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Masters of Light and Flight/ "This Most Republican Amalgamation"

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Masters of Light and Flight/"This Most Republican Amalgamation”

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A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty
of The College of William & Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of
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Master of Arts

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Masters of Light and Flight:
The Spectacle of Invention in *fin-de-siècle* U.S. Popular Culture, 1876-1917

Popular fascination with inventors in U.S. popular culture was at a high point in the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century. This paper analyzes the discourse surrounding inventors in the aviation and aeronautics industries: including Thomas Alva Edison, Nicola Tesla, Glenn Curtiss and Wilbur and Orville Wright. By analyzing invention as a spectacle, it sheds light on the relationships between the spectacle of invention and industrial modernity. On the one hand, inventors became popular symbols of control over the process of labor and its products during an era when the alienation of industrial and commercial labor, as well as the rising dangers of urban life were on the minds of many Americans. At the same time, popular coverage of inventors reminded the average person that mastery was no longer available to the ordinary but now only to exceptional celebrity-inventors. Finally, the discourse surrounding these celebrity-inventors facilitated a cultural transition from a 19th century worldview in which value was placed upon individual mastery to a 20th century worldview in which value was placed upon the collective mastery of corporations and the state.

“This Most Republican Amalgamation:”

In the 1820s and 1830s, reformers from disparate ideological traditions—including utopian socialists, abolitionist reformers, and more conservative reformers—were drawn to the manual labor system of education. They sought to introduce mechanical and agricultural labor into the curricula of colleges and seminaries for young men. Reformers believed that this would make education more affordable and healthful. This paper analyzes the way different supporters of the manual labor movement articulated visions of republicanism and Northern nationalism in their efforts to promote the manual labor system. In their articulations of republicanism and Northern nationalism, abolitionist and socialist manual laborites created legitimate space for the exercise of state power to promote and protect equality.
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Finally, it is with great love and appreciation that I thank my parents—James and Lori Rick—as well as my brothers and sisters—Michelle, Michael, Mark, and John—for their love and support in this and all my endeavors.
Intellectual Biography

Some of the questions about U.S. history and culture that are most important to me, and that I have begun to explore through the two research papers that make up my graduate research portfolio, can be channeled through the question, “how did we get from Thomas Jefferson to Edward Bellamy?” In 1785, Thomas Jefferson published *Notes on the State of Virginia*, in which he penned the famous passages on agriculture and manufacturing that many historians point to as the quintessence of the values of Jeffersonian Democracy. In 1887, Edward Bellamy published *Looking Backward*: a progressive, utopian novel about an American nation of the future, in which an industrial army managed the production and distribution of goods to the entire population. Jefferson envisioned an agrarian republic peopled by yeoman farmers and independent mechanics with a limited, but not insubstantial, role for technological and industrial development. Bellamy envisioned an industrial nation in which technologies and economies of scale allowed the state to ensure the survival and prosperity of each interdependent member of society. Both visions had their egalitarian promises, and both had their limitations.

This question regarding Jefferson and Bellamy is more of a metaphor and a simplification than an actual research question. Neither Jefferson nor Bellamy are the direct subject of either of my research papers. Both papers do, however, explore cultural ideas about labor, technology, citizenship, and collective participation in the project of American modernity. They demonstrate how discourses surrounding education and invention, at different transitory points in
the nineteenth and early twentieth century, reflected and helped to shape Americans’ understandings of themselves as producers, citizens, and stakeholders in the collective project of building an industrial nation.

My first paper interrogates the spectacle of invention and the creation of the celebrity-inventor in the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century. *Masters of Light and Flight* illustrates how the changing realities and cultural conceptions of human labor are seldom far removed from the changing realities and cultural conceptions of the sociotechnical world. Concerns about industrial alienation were prevalent in the popular coverage of celebrity-inventors, who were portrayed as men able to transcend the alienation from the physical world brought by industrialization, even as their actions contributed to its creation. My argument that the discourse surrounding celebrity-inventors reflected, and helped to facilitate, a cultural transition from the valorization of individual to collective mastery of the material world calls attention to one step on the long road from Jefferson to Bellamy. The spectacle of invention helped to prepare viewers to become members of an industrial nation.

*Masters of Light and Flight* takes some new perspectives which could make it a useful contribution to the scholarship on the role of inventors and invention in American popular culture. Its conceptions of heroic inventors as celebrities, and of invention as a spectacle, provide useful tools of analysis that will allow me to build on the work of other scholars. Further reading into the historiography of the cultural, political, and economic developments between 1880 and 1920 would help to sharpen my argument about the cultural transition.
from individualism to collectivism. Finally, a narrower focus—perhaps on either the electrification or aeronautics industries alone—may make for a more publishable piece.

“This Most Republican Amalgamation” turns its gaze back into the antebellum era and looks at the manual labor movement in American education, which, like the spectacle of invention, was colored by American anxieties about the changing sociotechnical landscape and realities of labor. The reformers who strove to incorporate agricultural and mechanical instruction into American collegiate education for young men were the products of the market revolution. They were also the products of, and participants in, discourses on republicanism and Northern nationalism that renegotiated both what it meant to be a citizen and stakeholder in the republican project, and the role of the state in pursuing that project. My argument that radical manual laborites expanded the range of acceptable state action in American political discourse calls attention to another step on the road from Jefferson to Bellamy. These reformers contributed to the ideological formulation of an egalitarian nation-state through their participation in discourses on reform and education.

By focusing on the ideology behind schools both established and merely envisioned by the manual labor movement, “This Most Republican Amalgamation” deals with manual laborites who have been little discussed in the historiography of the movement. Particularly, it shines a light on the role played by secular, socialist reformers in what is often thought of as a religious movement. As such, its contributions to this historiography might be augmented
by narrowing its focus onto the British social reformers. Again, a deeper reading into the historiography of the cultural, political, and economic developments of the era would allow me to get a better sense for where an intervention is needed, and how this project might help make it.

Beyond the possibilities of the two papers contained within this research portfolio, each might help build to a number of entirely different projects. The concepts of invention, celebrity, spectacle, and industrial alienation explored in Masters of Light and Flight may very well join with the concepts of education, republicanism, Northern nationalism, and state power explored in “This Most Republican Amalgamation” in another project altogether. Such a project could make use of whichever of these concepts are pertinent and useful for getting at the themes and problems in the history of technology, labor, and citizenship in the United States. While such a project will certainly not be so simple as tracing the connections between Thomas Jefferson and Edward Bellamy, I hope it, and any other endeavors I embark on during my career as an historian, will contribute a piece of the puzzle that leads to answering the historian’s perennial question: “how did we get from there to here?”
Masters of Light and Flight:
The Spectacle of Invention in *fin-de-siècle* U.S. Popular Culture, 1876-1917

The whole concert of industrial operations is taken as a machine process, made up of interlocking detail processes, rather than as a multiplicity of mechanical appliances each doing its particular work in severalty.


Media stars are spectacular representations of living human beings, distilling the essence of the spectacle's banality into images of possible roles. Stardom is a diversification in the semblance of life—the object of an identification with mere appearance which is intended to compensate for the crumbling of directly experienced diversifications of productive activity.


By 1908, Wilbur and Orville Wright had “attained to that degree of fame which manifests itself in a popular curiosity regarding the personality of the inventors,” according to a writer for the *New York Times*. Along with other inventors of the era, the Wright brothers were the subject of a tremendous amount of popular interest which was, to their own confusion and occasional dismay, seldom limited to the strictly technical aspects of their work. The writer went on to say that the hardworking and modest pair did not understand, “why anyone should be so particularly interested in them. They can conceive of an aeroplane absorbing popular attention, but apparently, they cannot understand why anyone should be so interested in the inventor of one.”

This paper seeks to comprehend what the Wrights could not: why were late nineteenth and early-twentieth century Americans so interested in inventors, and what did that interest mean for American popular culture?

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Unlike much of the existing scholarship concerning inventors in this era, which is concerned more directly with their life and work, the true subject of my inquiry is not so much the men themselves as the layers of meaning which were attached to their public images in popular culture. These layers of meaning can be found in the discourse—located in contemporary newspapers, popular magazines and works of fiction—surrounding their lives and work. The display of inventions and their inventors took the form of a public spectacle in which celebrity-inventors were identified with the fears, hopes and desires of the “common person.” In their coverage of the spectacle of invention, the press and popular magazines of the era always made the crowd a central part of the story, whether they were rushing to get a glimpse of Edison’s Menlo Park laboratory or craning their necks to watch a flying machine defy gravity.

Thomas Edison, the Wright brothers, and the other pioneers of light and flight discussed in this paper represent only a small fraction of famous innovators who helped to build the technological world of the twentieth century. However, these men were not only the most frequently discussed, but also the celebrity-inventors whose popular representations most influenced the forging of an

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2 Popular representations of the inventors here discussed referred to them as both celebrities and inventors, albeit with different frequency. I use the combination term to channel Guy Debord’s concept of the celebrity as a figure within the spectacle upon whom individuals cast their hopes, fears and desires. Guy Debord. Society of the Spectacle. (Detroit, Michigan: Black and Red, 1977). Originally published 1967. The “common person” to whom the symbolic values embodied in the celebrity-inventor appealed is perhaps most easily imagined as a white man of any class, but the picture may have been more complicated. For instance, the perceived ability of celebrity-inventors to overcome the dangers of electricity and flight likely appealed more directly to urban, working-class men and women across racial or ethnic identities who were living in more direct contact with the physical dangers of life in the fin-de-siècle metropolis. Ben Singer. "Modernity, Hyperstimulus, and the Rise of Popular Sensationalism," In Leo Charney, and Vanessa R. Schwartz, eds. Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 83-88.
emergent culture of the twentieth century out of the symbols and values of the
nineteenth. The discourse surrounding celebrity-inventors and the spectacle of
invention in the electrification and aviation industries reflected and helped to
facilitate a cultural transition. During these decades, the valorization of individual
mastery and safety in late-nineteenth century American culture began to give
way to the valorization of collective mastery and safety in twentieth-century
American culture.³

Whereas previous scholars have argued that perceptions of inventors
obscured the processes of alienation, systemization, and mechanization, an
analysis of invention as a spectacle reveals that it facilitated the partial transition
from an individualist work ethic to an acceptance of the domination of the
industrial system which Thorstein Veblen called the “machine process” over
modern life.⁴ As humble mechanics possessed of a mastery of the material world
associated with earlier craft traditions, celebrity-inventors reminded observers of
an older economy. Their public images harkened back to times when laborers
had more control over the process and fruits of production, the managerial
middle class had not been so thoroughly removed from physical labor, and urban

³ Alan Trachtenberg. The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age. (New
Intellectuals and Industrial Alienation, 1890-1910. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press,
Luskey points toward the idea that, while the industrial alienation of the urban working class is
perhaps most acute, many middle-class Americans also worried about the increasing commercial
alienation of the growing labor force of office-workers. Both manual and mental laborers had an
interest in identifying with celebrity-inventors’ mastery of the material world.
⁴ Thorstein Veblen. The Theory of Business Enterprise. (Blackmask Online, 1999 [originally
published, 1904]), 2-7.
life had been less precarious. At the same time, popular visions of these mechanic-inventors reminded people that they could never go back to that old economy. Economic and technological changes continued to transform the material world from a place to be mastered by the individual workman into a place in which the workman was mastered by both the machine and the machine process. Their public images substituted the individual mastery of the celebrity-inventor for that lost by the individual. In doing so, it facilitated a cultural transition of values from the individual to the collective.

Masters of Light: Thomas Edison and Nicola Tesla

Scholars have referred to the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century as the “heroic age” of invention, when individual inventors like those discussed in this paper were central not only to the rapid material change taking place in society but also to the way in which the public understood innovation and the men behind it. The public personas of these celebrity-inventors were formed in the context of this heroic age. Although previous inventors, like Alexander Graham Bell, had risen to fame before him, Thomas

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Alva Edison is perhaps the most important of the vanguard of celebrity-inventors. Compared to “Professor” Bell, Edison was more identifiable with the “common man,” and proved a better vessel for his hopes and fears. Several historians who have written about Edison have pointed to the duality of the symbolism he provided as a public figure at this point in American history. Edison was associated in the public mind at once with the promises of a brilliant future and with the longing for an older concept of the "good life," one that was rooted in the dedication to craft of the Protestant work ethic. As Mark Essig notes, “Edison seemed to be a distillation of America’s self-image—unpolished and unpretentious yet gripped by an ambition to transform the world.”

However, Alan Trachtenberg points out that the birth of the “Edison myth,” coincided with the reality that industrial alienation was becoming an increasingly large part of the lives of working people. We might add to this observation that the managerial and commercial middle class was also increasingly concerned about its own separation from useful physical labor and the material world.

Trachtenberg is correct in his assertion that the fascination with Edison’s “self-taught mastery of mechanics and electricity” is deeply contingent with the alienation of labor felt by a large portion of the American work force in the final

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7 Newspapers and popular magazines usually referred to Alexander Graham Bell as “Professor Graham Bell,” or often as simply, “the Professor,” and otherwise highlighted his intellectual and scientific pedigree. This differed from the manner in which they dealt with later celebrity-inventors in the fields of electricity and aeronautics who were often cast as a combination of tinkering mechanic and arcane magician. For examples, see, “Un Petit Telephone,” New Hampshire Sentinel. April 5, 1877.; “Death of Alexander M. Bell,” Springfield Republican. August 8, 1905.


decades of the nineteenth century. However, further analysis of the popular discourse surrounding inventors reveals that the fascination and myths surrounding Edison and other inventors did more than obscure the process of mechanization. While it did, as Trachtenberg asserts, perpetuate “a common belief that the system owed its dynamism and innovations to the personal ‘genius’ of prominent individuals,” it also allowed common people to identify with inventors as celebrities who were supposedly in possession of a mastery they had lost.

Thomas Edison first rose to fame for his 1877 invention of the phonograph and his displays at the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. Public fascination with “the Wizard of Menlo Park” would continue throughout the ensuing decades. Judith Adams demonstrates that spectacular displays and entertainment were a principle part of the promotion of new technologies in these decades. The spectacles, however, were focused not only on the inventions displayed, but also on their inventors.¹⁰ Edison’s work with electric light allowed him both to cultivate a persona as a celebrity-inventor and to channel the power of the spectacle in display. A well-placed article in the New York Herald drove interest in the New Year’s Eve 1879 unveiling of his new, more efficient and more marketable, incandescent lightbulb. The display, and coverage of it in the press, facilitated enough public interest that extra trains had to be run to accommodate the increased traffic of passengers venturing from New York City to Edison’s New Jersey laboratory. A New York Herald headline on January 2nd read,

“Thoughtless Crowds Invading Menlo Park Laboratory.” While Edison had set out to cultivate this interest in his work for promotional purposes by ordering the lab’s “doors thrown wide open,” he may have bitten off more than he could chew.\textsuperscript{11}

These, “surging crowds,” were plainly interested in Edison’s invention, but they also demonstrated a fascination with the man himself, making their way not only into the lab and machine shop but also into Edison’s private office. The reporter noted that, “the exclamation, ‘there is Edison,’ invariably caused a rush that more than once threatened to break down the timbers of the building.” However, people seemed to have engaged with the spectacle in different ways, some of which caused more disturbance than others.

Of course, hundreds of those who came were well-bred people, who meant not to, and did not take, advantage of Mr. Edison’s good nature, but it is to be regretted that there were others, and they were numbered by the score, who cared nothing for science, and who regarded the laboratory as they would a circus.\textsuperscript{12}

The presence of a good number of working-class men and women among the crowd, as well as the spectacular atmosphere, can be surmised from the lament of the reporter about less “well-bred” visitors who did not take the experience of visiting Menlo Park as seriously as they should. The broad popular appeal of Edison as a celebrity seen in this early event and in Edison’s later public exhibitions transcended the type of attention which had been paid to other famous inventors.

Contemporary newspaper articles, which began with descriptions of how the “brilliancy” of Edison’s displays of incandescent light “excited the admiration

of all who saw it,“would go on to use words like “creation and control” and “regulation” to describe what Edison was doing with the fleeting and almost non-corporeal properties of light and electricity. This terminology implies a level of material mastery, inherent in the spectacle, which was derived from Edison’s “originality of conception, indefatigable patience and immense labor.”13 The press’ tendency to focus on Edison’s ability to manipulate and control the almost non-corporeal forces of electricity and channel them to human use demonstrated the popular appeal of material mastery among newspaper readers.

Representations of Edison’s dedication to craft can be found in fiction as well. Although Theodore Dreiser’s novel, *Sister Carrie*, was not initially well-received or widely read by the public in the years immediately following its publication in 1900, it nonetheless provides a useful view into the way Thomas Edison often appeared in popular culture. Dreiser’s novel follows Carrie, a young, Midwestern woman who moves to New York City and gets caught up in extramarital love affairs and various other forms of debauchery. Towards the end of the novel, Carrie is introduced to an inventor named Bob Ames, who bears striking similarities to Thomas Edison and who at least one literary scholar has asserted was constructed by Dreiser in Edison’s image based on Dreiser’s interview of Edison for *Success* magazine as he was writing the novel.14

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Ames, like Edison, is a somewhat “boyish” and idealistic Midwesterner—the fictional Ames is from Indianapolis while Edison was from Ohio—who Carrie, “turned her eyes to as to an oracle.”\(^ {15}\) Dreiser uses the encounters of his main character with Ames, who tells Carrie that he is most happy when working on an invention, to facilitate her redemption from the wicked world of the city and consumption through a renewed dedication to craft. Dreiser leaves Carrie, in the last page of the novel, “often disillusioned” but cognizant that “Ames had pointed out a further step” towards her eventual redemption and happiness. Further, Ames remarks of a fancy dinner party, “I wouldn't care to be rich, not rich enough to spend my money this way ... What good would it do? A man doesn't need this sort of thing to be happy.” By having Ames criticize the urban, consumer culture of the turn of the century, Dreiser obscures the relationship between technological change and the changing economy in much the way that Trachtenberg describes. Dreiser also demonstrates the way individuals like Carrie might project their desire for a connection to craft onto inventors.\(^ {16}\)

Edison himself appeared to cultivate this association with craft. He told at least one journalist that he was not afraid of business failure because, “if worse comes to worst, I've got a good trade. I can always make $75 a month as an expert telegraph operator and I can live on that.” The reporter went on to note that Edison's superior capacities as a telegraph operator were “still talked about today by veteran Morsemen.”\(^ {17}\) Readers were reminded that Edison had started

\(^{15}\) Dreiser, 356.
\(^{16}\) Dreiser, 351, 357, 557.
as an ordinary wage laborer, but had transcended industrial alienation—and achieved great wealth—through his hard work, brilliance and skill. This kind of rags-to-riches and alienation-to-mastery story was appealing, particularly to the writers and editors of newspapers, who saw individualism as the answer to the pursuit of meaning as well as wealth.

Historians have noted how the image of Edison as a lone inventor was misleading. Edison had a strong team of researchers and fellow tinkerers behind him from Menlo Park on, but whenever the press covered his team, they usually included anecdotes which affirmed Edison’s control of the situation. One article pointed to a time when Edison needed to know the volume of a glass light bulb. Two of his employees spent hours coming up with mathematical calculations while the more practical Edison demonstrated to them how one might find the volume of a bulb by simply filling it with water. Edison, through his simplicity and work ethic, was always represented as not only the leader of his band of tinkerers, but the source of everything which came out of his lab. What then, about the figure of Edison made him such an appealing vessel?

Much of the popular appeal of Edison was derived from the ability of people to identify him as “the common man.” Reporters often expressed pride and surprise at the reality that “there is not a man in the world to-day so great a hero as the shock-headed, flannel-shirted, tobacco-chewing Ohio boy.” The same article which relayed the anecdote about measuring the volume of a bulb included a description of the “popular idea of an inventor,” who is, “although

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simple in personal manner and appearance,” nonetheless “extraordinary in habits of life and work.” Naturally, the author asserted, nobody fit this image better than Thomas A. Edison. An author for Popular Mechanics recounted Edison’s boyhood in Milan, Ohio; paying special attention both to Edison’s lack of formal education and his personal genius. These descriptions of Thomas Edison are, however, double-edged. While his simple, Midwestern origins and demeanor allowed many people to identify with him and to see in him the material connection they felt dispossessed of, these descriptions also highlighted his exceptional character, and reminded the common man that mastery of the material world was not for everyone.

Returning to the closing lines of Sister Carrie, we are reminded that Ames was, for Carrie—as industrial and commercial alienation had made control of the process and product of labor for many American workers—simply unobtainable. Carrie is attracted to Ames, but stuck in a flawed relationship of her own. Meanwhile, Ames “had nothing of the ladies’ man about him. He had respect for the marital state and thought only of some pretty young girls in Indianapolis.” The novel concludes with Carrie contemplating both the words Ames spoke to her and her future, with Dreiser narrating: “In your rocking chair, by your window dreaming, shall you long, alone. In your rocking chair, by your window shall you dream such happiness as you may never know.”

21 Dresier, 350, 557.
craft symbolized by Edison—and his fictional representation, Ames—always appeared out of reach.

Edison held broad popular appeal not only as a celebrity who demonstrated a degree of control over his work which appeared to be slipping from many occupations in these decades. He also was perceived to command a dangerous force associated with the possibility of random and accidental death in the expanding urban centers. Ben Singer has drawn a connection between the fear of accidental death, the changing realities of urban working-class labor, and popular sensationalism in these decades. He argues that, “the illustrated press’s preoccupation with the perils of modern life reflected the anxieties of a society that had not yet fully adapted to urban modernity.” These same anxieties which led to a fascination with illustrated depictions of accidental death also lead to a fascination and identification with celebrity-inventors who were seen as mastering the very same mysterious forces which made modern life so dangerous. As Singer argues of sensationalism, this association was particularly strong among the urban, working class which was more directly confronted with these dangers in their daily lives.

Electricity was one of the new forces present in the frighteningly dangerous fin-de-siècle metropolis and Edison’s efforts to systematize and expand its usage would only increase its urban presence. Accidental electrical deaths reported in the media, and the corporate battle between Edison and his rival Westinghouse over which type of current would be branded the

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22 Singer, 83-88.
“Executioner’s Current” provided the public with a context in which to associate electricity and tragically violent death in a new and unforgiving urban world. The public’s association of electricity with death caused them to revere Edison as its master. Fittingly, however, it was not Edison, but his employee-turned-rival, Nicola Tesla, who most embraced this image of death-defying magician. Tesla was certainly not as capable a businessman as Edison, but he may have been a better showman. A typical newspaper article began:

All sorts of wonderful wizard-like things were done at the Franklin Institute last night, When Nicola Tesla, the famous electrician, delivered an intensely interesting lecture to a large audience on some of the latest phases of illumination by electricity, illustrating his talk by a number of beautiful demonstrations.

The “wizard-like” Tesla’s spectacular displays of electricity highlighted both his celebrity and his personal mastery over a mysterious and deadly force. He regularly ran electricity through his body during demonstrations to large crowds, receiving much attention for his ability to do so without harming himself. Occasionally he did so for purposes of illumination:

The effect must be seen to be thoroughly appreciated, but when it is stated that the experimenter without difficulty succeeded in radiating light not only from an exhausted glass tube held in his hand, but also from his

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23 Freeberg, 83-86.; Moran, 31-39.; Essig, 116-117. In the decades after Edison’s unveiling of his incandescent lightbulb and the spread of electricity across the country, Edison became embroiled in what have often been called the “Current Wars,” with the Westinghouse Electric Company. While Edison owned the patents and materials necessary to commercialize direct current, Westinghouse—thanks in part to one of Edison’s former employees and celebrity-inventor in his own right, Nicola Tesla—was better equipped to commercialize alternating current. In their various efforts to promote their own forms of current at the expense of the other, Edison’s interest in his own profits usually behooved him to stress the safety of electric power over its destructive capabilities, but in his efforts to discredit his competitors he had to make their alternating current system seem dangerous, and fit only for capital punishment. His competitors, in response, had the same thing to say about his direct current system. This very public dispute introduced terms like “electrocution” to the public and strengthened the association of dangerous electricity with accidental death.

thumb, his nose and other features, the enthusiasm which swept over his audiences in London and Philadelphia may be appreciated.25

Press coverage of these displays highlighted the combination of Tesla’s flirtations with deadly forces, the visual spectacle of his displays, and the public’s enthusiasm for them. Tesla’s audiences surely aspired to his ability to master the dangerous force of electricity, but they were also again reminded that individual mastery was not for everyone. While Edison was at least presented as somewhat relatable to the average citizen, Tesla was regarded as exceptional and eccentric. Tesla and Edison were both described as scientists and experts, but Tesla never received the accolade of mechanic or tinkerer that harkened back to an earlier craft tradition. In the end, the public personas of both Edison and Tesla allowed Americans to project their desires for mastery and safety in an increasingly alienated and dangerous urban world onto these celebrity-inventors. However, emphasis on the exceptional nature of Edison and Tesla reminded the public that these desires were not achievable for the average American.

As individual mastery and safety increasingly seemed a thing of the past for the average person, the symbolic place of the celebrity-inventor channeled aspirations of collective mastery and collective safety which seemed more at home in the imagined world of the approaching twentieth century. The press and popular magazines identified celebrity-inventors with the potential for collectivities—namely corporations and the state—to use new technologies to master the material world and ensure a safe social order. Fears of the dangers of electricity and desires for greater safety played their roles in the systemization of

electricity as well, as cities began demanding that electrical wires be buried rather than strung up on poles along the sides of streets. Further, many companies in the electricity business attempted to sell their products to cities with the promise that the conquest of darkness would reduce crime. Corporations and the state were to be trusted by the public to assert collective mastery over urban space and bring collective safety through the technology which had been created by exceptional individuals.\textsuperscript{26}

Other collectivist promises were represented in the popular press through the technological-utopian visions associated with celebrity-inventors. Optimistic and progressive social reformers like Henry George saw inventors as playing a key role in shaping the perfected social order of the future. George predicted that “the remarkable discoveries of Nicola Tesla are going to play an important part, I think, in the commercial development of the next century.” He went on:

The conquest of the elements so that they may be made to serve mankind is manifestly to be continued in the next century… How far men will subdue the forces of nature is as inconceivable as it would have been for the men who fought the battles of the Revolution to understand how it could be possible to exchange intelligence with Europe on the instant, or with a friend 1,000 miles away.\textsuperscript{27}

Significantly, it was now “men”—as a collective group, rather than as individuals—who were seen as acting upon the material world. A reporter wrote of Tesla’s Niagara Falls hydroelectric power project, “If electricity can be brought to New York, as Mr. Tesla declares, at such a price, we should have a

\textsuperscript{26} Freeburg, 47-69.
Bellamyized metropolis.” By invoking the utopian fiction of Edward Bellamy, the reporter highlighted the association between the symbolic meanings ascribed to celebrity-inventors and hopes for urban collectivity.

Even the more conventional Edison, who tended to vote for Republicans, had his own admirers on the left. Allan L. Benson interviewed Edison for *Cosmopolitan* five years before his run for president as the official nominee of the Socialist Party of America. Benson’s article begins with the normal presentation of the Edison myth, highlighting Edison’s upbringing and personal mastery, but also notes that, “he believes serious industrial trouble—clashes of a sort that will threaten dynasties and thrones—are due in Europe at any time, and that similar troubles will be due in this country in ten years.” As for who would come out of these industrial clashes victorious, Benson quotes Edison as saying, “I believe that all England will some day stop at the sound of one command, and that the command of a workingman.” Benson goes on to conclude this narrative of struggle and victory:

Man, at last, coming into his own. Coming into his own because he knows how to use his own. Knows how to use his own because he knows what is his own. Knows what is his own because his own brain has told him. Has told him that everything on earth, in the sky and beyond the sky are his own. That the lightning can be bended to his will, the cataract harnessed to his need, and the dead iron in rocks fashioned into tongues that speak and hands that make. Hands such as never were human hands. Hands that can spin a thread of silk or crush a ton of rock. Hands that can make in abundance whatever human beings need.

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28 “Niagara Will Do It,” *New York Herald*. February 24, 1895.
The word “Man” here means the same thing as the word “men” in the previous article on Tesla and identifies collectivity. Benson’s portrayal of Edison’s ideas likely tells more about Benson than about Edison himself, but it is a useful example of how meaning and hope were projected onto the public persona of Edison as a celebrity-inventor. Workplace alienation and the dangers of modern urban life behooved many Americans to identify celebrity-inventors with the personal sense of mastery of the material world and safety which they felt slipping from their own lives. This identification allowed people to become adjusted to alienation by transfixing their desires first upon the public personas of celebrity-inventors like Edison and Tesla. Through those personas, those desires were then transfixed upon the state and corporations as the representative bearers of collective mastery. The next section looks, as Benson did, to the sky to see how pioneers in the aviation industry were a part of the same process of transition from the individual to the collective.

Masters of Flight: The Wright Brothers and Glenn Curtiss

As the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth, the association of celebrity-inventors with the hopes, fears, and desires of the viewers of the spectacle intensified, particularly in the emergent field of aeronautics. In recent years, cultural historians have noted the ways in which early twentieth-century Americans cast their hopes and fears onto the new technology.\(^{30}\) This section

expands upon that scholarship by paying closer attention to the ways in which the public identified inventors and aviators with their hopes and fears concerning industrial alienation and the changing nature of urban life. Recent biographies of the three biggest names in aviation during these decades—original inventors of the airplane, Wilbur and Orville Wright, alongside their emergent rival Glenn Curtiss—focused naturally on the aviators themselves as opposed to the crowds who flocked to see them. Thus, they only discuss popular perception of these men to a limited extent. Contemporary newspaper articles describing exhibitions of flying machines, on the other hand, nearly always made the crowd an important character in the story being told.

George Kidde Turner, a writer for *McClure’s Magazine*, interviewed the Wright brothers in February of 1908, before the crowds began flocking to them. The Wrights had spent the five years since their initial in 1903 securing their patent rights, and perfecting their flyer near their hometown of Dayton, OH, where, as Orville told Turner, “the local papers were good enough not to print descriptions of our work.” During this time, the Wrights had valued secrecy over fame, and press coverage of their efforts had been limited. However, there was apparently enough coverage for Orville to already have found a problem to take issue with in the portrayal of him and his brother.

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31 For biographies of the Wright brothers, see Tom D. Crouch. *The Bishop’s Boys: A Life of Wilbur and Orville Wright*. (New York: Norton, 1989); and David McCullough. *The Wright Brothers*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015). The most useful of these biographies for analyzing the Wrights’ and Curtiss’s fame are those that discuss the men and their companies in interaction with each other, as the public perceptions and commercial strategies of these aviators are inseparable from each other. See, William F. Trimble. *Hero of the Air: Glenn Curtiss and the Birth of Naval Aviation*. (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2010); and, Lawrence Goldstone. *Birdmen: The Wright Brothers, Glenn Curtiss, and the Battle to Control the Skies*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 2014).
We object to the manner in which we have so far been put before the public. Nearly every writer upon our work in current publications has characterized us as mechanics, and taken it for granted—because of the fact that we are in the bicycle business, no doubt—that our invention has come from mechanical skill. We object to this as neither true nor fair. We are not mechanics; we are scientists. 32

The Wrights’ objection to this portrayal was rooted both in pride in their accomplishments—they had, in fact, made a tremendously important scientific discovery—and in their desire to be rewarded for their efforts. The Wrights knew that their claims to intellectual property in the manufacture of heavier-than-air flying machines would be stronger as scientists than as mechanics. However, the press’ tendency to describe the brothers as mechanics, particularly in the early years of their fame, contributed to their relatability to the common person. Like Edison, the Wright brothers were not thought of as professors and neither were they highly educated. Instead, they asserted that the problem of aerial navigation “can be approached by any one possessing a high school education—which we have had.” The average person was encouraged by press coverage of these industrious bicycle mechanics and their achievements to identify with these mechanics and cast hopes, fears, and desires onto them. 33

Popular writing about the Wright brothers located the origins of their association with mechanics earlier than their time in the bicycle business. An article in American Magazine attributes the Wright brothers’ success to their parents’ cultivation and praise “of every sign of mechanical talent they showed.”

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32 Turner, 450, 452.
33 Ibid.
It was only after this industrious boyhood and a short-lived printing business that “they were carried away by the bicycle craze.” The article went on:

It must have given the good gentleman [Wilbur and Orville’s father] a great deal of satisfaction to have watched these boys working out their own tools, even the larger and complicated ones like the lathes. As a matter of fact, I find that the Wrights now prefer to make their own tools. They seem to have more faith in that which their own hands have fashioned. (…)

It is not boys in homes like the Wrights’ and towns like Dayton that worry me (…) It’s the boy in New York, in Chicago, in Pittsburgh, the boy whose home is an air-tight flat, whose father and mother are in an endless struggle for rent and food money, whose only playground is a street which never saw a grasshopper or tadpole, and where his possession of it is disputed by drays, pushcarts, grown-ups, girls and cops.³⁴

The emphasis on mechanical skill and craft not only endeared the Wright brothers with relatability, but also fostered a symbolic connection to the possibility of individual mastery, which had been deteriorated by industrial alienation.

Further, the author’s concern for boys in the more alienated and less safe large cities reveals how much of popular obsession with the Wrights was rooted in fears of urban modernity.

The Wright brothers’ biggest rival in the aviation industry, Glenn Curtiss, also got his start in the bicycle business, and the popular story of his mechanical prowess also went back further than his time as a bicycle sportsman. However, due to the death of his father when he was still young, Curtiss, like the boys in New York, Chicago, and Pittsburgh mentioned above, was faced with the realities of industrial work more directly. Although he spent a good deal of his childhood working to help support his family, the Curtiss Aviation Book relayed to

³⁴ “In the Interpreter’s House: When the Wright Brothers Were Boys.” American Magazine 68 (June 1909): 205–8.
the public that “all during the time that Curtiss was working for others for wages, he continued to tinker, making things then taking them apart.” This included the time when, while working at the Eastman Kodak works near his hometown of Hammondsport, NY, young Curtiss “induced his employers to make his work a piece-work job, and had improved the process of manufacture and increased the production from two hundred and fifty to twenty-five hundred a day.” Popular remembrances of Curtiss’s and the Wrights’ childhoods often emphasized this personal mechanical aptitude, as well as their lack of formal education, just as had those of Edison’s childhood. Thus, the popular press presented these celebrity-inventors as iconic possessors of material mastery with whom the average person could identify.

The Wrights truly attained their status as celebrity-inventors with their exhibition to military representatives, members of congress, and the public at Fort Myer, VA in September 1908. A reporter described Orville’s rapid ascent into celebrity by noting that “he has grown in the last two weeks from fame comparatively local to science into having his name a household word in all the civilized nations of the earth.” Coverage and commentary of Orville’s flights at Fort Myer set the tone for the way the press would talk about the Wright brothers in the following years. By dubbing Orville “the wizard of the air,” and lauding his “remarkable performances,” reporters associated him with the spectacles put on by earlier celebrity-inventors like Thomas Edison and Nicola Tesla. They also

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made the crowd a key player in the story by focusing on their reactions to, and
interactions with, the aviator. One of Orville’s first displays of showmanship
occurred at Fort Myer, where a newspaperman recorded him “dipping to the
crowd” in his flyer.\textsuperscript{37} Observations noting the enthusiasm of the crowd were
common among the news reports of Orville’s flights. One article described how
the Wrights’ long-time mechanic and closest assistant, Charlie Taylor, marked
out the minutes Orville had spent flying in eye-catching white paint on the roof of
a barn so that Orville would know how long he had been in the air. When Orville
passed the hour mark, “All of the motorists tooted their horns and each time the
aeroplane circled around after that the spectators cheered wildly.” While this
display had a utilitarian purpose, it also fostered the sense of spectacle for the
crowds.\textsuperscript{38}

Coverage of the spectacle never lost sight of the development that, over
the course of several days, “Wright gained gradually what appears to have been
a complete mastery of his machine.”\textsuperscript{39} Reporters themselves were aware that
this was what drew the crowds that one observed, “grouped about the shed, a
throng [which] was eyeing with curiosity and wonder the machine which had
gained so much mastery over the air.”\textsuperscript{40} This association of the Wright brothers’
celebrity with their ability to conquer the skies would continue to characterize the
way the media talked about the Wright brothers throughout the next decade.
Wilbur’s 1912 obituary stated that he had “earned for himself a place with the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{37} “Wright Flies Over and Hour,” \textit{New York Times}. September 10, 1908.
\item \textsuperscript{38} “Flies 65 Minutes in Brisk Breeze,” \textit{New York Times}. September 11, 1908.
\item \textsuperscript{39} “Wright’s Great Exploits,” \textit{New York Times}. September 18, 1908.
\item \textsuperscript{40} “How the Wrights Developed their Aeroplane,” \textit{New York Times}, September 20, 1908.
\end{itemize}
great master builders of civilization—with Watt, Stephenson, Morse, Edison and Bell.” By identifying these inventors as “master builders,” the obituary invoked the memory of a waning craft tradition.41

As had been the case with Edison, the Wright brothers’ humble, Midwestern origins allowed them to play the role of relatable celebrity-inventor well. Reporters often praised their work ethic and modest nature which left them “but little time to talk about themselves.”42 Another writer noted that the brothers exhibited an authenticity which Americans longed for:

Unlike many celebrities, a close acquaintance and daily association with the Wrights does not discover the flaw in the wall which hero worship erects about those who are rated among the world’s really great. Wilbur and Orville Wright are in fact the simple, unassuming, modest men our somewhat hysterical press has represented them to be. They really do not care for applause, for notoriety, or for crowds.43

Like Edison, the Wrights were seen not as having sought out the spotlight, but rather as having it thrust upon them. The brothers’ Midwestern modesty and rootedness in an idyllic narrative flowing from their childhood in Dayton to their invention of the airplane allowed observers to see them as thoroughly relatable men, although the separation between these celebrity-inventors and ordinary folks was not forgotten. The spectacle often gave way to hero worship. One writer described a man whose obsession with the inventors of the airplane seemed to him almost comical, but who was nevertheless “satisfied to have lived

41 Many popular perceptions of the Wright brothers are still colored by language which invokes both the Protestant work ethic and a dedication to craft. Historian Lawrence Goldstein, for example, concludes his book with the assentation that Wilbur Wright was a perfect example of Weber’s “ascetic Protestantism.” Goldstein, 385-386.; Henry Woodhouse. “Wilbur Wright, The Man Who Made Flying Possible.” Collier’s Magazine, June 15, 1912, 13.
even for a little time in the shadow of greatness.”\textsuperscript{44} While popular magazine articles like “How to Build a Glider” offered readers fantasies of heroic material mastery and flight, they were often paired with articles that reminded readers of the difficulties of achieving that sort of mastery.\textsuperscript{45} One such article chronicled the trials of an amateur aviator.

I was completely saturated with aviation lore, and knew not only all that the Wrights and others had accomplished but had gotten the idea that I knew a thing or two more. As I look back over that period now and realize how little I did know I am ashamed to look a picture of the Wrights in the face, but like everyone else I have found the experience a great teacher.\textsuperscript{46}

Attitudes like these reveal both the appeal the Wright brothers had for many who felt their connection to or control over the material world slipping away, as well as the fact that many were aware that it was not to be recovered by ordinary folks. Material and mechanical mastery had become the privilege of the celebrity-inventor.

Lewis Mumford also saw the public’s obsession with such things as rooted in the changes wrought upon human life by machine civilization. He attributed the popularity of airshows, along with all other spectacular “mass-sports,” to a desire to transcend the regimentation of life in a mechanical age. However, Mumford saw the ability of airmen to do so as less rooted in their technical expertise than in their physical prowess put on display in a competitive arena.\textsuperscript{47} The success of

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid, 933.
\textsuperscript{45} Harold S Lynn. “How to Build a Glider.” Country Life in America 20, no. 6 (July 1911): 34–35.
\textsuperscript{47} Lewis Mumford. Technics and Civilization. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), 303-306. It is worth noting that Technics and Civilization was published only two decades after the Wright brothers first flew and during a time in which airshows and races remained one of the more common forms of mass-spectacle available to the public.
Glenn Curtiss’s company not only gave the Wright brothers a competitor in the emergent market, but also added a new level of competition to the spectacle surrounding celebrity-inventors. Airplane exhibitions, races and meets became a common form of mass entertainment in the years after 1908 and newspapers were often eager to advertise them as grand battles between celebrity-inventors and the fleet of pilots under their employ.48 In 1910, a reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* noted that “the proposed tourney is to be a battle of the two schools of aviation, one represented by Curtiss and the other by the Wrights.” The reporter would also not allow readers to forget that “keen rivalry exists between the Wright brothers and Curtiss.”49 This competitive atmosphere and focus on the physical prowess of aviators was more present in the popular discourse surrounding aeronautics than of earlier inventors due to the rise of spectator sports and sportsmen’s culture in the Anglo-American world in the 1890s.50

As both pilots and inventors, aviators like Curtiss and the Wright brothers embodied the hopes for prowess associated with sportsmen’s culture as well as those associated with tinkering mechanics. One aviator noted that “I am firm in

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my belief that to be a successful constructor one must also be capable of flying a
machine for himself."51 Many commentators began referring to flying as a sport
and pitching it as a useful activity for men seeking to live strenuous lives. “Only
the fittest survive,” wrote one amateur flyer, “the better the man, the better the
aviation sportsman.” As such, it became a ground on which the “transformation of
masculinity,” as discussed by Gail Bederman in Manliness and Civilization, took
place.52 Nevertheless, even articles like these noted that “the test of a real aviator
lies in his ability to handle his craft.” Such mastery, readers were always
reminded, was possessed by “only veterans like the Wrights, the Curtisses, the
Baldwins, the Graham-Whites, and the Paulhans.”53

Although some flying sportsmen associated flight so closely with
masculinity, both the exhibition flying business and amateur flying also attracted
women to their ranks. Early twentieth-century flyers like Neta Snook, who taught
Amelia Earhart how to fly, stood at the vanguard for the corps of female pilots
who would soar in the 1930s. They were often favorites of the crowds, and at
least one airman took to the habit of dressing like a woman himself while
performing tricks to add another layer to the spectacle.54 Generally, the press
praised the “commendable work” of these female flyers. Female aviators were
part of the formation of the “New Woman,” both as an idea and cultural identity.

51 Phillip Wakeman Wilcox. “Why I Am in Aeronautics.” Country Life in America 20, no. 6 (July
52 Bederman, 6-10.; See also, E. Anthony Rotundo. American Manhood. (New York: BasicBooks,
Oxford University Press, 2006), 82-115.
53 Clifford B. Harmon. “Flying as a Sport for Amateurs.” Country Life in America 20, no. 6 (July
54 Goldstone, 323.
Nevertheless, women faced considerable difficulty in their attempts to get into aviation, particularly in these early years. Neta Snook had initially been turned away from one of Curtiss’s flight schools in Newport News, VA.\(^55\)

A young woman visited the same flight school in 1919, and reported in a diary entry on her fascination with both the machines and Glenn Curtiss. Her remark, “I touched his coat when he wasn’t looking,” reflected the aura of his personal celebrity. Her interest in flight was apparent from her description of the school as “the greatest place of all.” Because she was on vacation with her family, it is unlikely the young woman directly sought to enroll in the school, but she did learn, as had Neta Snook, that “they will not teach women unless they buy a machine.” Snook’s response to this had been to buy a plane after the war, rebuild it herself, and learn to fly in a different place. The young diarist, on the other hand, wrote, “we saw a new one. Tried out by an expert for the first time. It worked beautifully—It surely thrills one to see such a great success—accomplished before one’s eyes.”\(^56\) Rather than attempt to strike out on her own, she simply enjoyed the spectacle put on by the male professionals. While the association of flying with sport opened the door for the participation of numerous individuals in the conquest of the air, the public was nonetheless consistently reminded that individual mastery belonged only to a few, male celebrity-inventors.

\(^55\) In addition to prejudice about women’s ability to operate a flying machine, women also faced the reality that many men in the aviation business worried that if a woman was to be hurt or killed while flying a machine, the public perception of flight as inherently dangerous would never recede. Amy Waters Yarsinske. *Flyboys Over Hampton Roads: Glenn Curtiss’s Southern Experiment.* (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2010), 87-93.; Corn, 75-76.

\(^56\) Diary (Hampton, Va.), Special Collections Research Center, Swem Library, College of William and Mary.; Yarsinske, 87-93.
As with the celebrity-inventors associated with electricity, the press glorified aviators not only as the possessors of personal mastery of the material world, but also because they could transcend the dangers of modern life. Robert Wohl has connected aviation in Western culture with an obsession with death, while Ben Singer argues that the sensational depictions of death encountered in this era expressed a deep unease and sense of danger regarding modern, urban life.\(^{57}\) The Wright brothers were confronted with the connection between death and aviation with the death of Lieutenant Thomas Selfridge during their exhibition at Fort Myer. Orville had taken Selfridge up as a military representative on one of his flights but a propeller problem led to a crash in view of a crowd of onlookers who had to be chased away from the “wreck of bloodstained wood, wire, and canvas,” by cavalry.\(^{58}\)

In the wake of the crash, one writer expressed concern for something “far more important than the injury to the machine” in wondering “will he [Orville] lose his nerve?” The public was concerned that their hero may not be able to recover his mastery over the dangerous forces of the sky. Orville himself, the author asserts, never lost faith in his nerve, “but many not so fortified wondered whether Orville Wright would ever again sail over the earth in his aeroplane, whether the air would ever know his hand in mastery again.” Thankfully, the article continued, “his flights at Fort Myer this year have triumphantly answered these questions, for never a trace of nervousness or worry could closest observer see, and in none of his flights was there any evidence of lack of control or timid wavering.”

By continuing to pilot his machine fearlessly and skillfully, the celebrity-inventor held onto his symbolic mastery over death.\textsuperscript{59}

The death of Thomas Selfridge and the public’s fascination with it would not prove to be an isolated incident, but instead foreshadowed the atmosphere that surrounded aeronautical exhibitions and meets in the ensuing years. In fact, between Thomas Selfridge’s death in 1908 and the first death of a female pilot in June 1912, aviation had claimed 146 casualties.\textsuperscript{60} Many men and women proved to be as fascinated by these deaths as the readers of the sensational newspapers discussed by Singer were by accidental, urban deaths. Lewis Mumford asserted that the possibility of death became an intrinsic part of the spectacle of an airshow.\textsuperscript{61} In fact, he was only echoing what many stunt flyers of the time had already said.\textsuperscript{62} The crowd itself was blamed in the death of one aviator, after John Frisbie, a pilot under Curtiss’s employ, was driven to fly in a damaged craft by jeers from a Kansas crowd and promptly crashed.\textsuperscript{63} In other cases, the crowd itself was not safe from the dangers of aviation, as one story covering an accident involving a plane that crashed directly into the crowd demonstrated. The article described the “moans of the maimed” and the “excited trampling of the crowd, pouring down the grandstand to get a closer view” as the plane crashed into “the scrambling mass of humanity” in the grandstands. As the

\textsuperscript{59} C.H. Claudy, “With the Wright Brothers at Fort Myer.” \textit{World To-Day} 17 (September 1909): 929–36.
\textsuperscript{60} Goldstone, 328.
\textsuperscript{61} Mumford, 305.
\textsuperscript{62} Lincoln Beachey, for instance, once attempted to quit stunt flying, in part out of his disgust for the crowds which he believed came to his shows, “to watch me die.” \textsuperscript{62} “Beachey Killed in a Taube Drop,” \textit{New York Times}. March 15, 1915.
\textsuperscript{63} “Airman Driven to Death by Jeers,” \textit{Belleville News-Democrat}. September 2, 1911.
article went on, its descriptions became more grotesque, as "features and limbs were sliced off as with a knife and several minutes after the accident took place a severed nose and finger were picked up in front of the grandstand." Of the incident’s single fatality, the reporter stated, "Identification was almost impossible, as his entire face had been cut off by the propeller of the aeroplane."64

Pilots themselves, however, were more often the victims of these accidents. One of the most widely reported on deaths of an exhibition pilot was that of Ralph Johnstone. Johnstone, who was known for his somewhat reckless flying, became the subject of a morbid spectacle when his machine plummeted to the ground during an exhibition in 1910. “Body buried in the Wreck of His Machine. Carried from Field to Ragtime Music,” ran the headline in the Boston Daily Globe.65 Several other papers carried a report that the crowd which rushed Johnstone’s downed flyer attempted to make off with souvenirs.

Scarcely had Johnstone hit the ground before morbid men and women swarmed over the wreckage, fighting with each other for souvenirs. One of the broken wooden stay had gone almost through Johnstone’s body. Before doctors or police could reach the scene one man had torn this splinter from the body and run away, carrying his trophy with the aviator’s blood still dripping from its ends.66

The disdain for the “morbid men and women” is reminiscent of the descriptions of the crowds which swarmed Edison’s lab in 1880. Both the

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obsession of these men and women with the death of an aviator and the
obsession of the reporter and his readers with their behavior reveal an unease
about both the nature of the spectacle and the dangers of modern life. The
coverage of these tragedies also reminded the public that very few individuals, if
any at all, were truly safe in the skies.

The duty of making aviation appear safe amidst the deaths of scores of
exhibition pilots fell on veteran aviators like Curtiss and the Wright brothers. One
writer expressed hope that the Wright brothers “will lay down the law to his
[Johnstone’s] teammate, Hoxsey, in plain Ohio English, and insist that while he
flies for them he shall cut out the spiral descent, except in a modified form.”67
Many commentators began to draw a distinction between the old generation of
aviation pioneers, including Curtiss and the Wrights, and the younger generation
of exhibition pilots who seemed to be dying off in droves. Walter Brookins, one of
the Wrights’ longest-serving exhibition pilots, attempted to organize “the safe and
sane flyers club” to encourage these young pilots to fly more conservatively.68
With even professional flyers at severe risk, the public was reminded of their
inability to maintain personal safety in a dangerous modern world. Celebrity-
inventors as veteran flyers became more exceptional, even within their own field.

67 Even if such a stern command was given, it would seem to not have been enough to prevent
Hoxsey’s own death in an exhibition crash only a few months later. Goldstone, 254.
68 The club’s failure to get off the ground is attributable to both the difficulty Brookins had in
getting Curtiss and the Wrights to work together and in the fact that the most effective way for
young airmen to make money was in performing dangerous stunts. Comparatively, there was not
much money to be made as a, “safe and sane flyer.” The spectacle, when not directly fixed upon
the celebrity-inventors like Curtiss and the Wrights, was more interested in the sensational.
Goldstone, 324-325.
These same veteran aviators began looking for collective solutions to the dangers of the aeronautical industry. Curtiss demonstrated his support for safe flying by writing the following in the *New York Times*: “I believe that the day of purely daredevil and spectacular feats by aviators, simply for the reputation of doing such things, is rapidly passing.” He foresaw a new era of increased commercial use of the airplane, which had thus far been limited outside of exhibitions and military development. Significantly, he noted that “the skill of the aviators has kept pace with the increasing dependability of the machine. Aviators have become more proficient because they have more faith in their machines.”

While an increase in both the proficiency of pilots and the utility of technology was necessary for airplanes to become safer and to take on more industrial roles, the human element was plainly made dependent on the technological element. Curtiss went on:

> Experience has demonstrated the fact that aviation is beyond the experimental stage, and the development of the industry deals to-day with the improvement of details in the construction of standard makes of aeroplanes.69

By laying his hopes upon the standardization of the industry, Curtiss closed the door on the very path to mastery he had taken—through independent invention and experimentation in the aeronautical industry. The Wrights also championed a vision of the future of aviation rooted in large-scale industry in the *New York Times*.70 Standardization, which augmented industrial alienation even while it promoted safety, was the vision for future of the aeronautical industry set

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forth by Curtiss and the Wrights. The images of celebrity-inventors allowed the public to accept their own alienation in return for the collective mastery and safety promised by new technologies through their representative celebrity-inventors.

Naturally, part of their push for standardization and the end of the exhibition era of aviation was rooted in a desire to make flight a safer act. Both Curtiss and the Wright brothers saw innovations in aeronautical technology as the way to accomplish this end. Curtiss devoted a good portion of his research and invention capacity to the development of hydroplanes, which he hoped to sell both to the military and the public. Flying over water would be less dangerous than flying over land and hopefully put piloting “within the range of possibility” for the average person.\(^7\) Orville Wright, on the other hand, devoted his resources to the development of a better automatic stabilizing mechanism, which he hoped would both make flying safer and render trick flying obsolete.\(^7\) If there were to be an airplane in every garage, it would be by virtue of technology making flying easier and safer, not by an increased sense of personal control or ability on the part of individuals. Thus, the drive to establish safety in flight helped to push the concept of collective mastery and safety through the public personas of celebrity-inventors.

The dream of an airplane in every garage was one of the many hopes Americans placed upon aviation technology that would not be fulfilled. Visions of

\(^7\) Glenn Hammond Curtiss “Bird-Man and Duck-Man.” *Country Life in America* 20, no. 6 (July 1911): 32–33.

technological utopianism were present in the discourse surrounding aviators just as they had been in the discourse surrounding inventors in the electrification industry. Joseph Corn discusses these utopian visions of aviation’s future at length in *The Winged Gospel*. These aspirations included but were not limited to the belief that airplanes could break railroad monopolies, eliminate inequality between men and women, end war and foster global connectedness, and even bring about the next stage in human evolution. While Corn roots these visions of technological utopia in evangelical Protestantism, A. Bowdoin Van Riper points towards the emergent progressivism and other political context of the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century. Whatever their intellectual and cultural origins, the intensity and ubiquity of these visions of utopia reveal an acceptance of the loss of individual material mastery and safety on the part of large portions on the American public. This acceptance was, in many ways, channeled through the celebrity of inventors and led to a desire for collective mastery of the material world located in corporations and the state rather than in the individual producer-citizen.⁷³

**Conclusion: One-part Man, Two-parts Machine**

Amidst the height of the spectacular drama of early twentieth-century airplane meets, Wright Company aviator Walter Brookins was asked about his feelings regarding an upcoming race. His response illustrates how the spectacle of aviation invoked ideas and concerns about the relationship between men and women and the machines that shaped their world.

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⁷³ Corn, 34.; Van Riper, 27.
The race will be a fine and thorough test of the modern aeroplane and its operator. I think it will be found that the division of the labor and strains will be one-third on the engine, one-third on the surface, and one-third on the man himself. That is to say, if you have the best engine in the world and a poor mechanic in the seat, the perfect motor would do you no good. The same applies to the supporting surfaces of the aeroplane. The finest operator could do little with a bad engine or a badly designed and constructed aeroplane. And there you are, with an equal division among all three factors for success. The race will be a test of the three--motor, planes and man.  

When crowds gathered across the country to see a man or woman conquering the air in a flying machine, or when crowds invaded Edison’s workshop, they were hoping to witness a representation of the mastery of the material world they felt slipping from their own lives. However, they were also confronted with the unobtainability of that mastery. Aviators like Walter Brookins could only hope to achieve connection to and command over the material world with the help of their machines. Two out of Brookins’ three components for success were embodied not in the pilot but in the machine, whose only human masters, if indeed it had any, were the definitionally extraordinary. The spectacular display of new technologies and the celebrity of inventors allowed the public to identify vicariously with celebrity-inventors while nonetheless asserting that individual mastery was beyond the reach of ordinary folks. The discourse surrounding the collective future predicted by these celebrity-inventors then allowed the individual—whose own industrial endeavors had often been rendered, like that of the aviator, one part man and two parts machine—to shift their desires from the individual to the collective. In a republic once built on the premise of an independent citizenry of yeomen and mechanics, this shift in

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cultural values—facilitated by the spectacle of invention and celebrity-inventors which derived its symbolic power from a connection to the memory of an individual craft tradition—was a profound and consequential shift indeed.

The echoes of this shift can be heard in the political, economic and cultural currents of the early twentieth century. Michael McGerr argues that progressivism as a political, economic and cultural project was championed by members of a middle class who had decided to eschew individualism for collectivism. Important progressive intellectuals like Thorstein Veblen demonstrate the extent to which collectivist visions of the future were replacing individualist ones, as the machine process was seen not only as the harbinger of individual alienation but also the bearer of collective mastery. McGerr also points to the middle class’s shaken faith in the Protestant work ethic as another keystone of the development of progressivism.\(^7^5\) Among the working classes, socialism and the American Socialist Party began to reach a mass audience in the first decades of the twentieth century.\(^7^6\) In addition to collective-oriented leftist and reformist political movements, David Harvey also sees a more collective-focused hegemonic cultural and economic system, which he calls “Fordist-Keynesianism,” arising in the early twentieth century in accordance with changes in the capitalist mode of production. Labor under Fordism, for both laborers and


the managerial middle class, involved a surrender to alienation in exchange for the collective mastery of the state, corporation and economy as a whole.\textsuperscript{77}

The discourse surrounding celebrity inventors demonstrates how the old intellectual values of individual mastery could be transformed through the medium of public spectacle and begin to change the way people thought about their relationship with the material world. While Americans did not, and to this day have not, abandoned a commitment to individualism generally, a renewed commitment to the collective project was championed through the spectacular representations of individual and extraordinary celebrity-inventors which helped to facilitate the transition from a nineteenth-century American culture to the emergent culture of a twentieth-century economy of mass-production.

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“This Most Republican Amalgamation:”¹
The Ideology of the Manual Labor Movement in Early U.S. Education

In 1831, a writer for the Workingman’s Advocate attended a meeting called by the abolitionist and millennial philanthropist, Lewis Tappan, on the subject of “Fellenberg or manual labor institutions.” The writer expressed pride that the system of instruction espoused by the working men’s movement—in New York City and elsewhere—was gaining popularity. While manual labor system had previously been “denounced as ‘the wildest dream that ever entered the brain of a visionary fanatic,’” the writer was encouraged that it was now “openly advocated by reverend gentlemen.”² The writer implied that the manual labor system was the product of socialist reform and workingmen’s political circles, and had only recently been picked up by seminaries. In reality, different groups—with different ideological goals—had already been attracted to the idea of incorporating agricultural and mechanical instruction into secondary and collegiate education for young men for more than a decade. Supporters of manual labor education ran across a wide spectrum of differing visions of republicanism and Northern nationalism but each contributed to the discourse on those subjects. In the end, it was the radical abolitionist and socialist manual laborites who had the most to say in crafting a vision of republicanism and Northern nationalism that made room for the exercise of state power on behalf of equality.

¹ Six Essays on Public Education. (New-York: New-York Daily Sentinel, 1830), 12,
The manual labor movement reached its height of popularity and institutional support in the early 1830s, during which manual labor was incorporated, to varying degrees, into the curricula of approximately thirty or forty schools, largely in both Eastern and Western States North of the Mason-Dixon line and the Ohio river. Educational reformers looked to the school established by Philipp Emanuel von Fellenberg in Switzerland for inspiration. However, while Fellenberg’s school segregated the sons of the working class, pursuing the industrial program, from the sons of the rich, pursuing the traditional program, most reformers in the United States sought to make manual labor a part of education for all students. They believed doing so would, among other things, ensure the physical well-being of the students and allow “indigent” students to pay for a portion of their education through the products of their labor. Although trumpeted in the religious, pedagogical, and reform presses in the decade after 1825, the movement was in decline by 1835. Many colleges established on the manual labor system experienced financial difficulties, and others abandoned the agricultural and mechanical components they had previously adopted. However, the schools which were merely imagined and written about by the strongest advocates of the manual labor system have as much to contribute to an analysis of the ideology behind the pedagogy as those schools they actually established.

The tendency of historians to focus on established schools and their founders has led them to devote their attention to the religious side of the movement. Most of the colleges that were founded on the manual labor system, 3

or engrafted it upon their existing curricula, were seminaries associated with the
Christian revivalism of the Second Great Awakening. A major dispute in this
historiography revolves around relationship of the Second Great Awakening to
the shifting dimensions of class amidst the market revolution. Robert Abzug and
Jonathan Glickstein discuss reformers’ ambivalences regarding the devaluation
of manual labor and growing class distinctions in the midst of the market
revolution.\textsuperscript{4} Paul Goodman takes this argument furthest by focusing on the close
connection between the manual labor system, Christian revivalism, and
abolitionism. He asserts that “the manual labor phase of the Finneyite revival was
a critical reaction to an unfolding bourgeois culture.”\textsuperscript{5} As such, Goodman is
contributing to trend among scholars writing in the 1990s to question the
conclusions of previous social historians, like Paul Johnson, who see the Second
Great Awakening as a largely bourgeois affair through which the middle and
upper classes cemented their control of an emerging working class.\textsuperscript{6} Stephen P.
Rice argues reasserts the view of the manual labor movement as serving
privileged interests. According to Rice, the manual labor movement was a part of
the cultural and intellectual creation of a class society in the nineteenth-century

University Press, 1991), 79-82. Glickstein, particularly, points to the manual labor system, and
public education in general, as something both conservative and radical voices could agree on for
vastly different reasons.; Paul Abzug, \textit{Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious
\textsuperscript{5} Goodman, 388.
\textsuperscript{6} See also, Mark S. Schantz, “Evangelical Reform, and the Market Revolution in Antebellum
America.” \textit{Journal of the Early Republic} 17, no. 3 (Autumn 1997): 425–66.; Daniel Walker Howe,
University Press, 2007), 291.; Paul E. Johnson, \textit{A Shopkeeper’s Millennium: Society and
United States. What histories of the manual labor movement in seminaries typically agree on, however, is that religious reformers hoped to cultivate stronger and more hardy men to combat the perceived feminization of Christianity.8

Looking beyond, but not entirely away from, the seminaries reveals that some of the most ambitious manual-labor reformers—including William Maclure, Robert Dale Owen, and Frances Wright—were unabashedly secular and came from a British dissenting tradition. Understanding the role of the manual labor system in their ideologies contributes not only to the historiography of the manual labor movement, but also to the historiography of Owenism in America, which often deals with the importance of education to Owenite philosophy but does not put it into conversation with the broader manual labor movement.9

The concept of republicanism is integral to the ideology of the manual labor movement. Daniel T. Rodgers highlights how many historians have followed Gordon Wood in defining republicanism as the effort to reconcile “competing interests” to the “common good” through the exercise of virtue. He notes how many historians have even pushed this concept further into the

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8 In addition to those works mentioned above, see Laura Graham, “From Patriarchy to Paternalism: Disestablished Clergymen and the Manual Labor Movement in Antebellum America.” Dissertation, University of Rochester, 1993.
nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{10} Sean Wilentz builds on the work of J.G.A Pocock, who characterizes republicanism as rooted in the valorization of an independent and virtuous citizenry dedicated to the good of the commonwealth. Wilentz argues that the American working class formed in the first half of the nineteenth century around an “artisan republicanism” that added the valorization of equality.\textsuperscript{11} Harry Watson, on the other hand, identifies republicanism not with the effort to reconcile competing interests, but with rhetorical consternation about power, virtue, and decay.\textsuperscript{12} While the republicanism dealt with here has more to do with reconciling competing interests, the question of state power is also central, as the different visions of republicanism offered by manual laborites included ideas about legitimate state power. Further, Watson and Howe describe the different visions of republicanism presented by the Democratic and Whig parties of the 1820s and 1830s. Different factions within the manual labor movement fit into, crafted, and built upon these different visions of republicanism.\textsuperscript{13}

In my discussion of the relationship between republicanism and Northern nationalism, I will be building off the work of previous historians as well. James McPherson points to the exceptionalism of the North, rather than that of the South, as a driving factor in sectional conflict. He connects the Northern United States to parts of industrial Western Europe through shared exceptional qualities associated with the development of capitalism and liberalism. Reform

\textsuperscript{11} Wilentz, 14-15, 61-63.
\textsuperscript{13} Howe, 544-545.; Watson, 45-47.
movements, like the manual labor movement, were an important part of this exceptionism which invigorated the North and frightened Southern leaders.\textsuperscript{14} Susan-Mary Grant points further to the way Northerners crafted their own region-specific nationalism, in opposition to perceptions of the South, in the first half of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{15} Finally, Jonathan Glickstein brings conceptions of free-labor to the center of sectional identities in describing how Northerners fashioned ideas about free-labor in opposition to their perceptions of the slave-labor system of the South.\textsuperscript{16}

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While egalitarian reform drove some of the most significant advocates of the manual labor system, Stephen Rice reminds us that most were relatively conservative.\textsuperscript{17} These conservative supporters focused their efforts both on seminaries and in general colleges. Whether in the seminaries or outside of them, conservative manual-laborites communicated a vision of free-labor republicanism in accordance with that of the rising Whig party. This idea of republicanism cast class distinctions as natural, and even symbiotic. Conservatives sought to use manual labor education as a form of social control and sought to reconcile competing interests in a hierarchical republican framework.

\textsuperscript{14} James M. McPherson, “Antebellum Southern Exceptionalism: A New Look at an Old Question.” \textit{Civil War History} 29, no. 3 (September 1983): 242-244.
\textsuperscript{15} Susan-Mary Grant, \textit{North Over South: Northern Nationalism and Identity in the Antebellum Era}. (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2000).
\textsuperscript{17} Rice, 72.
Some of the earliest mentions of the “Fellenberg System” in American newspapers demonstrate the appeal of the school established by Philipp Emanuel von Fellenberg in Switzerland to conservatives interested in regulating the working class. While manual laborites of all stripes cited Felleberg’s school, Hofwyl, in Switzerland, as the inspiration for their efforts, the conservatives held most closely to its founder’s vision, which segregated the students of different classes. In the early 1820s, many mentions of Fellenberg’s school in the mainstream American press simply praised the system, without offering improvements.\(^\text{18}\)

Newspapers expressed support for the system’s ability to foster industrial discipline amidst the social turbulence in the wake of the American and market revolutions. “One of the leading features of the plan,” reported the National Gazette, “is, a moral and physical discipline, such as cannot be achieved within the precincts of a populous town.” The rural character of Fellenberg’s boarding school appealed to philanthropists worried about urbanization and was a central feature of the system. American supporters of Fellenberg sought to craft young men into efficient and obedient workers in isolated boarding schools. The rural placement of Fellenberg’s school also allowed for the students’ performance of agricultural labor, one of the activities which would promote “habits of personal labor and exertion, of unremitted order and decorum, of abstinence from civic luxuries and distraction and familiarity with the direct means of gaining a livelihood.” As such, the manual labor system was ideal for inculcating “the idea

of self support and social effectiveness.” The *Connecticut Mirror* also championed Hofwyl as an institution worthy of imitation for the same reasons. The wealthier students at Hofwyl, although living “quite separate” from their working-class counterparts, were nonetheless taught “the method of reclaiming and of training them.” American admirers imagined Hofwyl as a place to teach workers how to be controlled and to teach wealthy students how to control them.

The *Mirror* reported positively on the efforts of Samuel S. Stebbins to found a manual labor school in Connecticut in 1824, and noted that “the scholars are to be boarded on the spot, and their industry, their frugality and their morals will be *practically* attended to.” The school began operating as the “Fellenberg School” in 1825. Throughout the coverage leading up to and during the founding of the Connecticut Fellenberg School, the *Mirror* assumed that the project would interest local farmers. The rural placement of manual labor boarding schools was also significant in the context of changing economic and demographic realities, particularly in the Northeast. New technologies and production techniques reduced the amount of manpower needed on farms while also facilitating increased population. At the same time, many New England farming estates were no longer large enough to divide between each eligible heir. Many young men were thus left looking for other opportunities. Many middle, and

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19 “Practical Education.” *National Gazette.* May 19, 1821.
20 “Mr. Fellenberg’s Establishment.” *Connecticut Mirror.* March 17, 1823.
upper-class reformers worried about the state of the countryside and the behavior of this growing class of landless workers.\textsuperscript{22} Anthony Morris, in an article originally printed in the \textit{American Farmer}, displayed anxiety about “this great class” of displaced agricultural workers. “Human labor on our farms,” he wrote, “has been left almost to its own undisdisciplined operation . . . . A day of undisdisciplined drudgery, stimulated in the field by whiskey, [is followed] by a night passed in the riot of intemperance.” He particularly noted the benefits of the Fellenberg system to rural areas. “Our moderate farmers and mechanics,” he wrote, “would find at their doors a liberal and practical system of education prepared for their sons, and the laboring classes would be simultaneously employed and educated.” This article also advocated for the Fellenberg system in its original form, with middle-class men to be educated separately from, but in proximity to, the sons of “the exclusively laboring class.” The result of such an arrangement, Morris believed, would be “industry, intelligence, and happiness, . . . instead of indolence, idleness, and misery.”\textsuperscript{23}

Christian revivalists latched onto the Fellenberg system as well, but for some different goals. Driven as much by the need to prepare an increasing number of ministers to meet the demands of the Second Great Awakening as the need to regulate working populations, manual labor seminaries were more likely to adapt the Fellenberg system for their own purposes. They did so by making

\textsuperscript{22} Howe, 526.; Watson, 19.
manual labor an important component of education for all students or by stressing the ability of students to pay their way through labor. While the conservative supporters of the manual labor system mentioned the possibility of using students’ manual labor to pay the cost of education, by and large they believed, as a Lafayette College pamphlet wrote, “not money-saving but health-saving is our grand peculiar object.”24 As a growing number of men, including those who served in the pulpit, began pursuing professions removed from physical labor, many reformers worried about the health of men who dedicated their lives to mental labor. Their concerns revealed deep ambivalence about the connection between productive physical labor and manhood in the antebellum United States, which came forth in the efforts of manual laborites to combat the feminization of Christianity.

The supporters of the manual labor system believed that their consternation about students’ health had life or death consequences. “Beyond all controversy,” the Lafayette pamphlet admonished, “the number of valuable young men is very great, who have fallen into ill health and a premature grave; not from want of original firmness of constitution; but from the utter neglect of systematic, regular, health-preserving exercise.” Physical exercise, however, was not all that the manual labor system offered. Gymnastics, a rival system of physical education, was gaining traction in pedagogical circles for similar reasons. Manual laborites, however, were adamant that their system was best because it put physical labor to productive use. Productive labor would cultivate

24 Fellenberg or An Appeal to the Friends of Education on Behalf of Lafayette College. (Easton, PA: J.P. Htrich, 1835), 11. Emphasis in original.
manhood in future-missionaries, who were sorely in need of it. “Now for this service,” the pamphlet continued, speaking of the ministry, “the Captain of salvation wants men—not the emaciated forms, but real men, capable of enduring (...). The age of cold metaphysical disquisitions is past. The seasons for action is upon us.”

Conservative manual laborites placed their hopes in the combination of mental and manual labor, valorizing productive free-labor as a component of manhood and citizenship.

The free-labor republicanism these reformers envisioned was definitively Northern. While the radicals of the abolitionist and socialist wings of the manual labor movement would perhaps push Northern nationalism further, conservative manual laborites also defined themselves against the South. In fact, many saw manual labor education as a tool to do precisely that. They sought “an adaptation to our national character” to help secure the hegemony of Northern conceptions of free-labor. They asserted the superiority of an educated working-class over an ignorant slave population. Providing education through labor would, Morris asserted, “form a character as different from that of the uninstructed, undisciplined, and often intemperate clown, as the free, industrious and intelligent farmer, mechanic and laborer of a republic ought to be, from the dependent, degraded and ignorant slave.”

In comparing the justice of their Northern free-labor system to the injustices and crippling effects of the slave-labor system of the South,

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25 Fellenberg or An Appeal to the Friends of Education on Behalf of Lafayette College. (Easton, PA: J.P. Htrich, 1835), 9-12, 22.
conservative manual laborites helped to construct a Northern nationalism based on Whiggish republicanism and free-labor ideology. They were less likely to include a place for state action, at least on behalf of manual labor schools, in their plans than the radical abolitionists and socialists, who conceived of state action as an appropriate tool to combat inequality of caste and class. However, in mentioning the possibility of a situation in which “labor is made to pay for education, and education to be the reward of labor,” even conservative manual laborites, like Morris, communicated something about the egalitarian potential of the system.27 The germs of a more equal republicanism and Northern nationalism were present in their formulations.

The Lafayette pamphlet argued that combining labor and education would elevate manual laborers in the eyes of educated men and foster fellow-feeling among different classes. Manual labor and intellectual aptitude, it asserted, were not incompatible.28 The Shrewsbury Polytechnic Institute, chartered by the State of New Jersey in 1829, presented a vision which further accentuated the egalitarian possibilities of the system.29 “Whether rich or poor,” the Shrewsbury constitution declared, “the Polytechnic Institute offers equal advantages to all.”30 The seeds of an egalitarian vision of education were latent in the visions of conservative manual laborites.

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27 Ibid.
28 Fellenberg or An Appeal to the Friends of Education on Behalf of Lafayette College. (Easton, PA: J.P. Htrich, 1835), 18.
30 Constitution and By-Laws of the Polytechnic Institute of Shrewsbury, Monmouth County, State of New Jersey. (New York: Elliot and Palmer, 1829), 6.
Many abolitionist reformers were drawn to the manual labor movement to cultivate those seeds. Most of these abolitionist reformers were involved, to at least some degree, in the Christian millennialism that took the Northern United States by storm in these decades. Christian revivalists sought to perfect human institutions and fought to rid the world of sin. Abolitionist reformers cast their eyes on an institution which had been a stain on the Republic’s virtue since well before its founding. In doing so, they articulated ideas about republicanism and Northern nationalism amidst the changing economy and society of the United States during the market revolution. Their visions left space for the exercise of state power to protect racial equality.

In the early 1830s, Theodore Weld—a student of Beriah Green’s abolitionist manual labor seminary, the Oneida Institute in Whitesboro, New York, and a beneficiary of the benevolence of Lewis Tappan—traveled the country and evangelized for the manual labor system. Upon his return, he published a tract as the general agent for the Society for Promoting Manual Labor in Literary Institutions. Weld was clearly attracted to manual labor education for one reason in common with more conservative revivalists: its potential to promote manliness among a lethargic clergy. He believed that the current seminary system “has a tendency to weaken the strong points of the character, and render it sickly and effeminate.” The manual labor system, on the other hand, “provides a commodity

31 Howe, 285-292.
which the exigencies of our own age call for with deafening clamor, but which is a scarcity in the modern market—manhood, full grown manhood.”

Blaming both the traditional, liberal-arts educational system of his time and the changing market economy for the effeminacy of clergymen, Weld promoted the manual labor system to secure a more muscular form of Christianity. However, for Weld and other abolitionist manual laborites, the need for strong, Christian men was rooted in the need to expand the free-labor republic across the continent. They were far more likely to adapt Fellenberg's system and make manual labor a requirement for all students at their institutions than to segregate classes. The words of a Reverend Mr. Frost, an abolitionist manual laborite, recorded in an Owenite newspaper, revealed that hardy Christian men were needed to combat one peculiar form of evil. “Dandies must not be raised to send on missions among the Indians,” Rev. Frost declared, “and to combat the ‘monster’ that is growing up in the valley of the Mississippi—they must be moral heroes.” While abolitionist manual laborites channeled the same obsession with manhood as their conservative brethren, they did so with an emphasis on slavery as a formidable foe. They also augmented and sharpened conceptions of Northern nationalism based on the moral superiority of free-labor over the “monster” of the Mississippi. Despite their emphasis on manhood, however, some manual labor seminaries, like Oberlin College, admitted women on an

33 “Fellenberg System of Instruction.” Workingman’s Advocate. June 18, 1831.
equal level with men, and some women’s colleges considered adopting the system.\textsuperscript{34}

Abolitionist manual laborites also articulated Northern nationalism through an understanding of republicanism in which they sought to reconcile competing interests to the common good. One group of competing interests they sought to reconcile were those of race, or, as an article in the \textit{Liberator} described racial prejudice, “the unchristian cord of caste.”\textsuperscript{35} The \textit{Liberator} first reported on the efforts of the New-England Abolitionist Society to establish a Manual Labor School for Colored Youth in February 1833.\textsuperscript{36} The editors wanted the school to cultivate a republicanism that would unite interests across the color line. They hoped that education would “easily vanquish the prejudices which still hold them in subjection” and cultivate fellow-feeling among white and black citizens.\textsuperscript{37} “When the naked heart of the educated colored man comes in contact with the naked heart of the educated white man,” the \textit{Liberator} declared, “their sympathies and affections intertwine around each other, and the current of brotherly emotion gushes out and flows together.”\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{34} Goodman, 384.
\textsuperscript{35} “Abolitionist Convention.” \textit{The Liberator}. December 28, 1833.
\textsuperscript{36} “Manual Labor School for Colored Youth.” \textit{The Liberator}. February 16, 1833.; “Manual Labor School.” \textit{The Liberator}. July 4, 1835. The Society dedicated effort to raising money for its establishment over the next two years until deciding in 1835 to direct interested free black men to the integrated Academy at Canaan. The Academy was not a manual labor school, but did offer, “facilities for converting it into a Manual Labor School, should it be thought desirable.” Based on the record, it does not appear that this ever happened. It is difficult to say whether this decision reflected a lack of interest, or ability to travel to the school, on the part of black men in New England or the declining prestige of the manual labor movement among reformers.
\textsuperscript{38} “Abolitionist Convention.” \textit{The Liberator}. December 28, 1833.
Manual labor would be an important part of making the education of free blacks possible by helping them to pay for their education. The *Liberator* praised the location of a manual labor school for free blacks in Pittsburgh. Due to “the extent of its manufacturing privileges,” the article declared, “the scholars of a manual labor school could always have healthy, and respectable, and profitable employment among these establishments.”39 The proposed New England school sought to replicate this example, as reformers hoped that profitable manual labor might “defray the expense of educating such pupils as may be otherwise unable to enjoy the benefits of the institution.”40

Weld argued in his report to the Society for the Promotion of Manual Labor in Literary Institutions that “the present system of education is anti-republican in its practical tendencies in another respect: *It makes labor disreputable.*” The manual labor system would change that. “If the officers and students of all our colleges and seminaries should spend their hours of relaxation in agricultural or mechanical employments,” he asked, “would it not go far in redeeming labor from disgrace?” Weld believed that the manual labor system could be used to cultivate a republicanism dedicated to equality of class as well as caste through its pecuniary advantages as well. In a section titled, “The Present System of Education is so Expensive, That the Practical Results are Anti-Republican,” he articulates a conflict between the few and the many grounded in education that was resonant with that articulated by the Democratic party, although Weld was certainly no Jacksonian. He argued that the high cost of education created a

situations in which “nineteen twentieths of our population are shut out from the advantages of education.” Weld maintained that “as knowledge is power,” the upper classes, who could afford education, thus used the benefits of education to continue exploiting the poorly educated. This led to a stark division of classes based on labor. “The laboring classes,” Weld lamented, “become hewers of wood and drawers of water for the educated.”41 The ability of students under the manual labor system to pay for their education by their own labor would, Weld hoped, ensure equal opportunities for the less wealthy. Weld appeared more radical in this regard than most abolitionist manual laborites, who lauded the pecuniary benefits of the manual labor system to the indigent, but did not frame them in terms of something like class struggle. In fact, many abolitionist manual laborites agreed with their conservative counterparts that the health benefits of the manual labor system were more important than the economic. The Board of Trustees of the Oneida Institute was adamant about this point, and stated that “we are far from regarding the pecuniary benefits which result to the student from uniting manual with mental labor, as the strongest attraction or the greatest advantage of the method he employs.”42 While abolitionist manual laborites were, at times, concerned about class divisions, their emphasis remained on promoting racial equality.

The ideological goal of racial equality pushed the abolitionist manual laborites to craft a vision of Northern nationalism defined against the South. McPherson has pointed out that the antebellum North may have had more in

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41 Weld, First Annual Report, 40-41.
42 Sketch of the Oneida Institute, 11. Emphasis in original.
common with industrializing parts of Western Europe, particularly with Britain, than with the American South.\textsuperscript{43} William Lloyd Garrison reflected this in his conception of Northern identity. Garrison was appointed by the New-England Abolitionist Society to travel to England to solicit funds for the proposed school.\textsuperscript{44} While there, attempting to solicit funds for the school, he wrote back to the Society that “although in a strange land, and for the first time a foreigner, I cannot but feel myself at home.” Garrison felt more at home among “a people whose cry is for universal freedom” than among his own countrymen.\textsuperscript{45} Garrison’s journey appears to have been less than successful, but certainly not from lack of effort on his part. He clearly perceived Britain to be a humanitarian ally in the struggle against slavery and constructed a Northern nationalism that defined itself with industrial Britain and against the slave South.

Other abolitionist manual laborites were constructing Northern nationalism as well. Theodore Weld took aim at both the Southern elite and those Northerners who believed their stories about the benevolence of slavery. He castigated Northerners for disbelieving that Southern planters could be capable of barbarism towards their slaves. Weld considered such an assumption of superior virtue on the part of the Southern gentry fundamentally absurd. Instead, Weld cast the Southern gentry as corrupt, pointing particularly to their fondness for dueling, cock-fighting and horse-racing.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{43} McPherson, 244.
\textsuperscript{44} “Important Mission: To the Friends of Emancipation.” \textit{The Liberator}. March 9, 1833.
\textsuperscript{45} “Mr. Garrison in England.” \textit{The Liberator}. July 6, 1833.
The Board of Trustees of Weld’s alma mater, the Oneida Institute, shared his disdain for sporting culture. A pamphlet promoting the school asked rhetorically, “What in any case, we would ask, leads a man to prefer idle sport to useful action? Such a preference, we cannot help thinking, indicates a bad state of the affections.”\(^{47}\) Northerners, while not perfect, were certainly not so barbaric. In fact, Weld blames the existence of horse-tracks and gambling in the North on “Northern men with Southern principles.” Weld thus crafted a vision of Northern nationalism built on dedication to sobriety, prudence and productive pursuits. He believed those Northern principles should be cultivated in a system of education. This imagined system was constructed against the “liberal education” of slaveholders. “‘Liberal education,’ despotic hands and ungoverned passions work together with slight friction,” Weld maintained, “and every day’s observation shows that the former is often a stimulant to the latter.”\(^{48}\) The connection he drew between the liberal education of Southern gentlemen and their barbarity illustrates that he saw education as an integral part of the formation of sectional character.

The republicanism and Northern nationalism crafted by abolitionist manual laborites allowed for the exercise of state power to protect equality. They envisioned state action as at the very least having a right, if not a duty, to end the evils of slavery. Goodman’s chronicling of the demands of Weld and the “Lane Rebels” for their school to take an immediatist stance on the slavery issue

\(^{47}\) Sketch of the Oneida Institute. (Utica, NY: Board of Trustees, 1834), 12.
\(^{48}\) Weld, American Slavery, 186-187.
illustrates this reality. In fact, in the case of Oberlin at least, backlash against the abolitionist stance of the college—based in part on the proliferation of an anti-Oberlin pamphlet which launched its authors’ career as a Democratic politician—drastically limited the capacity of the movement to expand. Abolitionist manual laborites were less enthusiastic about the role of the state in their educational schemes. Although Theodore Weld identified the object of the Society for Promoting Manual Labor in Literary Institutions as “entirely philanthropic and public” and the Oneida Institute presented itself in the same way, neither made any effort to get the state involved. Instead they solicited donations from “The Benevolent” and hoped the manual labor system would pay for itself. Abolitionist manual laborites crafted a vision of republicanism and Northern nationalism that valorized free-labor and accepted state action as legitimate for the republican aim of reconciling interests across racial lines.

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Another group, made up of some of the earliest and fiercest proponents of the manual labor system, has been little discussed by historians of the movement. A group of emigrant British socialists gained a new prominence in U.S. social and political discourse during the 1820s and 1830s surrounding the proliferation of utopian experiments modeled on that at New Harmony, Indiana,

49 Goodman.
50 Clayton S. Ellsworth. “Ohio’s Legislative Attack upon Abolition Schools.” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 21, no. 3 (1934): 379–86. Oberlin College itself was not shut down by backlash. However, efforts to repeal its charter came up regularly in the Ohio legislature in the 1830s and 1840s and one proposed school modeled on Oberlin was denied charter before its founding.; Delazon Smith. *A History of Oberlin or New Lights of the West.* (Cleveland, OH: S. Underhill and Sons, 1837).
and the rise and fall of Working Men’s parties in the 1830s.\textsuperscript{52} They were also dedicated to the manual labor principle. William Maclure, Robert Dale Owen, and Frances Wright all came of age in Britain, but came to see the United States as their true homeland. Influenced by the Scottish enlightenment and a British dissenting tradition, they identified with the United States as a nation of liberty and equality. Nevertheless, they wanted to strive further to make the United States into a more rational and egalitarian republic through the proliferation of the manual labor system.

The socialist proponents of the manual labor system, like the conservative and abolitionist proponents already discussed, presented a vision of manhood, republicanism, and Northern nationalism when writing on education. Like the abolitionist manual laborites, their conceptions of republicanism and Northern nationalism created space for state action to combat inequality. However, while the abolitionist crusaders legitimized state power to build republicanism across the color line, the socialists were more interested in reconciling competing class interests. They sought to do so by using education as a means to eradicate inequality.

Socialist reformers had been intrigued by Fellenberg’s Hofwyl and enthralled by the promise of the manual labor system as early as any other manual laborites. William Maclure visited the school in 1813 during his travels through Europe, and Robert Owen—Maclure’s partner in the New Harmony

\textsuperscript{52}Bestor, 94-132.; Howe, 285-292, 540-541.; Watson, 187-190.; Wilentz, 162-211.
experiment in the late 1820s—sent several of his sons to study there.53 One of those sons—the eldest and direct heir to his father’s reputation as a philanthropist and reformer—Robert Dale Owen, would go on to become one of the foremost champions of the socialist vision of the manual labor movement in the 1830s. Looking back on his time at Hofwyl, Owen had positive things to say about Fellenberg’s system. He describes Hofwyl as more than a school, but rather as a little republic. According to Owen, the students were given a voice in how the school was run, although he does not mention whether this power applied only to the sons of the wealthy or to all students. Fortunately, the students at Hofwyl made good use of this power and conducted themselves with proper republican virtue. He notes that not “even a suspicion of interested motives” arose in any of their elections. Owen clearly considered his experience at Hofwyl to be formative in terms of both his character and his politics. “It awakened in the young republican,” he wrote, “an interest in the public welfare and a zeal for the public good.”54

While both William Maclure and the young Owen were inspired by parts of Felleberg’s system, they considered it in serious need of improvement. “I do not think that the mechanism of instruction, if I may express myself, was very perfect at Hofwyl,” Robert Owen wrote for the Mechanics’ Free Press in Philadelphia in 1829. “I have seen many improvements on it in this country, by which I believe that much time may be saved, and much more definite and practical knowledge

given.” Maclure, upon his visit in 1813, sharply criticized Fellenberg for his “indifferent opinion of all shades of democracy.” Unlike some of the more conservative proponents of the system, they sought to adapt Fellenberg’s system to serve democratic ends. Additionally, as dedicated free-thinkers, they also sought to remove religion from the equation.

Revivalist manual laborites, as previously mentioned, sought to adapt Fellenberg’s system and to make manual labor a more significant component of education for all students to promote the health and vitality of a new generation of missionaries. The British socialists were comparatively less interested in the health benefits of the system—although they still advertised them—and spent less time talking directly about manhood. Nevertheless, gendered ideas about labor did enter into their ideological framing of the system. They presented a vision of what Michael Kimmel calls the “heroic artisan” vision of manhood. The Owenist Working Men’s Advocate ran an article in support of the manual labor system which harangued new mental professions. It claimed there were too many doctors and lawyers already and declared “there is ruinous propensity in the great mass of people, to train up their children to live by their wits instead of their industry.” These men, the article warned, would be bred and educated into nothing more than “scheming dandies, and wordy demagogues (…) forced upon the community, born to eat up the corn.” The admonition by some socialist

55 Ibid.
56 Maclure, European Journals, 622-623.
58 “Law and Medicine.” Workingman’s Advocate. October 31, 1829.
manual laborites, Frances Wright among them, that any system of education
should include women complicates the connection to manhood, but doesn’t
t entirely undermine it. While never truly acted on by the socialist manual laborites,
manual labor education for women was considered and certainly was not
incompatible with their broader scheme.59

Producerist language—rooted in the theories of eighteenth-century
Scottish political economy and the labor theory of value—framed more than the
socialists’ vision of manhood. It colored the republicanism they championed.60
Building on this tradition, they channeled a vision of republicanism that cast the
interests of the few against those of the many. While this republicanism was
similar to that presented by the democratic party of the time, socialist manual
laborites pushed their egalitarian ideology further into the territory of a kind of
plebian, or artisan republicanism.61

The British emigrant socialists put manual labor education at the front and
center of their efforts to reconcile competing interests across class lines. Their
faith in the system was grounded in a belief in the profitability of honest labor,
which they hoped would allow manual labor education to take on a leveling
character by making education equally accessible to all. Education, for Maclure,
was not only a philanthropic project, but the cornerstone of his revolutionary
strategy. Maclure first championed this system as part of the utopian experiment

59 Frances Wright, Course of Public Lectures. (New-York: The Free-Enquirer, 1829), 37-38.;
States.” Review (Fernand Braudel Center) 13, no. 4 (Fall 1990): 465–97.
61 Howe, 544-545.; Watson, 192-193.; Wilentz, 14-15.; Nick Salvatore, “Some Thoughts on Class
and Citizenship in America in the Late Nineteenth Century.” In Marianne Debeouz, ed. In the
at New Harmony, Indiana, in the mid-1820s. He operated his School of Industry in New Harmony according to his democratic adaptation of the manual labor system.\(^{62}\)

By focusing on the pecuniary benefits of the manual labor system to those who could not afford education, rather than the health benefits, socialists championed the egalitarian possibilities of the system. After the decline of the community at New Harmony in the final years of the 1820s, socialist manual laborites started to shift their focus from the founding of new manual labor colleges to the promotion of a national system of education through state legislatures. The manual labor system was to be a prominent component of this national system of republican education. While Maclure had once written to his partner in reform, Marie D. Fretageot, that “all that you can expect from the greatest part of mankind is that they will tolerate you and not persecute you,” he changed his opinion by the 1830s and sought to use the power of popular suffrage to implement the manual labor system.\(^{63}\)

Although Maclure supported this plan, he did less to advance it than did Robert Dale Owen and Frances Wright, who involved themselves in the formation of the Working Men’s Party in New York City in 1829.\(^{64}\) The Working

\(^{62}\) *Disseminator of Useful Knowledge*. January 16, 1828. It was from the press of this school the Maclure published most of his writings. The first issue of the school’s official paper declared as its goal advocacy for the manual labor system.


\(^{64}\) Maclure wrote several articles on the subject which appear in his collected works. He even expressed the belief, in private that Wright and Owen were stealing his ideas. William Maclure *Opinions on Various Subjects*. New Harmony, IN: School of Industry, 1837.; William Maclure to Marie D. Fretageot. February 1830, Mexico. In Elliott, *Partnership*, 686-688.
Men’s Party was formed as a coalition of several factions of master and journeyman craftsmen who promoted legislative efforts in their interests. Among these was a mechanics’ lien law, and more radical members of the movement even pushed for a redistribution of land. Owen and Wright, however, fought to make a state-wide system of manual labor education the central object of the Working Men’s platform, as a stepping-stone towards their aspirations for a national system of public education.65

Owen and Wright created a Society for the Protection of Industry and Promotion of National Education to lobby within the Working Men’s movement. Their public resolutions—that inequality of education was the root of all inequality and that they would only support candidates for public office who supported their system of education—reveal the connection between their dedication to education and their dedication to a republicanism built on class equality. Declarations such as these were routinely printed in the *Workingman’s Advocate*, a newspaper sympathetic to Owenism and with a banner that declared “All children are entitled to equal education, all adults to equal property, and all mankind to equal privileges.”66 Other papers in New York, such as the *New-York Sentinel* and those that represented Working Men’s movements in other cities, like Philadelphia and Boston, also ran articles in support of a national system of public education. “The union of industry with literature and science,” the

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65 Previous historians have noted the prominence of public education in the goals of various Working Men’s parties, but have neglected to mention their adherence to the manual labor system. Wilentz, 162-211.; Howe, 541-543.; Watson, 187-188.
Mechanics’ Free Press of Philadelphia declared, “constitutes the only desideratum by which an equal education can be supplied and secured to all classes.” The New-York Sentinel published a series of essays on defending a system of public education in which “the children shall, without exception, be taught agriculture, gardening, and some mechanical trade.” The essays pointed to Fellenberg’s example and declared that the “most republican amalgamation” of manual labor and literary education “will make but one class out of the many that now envy and despise each other; it will make American citizens what they once declared themselves, free and equal.” Public manual labor education would unite competing interests by eradicating class differences.

Socialists also valorized free, manual labor in a different way than other supporters of the system. Rather than unabashedly accepting the positive influence of manual labor on health, they were the only manual laborites to argue that some people worked too much. The essayist worried equally about those “oppressed by toil” as those “rendered dyspeptic by continued sedentary employment.” Socialists hoped that “making every scholar a workman, and every workman a scholar” would help both. Frances Wright communicated this concern in her public lectures in describing “the millions harassed with health-destroying labor.” By paying attention to the health concerns of the working class, socialist manual laborites valorized free-labor, not for its own sake, but to

69 Ibid, 18.
70 Wright, 155.
promote an egalitarian vision of labor republicanism in which the burdens of labor would be more equally distributed.

This vision of republicanism was constructed in Northern nationalist terms, drawn up in opposition to the “aristocratical” examples of the American South and Europe. “We of republican America,” the Sentinel’s essayist lamented, “have hitherto, in education as in many other things, followed the example of aristocratical Europe.”71 Frances Wright echoed this sentiment in her public lectures.72 Many of them had, in fact, left the British Isles to pursue their democratic projects in the young American republic. In this they were different from abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison, who looked to Britain as an ally in the struggle against slavery. For these emigrant British socialists, their former country was far more of an enemy to their project than a friend. The United States, on the other hand, held promise. William Maclure wrote in the New-Harmony Gazette that “this, of all the countries on earth, by moral, physical and all other advantages, is most fit for feeding, clothing and instructing children, by their own labor . . . . we should have been the first people to put [the manual labor system] into practice.”73

Although they usually stated their enthusiasm for the United States broadly, their nationalism was based on an idea of Northern identity defined against the American South. Like Weld, these socialists worried that their visions of practical education would not be well received in the South, where they

72 Wright, 124, 155.
perceived that “aristocratical” tendencies had deeper roots. Paul Brown, a socialist who joined Maclure and Owen at New Harmony, pointed to the teaching of the “dead languages”—classical Latin and Greek—in Southern academies as evidence of this aristocratical propensity. Brown had the South, and particularly the specter of slave labor, on his mind again when he compared the state of working people at New Harmony in its failing years to that of “black slaves in the South.” Maclure’s *Disseminator of Useful Knowledge* asserted that the institution of slavery was the root of many of the South’s educational problems. “All the vicious propensities of ignorance,” he wrote, “are aggravated by the pernicious habits of slavery.” William Maclure also betrayed something about his feelings toward the South when writing to Marie D. Fretageot in New Orleans. Maclure was convinced his ideas had many enemies among “the mercantile aristocracy of New Orleans” who he thought were attempting to seize and destroy copies of the *Disseminator.*

Any bias Maclure held against the South may have arisen from some of his peculiar ideas about the relationship between climate and forms of government. In an article originally published in the *New-Harmony Gazette,* Maclure argued that there is a correlation between tropical or semi-tropical climates and despotism. His reasoning rested on assumptions about labor and


value. Maclure believed that labor was the source of all value. As tyrants sought to remove themselves from productive labor, they depended on the production of surplus value. "In climates where a perpetual spring and summer renders the production of this surplus easy, and attended with little labor," Maclure wrote, "it is given by the thoughtless inhabitants with the same ease, for the support of their tyrants and masters." Life in a lazy climate was predisposed to a situation in which "slavery with all its most degrading, and horrible features, pervades the whole population, and renders all change or amelioration almost impossible." Colder climates in the North, by contrast, were predisposed to freedom, as free producers jealously guarded whatever surplus value they managed to produce.77

Susan-Mary Grant observed that antebellum Northern nationalism was not meant to be entirely exclusive of the South. Rather it sought inclusion at the price of the South’s acceptance of Northern values.78 Frances Wright displayed this tendency in her scheme intended to incrementally rid the United States of slavery by colonization. Wright proposed the establishment of slave communities, where masters could send their slaves to work and where the superior productivity of the communal labor system would allow slaves to purchase their own freedom and transportation to Africa. Gail Bederman argues that Wright’s efforts to put this system into place at Nashoba revealed her intention to rid the United States of the one major blot on its utopian potential. Unlike the abolitionist manual

78 Grant, 20.
laborites previously discussed, Wright and other British socialists did not intend to cultivate a multiracial republicanism and Northern identity. They were too committed, perhaps in order to retain support among Northern artisans, to a republicanism and Northern identity based on herrenvolk democracy.\textsuperscript{79}

Their visions of republicanism and Northern nationalism, in contrast to those of the abolitionist manual laborites, carved out a place for the exercise of state power to protect the economic equality of white men, but, despite the abolitionist views of every socialist here discussed, left racial equality out of the equation. Socialist manual laborites cast public education as the responsibility of a Northern, republican state. Although they hoped the manual labor system would pay for itself, they were certainly willing to commit public funds to the endeavor. William Maclure lauded “the claim now made by the working classes, that a part of their property, yielded to the government in taxes, should be appropriated to a general and equal system of education.”\textsuperscript{80} Frances Wright also supported the idea of funding a national system of education “by a general tax (…) so long as it shall be necessary—that is, till the well-regulated industry of the children shall meet the expenses of their education.”\textsuperscript{81} Public taxation was also a part of the Working Men’s education plan.\textsuperscript{82} Although socialist manual laborites presented the profitability of student’s labor as a means for funding public education across the country, they nonetheless presented a vision of

\textsuperscript{79} Gail Bederman, “Revisiting Nashoba: Slavery, Utopia and Frances Wright in America, 1818-1826.” \textit{American Literary History} 17, no. 3 (Autumn 2005): 438–59.; On herrenvolk democracy, see, Howe, 545.; Watson, 45.
\textsuperscript{81} Wright, \textit{Public Lectures}, 124.
\textsuperscript{82} \textit{Six Essays on Public Education}, 17-18.
republicanism and Northern nationalism in which the state could take an active role in promoting equality.

As was the case with the abolitionist manual laborites, it was this imagination of state action on behalf of equality that helped lead to the declining popularity of the manual labor system. Critical newspaper articles, like one from the National Gazette, tended to focus either on the socialists’ hostility to religion or on their efforts to the expand state power to promote equality. The writer was most upset at the idea of education as a right. “If not demanded as a right,” the article stated, “we should consider the proposal on the ground of public expense, and willingly submit to any reasonable plan that the good of the country requires, and that does not involve a premium for idleness, vice and bastardy.” However, the article reiterated that “a right to seize our property for the benefit of his children” was simply too much.83 Most of the articles attacking the proposed national system did not even give it that much credit. More often than not, the socialists were simply conflated with the more radical followers of Thomas Skidmore, who sought state redistribution of property in land. Employing their own form of Northern nationalism, some critics of the emigrant British reformers told them to go back to Europe.84 “Mr. Robert Dale Owen,” one stated, should not “transfer his sympathies from his suffering countryman, who need them; and intrude on those who neither require nor ask for them.”85 In part due to these

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criticisms, the socialist manual laborites were not successful in their attempts to promote a national system of education—although Robert Dale Owen himself would be instrumental in the creation of Indiana’s system of public education as a Democratic politician later in his life. The discourse on manual labor they helped to create did, however, present a vision of republicanism and Northern nationalism which approved of state action to promote equality.

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Many of the educators and reformers associated with the manual labor movement in education participated in shaping different ideas of republicanism and Northern nationalism. The radicals envisioned a place for state action in the protection of equality. Abolitionist manual laborites saw a role for the state in the abolition of slavery, while socialists saw a role for the state in the promotion of economic equality. Often the two positions did not go together perfectly. There were, however, points of overlap between these goals. As previously mentioned, Theodore Weld argued for the manual labor system as a tool to bring about economic and political equality in his *First Annual Report.*\(^6\) Reverend Beach of Illinois College did the same in a meeting called by abolitionist and revivalist reformer, Lewis Tappan. The meeting, on the subject of “Fellenberg, or manual labor schools,” was attended by a writer for the *Workingman’s Advocate.* The writer for the *Workingman’s Advocate* expressed ambivalence about the proliferation of the manual labor ideal among such disparate groups. “We wished the benefits of the system to be open equally to *all,* at the expense of all,” the

writer began, “while others propose the more approved of plan of endeavoring to get all to contribute for the benefit of a few.” Nevertheless, the writer praised one speaker, who “thinks it full as necessary that all the children of the land should be well educated.” That speaker was Revered Beach. The *Workingman’s Advocate* lauded Beach’s “very appropriate and interesting remarks” about the democratic possibilities of the manual labor system. 87 Another overlapping voice can be heard in a letter to the *Liberator*, in which a British reader, pointing to the writings of Robert Owen, implored the editor to champion “universal reform” which would combat all types of inequality. 88 Whether they sought to advance equality along racial, class or—as occasionally was championed in the case of Frances Wright and Oberlin College—gender lines, the radical voices of the manual labor movement articulated different visions of republicanism and Northern nationalism. These visions left space for the legitimate exercise of state power to ensure different types of equality.

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