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Violence on the Michigan Frontier: The Incidence of Sporadic Assault in Michigan Territory, 1817–1830

KEITH BURGESS-JACKSON*

Introduction: The Frontier Thesis

The frontier has weighed heavily on the minds of historians. Since 1893, when Frederick Jackson Turner hypothesized that the frontier explained the unique character of American civilization,¹ scholars and lay people alike have debated and redebated the precise impact of the frontier on attitudes, values, behavior, and institutions. To this day, articles and books either in support of² or in opposition to³ Turner's thesis are being written and published.

Professor Turner's hypothesis was remarkable in its simplicity. The frontier, he argued, was the crucial factor in the transformation of Europeans into "Americans." As people packed up their belongings and moved westward, they were confronted with unfamiliar and often harsh conditions.⁴ Besides the innumerable physical hardships, such as those created by climate, topography, soil, and flora and fauna, the very nature of frontier life required a reordering of social relationships and the establishment of institutions more attuned to the new environment. Customs and habits that had been appropriate in the more urbanized East were found to be unnecessary (and even, at times, counter-productive) in the

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sparsely-populated West. The institution of law itself came to be seen not as a necessary instrument of social control, but as an effective deterrent to economic growth and individual autonomy.

According to Turner, the clash of pioneer and frontier spawned a new personality—a uniquely “American” personality. This personality consisted of two dominant traits, both of which, in the proper set of circumstances, could be turned to anti-social (and so, ultimately, to violent) ends.

The first trait bred by the frontier was individualism. Individualism was produced by the relative lack of formal restrictions on behavior to be found on the frontier (such as those traditionally provided by law and an integrated moral culture), as well as by its comparative isolation and wildness, which inclined people toward self-reliance and pragmatism. On the frontier, one could not always count on the assistance of others to solve problems, for the simple reason that others were not always present. Solutions had to be found, when needed, quickly and independently—and often in the face of great danger to life, limb, and property. The frontier experience placed a “survival value” on individualism and improvisation, and therefore tended to promote those qualities in the people who were born or went to live there.

The second trait generated by the frontier was a sense of efficacy—a feeling of being in control of one’s destiny. In a land with what appeared to be unlimited resources, and with few if any restrictions on what could be done with them, any person, it seemed, could forge a living; the environment stood ready to be mastered. To the pioneer, the requisites for success were no more or less than an enterprising spirit, an inventive and practical mind, and the physical wherewithal to withstand the elements, the wild animals, and the Indians. Material well-being was viewed as a simple function of desire and initiative. In the American West, especially, which many considered to be the land of promise and plenty, material failure was tantamount to moral failure.

But the American frontier experience was not all romance and adventure, as modern movies and literature would have us believe. Professor Turner and his academic progeny were quick to point out that the very same traits—individualism and efficacy—which made Americans democratic and nationalistic were also at work making the frontier an unsafe, and unsavory, place in which to live. Individualism, they informed us, is but a step removed from social irresponsibility. In the right circumstances it could metamorphose into coarseness of manner and even
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social animus. The lack of an integrated moral culture on the frontier allegedly made interpersonal conflict both more likely to occur and more brutal and extensive when it did occur. Finally, generations of frontier historians led us to believe that the sense of efficacy which gave pioneers such a feeling of dominion over their physical environment gradually, but inexorably, bled over into the social sphere, causing a net increase in aggression within society. Professor Turner summed up this supposed link between “frontier” and “violence” when he said that:

[T]he frontier is productive of individualism. Complex society is precipitated by the wilderness into a kind of primitive organization based on the family. The tendency is anti-social. It produces antipathy to control, and particularly to direct control.

In the Turnerian worldview, it was logically inconsistent to speak of an “orderly” frontier. Violence and turmoil were expected to be, and consequently understood as, the “natural” states of affairs in such places.

The Turnerian thesis, however, is just that—a thesis. There is an alternative strain of thought, largely ignored by frontier historians, which suggests that, contrary to the link drawn by Turner, the frontier contained fewer incidents of violence per capita than its urban counterparts. Intuitively, it is not hard to discern why this should be. All of us are familiar with the phenomenon wherein a natural threat or disaster serves as a binding or cohesive force within society. For example, when a flood is about to destroy a mountain community, the townspeople invariably gather together to construct makeshift flood barriers. After a hurricane or tornado strikes a city or town, its residents help one another to rebuild their homes and businesses, while emergency aid pours in from unaffected areas. Gradually, as the immediate danger and sense of common affliction passes, people retreat into their former patterns of behavior and begin to narrow once more the range and variety of associations that they maintain. Historically, this process of threat, cohesion, rescission of threat, and partial disintegration has occurred whenever a nation of people has gone to war.

It is possible, and certainly conceivable, that the same process occurred with respect to the frontier. Inasmuch as the frontier posed a grave threat to the physical and material well-being of its inhabitants (a fact not generally in dispute among historians), it constituted a “common enemy” that had to be “defeated.” Small enclaves of people in
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the midst of an unfamiliar territory, with scarcely enough food, water, and supplies to tide them over a harsh winter or a dry summer, and with wild animals and Indians virtually knocking at their doors, were overwhelmingly concerned with one thing—survival.\textsuperscript{11} The members of such communities found physical and moral strength in numbers and, as a rule, had little time or energy to expend on either elaborate cultural activities or acts of aggression against their neighbors. The frontier provided pioneers with a common “enemy,” a common purpose, and ultimately it was hoped, a higher standard of living. Success in such an environment depended to a great extent on the level of altruism and cooperation within society, and as a result, minor grievances tended to be overlooked as the chores of living were performed.\textsuperscript{12}

In this paper I propose to make a test of Turner’s frontier thesis by subjecting it to an empirical examination. I intend to demonstrate (and I think the available evidence supports the conclusion) that in Michigan Territory, circa 1817–1830, the frontier was not a violent place in which to live. Interpersonal, physical, non-consensual conflict did occur there to be sure, and at times it was brutal in its consequences, but as a general proposition violence was a rare phenomenon in Michigan Territory. This divergence from received wisdom is best explained, I think, by the unique conditions of life that obtained on the Michigan frontier.\textsuperscript{13}

Michigan Territory, 1817–1830

Contrary to what many people (including some historians) believe, Michigan Territory was not culturally barren during the early part of the nineteenth century. Nor was it without the rudiments of government and a criminal justice system. In fact, Michigan Territory contained a surprising variety of cultural institutions and boasted an elaborate governmental and judicial structure. It had a criminal code, for instance, as early as 1808.\textsuperscript{14} But even with its growing social maturity, physical conditions within Michigan Territory during the study period dictate that it be classified as a “frontier” area.

In 1822, Detroit was but a fort in the middle of a wilderness.\textsuperscript{15} A contemporary Eastern atlas described it as “a regular work, with parapets and bastions, and surrounded by palisadoes [sic], a deep ditch and glacis.”\textsuperscript{16} Living conditions inside the fort, like those on the outside,
were crude and "backward." The town's streets were nearly always extremely muddy, and mail, when it arrived at all, was erratic. Public utilities were few to non-existent. Drinking water, which had to be carried from the Detroit River in pails, was stored in barrels within the fort, the barrels serving in time of conflagration as fire extinguishers. "Green stagnant pools," it is said, lay everywhere within the fort, furnishing breeding grounds for mosquitoes and polluting the fresh water supply. In the words of a distinguished historian, "The frontier character of life in Detroit . . . [was] reflected in primitive conditions on every hand."

Then as now, Detroit was the largest urban area within Michigan. As might be expected, physical conditions in the interior of the territory were even more "primitive" than those in Detroit. To whites, that interior area was also substantially unknown. In order to remedy this informational defect, Secretary of War John C. Calhoun sent several exploring parties into Michigan Territory in 1819 and 1820 to gather geographical and other data, and in 1820, Governor Lewis Cass and forty companions conducted a valuable exploratory and mapping tour of the Upper Peninsula. Subsequent expeditions into the interior revealed Michigan to be a storehouse of timber and mineral resources and a veritable "arcadia" for farmers. Nevertheless, as late as 1825, "Michigan Territory . . . was . . . virtually beyond the bounds of civilization."

In 1818, Michigan Territory was considerably larger than the present State of Michigan. In that year, after Congress admitted Illinois to statehood, the boundaries of Michigan Territory included all of contemporary Michigan and Wisconsin, as well as substantial portions of what are now Minnesota and Ontario. It was not until 1837, when Congress admitted Michigan to statehood, that the boundaries of the state were drawn at their present locations.

The population of Michigan Territory in 1820 was 8,896. Nearly one fourth of the people reflected in that total resided in Wayne County alone, which at the time extended in a narrow swath completely across the Lower Peninsula. Of the amount residing in Wayne County, 1422, or roughly two thirds, made their homes in Detroit. By 1830, a decade later, the population of the territory had swollen considerably, to 31,639. Four counties—Wayne, Oakland, Washtenaw, and Monroe—each at that time had populations in excess of three thousand. Males outnumbered females in the territory by a ratio of 1.37 to 1.00, and
there were approximately 250 free Blacks in Michigan.\textsuperscript{25} Half of the Blacks resided in or near Detroit.

The number of Indians in Michigan Territory between 1817 and 1830 remains unknown. But there were in excess of five thousand Indians living in Michigan in 1807, when the first of several treaties between the United States government and the various Indian tribes was executed.\textsuperscript{26} The 1807 treaty, negotiated and signed in Detroit by General (then Governor) Hull and several chiefs of the "Potewatamie, Ottawa, Wyandot and Chippewa tribes," resulted in the cession by the Indians of some four million acres of land to the United States.\textsuperscript{27} The ceded land included the entire eastern portion of the Lower Peninsula, exclusive of several small "reservations" for the Indians. Important reservations were located at the mouth of the Miami River, at the junction of the Raisin and Macon Rivers, along the Rouge River, and on Lake St. Clair above the Huron River. Six of the one-square-mile sections were to be "located by the Indians, so as not to interfere with the claims of white settlers."\textsuperscript{28}

In 1819, Governor Cass negotiated a second treaty with the Indians. This treaty, signed near Saginaw, gave whites exclusive ownership and possession of land running from present-day Battle Creek in the southwestern part of the territory to the territory's extreme northeast corner.\textsuperscript{29} In 1820, the United States government obtained a cession of four square miles of land at Sault Ste. Marie in the Upper Peninsula from the "Chippeway Indians."\textsuperscript{30} After this particular cession, title to most of the land in what is now Michigan had been legally transferred from Indians to the governments of white settlers.

Initially, as we have seen, most of the white settlers in Michigan lived in and around Detroit. But there were also small pockets of settlers in the vicinity of Mackinac (near the southern tip of the Upper Peninsula), Green Bay (at the far end of Lake Michigan), and Prairie Du Chien (at the intersection of the Wisconsin and Mississippi Rivers, between Wisconsin and Iowa).\textsuperscript{31} These three outposts were the county seats, respectively, of Mackinac, Brown, and Crawford counties, all of which were organized by the Territorial Legislature in the year 1818. According to the historian Malcolm Rohrbough, the white population in these areas was so sparse that the county seats "contained scarcely enough people to fill the [governmental] offices."\textsuperscript{32}

County organization in Michigan grew apace with the population. In 1818, the territory consisted of six counties: Wayne, Monroe, Macomb,
Map of the Michigan Territory in 1822.
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Michilimackinac, Brown, and Crawford. Within a dozen years, another fourteen had been added to the list. The Territorial Legislature created Oakland County in 1820; St. Clair in 1821; Sanilac and Shiawassee in 1822; Washtenaw, Lenawee, and Chippewa in 1826; and Ingham, Eaton, Barry, Kalamazoo, Van Buren, St. Joseph, and Cass in 1829 and 1830. In several instances, counties were organized even before they were settled, as the fledgling government sought both to encourage emigration into the territory and to ease the transition into regular local government once settlement had in fact occurred.

By 1830, the entire southern half of the Lower Peninsula had been laid out into counties, and new towns were springing up on a regular basis in the hinterland. The greatest impetus to this growth was the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825, since the canal afforded cheap and convenient transportation from the East. Most of the new settlers came from western New York state and New England, although an appreciable number originated in nearby Ohio and Indiana. The majority of the emigrants were lured to Michigan by its fertile soils and relatively inexpensive lands.

Economically, Michigan Territory underwent drastic changes between 1817 and 1830. In 1817, Michigan was still reeling from the effects of the War of 1812. Troops which had been stationed around the western end of Lake Erie had exploited the land's resources, leaving it, as one historian puts it, "physically devastated." The war, in addition, had disrupted the territory's major industry, the fur trade, and had siphoned specie from the local economy. Many people found themselves in a state of near-starvation at the war's end.

There were some thirty commercial houses in Detroit in 1817. Industry, except for small clothing, wool-carding, and fulling mill concerns, was non-existent. Barter was still the medium of exchange. Prices were very high—a result in large part of the specie drain brought on by war. Because of the poor quality of roads, communication was frustratingly slow. In a very real sense, Detroit and the remainder of the territory were isolated from the rest of the country. The only bright spots in the local economy were the occasional exports of leather goods by artisans, and maple sugar, fish, and fruit by hard-working farmers.

By 1825, however, the economy was on the upswing. For several years prior to that date, Governor Cass and the editors of the Detroit Gazette had been directing regional and national attention to the agricultural capabilities of the territory, and when settlers finally began
arriving by the Erie Canal, their promotional efforts paid off.\textsuperscript{44} Flour was exported for the first time in the late 1820s. Enabling legislation was passed by the Territorial Legislature for the construction of an interior road network, which allowed farmers to transport their produce to market quicker and easier than before. Communication was facilitated by the increased use of riverboats. Gradually, local industry picked up, so that by 1827, Detroit could report a total of forty-six people involved in "manufacture." Several others were occupied in "commerce." A total of 451 listed their occupation as "farmer."\textsuperscript{45} By the late 1820s, "signs of economic maturity began to appear" in the territory, and by the end of the decade, says Rohrbough, "Michigan was on the verge of enormous physical expansion and accompanying economic prosperity."\textsuperscript{46}

The first residents of Michigan Territory enjoyed a modest social and cultural life. Though the exigencies of frontier life required a more or less continuous attention to work and detail, the pioneers were able to set aside brief periods of time for visiting and entertainment. Still, it is probably a little much to, as one historian did, characterize life during this period as "intensely dynamic."\textsuperscript{47}

Formal education began in Michigan Territory sometime during the 1790s, when private schools were conducted by itinerant ministers and schoolmasters. In 1809 the governor and judges, acting as legislators, passed a law establishing the first public school districts, and eight years later, in 1817, the "Catholepistemiad or University of Michigania" was founded by legislative decree.\textsuperscript{48} By 1830, the territory maintained a school system that was open to all citizens—regardless of ability to pay taxes—and in which classes were taught six months out of each year.\textsuperscript{49}

Churches were always important centers of social activity for the early settlers. In 1826 there were upwards of 7,000 Catholics in the territory, mostly of French-Canadian stock. Baptist missions were established in Niles in 1822 and at Sault Ste. Marie in 1828. As early as 1816, Detroit became the site of a Protestant denomination, which was initially a joint Congregational/Presbyterian assemblage and was later reorganized as a Presbyterian church. Methodists began activities in Michigan Territory in 1818.\textsuperscript{50}

Newspapers were a vital source of information and opinion for Michigan pioneers, and the territory had an active press almost from its inception. The first printing in Michigan was done in 1796 in Detroit. In 1809, Father Gabriel Richard published a short-lived newspaper. But the first newspaper to exist in the territory for any appreciable length of
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time was the Detroit Gazette. This paper, first published in 1817 by John P. Sheldon and Ebenezer Reed, continued on a weekly basis until 1830, when its presses were destroyed by fire. During the year that it lapsed, there were six other newspapers being printed and sold in the territory, including three outside the vicinity of Detroit.

When Michigan pioneers did find the time to indulge themselves in cultural activities, there was, surprisingly, a multitude of things for them to do. During the study period, settlers visited libraries and historical societies, fraternized in “Young Men’s Societies,” engaged in or attended theatrical productions, danced, and watched or participated in the sport of horseracing. Less-well-organized social events, such as quilting bees, house-raisings, and threshing bees, had the dual virtues of bringing people together into a quasi-community and insuring that tedious but necessary labor was performed. These occasions, however, were the exceptions rather than the rule, for as Willis Dunbar explains, “Amusements and diversions among the Michigan pioneers were rare experiences. The demands of necessity drove these men and women to long hours of toil . . . for the . . . necessities of life.” Fuller puts the matter even more succinctly: “In general, culture had to wait on the task of subduing nature.” As we shall see, anti-social behavior, too, very likely had to wait on the task of “subduing” nature.

The frontier thesis suggests that violent behavior was produced (in part) by the absence of government—that is, by a dearth of legal rules and enforcement mechanisms. But in Michigan those institutions were present from the very beginning. As early as 1796, when Congress organized Wayne County as part of the Northwest Territory, there was a formal government in and over the area northeast of Lake Michigan. Michigan Territory itself came into being less than a decade later, in 1805, at which time provision was made for its future governance.

Initially, the territory was governed by four persons—a governor and three judges—who were vested with legislative, executive, and judicial powers. But in 1818 a “systematic movement” was begun to make the territorial government more democratic. This movement culminated, in 1823, in an act of Congress which raised the status of Michigan government to the “second grade.” Second grade status meant that eligible territorial voters were empowered to select eighteen people in a regular election, nine of whom were then chosen by the President of the United States with the consent of the Senate as territorial legislators. The resultant body was called the “Legislative Council.”
In 1825, Congress further democratized the politics of the territory by granting its citizens the right to participate in government at the county level, and in 1827 the composition of the Legislative Council was made the exclusive prerogative of the people—subject, as before, to the governor’s veto and to congressional approval. Throughout most of the period under study, Michigan Territory had an elected delegate in Congress.

As early as 1817, Michigan Territory had a complex system of courts, and as its population increased during the ensuing decade, additional courts were established to deal with the “severe strain” placed upon the judicial machinery. The Territorial Supreme Court was created by act of the governor and judges in 1805. Until 1815, it had both original and appellate jurisdiction and heard criminal as well as civil cases. In 1815, however, the governor and judges (as legislators) deprived the Supreme Court of a “large part” of its original jurisdiction by establishing a system of county courts which exercised exclusive jurisdiction over non-capital criminal cases. The Supreme Court, in addition to its appellate duties and its role as United States Circuit Court, retained exclusive original jurisdiction over capital crimes.

By 1823, the vast physical extent of the territory had demonstrated the necessity of creating even more courts. In that year, Congress established a United States Circuit Court for the three outstate counties—Michilimackinac, Brown, and Crawford—and thus relieved the Territorial Supreme Court of a substantial part of its workload. The workload was even further diminished (this time qualitatively) by the creation of a system of circuit courts by the Legislative Council in 1825. Each circuit court, according to Professor Blume, was “held by one of the judges of the Supreme Court,” and since the circuit courts possessed original jurisdiction over capital cases, the Supreme Court became primarily a “court of appeal and a court of chancery.” Throughout the study period, there were also, in each district of the territory, probate courts, justices of the peace, marshals, and deputy marshals.

The first laws adopted by the governor and judges, in the year 1805, addressed a variety of subjects including marriage, oaths, jurors, taxes, and the licensing of taverns. In 1808, the first criminal code in the territory was enacted. This code defined certain activities as criminal and stipulated penalties for the commission of each. By modern standards, the penalties prescribed for violent crimes were harsh. For instance, the female age of consent to sexual intercourse was set at eleven
years. A male over the age of fifteen who engaged in intercourse with a female younger than eleven was exposed to a maximum penalty of a one thousand dollar fine and hard labor for life. Similar penalties were imposable under the code for treason, murder, arson, and robbery.\textsuperscript{73}

An arguably harsher, and even more comprehensive, criminal code was enacted in 1820. Entitled "An act for the punishment of crimes," this statute made criminal all manner of anti-social behavior, including "assaults, batteries, false imprisonments, affrays, riots, routs," etc. For violation of the act, the following punishment could be meted out:

\begin{quote}
\textbf{[F]ine or imprisonment, or both, or . . . fine, and imprisonment at hard labor, or both, or . . . fine, or solitary imprisonment at hard labor, or both * * * Provided, That such fine shall not exceed one thousand dollars, and such imprisonment one year.\textsuperscript{74}}
\end{quote}

The ultimate penalty, death, was incorporated into the criminal code in 1827, as part of a legislative revision. It was reserved, however, for the crime of murder, and was to be effected by hanging.\textsuperscript{75} Evidently the legislature was very much concerned with the safety of Michigan residents, and was making it clear to potential malefactors that it would brook no interference with the lives of innocent people. If the statistics of the following section are any indication, it was remarkably successful in this task.

There are two data bases for this study: the Detroit Gazette, during the entire period (1817–1830) of its publication, and William Wirt Blume's edition of the Transactions of the Supreme Court of the Territory of Michigan, 1805–1836.\textsuperscript{76} I have relied primarily on the Gazette, since it was published on a regular, weekly basis, but Blume's work serves as a valuable complement in that it supplies case synopses of all matters heard by the Territorial Supreme Court.\textsuperscript{77} Several methodological points need to be made at this juncture.

First, my usage of the term "violence" is strictly phenomenal. It refers to the intentional infliction of physical injury by one person on another. Motive or purpose is irrelevant.\textsuperscript{78} Second, I have omitted from consideration all incidents of collective or group violence. The type of behavior with which I am concerned involves sporadic\textsuperscript{79} assaults by individu-
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als (or small groups of individuals) upon other individuals (or small
groups of individuals). I am not concerned with vigilantism, militarism,
or other forms of organized aggression or resistance. Third, I am not (in
compiling data) interested in the result of the violent acts that were
reported. Homicide, for purposes of this study, is thus included in the
same category as simple assault.

The first assault reported by the Detroit Gazette occurred on 22 July
1818 near the mouth of the Huron River on Lake Erie. According to the
report, two Wyandot Indians had learned from a relative that an old
woman and her son were involved in the practice of witchcraft. The old
woman and son, they were told, had exercised supernatural powers in
causing the death of two other Indians—one described as a Shawnee
and the other as a man named Walk-in-the-Water. Upon receiving this
information, the two Wyandots “determined to kill the old woman and
her son” in order to “avert the vengeance of the Shawnee tribe.” They
thereupon crossed the Huron River and succeeded in killing the son.
The old woman, however, was not at home, so the next day the Wyan-
dots tried to lure her into the woods with whiskey. Two white settlers,
who happened to be in the vicinity, saw what was developing and
intervened to “preserve” the life of the old woman. One of the Wyan-
dots was captured and jailed. The editors of the Gazette viewed the
incident with disdain—as just another indication of the moral and cul-
tural “bankruptcy” of the Indians. “The circumstances,” they wrote,
“tend to show the continuance of that superstition which characterizes
the Indians, notwithstanding their intercourse with the whites.”

On 28 May 1819, the Gazette reported that a man was working outside
near the home of one Thomas Sargeant on the “River Rouge” when he
decided to go into the house for a loaf of bread. Shortly thereafter,
he came out of the house and was confronted by a “small party of Indians
who demanded the bread.” When he refused to give it to them, a scuffle
ensued, and Sargeant rushed to the scene. While attempting to free the
man, an Indian “levelled a gun at him [Sargeant],” but the gun misfired.
Sargeant retreated toward the house and was “fired upon and severely
wounded between his shoulders by a charge of shot.” The Gazette indi-
cated that several men were subsequently sent in pursuit of the Indians,
and that the pursuers were confronted with gunfire as they approached.
Two of the Indians were eventually killed and six others were “taken
prisoner.”

Another assault involving Indians was reported on 19 October 1821.
This time, no whites participated. Five or six Chippewa Indians, it seems, were "sitting by their fire" when one demanded a drink of whiskey from another. The latter refused, whereupon the first "immediately drew his knife and killed his comrade . . . by stabbing him in the neck." This train of events caused the father of the "murdered Indian" to retaliate. He "sprang upon the murderer, seized him by the throat, bore him to the ground, and gave him several stabs with a short knife." These efforts were apparently ineffective, however, for as soon as he removed himself from the victim, the latter "sprang upon his feet and fled." The editors of the Gazette guessed that the victim "has died of his wounds in the forest where he has hid himself."\(^{84}\)

On 28 December 1821 the Gazette reported the execution, on the preceding day, of two Indians who had been sentenced to death two months earlier for murder. The first Indian, Ke-tau-kah, had been convicted by a jury of whites of killing Dr. William S. Madison while the latter was in transit between two Michigan forts. The second Indian, Ke-wa-bis-kim, had been convicted of killing a trader named Charles Ulrich at Green Bay. According to the account, the execution of the Indians was quite a spectacle, for it is stated that a territorial militia attended and that "spectators were very numerous." The historian Alec Gilpin writes that "neither execution led to serious Indian disturbances."\(^{85}\) Students of capital punishment are in agreement that these two executions are among only four to have occurred in Michigan history. Three of the four took place during the period of this study.\(^{86}\)

Another incident involving Indians occurred in early December 1823, when a Chippewa Indian was killed near Saginaw by an Indian of the same tribe. At the time, the custom among the Chippewa when a person was killed was for relatives of the deceased to meet relatives of the slayer in order to effect a settlement. Occasionally, gifts were delivered to the family of the deceased, and at other times the perpetrator was ordered to be put to death. In this case, the chief ignored the ancient custom and refused to discuss the killing with the families or the accused. According to the Gazette, he "stepped up to the slayer, and with a single blow of his tomahawk, laid him dead at his feet." When queried as to why he had neglected to abide by the tribal law of discussion and settlement, the chief responded: "The law is now altered."\(^{87}\)

On the first day of January, 1824, there occurred an "altercation" between a soldier and an Indian at Green Bay. The Indian reportedly "drew a knife for the purpose of stabbing the soldier, who . . . gave him
a severe blow upon his head with a cane. . . ." The Indian suffered a fractured skull and died shortly thereafter, while the soldier, says the Gazette, "was given up to the civil authority."

Still another incident involving Indians was reported on 24 September 1824. In this case, a lone Potawatomee Indian killed another of the same tribe "by stabbing him through the body. . . ." The affray occurred at Spring Wells, which the Gazette said was but "a few miles below" Detroit. A coroner examined the body of the dead Indian and preferred manslaughter charges against the assailant, but a grand jury (of whites) subsequently heard witnesses and discharged the indictment.

In the month of October, 1824, "in the vicinity of River Rouge," an elderly man named Laurent saw two Indians in his field digging potatoes. Investigating, he "requested them to leave the field." When they refused to do so, he "took one by the shoulder and endeavored to push him out of the field." The Indian resisted and instead "threw Laurent down." By this time, the sixteen-year-old son of Laurent had become aware of the fracas and had arrived on the scene with a club. Just as one of the Indians was about to strike the older man with a knife, the son struck the Indian "so severe a blow upon the head as to cause his immediate death." Evidently, the Gazette’s news source for this incident was somewhat less than reliable, for one week later the Gazette printed a partial retraction of the story. According to the corrected version, the Indian had not died until the day following the incident, and the Indian’s "squaw" asserted "that he did not die in consequence of the blow, but from sickness." Such were the travails of news gathering and editing on the Michigan frontier.

The first reported violent incident involving only whites occurred in early April, 1825, in Bloomfield, Oakland County. Imri Fish, a boarder at the home of John Utter and his family, killed Utter’s wife and daughter by "giving [them] several horrid wounds, with the edge of [an] axe, in [their] head[s] and other parts of [their] bod[ies]." According to a letter to the Gazette written by the husband and brother of the elder deceased, Fish had been "from his childhood, . . . subject to epileptic fits, and during the last nine years ha[d], at times, been deranged." The killings were supposed to have occurred while Fish was in just such a state of "derangement." The letter went on to describe in lurid detail the injuries that were suffered by the victims. The wife, it noted, was "found with her head nearly severed from her body," while the daughter was "found about 20 rods from the house, killed by a deep
wound extending obliquely from her mouth across her neck, besides some other wounds.” The suspect, Fish, when apprehended by authorities, readily admitted to having killed the women, and even explained his motive. “It was,” he said, “his duty to do so.” The suspect later admitted to having killed his brother’s horse with the same axe.91

On 10 January 1826, the Gazette reported that an Indian of the “Saginaw tribe” had been found “nearly dead” on one of the lower city streets. The Indian had a “deep cut made in the back part of his head with a tomahawk,” and had died during the night. Authorities suspected that the “notorious war-chief” Kishkauko had committed the assault, so they formed a posse and overtook him later that evening. The next day a jury was assembled and Kishkauko and his son Big Beaver were pronounced guilty of murder.92

In the same issue of the Gazette, it was reported that “the bodies of three Indians were found in [a] road” near Swan Creek in Monroe County. The bodies, said the paper, were “mangled in a most shocking manner.” A week later the Gazette elaborated upon this story by announcing that the Indians had been murdered by two others of the “Potowatomy nation,” and that the “supposed murderers” had been “committed to jail, to await their trial before the Supreme Court.”93

Another incident involving only whites was detailed by the Gazette on 10 July 1827. In this incident, a person named Levi Willard “killed his brother, Abner, by stabbing him with a butcher’s knife in the abdomen.” The brothers and a “hired man” were apparently “in a state of intoxication” one night when a quarrel ensued between the hired man and Levi. Abner intervened and succeeded in pulling the two men apart. But immediately thereafter “a quarrel arose between the brothers, who seized and choked each other—they soon separated, and Levi went into the kitchen, took up a knife, and threatened vengeance against any one who attempted to molest him.” Ignoring his brother’s threat, Abner “rushed in” and struck Levi a blow near the temple. At that, Levi “stabbed [Abner] two or three times.” Levi was subsequently apprehended by authorities and found guilty of murder. Predictably, the editors of the Gazette used the incident as a springboard to launch a tirade against the abuse of liquor, calling it “that bane of society; that destroyer of families; that curse of our country. . . .”94

In March of 1828 there was an unexplained incident which reeks of assault. The Gazette stated that a “Mr. Buel” was washing in a creek
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with “three or four persons near him” when two of the people decided to go into a nearby house. A few minutes later, “Mr. B. entered having his scrull badly fractured.” He is reported to have died on the following morning. The coroner, according to the Gazette, was unable to determine the cause of death.95

Not all incidents of sporadic assault in Michigan Territory involved just Indians or whites or combinations thereof. A rare assault among “Blacks” was reported on 24 April 1828, in which “two colored men, John Tyler and George Hicks, had a rencontre [encounter].” Tyler, apparently, was in the process of “beating a colored woman” when Hicks intervened to assist the woman. Distracted from his main task, Tyler focused his heated attention on the intruder and administered “severe blows and kicks.” Hicks later died from the injuries that he received. The incident occurred in a racially segregated area of Detroit “at a settlement of blacks, in rear [sic] of the farms about three miles below this city.” Tyler is reported to have fled to the woods following the assaults and had not been apprehended as the Gazette went to print.96

In November 1828, a “mulatto” named Tom Dodemead was being held in custody on a theft charge in Detroit. Upon promising the sheriff that he would “point out . . . where a trunk and several articles were hid,” the two went to a spot in Canada “a few miles below Sandwich.” They were not successful in locating the goods, however, so the sheriff decided to make the return trip at night. During this trip, Dodemead engaged the sheriff in a “severe struggle” and escaped custody, finally making his way back into Canada in a canoe. To the editors of the Gazette, the entire affair had been a ploy by the “cunning mulatto,” who in their estimation had “invented a story . . . in order to have an opportunity to escape.”97

Two Indians were killed “in the vicinity of the White Pigeon Prairie” in April 1829. “The murderer,” said the Gazette, “[was] supposed to be an Irishman named Pat Welch, who formerly kept a sort of tavern at Swan Creek, in Monroe County, and who is notorious for his other villainies.” As a result of the killings, white settlers in the region were considerably alarmed, “lest the Indians should avenge their friends in their own way, by killing a certain number of whites, without reference to their guilt or innocence.” Interestingly, at about the time these incidents occurred, immigration of white settlers in the St. Joseph/White Pigeon area had reached “unprecedented” proportions. Some 400 fami-
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lies, according to the Gazette, were crowded into the various settlements there.98

On 25 June 1829, the Gazette reported that there had been several indictments handed down at the Prairie Du Chien settlement. David D. M'Nutt, said the paper, was indicted for the murder of one John Bonner, while two others—Henry Richardson and James Wells—were indicted for the killing of Fleet S. Clopton. James P. Nix and William Kelly were indicted together for the murder of James Meredith, but both Nix and Kelly escaped custody “previous to trial.” An individual by the name of Renica was indicted, tried, found guilty, and sentenced to be hanged for the killing of Lieutenant J. M'Kinzie of the United States Army.99

On 20 August 1829, the Gazette reported a violent incident that was perpetrated by a “delirious” person.100 It seems that a man named Smith, from the “river Rouge,” took sick and called upon his doctor for a bed. The doctor provided the bed, and in the middle of the night Smith “got up and attacked two boys who were sleeping in another bed . . . , apparently determined to kill them.” The doctor and his son were aroused immediately, and did their utmost to protect the boys, “but in the scuffle which ensued both were dangerously wounded with a knife—the young man fatally. . . .” The “delirious man,” said the Gazette, escaped to the woods.101

Incidents of violence seemed to increase in number in the latter part of the 1820s. On 27 August 1829, only one week after the report of the previous incident, the Gazette announced that one John Dickman “came to his death in consequence of blows inflicted by Robert M'Laren.” The “affray,” as the Gazette termed it, “originated in a drunken frolic.” The parties had apparently been “very intimate” prior to the occurrence.102

Some five months later, on 28 January 1830, the Gazette reported its last incident of violence. In this incident, a “Mrs. Mettez” was accused by “city authorities” of abusing her seven-year-old sister by “beating [her] with a hooppole, stave, or billet of wood, pinching [her] ears, neck and arms, and dragging [her] across the room by the hair, which she frequently pulled out by the roots.” The woman was also charged with “severely” burning the child’s hands by holding them on a hot stove. When censured by neighbors for her cruel and inhumane acts, the elder sister simply declared “that the child was under her care, and she would do what she pleased with [her].” 103

All told, there were thirty-seven incidents of sporadic assault reported
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by the Detroit Gazette during the period between 1817 and 1830. In nineteen of those incidents, Indians were involved as either assailants or victims. Whites participated in twenty-four assaults, while Blacks participated in three. Only ten of the thirty-seven incidents involved assailants and victims of different races. A complete breakdown of the assaults is as follows: 104

Table 1.
Distribution of Assaults, by Race

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Victims</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Indian</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Assailants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Leaving out the relatively small number of incidents involving Blacks, we arrive at the following distribution:

Table 2.
Distribution of Assaults, by Race

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Victims</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Assailants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this table, the number in parentheses indicates the "expected" distribution of assaults given the totals in each column and row. By utilizing the chi-square method of evaluation, we find that the race of the assailant is a significant factor in determining the race of the victim; that is, whites, as a class, were more likely to attack other whites, while Indians were more likely to attack other Indians.105 This, in itself, should not be surprising, since whites and Indians were not distributed randomly throughout Michigan Territory. As we saw earlier, representatives of the two races had negotiated a series of treaties, the avowed purpose of which was to segregate members of the two groups geographically.106 At
any given time and place, for any given individual, there were simply
more members of one's own race to assault than members of other
races. What is surprising about the figures is that, despite the existence
of the treaties, lone Indians and whites had occasion to confront—and
hence, an opportunity to assault—one another on the open frontier.

Frontier newspapers such as the Detroit Gazette are valuable sources
of information about violence in pre-industrial society. But like most
historical source materials, they have built-in shortcomings which need
to be recognized and if possible neutralized. Foremost among these
shortcomings is the fact that early newspaper editors, as a social class,
had "vested interests" in maintaining social solidarity and continuity.
"[A] common belief among most editors," writes William G. Robbins,
"was that enforcement of law and the establishment of order would lend
constancy and attract capital to the frontier town." In the case of the
Gazette, as has been noted, its editors were actively engaged in promot-
ing Michigan Territory among prospective eastern emigrants. Under
such circumstances, it would not be unexpected to find them "under-
reporting" or even suppressing incidents of violence and disorder.

Two factors, however, indicate that this did not happen in the case of
the Gazette. First, its editors were not averse, on occasion, to issuing a
diatribe against "lawlessness" in the surrounding community. For ex-
ample, on 20 November 1828, the Gazette reported that "[s]everal
petty [thefts] have lately been committed (in the night time) by a gang of
thieves who infest the city. * * * Nothing but vigilance on the part of
our officers and citizens, and a prompt administration of justice, will
secure us against these nightly depredations." 

Second, the violent incidents that were reported by the Gazette were
usually done so in minute and gruesome detail. Readers of the Gazette
were subjected (treated?) to grisly accounts of axe murders, stabbings,
clubbings, fractured skulls, partial decapitations, and revenge killings as
if those phenomena were common to the frontier. No editor concerned
with cultivating an image of peacefulness and stability would have pub-
lished such stories if truth and accuracy had not been of paramount or
at least substantial concern.

One way to verify the veracity and comprehensiveness of any source,
of course, is to compare it with something else. Fortunately, for this we
have Blume's Transactions. In the Transactions, Professor Blume records
some twenty-nine assaults and ten murders between the years 1817 and
1830, for a total of thirty-nine sporadic assaults. The Gazette, as we
saw, reported thirty-seven. Lest one should make too much of this apparent correlation, it should be emphasized that there is both an overlap and an incompleteness to the sources. Undoubtedly, some of the assailants named by the Gazette were indicted and tried before the Territorial Supreme Court (the case of the two Indians who were executed being a prime example), just as some incidents of sporadic assault must have gone unreported and hence undetected by both the Gazette and the criminal justice system. We are thus left with this rather crude approximation of the level of violence on Michigan's frontier from the two named sources: Seventy-four assaults (maximum) in the space of thirteen years, for an average of 5.69 violent incidents per year.\textsuperscript{111}

A statistical finding takes on meaning only in comparison with other such findings. Unfortunately, there have been precious few quantitative studies of frontier violence conducted by historians over the years; it is therefore difficult to gauge the significance of this figure.\textsuperscript{112} Nevertheless, two recent studies of the relationship between violence and the frontier shed light on our inquiry.

The first study, published in 1979, was conducted by Professor David J. Bodenhamer.\textsuperscript{113} Bodenhamer set out to measure the level of "crime" in Marion County, Indiana, between the years 1823 and 1850, during which time, he says, it "exhibited those traits that historians have identified with westward expansion—isorl ation and dispersion of settlements, a diversity of social and ethnic groups, and the absence of a traditional social order."\textsuperscript{114} Relying exclusively on local court records for his data, Bodenhamer found that both property crimes and crimes against persons "actually decreased from 1830 to 1850. . . ."\textsuperscript{115} "[M]ost of the prosecutions," he writes, "were not for violent crimes but for nonviolent property crimes, such as larceny. Indictments for murder or manslaughter were rare in Marion County." Professor Bodenhamer concludes, as I have done in this paper with respect to Michigan Territory, that "In its early years Marion County was not a violent or crime-ridden society."\textsuperscript{116}

The second study is somewhat less conclusive, but nonetheless illuminating. Political scientists James Shields and Leonard Weinberg sought to explore the hypothesis that "the endorsement of frontier values is positively related to support for reactive violence."\textsuperscript{117} Their first step was to select ten values—including individualism, practicality, and "personal optimism"—which Turner and other historians "saw as deriving from the frontier experience."\textsuperscript{118} They then "operationalized" those
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values by formulating survey questions which best elicited the desired attitudes. Finally, they submitted the questions to a random sample of residents of a contemporary western community. The objective was to determine which, if any, of the ten values was correlated with yet another variable—the "propensity for reactive violence."  

The results of the survey were mixed. Four of the values, including individualism, were found to be positively correlated with the propensity for violence. People who embrace individualism, in other words, were more likely than those who do not to accept violence as a legitimate response in a given social situation. Five values, including practicality, were found to have no statistical relationship whatsoever to the propensity for violence, while one value—personal optimism—was found to be negatively correlated with that variable. Shields and Weinberg concluded that "frontier values, though far from being the exclusive determinants [of an individual's propensity for reactive violence], nevertheless contributed to a meaningful degree in predicting our respondents' attitudes toward its use."

Conclusion

Historians have left us with a frontier of vicious and unrelenting violence. According to the prevailing wisdom, frontier denizens assaulted, battered, and killed one another on a regular basis. Modern movies and literature have done little thus far to alter this conception.

But not all frontiers were violent places in which to live. Michigan Territory is a prime example. During an extended portion of its frontier past, Michigan Territory was the site of surprisingly few incidents of sporadic assault. Most of the incidents that occurred there, moreover, involved family members or people who (in one capacity or another) knew each other. Random, sporadic violence—the kind that was supposedly typical of frontier areas—was the exception rather than the rule in Michigan.

Though the results of this study contradict the claims of Professor Turner and his progeny, it is not hard to account for the divergence. During the period in question (1817 to 1830), Michigan territory possessed all the attributes of a more "civilized" society, except that it was physically and technologically "backward." The territory contained a variety of cultural institutions, afforded its residents numerous albeit
modest social activities, and superimposed on the raw wilderness an elaborate governmental and judicial structure. Each of these elements, in its own way, contributed to making Michigan Territory a safe and tolerable place in which to live.

But it was the physical "backwardness" of the territory, quite conceivably, which served as the strongest cohesive force in early Michigan society. In the course of struggling for survival in the harsh, frontier environment, Michigan residents were forced to group together in order to accomplish their individual and familial ends. This "grouping effect" quite naturally led to a strengthening of social ties and to the development of stable, self-sufficient communities. "Nature," in a figurative sense, provided the "glue" for a more coherent social structure. It thus seems possible that, far from constituting the major cause of violence in Michigan Territory, the frontier was the single greatest force working against it.

Notes


4. In this paper, I use the terms "frontier" and "West" (or variations thereof) as if they were synonymous. Obviously, they are not. Nevertheless, as applied to the American experience, they are roughly equivalent.

5. Turner, Significance of Frontier, p. 57.

6. Ibid., pp. 48-53.

7. See, e.g., Joe B. Frantz, "The Frontier Tradition: An Invitation to Violence," in
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8. “Western society,” writes R. Carlyle Buley, “was society on the make. The American’s desire ‘to better his condition’ at times developed into an encroaching spirit, yet the pioneer was jealous of his possessions and willing to take the law in his own hands to defend them.” R. Carlyle Buley, The Old Northwest: Pioneer Period, 1815–1840, 2 vols. (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1950), 1, p. 359.


10. My use of the word “defeated” here is more than apt. Roderick Nash has noted that pioneers often used “military metaphors” to describe their relationship with the frontier. “Countless diaries, addresses, and memorials of the frontier period,” he says, “represented wilderness as an ‘enemy’ which had to be ‘conquered,’ ‘subdued,’ and ‘vanquished’ by a ‘pioneer army.’ * * * The image [was] of man and wilderness locked in mortal combat. . . .” Roderick Nash, Wilderness and the American Mind, rev. ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1973), p. 27.

11. Curiously enough, Turner states that “The Indian was a common danger, demanding united action.” Turner, Significance of Frontier, p. 38. He thus recognized the cohesive nature of the frontier (represented by the Indian), but did not draw the same conclusion as I have with respect to it.

12. Robert Ardrey has written that the sum total of amity (social cooperation and good feeling) within a society at a given time equals the amount of enmity (social discord and ill will) plus the amount of “natural hazard.” As Ardrey puts it, “every increase in hazard which the group faces reduces the need for enmity.” Robert Ardrey, The Territorial Imperative: A Personal Inquiry into the Animal Origins of Property and Nations (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1966), pp. 248–53. The philosopher Thomas Paine described the same phenomenon: “[A]s nothing but heaven is impregnable to vice, it will unavoidably happen, that in proportion as [settlers] surmount the first difficulties of emigration, which bound them together in a common cause, they will begin to relax their duty and attachment to each other. . . .” In Paine’s opinion, this was the point at which government became necessary—“to supply the defect of moral virtue.” Thomas Paine, “Common Sense,” in Colonies to Nation, 1763–1789: A Documentary History of the American Revolution, ed. Jack P. Greene (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1975), p. 271. (Emphasis added.) Lewis Carroll put the phenomenon to verse:

Tweedledum and Tweedledee
Agreed to have a battle;
For Tweedledum said Tweedledee
Had spoiled his nice new rattle.

Just then flew down a monstrous crow,
As black as a tar-barrel;
Which frightened both the heroes so,
They quite forgot their quarrel.


13. Not all historians have taken so uniform a view of the frontier as Turner and his progeny. Nelson Klose, for example, studied the same frontier and found not unifor-
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mity but diversity. "The results of [the frontier] process created certain common characteristics, but differences occurred on various frontiers due to differences in time, the geographic environment, and in the immigrants themselves." Klose, Study Guide to American Frontier, p. 5.

14. See footnote 73 below.


18. Ibid., p. 125. Fuller is speaking of 1818 Detroit.

19. Alec R. Gilpin, The Territory of Michigan, 1805–1837 ([East Lansing, Mich.]: Michigan State University Press, 1970), p. 76. The authors of the atlas cited in footnote 16 above were probably alluding to these expeditions when they wrote that "the eastern part of the territory, consisting of lands ceded by the Indians, has never till recently been brought into notice." "Geographical, Statistical, and Historical Map of Michigan Territory." (Emphasis added.)


21. 5 Stat. 144 (1837).


23. Ibid., 5, p. liv.


25. Fuller, Economic and Social Beginnings, p. 147.


27. Ibid.

28. Ibid. As the statistics in the next section indicate, this attempt at strict segregation of the races did not forestall all "interferences" of Indians with whites.


30. "Geographical, Statistical, and Historical Map of Michigan Territory."


32. Ibid., p. 229.


34. Ibid., p. 104.


37. Ibid., p. 135; Fuller, Economic and Social Beginnings, p. 146.

38. Rohrbough, Trans-Appalachian Frontier, p. 223.
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41. Fuller, "Introduction to Settlement," p. 553.
42. There was only one road leading into Detroit in 1818, and it was often so muddy that it was impassable. *Idem, Economic and Social Beginnings*, p. 125.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 225; see, e.g., Detroit Gazette, 4 May 1821; *ibid.*, 18 April 1823. In the latter editorial, the Gazette called for the "establishment, on proper principles, of a Territorial Agricultural Society," the purpose of which would be to "effectually promote the best interests of this territory."
52. The outstate papers were based in Ann Arbor, Monroe, and Pontiac. Fuller, *Economic and Social Beginnings*, pp. 554–55.
55. Fuller, "Introduction to Settlement," p. 556.
56. Indeed, says George B. Catlin, "before we were a nation equipped with a constitutional government we were provided with an ordinance [the Northwest Ordinance of 1787] for the government of remote interior regions which were still in an unsettled condition." George B. Catlin, "The Regime of the Governor and Judges of Michigan Territory," *Michigan History Magazine* 15 (Winter 1931), p. 19.
58. 2 Stat. 309 (1805).
59. Fuller, *Economic and Social Beginnings*, p. 83; see also "Geographical, Statistical, and Historical Map of Michigan Territory." For purposes of enacting or adopting legislation, the presence of three of the four members constituted a quorum, and of those three, a majority was necessary (and sufficient) to carry a proposal. Thus, a law could be enacted on the votes of two people. Blume, ed., *Transactions*, 3, p. xxi. According to Professor Fuller, the governor and judges were rarely in agreement. "[M]any are the accounts," he says, "of their frequent and bitter broils." Fuller, *Economic and Social Beginnings*, p. 83.
64. *Ibid.*, p. 84. The act authorizing such an election was passed by Congress in 1818, and the next year the first delegate was chosen. *Ibid*.
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68. Ibid., 3, p. xxvii.
69. Ibid., 3, p. xxxi.
70. Ibid., 3, p. x.
71. “Geographical, Statistical, and Historical Map of Michigan Territory.”
72. Gilpin, Territory of Michigan, p. 24. The laws adopted between 9 July and 8 October 1805 are known collectively as the “Woodward Code,” after one of the original Supreme Court justices, Augustus Woodward. Ibid.
73. Ibid., p. 30.
75. Gilpin, Territory of Michigan, p. 108.
76. See footnote 22 above for complete citation.
77. As we saw earlier, the Supreme Court had original jurisdiction over capital offenses between the years 1815, when the system of county courts was created, and 1825, when circuit courts were established. See text accompanying footnotes 67 through 70 above.
78. Since intent is a state of mind and can never be observed directly, I have inferred it where the circumstances indicate that it was present. This, of course, is what happens in a criminal prosecution where “intent” (or some other mental state) is an element of the crime.
79. That is, spatially and temporally isolated.
80. Say, two to five persons.
81. This avoids the knotty problem of causation, over which historians and philosophers still wrangle. See, e.g., Sten Sparre Nilson, “On the Logic of Historical Explanation,” Theoria: A Swedish Journal of Philosophy 36 (1970), pp. 65–81. Sometimes it is difficult for the historian, because of the sketchiness of his or her source materials, to determine whether a particular attack in fact led to death.
82. Detroit Gazette, 7 August 1818, p. 2. Two technical points need to be made here. First, as a general rule, citations will be given following the close of each paragraph, even though a direct quotation may be contained within the paragraph. Second, following each citation I will summarize the assault(s) that appear(s) in the paragraph by the race, respectively, of the assailant and the victim (where race is determinable). See footnote 104 below. This incident, for example, involved one assault and was between Indians; thus, (I,I).
83. Ibid., 28 May 1819, p. 2. (I,W)
84. Ibid., 19 October 1821, p. 3. (I,I; I,I)
85. Ibid., 28 December 1821, p. 2; Gilpin, Territory of Michigan, p. 124. (I,W; I,W)
86. Gilpin writes that “the last territorial execution occurred on September 24 [1830].” It involved one Stephen G. Simmons, a tavern keeper who was convicted of “killing his wife in a fit of drunken rage.” Simmons was subsequently hanged. Gilpin, Territory of Michigan, p. 99.
87. Detroit Gazette, 5 December 1823, p. 2. (Emphasis in original.) (I,I; I,I)
88. Ibid., 21 February 1824, p. 2. (W,I)
89. Ibid., 24 September 1824, p. 2. (I,I)
90. Ibid., 22 October 1824, pp. 2–3. (W,I; I,W; W,I)
91. Ibid., 8 April 1825, p. 3; ibid., 12 April 1825, p. 3. (W,W; W,W)
92. Ibid., 10 January 1826, p. 3. (I,I)
93. Ibid., 10 January 1826, p. 3; ibid., 17 January 1826, p. 3. (I,I; I,I; I,I)
94. Ibid., 10 July 1827, p. 2. (Emphasis in original.) (W,W; W,W)
95. Ibid., 27 March 1828, p. 2 (?.,W)
96. Ibid., 24 April 1828, p. 2. (B,B; B,B) It is interesting to speculate whether the first
assault detailed in this incident—that involving the "colored woman"—would have been reported if the second had not occurred. My guess is that it would not have been. Then as now, most incidents of domestic violence probably went unreported to either authorities or the media. And yet, if present figures are any indication, as many as thirty percent of the violent incidents that occurred may have involved family members or "lovers." This is (roughly) the percentage of murders committed in Michigan in 1980 which involved these classes of people. Only 23.8% of the 1980 murders were of the "felony type." See Michigan Department of State Police, 1980 Uniform Crime Report for the State of Michigan, 22d ed. (East Lansing, Mich.: Michigan Department of State Police, 1980), pp. 9–10.

97. Detroit Gazette, 11 December 1828, p. 2. (B,W) On 22 January 1829, the Gazette reported that there had been thirty-one burials in Detroit's Protestant Cemetery during the previous year. Only one of the fourteen adult deaths was caused by violence—"killed in a quarrel." The causes of the other deaths were listed as follows: four by drowning; one by "intemperance"; two by fever; two by "decline"; one by "inflammation in the stomach"; and three unknown. Ibid., 22 January 1829, p. 2.

98. Ibid., 16 April 1829, p. 2. (W,I; W,I)


It cannot be a coincidence that in almost every reported assault, homicide, and suicide, the actor is described by the Gazette as being either "deranged," "insane," or "delirious." I counted six suicides during the study period and in all but one of them the actor is referred to as being insane or deranged. See ibid., 21 November 1817, p. 2; 18 December 1818, p. 2; 5 October 1821, p. 3; 7 August 1827, p. 2; 4 September 1827, p. 2; and 17 April 1828, p. 2. In one case, the suicide in question was a former probate judge of Crawford County. The Gazette said that he was "supposed to be insane."

100. Ibid., 20 August 1829, p. 2. (W,W; W,W; W,W; W,W)

101. Ibid., 27 August 1829, p. 2. (W,W)

102. Ibid., 28 January 1830, p. 2. (W,W)

103. The race of one assailant is unknown. I have therefore excluded that particular assault from the compilation. In most cases, the race of the individuals involved was evident from either their names or the circumstances of the assault. Where available, I have relied upon the Gazette's characterization. I realize that while one's name may be an indicator of one's racial or ethnic background, it is certainly not a criterion thereof.

104. The distribution shown is significant at .01, which means that the probability of it occurring entirely at random is one in one hundred. Another way of putting this is that the race of the assailant is ninety-nine percent reliable in predicting the race of the victim (or vice versa). A caveat is in order. The chi-square method is most effective when the number of observed phenomena is large. Its accuracy may be affected by the fact that our sample is relatively small.

105. See text accompanying footnotes 26 through 30 above.


108. See text accompanying footnote 44 above.
"pilferers" and "culprits." *Ibid.*, 27 November 1828, p. 3. For editorials expressing everything from concern to outrage at the level of crime in Michigan Territory, see *ibid.*, 29 May 1818, p. 2; *ibid.*, 2 July 1819, p.3; *ibid.*, 3 May 1822, p. 3.

111. Using the 1820 population as a base, this computes to 6.4 violent incidents per 10,000 individuals, per year. The 1830 population of 31,639 (see text accompanying footnote 23 above) gives us a figure of 1.8 violent incidents per 10,000 individuals, per year. The true figure will lie somewhere between these poles.

112. Most studies of the frontier, to the extent that they treat the subject of violence at all, deal with it qualitatively or even impressionistically, as the following passage illustrates: "The frontier habitually received more than its quota of undesirable citizens, who escaped to a land where the hand of the law was feeble." Everett Dick, *The Dixie Frontier: A Social History of the Southern Frontier from the First Transmontane Beginnings to the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), p. 225.


114. *Ibid.*, p. 325. The reader will note that Michigan Territory exhibited the same traits during the study period.

115. *Ibid.*, p. 332. In addition to property crimes and crimes against persons, Bodenhamer studied crimes against "morality, public order, and [the] legal order." *Ibid.*, p. 331. His focus is thus much broader than mine, which is exclusively with "crimes against the person."


118. The construct "personal optimism" is analogous (but only analogous) to the trait I have called "efficacy." See text accompanying footnotes 5 and 6 above. The other seven values utilized by Shields and Weinberg are: (a) exploiting the environment; (b) America the melting pot; (c) democratic faith in the common person; (d) hostility to Indians; (e) self defense; (f) group vigilantism; and (g) retrospective vigilantism. See *ibid.*, p. 93.


120. The negative correlation is explained as follows. Individuals with a low level of personal optimism are more likely to resort to violence as a (first) means of achieving their goals, while those with greater confidence in their abilities and prospects are more likely to work "within the system" and to explore other, non-violent alternatives.


122. The late Ray Allen Billington called the link between "frontier" and "violence" a "distortion." It originated, he said, "in the tendency of visitors to single out unusual frontier types for extended description, partly because they were fascinated by the lawless reprobates who contrasted so sharply with the prosaic citizens of their own social circles. . . ." Ray Allen Billington, *America's Frontier Heritage* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. 72. In reality, wrote Billington, the majority of violence that occurred on the frontier was committed by a "handful of outcasts." "The true pioneers. . . . were the small-propertied farmers, ranchers, and entrepreneurs who formed the bulk of the advancing population. * * * They came to stay, and to grow up with the country. . . ." *Ibid.*, p. 73.