help the mother country to gain the goals in economic and military as well. Until the end of the sixteenth century the population of the European in the New World was not in great amount.

The story of American expansion finds its beginning in the later period of medieval Europe by the coming of Portuguese followed by the Spanish, then the supremacy of English. The founding of the colonies began in 1578. In 1606 was the Jamestown settlement.

In 1620 Plymouth was settled because of religious reason. There the people grew in New England which consisted of 13 colonies such as Maryland, the Carolinas, New York and New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Georgia. Since the population grew, they built the continent and enlarge their territory. The coming of the first settlers the continent until the end of the nineteenth century was considerable as territorial expansion.

Beginning from the seventeenth century up to the nineteenth century in the United States was in expansionistic temper. It began in 1620 by the coming of the Pilgrim in *Mayflower* at Plymouth Bay.

At first the concentration of the first settlers' arrival was the eastern of the continent. It lasted long until 1819. From 1819-1845 the fever subsided. And secondly the new territorial expansion with the concentration westward began as the object of expansion from 1845 up to 1849 which was called as the era of 'American frontier'.

In the New World, in America, the spirit became quite different from the original one. What was meant by the first settlers, frontier was free land in the New World, but in the successive generations of America, it has a wider meaning; it becomes not only expansions of land but also many aspects of life—economy, society, politics, science and military as well. And the implementation of the spirit of American frontier in the expansion itself where that spirit was often used as justification of all expansions. The spirit of frontier was brought into the New World since the first settlement of the colonies which began in 1606 with the settlement of Jamestown. The motivation of the settler at that time was land of planting raw material needed by European industry.

The problems arousing are: How the spirit of frontier by the first settler changed in America; What was the function of American frontier behind the American expansion; How the literary works recorded the spirit of American frontier behind the American expansion.

The goal of this subject is to know how this American frontier as the spirit of the American became the motivation behind the American expansion. By knowing the motivation, the readers will know the motivation of American expansion over the world.

## RESEARCH METHODS

The research was conducted by library research, covering the story of the American expansion. The expansion behind the spirit of the American frontier was recorded through the works of literature, such as poetry, novel, and film. These literary works are used as the evidences of the application of American frontier in American history.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The spirit of frontier was brought by the first settlers into New World since the settlement of Jamestown in 1602. The arrival of the European settlers especially the Englishmen at that time was to find prosperous land to support the European industry with its raw material. From economic motivation the coming of the next settlers had different motivation. The Pilgrims at *Mayflower* were offshore at Plymouth Bay. They tried to find land to establish their church, which meant that they wanted to form of democracy for recognized church. Afterwards, the territorial expansion went on the continent.

The existence of 'American frontier' as an interesting phenomenon was noted long before the American independence. In American history, the frontier may be defined as a region where at a time, the pioneering process was actually going on (Adams, 1951: 351)

From European seaboard frontier as the origin of the 'American frontier', the settlers of the New England tried to expand their territory because of the lack of soil to farm, the growth of the population and the exhausted soil. The spirit of the frontier from the first settlers always haunted them, but it gave different application when the spirit brought into New World and motivated them to expand their territory.

In the eighteen century, the American in New England as the successive generation of the European settlers wanted to move westward. The beginning of the frontier itself in the United States began from the seaboard frontier. Then, it was followed by 'American frontier' marked by the frontier of the fall line of the Appalachian Mountains. The pioneers were venturing over the mountains in 1763. The 'American frontier' supported by the spirit brought by the settlers applied to expand their territory. Since then, the expansionism had been an integral part of American history, most notably in the nineteenth century. The geographical conditions of the thirteen colonies supported the settlers to move to westward in different motivation depended on their condition in the former territory.

The colonial America which was divided into four geographical conditions such as New England, the middle colonies, Southern plantation and the frontier had different condition. New England colonies were settled almost entirely by the Englishmen, for the most middle class, religious dissenters primarily the Puritans and the Pilgrims. Most English settlers who came to America had no thought of establishing a radically different form of government from they had previously experienced. They simply wanted a greater freedom. The middle colonies had the most heterogeneous population and tended to develop into three distinct geographical regions, the Hudson, the Delaware and the Susquena River Valleys. The Southern plantation colonies, the region was large and founded by members of lesser aristocracy, and this gave the South a different social structure and system from the rest of American colonies. The fourth was the frontier. It was the west part of the continent which its condition was the wilderness.

The factors attracted people to this area the lucrative fur trade available land which caused by exhausted soil in his past land, indentured servant, greater religious freedom and began new settlements. The settlers from east who wanted to move to westward were mostly indentured servants. Their motivation was to move was to have their own land. But, unfortunately, they believed that the frontier was unsettled area as the first settlers did in their first arrival in New World. They did not care of the frontier former settlers such as Indians. They had such courage to move to make the better life from their poor conditions. The motivation of the other settlers from middle colonies for instance was because of their exhausted soil, therefore they tried to find fertile lands to plant. The Southerners' motivation was to enlarge their plantation in order to increase their production. Except for the huge increase in the black population, due to the rapid expansion of the slave system, the ethnic and racial composition of the United States had not changed a great deal since the colonial period. There were, however, progressively more poor people from these traditional ethnic groups, particularly the Irish, who were coming to America. Because of their middle-class background, these people experienced some serious difficulties, but the availability of land and opportunity, coupled with hard work, enabled many of them to acquire a degree of self-sufficiency within the span of a generation. All of this condition is clearly described in the film *Far and Away* by Ron Howard, which depicted the struggles of the two Irishmen in their arrival in American continent. Both were run away people, the rich woman and the poor boy had to be strong enough in competition with the hard life. This film also described how the government of the United States distributed the land in the West without charge to the immigrants. But in order to get the lands, they have to compete with each other. American continent at that time was the promised land for Europeans. And they sailed beyond their frontier to search the new one to realize their dream.

In various sense, the frontier meant borderland, the actual border between two countries or the region about international boundary (Bridgewater, 1935: 731). In the United States history, however, it means the border area of white settlement, vital in the conquest of the land between the Atlantic and the Pacific. The 'American frontier' finally became the justification of American expansionism. Hiding behind the spirit of 'American frontier', the American showed their superior institution over non-white-settlers of other continents.

The frontier was a governing factor in the development of the United States civilization, as distinct from that of other nations. Hard life in the frontier forced the settlers to rely upon themselves. Frontier condition also forced the equity among people where birth and social background meant nothing. The frontiersmen were individualistic and self-reliance. It was the basic characteristic of the frontier type (Turner, 1986: 10-24).

In 1893 Turner (1986) stated that American democracy was shaped by the frontier, the contest of the settlers with the wilderness, not only the woodland wilderness of the East, and the Great Lakes, but the grassy wilderness of the prairies, and the rocky wilderness of the Western mountains. Thoreau in his *Walden* written in 1854 also opposed the vital wilderness of the West to the dead tameness of civilization (Smith, 1950: 85).

*Start now on the farthest western way,  
Which does not pause at the Mississippi  
Or the Pacific, nor conduct toward a  
Worn-out China or Japan, but leads on  
Direct a tangent to this sphere, summer  
And winter; day and night, sun down,  
Moon down, and at last earth down too.*

He loved nature as well as the wildness of the West itself. The presence of the Indians who by white Anglo Saxon Protestants were assumed as savage and primitive people actually did not bother him because both could live in harmony without bringing the superiority of one to another.

The wilderness is a formidable adversary and a man did not always win in the contest; he learned self-reliance and on his lonely farm, he and his heroic mate and children become assured of equality with any man and resentful of class distinction and any attempts a civic and social coercion (Blum, 1984: 106).

There is no question that their process of peopling the West is a central theme in the United States history and the belief that was shaped in American thought and characteristic was almost universally accepted. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession and the advance of American settlement westward, explained American development (Turner, 1986: 1)

If in other nations, the development had occurred in a limited area, than nation had expanded, it had met other growing people from the area conquered, the United States had different phenomenon. Limited attention to Atlantic coast, they had familiar phenomenon of the evolution of institutions in limited area, such as the rise of representative government, the differentiation of simple colonial governments into complex organs, the progress from primitive industrial society, without division of labor up to manufacturing civilization. Nevertheless, the process of the evolution in each western area reached the process of expansion (Turner, 1986: 2). Westward with its new opportunities was not only along a single line, but return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line and a new development in the Great West. The frontier is also the meeting point of savagery and civilization. The process of people the West became the belief that is shaped in American thought and character and that individualism on the frontier has been perhaps overemphasized, and that the frontier forming community has possibly not as a classless. The process of peopling the West is depicted in the film series of television entitled *Little House in the Prairies* by Michael Landon. Here the family living in the West had a hard life. Most of them had guns to protect themselves from the enemy. Living difficult conditions makes the people more self-sufficient and struggle to achieve their aim.

The 'American frontier' is different from European frontier, a fortified boundary line running through dense populations. The most significant thing about the 'American frontier' is that it lies at the hither edge of free land. In the settlement of America, European life came to enter the continent. The American, then modified and developed it as well as reacted on Europe.

The frontier was the line of most rapid and effective Americanization. The wilderness masters the colonist. At first, at the frontier, environment was too strong for the man. He had to accept the condition which it furnished or perished and he also fitted himself into the Indian clearings and followed the Indian trails. Finally he transformed the wilderness. This was the new product, the American (Turner, 1986: xvi).

In American continent, the first frontier was the Atlantic coast. In real sense, it was the frontier of European. Moving westward the frontier became more and more American. In the successive generation, each frontier left its traces behind it and become a settled area, the region still partakes of the frontier characteristics. Moved away from the influence of Europe, the frontier meant a steady growth of independence on American lines.

In the seventeenth century, the frontier was the Atlantic coast, beyond 'the fall line' and the tidewater region became the settled area. In the first quarter of the eighteenth century, the traders followed the Delaware and Shawnese Indians to Ohio. There were the Scotch Irish and the Palatine Germans who arrived in the west part of Virginia.

At the time of the formulation of the Constitution, most Americans were still of Anglo-Saxon ancestry, and most spoke the English language. It was propitious for the nations. A certain sense of unity existed at a critical time in the early history of the nation. It is a moot point whether or not the United States could have survived as a nation had there been a large number of different ethnic groups competing with each other during these early years.

The numbers of Irish and German immigrants, together with their obvious cultural economic differences from many earlier American immigrants gave rise to considerable apprehension concerning their presence. The Irish were Catholic, poor, and would work for very low wages; the Germans were clannish, self-sufficient, and imbued with alleged radical political ideas. Both groups avoided the slaveholding South, thereby contributing the North's swelling population. During the 1850s the westward movement of the frontier became thoroughly enmeshed in the thorny issue of slavery.

Living in some areas in the west, the people were alienated and they needed to communicate with other areas. Poor transportation meant that most people who initially lived in the western most reaches of their states were almost completely isolated from their government, while those residing beyond the Appalachian were totally isolated.

At the time of naturalization laws were exceptionally lenient. Many new immigrants were allowed to vote, even though one-year-residency and formal intention of naturalization were the official requirements. The Democratic party capitalized on this situation to carry the immigrant vote, and this further arouse resentment among anti-immigrant groups of which there were many. The party called for the discrimination against non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants and particularly sought to prevent members of the Catholic faith from gaining a foothold in America, even to the point suggesting that no Catholic be allowed to hold any public office.

In the period of Revolution, the frontier crossed the Alleghanies into Kentucky and Tennessee and the Ohio was settled (Turner, 1986: 5). It became isolated in the middle of this century. The boundary was the Indian territory, Nebraska and Kansas, Minnesota and Wisconsin, as well as California with its gold discoveries, Oregon and Utah.

Natural boundary lines marked the characteristics of the frontiers. The fall line marked the frontier of the seventeenth century, the Alleghanies that of eighteenth, the Mississippi that of the first quarter of the nineteenth, the Missouri that of the middle of the nineteenth and Rocky Mountains and the arid tract marked the frontiers of the end of this century (Turner, 1986: 9). The United States which began as a tiny settlement on the coast of Virginia in the 1607 and grew to encompass most of the temperate zone of the North American continent. It survived internal attempts toward disunion and continued to expand and to acquire territories the world over. Thus expansion has been an integral part of American history, most notably in the nineteenth century.

In the year that followed, the agricultural frontier continued to advance. In 1841 American farmers were passing over the Great Plains and began their push into the fertile Oregon country, settling in the Columbia River basin.

Process of life in the Atlantic frontier guided the American in the westward frontier life, such as the mining experience of the lead regions of Wisconsin, Illinois and Iowa was applied and also the policy to Indians. The frontier which was distinguished into trader, miner and farmer frontier affected the life of the frontiersmen. The traders' frontier affected the exploration into wilderness by following the trace of the traders (Turner, 1986: 2). The path of the traders led the expedition into Pacific coast. Rancher's or miner's frontier lacked of transportation urged to build railroads to the west because as the frontier developed, the frontiersmen needed means of communication with the East. Phillip Frennau-Brackenbridge (Smith, 1950: 21) gave his comment on his poem:

*A new Palmyra or an Ecbatan  
And sees the slow pac'd caravan return  
O'er many a realm from the Pacific shore,  
Where fleets shall then convey rich Persia's silk,  
Arabia's perfumes, and spices rare*

*Of Philliphine, Coelebe and Marian isles,  
Or from the Acapulco coast our India then,  
Laden with pearl and burning gems of gold.*

In elaborating the idea of westward course of empire, he predicted that analogues of various imperial capitals of the Old World will spring up in America of the future; a St. Petersburg amid the snow of the far north, a Babylon in Mexico, a Nineveh on the Orinoco in South America and the Far West which gave good opportunity of the future in Asia. Therefore, moving westward and finding new frontiers were very important for the future of the United States.

To support for westward expansion was also given by Walt Whitman in his *Passage to India* (Smith, 1950: 14). He suggested that it was necessary to have relation with the Far West because it gave a better future for the United States. In order to realize the dream it needed a way to go to the Far West, that was moving westward from New England up to the shores of Pacific Ocean.

The building of the transcontinental railroads in the 1860's increased numbers of Chinese who were encouraged to come to United States to work as cheap labor force. It is well-depicted in Jacky Chen film, *Shanghai Noon*.

Chong Wang, a Chinese coming to America has often played a fish out of water, but he rarely found himself so far upstream as in this comic adventure, in which he put his fighting skills to the test in the Old West of the 1850s. Lo Fong, onetime captain of the Chinese Imperial Guard, had traded upholding the law for smuggling opium. Needing some operating capital, Lo Fong kidnapped the Emperor's daughter, Princess Pei Pei, and took her to America. When the Emperor sent his best men to find her, Chon Wang, one of the Emperor's less distinguished guards, insisted on joining them; he felt at fault for Lo Fong's capturing the Princess, and he wanted to make amends. However, while the rescue party scoured the West, Chon Wang got separated from the group and soon became lost. When he crossed paths with Roy O'Bannon, a bright but arrogant train robber, the two became unlikely allies.

American, however, did not completely give up the idea of farther territorial expansion at the end of the decade, interest in acquiring Canada was openly expressed, but with the recent northern boundary settlements and a strengthening Canadian government, this hope was rapidly fading. In regard to the Caribbean, there was also a continuing expansionistic sentiment. Of particular interest was the island of Cuba during presidency of Franklin Pierce in the 1850s helped to increase the tension between North and South that eventually erupted into civil conflict. With the rise in sectional antipathy, American desires for further territorial acquisitions subsided until after the Civil War.

The acquisition of the vast and mass west of the boundaries of Louisiana purchase led to a search for some means of transportation to help bind the nation together. A sensible solution was constructing a transcontinental railroad. With this in mind, in early 1853 Congress authorized the army to survey all possible routes. The survey team eventually reported that there were possible good routes but that the extreme southern one would have to pass through a small piece of Mexican territory. 'American frontier' cannot be applied elsewhere with any degree of success is no valid criticism; it is an explanation of what occurred, not intended as a law of the universe. Somewhat similar developments may be seen in other parts of the world as in the spread of population into and from the state of Sao Paulo, Brazil and some development of the Union of South Africa. In group and government controlled development of a frontier (as in the Soviet exploitation of Siberia) the conditions are likely to be widely different although there, too, resourcefulness is pitted against a wilder.

By a series of giant strides the American people settled the Atlantic seaboard, then the Mississippi valley; purchased the vast Louisiana Territory; fought expansionistic war with Mexico;

negotiated with England for other continental territories; purchased Alaska from Russia; and annexed foreign territories in a brief episode of imperialism at the beginning of the twentieth century.

There are still strong indications that the frontier impetus has not yet run its course but simply taken on a new form. Today it appears that the excitement and romance of the wagon trail, of the frontier rabble armies grabbing bits and pieces of land, of the various Indian wars, and of the Rough Riders, are being replaced by a new, more sophisticated form of expansionist into the frontier space.

For centuries the United States had a vast contiguous, sparsely settled area which it could expand. Its physical resources, therefore, appeared limitless. But that area of physical expansion no longer exists; there are no more areas to harvest. The America of the 1970s faced with a situation where in its physical environment was not boundless.

Then Northwest Ordinance, until the Last Possessions of Hawaii and Alaska in 1959 brought to an end the territorial expansion of the United States.

The trend of population shift and industrial development continue to move from east to west. For example, California is now the most populous state. The Southwest is one of the fastest-growing parts of the country. Even Alaska and Hawaii are experiencing phenomenal population growth.

The development of the American character has been strongly influenced by the expansionistic impulse of over a century. Expansionism, of course, does not necessarily mean that mote territories must be added to the national domain. It could pertain to the full development and utilization of the currently held land mass, and it could also involve penetration of the seas and of space.

There is a new frontier—the frontier of space—and it is an exciting and challenging frontier with great potential and great limitations. Furthermore, it is restricted to highly skilled, carefully selected individual; it is not for every individual who wishes to enter into it. So for all practical purposes, the classical frontier no longer exists.

But the expansionism of the past was often individualistic and unorganized. It did not require sophisticated equipment and huge capital outlays. Many Americans who were so disposed could become a part of the expansionistic movement as pioneers.

The expansionism of the future will be different. It will be accomplished by individuals who are highly trained such as astronots and aquanuts. It will be organized, highly sophisticated, and require huge expenditures of money. It will not be opened to any American who simply has the urge, unless the first undergoes a rigorous training program and highly selective process. One question raised by this development is whether the American people can no longer identify with expansionism to any considerable degree. And if they cannot, will they lose the dynamic spirit that was largely responsible for developing the weathies, most powerful nation on earth?

## CONCLUSION

The spirit of American frontier brought by the first settlers in America which led them to expand their land has become different application in every era of the American history. The motivation behind the spirit of the frontier are different in every era. But all of them are land either because of economy, religion or population growth.



The different application of this frontier used for expansion is well depicted in the works of literature, such as in the films: *Far and Away*, *Little House in the Prairies*, and *Shanghai Noon*; in the poems: Thoreau *Walden* and Brackenbride *A New Palmyra or Ecbatan*; and a novel *A Passage to India* by Whitman.

## REFERENCES

Adams, J. T. (1951). *Dictionary of American History Vol II, 2nd ed.* New York: Charles Scribner's Son.

Blum, J. M., et al. (1984). *The National Experience, part two: a History of the United States since 1865, 6th ed.* New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers.

Bridgewater, W., & Sherwood, E. J. (1935). *The Columbia Encyclopedia, 2nd ed.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Smith, H. N. (1950). *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth.* New York: Vintage Books.

Turner, F.J. (1976). *The Significance of the Frontier in American History.* Arizona: The University of Arizona Press.

<http://movies.amctv.com/movie/18710/Shanghai-Noon/details>