

Speed is a Virtue: Travel in the Mid-Nineteenth Century United States

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In 1830 the Lancaster, Ohio school board observed with one voice that if God had meant "his creatures" to travel at the "frightful speed of 15 miles per hour He would have foretold it through His holy prophets." Such speed was the "device of Satan to lead immortal souls to hell."¹ Twenty-five years later English tourist Charles Weld recorded a harrowing journey he made from Cumberland, Md. to Washington, D.C. Trying to make up for time lost in delays, the conductor pressed the train faster than Weld thought wise. Soon the train lurched from side to side with such violence that the cars began to come apart around the passengers. Weld remonstrated with the conductor about the speed, but received no satisfaction. To almost no one's surprise, the train eventually jumped the track. Emerging from the wreck (lucky to be alive), Weld again castigated the conductor, but to his amazement none of the other passengers joined him: indeed, most applauded the conductor's efforts to recoup the lost time.²

How can we reconcile these two stories? Initial misgivings about haste in transit aside, Americans came to embrace speed to an extent that disconcerted visitors to the U.S. in the nineteenth century. By mid-century speed had acquired an unquestioned place among the elements of progress for many Americans. The way in which Americans by the late twentieth century took rapid transportation for granted makes exploration of the subject difficult: so ubiquitous is the desire for speed in

¹ The quotation appears in the Pennsylvania Railroad Museum, Strasburg, Pa., and likely comes from an edition of the journal *Railroad History*.

² Charles Weld, *A Vacation in the United States and Canada* (London: n.p., 1855), 222-335, 247.

transit, and its importance so assumed, that few think to explain why it is that haste in transit is so important to Americans' daily life.

There was something distinct in the American desire for speed, a desire that knew few bounds and which became vested with a degree of nobility. This peculiarity stemmed from a number of influences: a Protestantism that, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, was already distinct from its European ancestry--and became more so as the years passed; the nation's geography and topography, a nation whose size dwarfed all of Western Europe; a social fluidity that fascinated and perturbed foreign visitors unaccustomed to loosely-defined classes; and the opportunities that came with the founding of a new government. With all this in mind, to Americans the quest for speed was not simply a convenience, a distraction, or a thrill: it was a virtue.

There are several reasons for this development to consider. The immensity of the country is perhaps the most obvious. Travel time between Baltimore and Washington, D.C., in 1812, the year in which the first steamboat, the New Orleans , began plying the waters of the Mississippi, took a three-horse coach a day-and-a-half.³ Riders traveling from Providence to Boston, a trip of fifty miles over long-established roads, had to settle for a journey of just under five hours. "If anyone wants to go faster," wrote one traveler to a friend in 1822, "he may send to Kentucky and charter a streak of lightning."⁴ Nevertheless, we cannot account for this desire for a speedy voyage simply by nodding to the expansive territory Americans progressively occupied and the enormous distances they had to cross, however real those observations: that does not, by itself, account for a readiness to risk everything.

Another way to approach the matter is through the American quest for efficiency. Efficiency in commerce was central to the argument Robert Fulton advanced in his early advocacy of the Erie Canal in 1814. Efficient communication in order to effect sound government was the concern of James Madison and Albert Gallatin lest the country's size compromise the form of government itself. Ann Archbold

³ Seymour Dunbar, A History of Travel in the America, Showing the Development and Transportation from the Crude Methods of the Canoe and the Dog-Sled to the Highly Organized System of the Present and Changing Social Conditions that Accompanied this Economic Conquest of the Continent: And Those Related Human Experiences, Changing Social Conditions and Governmental Attitudes Which Accompanied the Growth of a National Travel System (Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1915; reprint, New York: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1968), vol. 3, 743.

⁴ Dunbar, A History of Travel in the America , 743.

went west as a missionary in 1849. On her return she noted pointedly of her voyage down the Missouri aboard the steamboat Cora that "the serious part of all denominations among us lamented the waste of time, and devoutly wished that our young friends would find more substantial joys as they were swiftly gliding down the stream of time to the great ocean of eternity."⁵ Compelling as a quest for efficient use of time or money may be, it does not, by itself, adequately explain why Americans were willing to risk their lives and limbs, though it is part of the story.

The American embrace of capitalism is sometimes considered the primary motivation behind this quest for speed. Speed in transit, goes this argument, came as a simple by-product of the demand for quick access to markets, the better to close deals. There is no doubt that the economic system of the United States played a role in justifying both the pursuit of speed and the costs involved. But this alone cannot adequately explain the compulsion for speed when we stop to consider that, as the nineteenth century advanced, for many of the travelers on the country's transportation networks speed was not strictly essential to the conclusion of their business, whatever that might have been.

When considering speed in the American context we benefit most by conceiving of it as a route to virtue, and eventually a virtue itself. In the context of nineteenth century American society and culture it is what speed afforded that made it a virtuous pursuit. By conceiving of speed as a virtue--and then only because of what it made possible--could a populace move from reasoned concern to its thorough embrace. In the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries speed gained in value through its association with a variety of basic tenets of American virtue. These included progress, a firm belief in the wise use of God-given time, and the importance of productivity to the individual as well as to the commonweal. Going fast became a measure of good, of progress and civilization, just as surely as going slow became synonymous with inefficiency, unproductive use of time, wastefulness, and indeed, sin.

Virtue

The most common usage of the term "virtue" in the decades on either side of the American Revolution connected virtue with public service, specifically republican

⁵ Ann Archbold, A Book for the Married and Single, the Grave and the Gay: and Especially Designed for Steamboat Passengers (Woodsfield, Oh: N A Baker, Printer, 1850), 61, 75-76.

government, and in the American context, the burden of government rested on the shoulders of the citizenry.⁶ In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries virtue reposed with those of special status in society, church ministers and the wealthy individuals who gave themselves over to public service. But the process of democratization in the years subsequent to the Erie Canal broadened the category of individual considered suitable for public service, and associated with virtue. In achieving the responsibilities of democracy the common man could also appropriate the virtuous qualities that once defined the responsibilities of, and that had belonged to, those who executed the offices and duties of public service. In a culture that had little time or patience for inherited privileges and titles, almost the only thing left with which to wrap oneself was the idea of virtue, or sacrificial service to the commonweal. "He who is an active and useful member of society, who contributes his share to augment the national wealth and increase the numbers of the population," observed mid-century French tourist Maurice Chevalier, "he only is looked upon with respect and favor. A man who has no profession enjoys little consideration."⁷

⁶ See Gordon S. Wood, The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), and J. G. A. Pocock, Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). The classical conception of republican government held these principles as a foundation and those who manifested public-spirited participation in self-government were virtuous citizens. Sacrifice formed an essential element of public virtue: individual interests yielded to those of the commonweal. Debates regarding questions of virtue, sacrifice, and self-interest that took place during the Enlightenment are quite useful in grappling with changing ideas of virtue. The Philosophes' efforts at establishing a rationality to life entailed an aversion to the common pre-existing foundation, namely Christianity. For a detailed examination see for instance Jean A. Perkins, "Diderot's Concept of Virtue," off print from Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century (Geneva: Institut et Musée Voltaire les Delices, 1963) and Adrienne Koch, The American Enlightenment: The Shaping of the American Experiment and a Free Society selected and edited, with an introduction and notes, by Adrienne Koch (New York: George Brasiller, 1965).

⁷ Michael Chevalier, Society, Manners, and Politics in the United States: Letters on North America edited with an introduction by John William Ward, translated after the T. G. Bradford edition (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1961), 267. There was strong and consistent endorsement for this in the literature of the period typified by John Frost, Lives of American Merchants, Eminent for Integrity, Enterprise, and Public Service (Auburn: Alden and Markham, 1848), which had more than seven editions, and Freeman Hunt's eponymous Merchant's Magazine. Divines of the era joined the chorus. See for example Thomas P. Hunt, The Book of Wealth; in which It is Proved from the Bible, That It Is The Duty of Every Man to Become Rich (New York: Ezra Collier, 1836), Russel H. Conwell, Acres of Diamonds: Our Everyday Opportunities and Their Wonderous, Unsuspected Riches. An Original Presentation from the

As a result, virtue implicitly contained elements of individual determination, independence, and the making of personal wealth. Economic independence formed a vital part of arguments for self-rule, for economic independence helped secure the personal independence so necessary to the idea of civic responsibility.⁸

But in the early decades of the nineteenth century virtue gradually lost much of its connection to classical republicanism, civic duty, and the common good. Instead, economic productivity and industriousness became the criteria for virtue as it moved from the "realm of public activity to the sphere of private character." In the context of the early American republic civic virtue relied on individual and economic independence to ensure the uncorrupted exercise of political participation. One needed wealth (property) to be able to demonstrate and practice virtue (politics or public service). Ultimately, the pursuit of wealth became tantamount to a quest for virtue. But this was initially tinged with moral dubiousness: the implication was that those deeply set in business, manifestly driven by self-interest, "were not proper candidates for public office."⁹ The inherent conflict between virtue and commerce can be summarized

Standpoint of To-day of the Master Motives and Methods that Determine Success in Life. Practical Directions and Incentives for Worthily Acquiring Wealth and Achieving Distinction, Enforced by a Graphic Recital of the Example, the Struggles and Triumphs of Noted Successful Men and Women Representing Every Department of American Life. A Volume of Help and Cheer for Every Person, of Either Sex, Who Cherishes the High Resolve of Getting On In the World and Sustaining a Career of Usefulness and Honor (Philadelphia: John Y. Huber Company, 1891), and perhaps the most popular of all, Henry Augustus Boardman, The Bible in the Counting House: A Course of Lectures to Merchants (Philadelphia: Lippincot, Grambo & Co., 1853) which had five editions. By the latter decades of the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries there was a small industry of children's books totaling millions of volumes that had a material affect on their audience; see Judy Hilkey, Character is Capital: Success Manuals and Manhood in Gilded Age America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

⁸ It is important to distinguish between civic virtue, which is public in nature, and private virtue, which tends to be defined by religion and morality. Wood and Pocock attach different meanings to virtue, even while both use the term in an explicitly political context. Wood favors "public virtue" while Pocock uses the term "civic virtue." The nuances of their distinctions are not germane here; regardless of whose term one prefers, both virtues are measured publicly rather than privately. It is public virtue that is implied when the term is used in this study, and it is not strictly a political definition.

⁹Joyce Appleby, Capitalism and a New Order: The Republican Vision of the 1790s (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 9. Historian Jack P. Greene firmly disagrees with the timeline here, arguing that commercial values surfaced in a more visceral way before the Revolution. Jack P. Greene, Imperatives, Behaviors, and Identities: Essays in Early American Cultural History (Charlottesville: University of

simply: commerce emphasized liberty over obligation, rights over duty, and most important, the self over the whole. Commercial values challenged the benefit of sacrifice, arguing that public good came through efforts at private gain. The role that speed plays in all this is often difficult to discern yet it is a significant one, for speed accommodates these conflicting impulses, thereby becoming valuable to both sides of the issue. The quest for speed became firmly connected to this new virtue of industriousness just as surely as it had ensured the success of the new republic by enabling communication over long distances. Now to tarry between places was to lose opportunity for improvement, growth, expansion, profit, progress, success--personal as well as national--in short, to impede progress. In time, public good was deemed to be the result of the efforts at private gain, proving correct, it seemed, eighteenth century writer Bernard Mandeville.¹⁰

During the course of the nineteenth century the pursuit of efficiency for the sake of good government or the commonweal and the pursuit of efficiency for personal economic benefit came to be interchangeable. Nestled within this was the matter of human stewardship of God-given time: thus, speed and efficiency were intimately associated with good, sound government, capitalist acquisitiveness, and the careful use of God's gift of time on Earth. The quest for one was as good as the quest for the others in the minds of most Americans.

Americans in the nineteenth century increasingly took advances in technology as evidence of national virtues even while its dictates disconcerted some. But what constituted progress? Extension of the republican experiment was certainly one definition. To that end, geographic expansion was both necessary and good, and new transportation technology not only facilitated continental expansion; it seemed to do so without sacrificing the virtues of republican government.¹¹ Speed was the very essence

Virginia Press, 1992), 220 and Isaac Kramnick, "The Great National Discussion: The Discourse of Politics in 1787," William and Mary Quarterly 45 (1988) vol. XLV, January, 22.

¹⁰ Bernard Mandeville, The Fable of the Bees: or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits with a Commentary Critical, Historical, and Explanatory by F. B. Kaye, two volumes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924). Mandeville first published his work anonymously, as a tract, in 1714, and only later revised the text into a book. His allegory posited that public good would derive not from noble sacrifice, but from individual selfishness and greed.

¹¹ Frances (Fanny) Palmer's painting Across the Continent: Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way (1868) is not only one of the most recognizable of the period, it's also an ideal example. It shows the transcontinental rail line stretching from lower right to upper left of the painting, and then receding in the distance. On the right

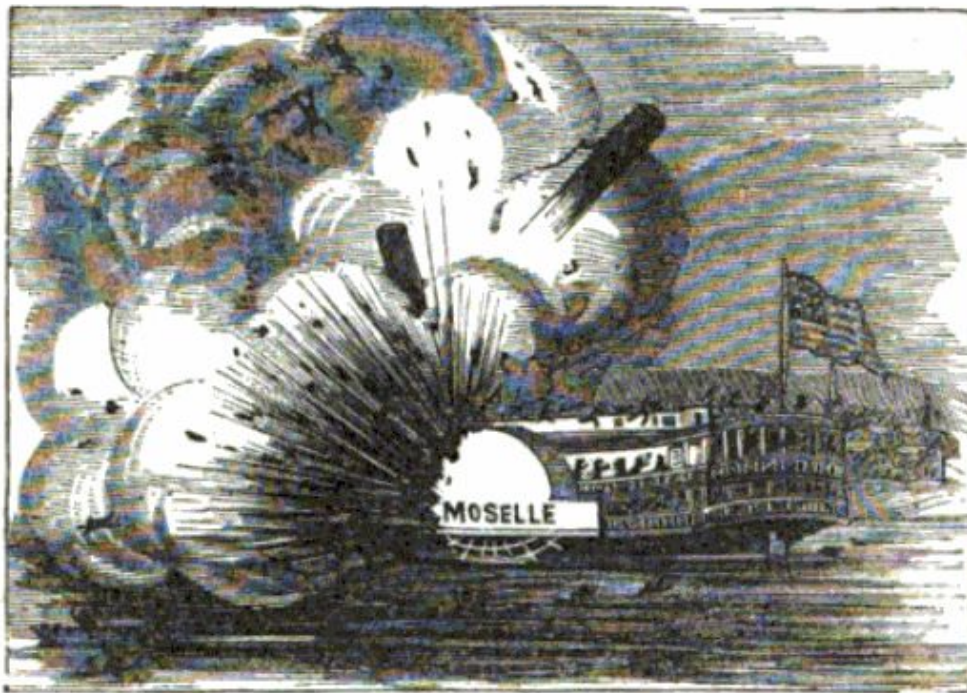
of this technology: it would allow the practice of republican values far and wide, and it would help extend the base for the experiment. At the same time speed would enhance the condition of the citizenry through the growth of commerce and travel. Furthermore, speed in transportation hastened the spread of civilization, a cause in-and-of-itself by century's end. Speed, then, embodied a moral imperative.

As the real speed of transportation picked up, and differences in transit times between wagon and train, flat-boat and steamboat, or train and airplane are material, employing anything but the fastest means of transportation suggested a squandering of precious time. Such a mindset only works if one subscribes to a Christian cosmology or a capitalist framework, something most Americans professed to do. Christian ministers throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries regularly promoted the fruits of labor and commerce, even while reminding their audiences as something of an afterthought of the attendant obligations to their less-fortunate fellow citizens. By late in the nineteenth century, according to many of the most revered divines, making money was no mean labor, and making a great deal of it bore no particular odium. Speed was important to those in quest of fortune just as wise use of time was in the best interests of the devout Christian. To divines speed was virtuous for reasons other than for the good government that communication enhanced, or for the wealth which then ensured independence; speed connoted wise use of time. Such ministers as Hendry Boardman, Russel Conwell and Amos A. Lawrence instructed their audience (for they reached far more than just their parishioners) that a connection existed between wealth and godliness. (It was the latter who famously wrote that

side of the painting is a lake at the base of a chain of snow-capped mountains. There is no development on the right side of the track, just "wilderness." On the left side is a small town with seven modest log buildings and even three tents at the western edge of town--and it is the western edge because west is the train's destination. A road, shifting left and right in a meandering way, parallels the tracks. There are covered wagons heading west, and the only identifiable building in town is the "public school," so noted because a sign hangs above the doorway. One of the four men on the hill in the lower left looks down from his work cutting wood, and gazes at the train with its five red passenger cars. The engine has a full head of steam, evident by the plume of smoke wafting away from the stack. And on the small knoll to the right of the train, near the lower right corner, are two Indians on horseback, gazing at the train. The smoke from the engine blows directly at them, and at once obscures their view of the west and threatens to envelop them. In the distance the plains stretch unending to the horizon, green, uninterrupted, and inviting with promise. The rail is the defining mark between the past and the future, between raw and tamed, between stagnation and progress.

"Godliness is in league with riches."¹²) Even if they did not explicitly state that speed was good, reaching the end goal of wealth invariably meant getting someplace as fast as possible, the better to cement one's chance at fortune. The link between speed and the fruits and promises within the messages of the divines cannot be ignored.

Disentangling the religious value of speed from the economic and political



EXPLOSION OF THE MOSELLE.

Figure 1: Explosion of the steamboat Moselle near Cincinnati, Ohio, 25 April 1838.

valuation, and separating the pursuit of private wealth from public good became increasingly difficult in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

This is partly because over

time other interests co-opted the virtues of speed. Efficiency, for instance, itself not necessarily related to speed, became its synonym, absorbing the former's virtuous attributes in the process. If public virtue was measured by the likes of George Washington or Benjamin Franklin in 1800, Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller were its paragons by 1900. Speed was instrumental in redefining virtue, for it bonded disparate, sometimes antithetical, interests and it did so by being a virtue to all possible parties.

The Moselle

On Wednesday, April 25, 1838, between four and five o'clock in the afternoon, the steamboat Moselle exploded several miles up-river from Cincinnati, Oh. So violent

¹² William Lawrence, "Relation of Wealth to Morals," World's Work March 1901, 283.

was the explosion that it hurled passengers and crewmembers far through the air, many landing on the riverbank. At least one man came to rest halfway through a house roof on the bluff facing the river; the captain was found dead on shore. Many not thrown from the wreckage by the explosion were severely scalded, the less fortunate of whom did not die instantly. The estimated list of casualties ran high: 81 killed; 55 missing; 13 badly wounded. Only 117 passengers survived the disaster.¹³ After boarding passengers at Cincinnati's waterfront the Moselle had been driven upriver to load additional deck passengers heading to St. Louis and points beyond. The disaster occurred in full view of those on shore who had gathered to watch the departure of a magnificent machine already gathering fame for its speed.

Americans blithely rode machines like the Moselle throughout the nineteenth century, ready to accept a startling amount of mayhem in return for a quick voyage. Steamboating continued to thrive during the century despite the frequency of such events and observers, then as now, concluded by way of an explanation that Americans were in a remarkable hurry.

The Moselle's plight was not unusual. Steamboats had met with disasters since their introduction, both on western rivers and in the coastal waters. The first steamboat to carry commercial traffic on the Mississippi, the New Orleans, struck a submerged snag and sank near Baton Rouge, La, in 1812, barely seven months after entering service.¹⁴ Branches and logs periodically thrust through the floor of the boat by the paddle wheel occasionally killed sleeping passengers.¹⁵ The steamer Washington under the command of Henry Shreve himself, exploded in 1816 with a full complement of crew, scalding many whom, if they survived the blast, drowned as the boat foundered. In 1833 the steamboat New England exploded just off the city of

¹³ Report of the Committee Appointed by the Citizens of Cincinnati, April 26, 1838, To Enquire Into the Causes of the Explosion of the Moselle and to Suggest Preventative Measures as May Be Best Calculated to Guard Hereafter Against Such Occurrences (Cincinnati: Alexander Flash, 1838), 22.

¹⁴ Leonard V. Huber, Advertisements of Lower Mississippi River Steamboats, 1812-1920: A Scrapbook with Introduction and Index of Vessels and Lines with a foreword by Frederick Way, Jr. (West Burlington, R.I.: The Steamship Historical Society of America, 1959), 2.

¹⁵ Joseph Fawcett, The Journal of Jos. Fawcett: Diary of this Trip in 1840 Down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to Gulf of Mexico and up the Atlantic Coast to Boston with an introduction by Eugene D. Rigbey (Chillicothe, Oh.: David K. Webb, 1944).

Essex, Ct, with disastrous results considering the load of passengers it carried.¹⁶ Just as commonly, steamboats caught fire without any preceding explosion, making travel on the rivers and coastal waterways a perpetual risk. Western steamboats were notorious for a seeming indifference to careful stowage of freight. In 1858 the Pennsylvania exploded and caught fire. In its hold not far from the engines were barrels of turpentine that joined the conflagration. "The sober truth," wrote John A. Roebling, "is that steamboat running is a bold game between life and death all the time."¹⁷

The day following the explosion of the Moselle , and only after the living had been sorted from the dead, the mayor of Cincinnati convened a public meeting to examine the cause of the disaster. As the most professionally qualified man around, John Locke, professor of chemistry at the nearby Medical College of Ohio, performed the primary analysis of the accident. He concluded that the safety valve on the boiler had been weighted down while the boat lay alongside the shore, effectively undermining the valve's purpose because there could be no emergency release of steam as the pressure in the boiler mounted.¹⁸

At the time of the disaster the Moselle had made only three trips yet she was already known as a "brag boat," a desirable appellation for those seeking a quick trip "and passengers chose to embark on this boat in preference to others."¹⁹ The local newspapers had eagerly reported on the Moselle ' s accomplishments to that point. The day before the explosion Cincinnatians could read of the most recent, and only second voyage of the Moselle , during which the passengers urged the captain on in his attempt to establish a new speed record, which he did.²⁰ In the wake of steamboat disasters newspapers sometimes apologized for encouraging passengers to select the fastest boat for their transit. In the case of the Moselle , contrition set in during the days

¹⁶ The Weekly Register , Chillicothe, Oh., 1816, vol. II, No 45, June 13, 1816; Report of the Board of Examiners, Appointed by the Connecticut River Steam Boat Company, To Inquire into the Causes of the Explosion of the Steam Boat New England, which occurred at Essex, [Conn.] October 9th, 1833 (New Haven: Steam Boat Company, 1833).

¹⁷ "Prevention of Explosion of Steam Boilers," Pittsburgh Morning Post , 28 June 1858, 2.

¹⁸ Report of the Committee Appointed by the Citizens of Cincinnati, April 26, 1838 , 52-3.

¹⁹ Report of the Committee Appointed by the Citizens of Cincinnati, April 26, 1838 , 18.

²⁰ Louis C. Hunter, Steamboats on the Western Rivers: An Economic and Technological History (New York: Octagon Books, 1969), 285.

that followed. At least one newspaper confessed to encouraging the celebration of speed-seekers. "We, in part, take blame, we plead guilty, in common with other presses, of having praised the speed and power of the boat--circumstances that doubtless contributed to inflate the ambitions of its captain and owners," wrote E. W. Gould in his compendium of river travel in the United States.²¹

Reports of steamboat sinkings and explosions circulated up and down the rivers and appeared in the newspapers of river towns and cities, and passengers frequently read dreadful news about boats they knew of. Few, if any, were unacquainted with the risks involved in steamboat travel. To be sure, death, whether by disease or accident, was a familiar part of life for Americans in the nineteenth century: when disaster struck few paused to do more than record the event or the loss of a loved-one.²² Lady Emmeline Wortley traveled on stagecoaches and steamboats and found Americans inured to the risks. The vessel on which she was a passenger came upon the steamer Empire that went down only two days before her boat arrived

²¹ E. W. Gould, Fifty Years on the Mississippi; or Gould's History of River Navigation, Containing a History of the Introduction of Steam as a Propelling Power on Oceans, Lakes and the--The First Steamboats on the Hudson, Delaware, and the Ohio Rivers--Navigation of the Western Rivers Before the Introduction of Steam--Character of Early Navigators--Description of First Steamboats--Steamboat New Orleans in 1811--Their Effect Upon the Settlement of the Valley of the Mississippi--Character and Speed of Different Boats at Different Periods--Appropriations by Congress for the Improvement of Western Water Ways--Floods in the Mississippi River Valley for 150 Years--Mississippi Commission and Its Work. Rapid Increase and Decline of River Transportation, Causes of the Decline--Destruction of Steamboats on Western Waters--Biographies of Prominent Steamboatmen--Illustrated by Photographs and Cuts of Steamboats of Different Periods (St. Louis, Mo.: Nixon Jones Printing Co., 1889; reprint, Columbus, Oh.: Long's College Book Co., 1951), 521.

²² A broadside exists, undated, announcing a traveling diorama of the "explosion of the Moselle. Scene 1.--A view of the Public Landing at Cincinnati. Steamboats are seen coming and going--also, the two Ferry Boats and a number of other crafts. The Mail Boat starts for Louisville; and shortly after the MOSELLE appears under a full press of steam ascending the river. Crowds of people on the Landing in various occupations, give to this scene an exciting interest. Scene 2--View of Fulton--below is seen the Cincinnati Water Works--higher up is the raft, along side of which the Moselle was lying shortly before the AWFUL CATASTROPHE!! The Steamer Moselle is seen ascending the Ohio--stops at the raft--persons occupied with transporting articles, and entering the steamer--when, after a short stay, she is pushing from the Landing, the Explosion takes place, blowing high up in the air Hundreds of Human Bodies and articles of all kinds, which, when descending, cover for a considerable distance the surface of the river." Given the extent of the graphic display we can certainly infer some moralizing involved. (Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County, Rare Books Room, the Inland Rivers Library.)

on the scene. She struggled to reconcile the actions of Americans with her own culture, asking rhetorically: "Whence arises this indifference to human life in so flourishing and prosperous a community?"

It is that they are tyrannized over by a very despotic taskmaster--Mammon. Indeed, money-getting, which is certainly in most countries a great business, appears here to me almost a battle. It seems as if they must win, do or die, and the dead on the field are trodden under foot by their eager comrades and competitors. ... to make money seems a sort of duty in Americans--the great object of living.²³

In the minds of many Americans, society's progress depended on the betterment of the individual, whose condition would be marked principally by economic improvement. Commerce was one of the "great means of civilizing and improving mankind," wrote George W. Burnap, and those, "such as the merchants who sought their profits were equivalent to generals at the heads of armies, equally the instruments in the hands of a higher Power of ministering to the gradual improvement of the world."²⁴ Herman Haupt was more blunt: "Time is money, and the value of time is so fully understood and appreciated, that no tax imposed upon travellers within reasonable limits will drive them from the railroad." [sic] It matters not that he spoke of the railroad in 1855; the motive was the same.²⁵

Transportation had long been the purview of the wealthy, wrote Michael Chevalier of his tour in the United States to his countrymen in France,

but modern communication not only promoted real, positive, and practical liberty, it is to extend to all the members of the human family the power of moving about and using the world which has been given to all as a common patrimony. I would go further: it is to establish equality and democracy. The effect of the most perfect system of transportation is to reduce the distance not only between different places, but between different classes.²⁶

In short, speedy communication was virtuous for the nation. Existing American conceptions of republican government relied on individual independence as the basis

²³ Lady Emmeline Wortley, Travels in the United States, etc. During 1849 and 1850 3 volumes (London: Richard Bentley, 1851), 10-11, 13-14.

²⁴ George W. Burnap, "The Social Influence of Trade," Hunt's Merchant's Magazine 4 (May 1841), 415.

²⁵ Herman Haupt, A Consideration of the Plans Proposed for the Improvement of the Ohio River (Philadelphia: T K and P G Collins, 1855), 11.

²⁶ Chevalier, Society, Manners, and Politics in the United States , 204.

of democratic government, which in turn, hinged on financial security. And of course, in a society that actively rejected traditional European social hierarchies, money became almost the sole means of measuring social rank. Speed promised to fulfill so much of Americans' notions of virtue that even at its riskiest it remained virtuous.

Argentine tourist Domingo Sarmiento's comments are further illustration of this emerging commercial virtue. Sarmiento was deeply, if uncritically, impressed with the United States and the American character. Like many visitors to the U.S., he was struck by the profession of democracy and equality, the results of which were profound. His comments reflect his discipleship of Franklin, though his conclusions are more of the period than of his hero's.

Avarice is the legitimate daughter of equality, while fraud comes (strange as it may seem) from liberty itself. The American fights with nature and endures hardships in order to arrive at the supreme good which his social position makes him covet: comfort. And if morality gets in the way when he is about to reach his goal, is there anything strange in putting it aside in order to pass by or in giving it a push if it persist in interfering?²⁷

We find an echo of this in the comments of other tourists at the time, such as Aleksander Borisovich Lakier, a Russian who visited the United States in the mid 1850s. Writing for his fellow countrymen, Lakier described wealth as a route to privilege in the United States--the privilege to "elect and be elected." This wealth secured the right to suffrage, but it also denoted those eligible to serve the public. This is the transference of virtue from the long-established, traditional repositories to anyone with the money—the rabble, the everyman.²⁸

If we turn to the official report of the Moselle disaster we find within it an indication of popular values that made speed a desirable, virtuous undertaking. The deaths from the Moselle explosion, read the report, resulted from

²⁷ Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, Sarmiento's Travels in the United States in 1847 translated and introductory essay by Michael Aaron Rockland (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 8.

²⁸ A Russian Looks at America: The Journey of Aleksander Borisovich Lakier in 1857 translated and edited by Arnold Schrier and Joyce Story, with an introduction by Schrier and a foreword by Henry Steele Commager, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 68.

an excess of those things which are in themselves laudable. They have their foundation in the present mammoth evil of our country, the inordinate love of gain. We are not satisfied with getting rich, we must get rich in a day. We are not satisfied with traveling with a speed of ten miles per hour, but we must fly. Such is the effect of competition that everything must be done cheap; boiler iron must be made cheap, travelling must be done cheap, freight must be cheap and yet every thing must be speedy. A steamboat must establish a reputation of a few minutes "swifter" in a hundred miles than others, before she can make fortunes fast enough to satisfy the owners. And while it is so, is it strange that ambitious young men should run the same risk which they would run for the post of honor in the battle field? That they should jeopard every thing, even life itself, for that which has become a very deity?²⁹

No matter the public contrition: barely had the wreck from the Moselle explosion been sifted and the dead buried than the United States Post Office offered \$500 in gold to the first steamboat captain who would carry the mail from New Orleans to Louisville in less than six days.³⁰ "Every man is either just in from Cincinnati or Chicago, or he is starting for one of these places," observed British tourist J. Milton Mackie. "Unless he makes his hundred miles between breakfast and dinner, he counts himself an idler and talks of growing rusty. I saw in the West no signs of quiet enjoyment of life, only a haste to get rich. Here are no idlers."³¹

By mid-century Herman Melville, though himself somewhat disconcerted by the course he saw his country taking, nevertheless wrote: "we Americans are the peculiar, chosen people--the Israel of our time; we bear the ark and the liberties of the world." With a perspective such as this almost anything or any action can be imbued with noble significance. Even those things which might seem at first selfish, tarnished, or dubious in character were redeemed in light of the larger moral cause. "Almost for the first time in the history of the earth," continued Melville, "national selfishness is

²⁹ Report of the Committee Appointed by the Citizens of Cincinnati, April 26, 1838, 28.

³⁰ Frederick Way, Jr., She Takes the Horns: Steamboat Racing on the Western Waters (Cincinnati: Young and Klein, Inc., 1953), 26.

³¹ J. Milton Mackie, From Cape Cod to Dixie and the Tropics 2 volumes (New York: Putnam, 1864), 192. Also, "Americans were always in a hurry," recalled Moritz Busch of his sojourn in the United States, and he characterized life in America as like a buzz of bees. Whether he meant to cast a nod toward Mandeville is unclear, but he then put his finger directly on the pulse of this frenzied activity: "To get to the goal in the shortest time imaginable is the guiding principle." This observation, he added, applied to the glass as well as to work, which he thought explained the American preference for whisky over beer or wine. Moritz Busch, Travels Between the Hudson and the Mississippi, 1851-1852 translated and edited by Norman H. Binger (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1971), 22.

unbounded philanthropy. We cannot do a good to America, but we give alms to the world."³²

It is good to keep in mind the importance of earthly time to Americans of the nineteenth century, largely products of Protestantism and a political revolution that they were. They had little patience with the past, and little interest in anything but the present and future, for it was there that their destiny lay and they were in a hurry to fulfill it. In answering a question, one American in 1850 summed up the reasons behind the cultural desire for speed and all that it made possible. "We don't vally [sic] these things in this country," he said of his ancestors, and the past in general. "It's what's above ground, not what's under, that we think on."³³ And Americans had much to think on when it came to their apparently divinely-sanctioned destiny; not only was all the world watching, but all the world waited, like Lazarus, for the crumbs to fall from the rich table.

³² Herman Melville, White Jacket, or The World in a Man-of-War with an introduction by William Plomer (New York: Grove Press, 1850), 151.

³³ Alexander Mackay, The Western World, or, Travels in the United States in 1846-47 2 volumes (London: n.p., 1850), quoted in Allan Nevins, ed., American Social History as Recounted by British Travellers (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1923), 215-217.