



# Migration to the agricultural frontier and wealth accumulation, 1860–1870 <sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

I use a new data set of households linked between the 1860 and 1870 censuses to study frontier migration. Households that moved to the frontier to farm were more likely than non-migrants to have been poor, landless, and illiterate, and to have had young children. Also, after controlling for observable differences, migrants had below average abilities to accumulate wealth. These findings suggest fewer opportunities for migrants to accumulate wealth in non-frontier areas and a reason for their migration. Nonetheless, migrants fared well, accumulating wealth at high rates. The gains in wealth of migrants, especially those with long tenure on the frontier, suggest the extraordinary benefits of migration.

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## 1. Introduction

A large body of research shows that between 1850 and 1900 inhabitants of the US frontier enjoyed significant opportunity to accumulate wealth. For instance, in his path-breaking study, Curti (1959, pp. 176–221) found low levels of initial wealth but also widespread land holding and high rates of wealth accumulation among the settlers of Trempealeau County, Wisconsin. “[T]hat opportunity,” he concluded, “w[as] largely provided... by frontier conditions.”<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, other historians have identified similar patterns of land holding and wealth accumulation in frontier areas of Utah (Kearl et al., 1980), Arkansas and Texas (Schaefer, 1987), Iowa (Galenson and Pope, 1989), and Missouri (Gregson, 1996), giving rise to a set of facts about wealth in frontier areas and contributing to the perception of the frontier as a place of economic opportunity.<sup>2</sup>

While our understanding of wealth on the agricultural frontier is now considerable, our knowledge of who settled the frontier is less exhaustive. That is due in part to the effort required to trace households over time and between places in the census manuscript schedules.<sup>3</sup> The recent contributions of Schaefer (1985), Steckel (1989), and Ferrie (1997) notwithstanding, important questions about the ability of households to migrate to the frontier remain. For instance, we do not know how many of the poorest Americans migrated to the frontier (Ankli, 1974; Atack and Bateman, 1987; Danhof, 1941; Klein, 1974; Shannon, 1936), nor whether, as Turner (1903) surmised, households in urban areas in the East availed themselves of the “free lands” of the West (Ferrie, 1997; Goodrich and Davidson, 1936; Shannon, 1945; Turner, 1893; Turner, 1903).

This paper adds to our knowledge of 19th century frontier migration and wealth accumulation. I study households that migrated to the frontier—defined as the area within the present-day borders of Kansas, Nebraska, and South Dakota (then a part

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<sup>1</sup> Curti (1959, p. 446).

<sup>2</sup> Roughly, those facts are: (1) rates of wealth accumulation on the frontier were high and often above those in non-frontier areas (Curti, 1959; Galenson and Pope, 1989); (2) there was a gap between the wealth of early and late arriving settlers (Curti, 1959; Kearl et al., 1980; Schaefer, 1987); (3) early arriving settlers accumulated wealth at higher rates than late arriving settlers (Gregson, 1996); and (4) inequality in wealth holding increased with time due to Riccardian rents and the accumulation of location specific knowledge (Gregson, 1996; Kearl et al., 1980; Schaefer, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> Until recently historians interested in frontier migration had to rely on anecdotal evidence to infer the characteristics of migrants (Goodrich and Davidson, 1936) or state-level census data on the places of birth of residents (Gallaway and Vedder, 1971; Malin, 1935; Steckel, 1983).

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