



Miss Semple meets the historians: the failed AHA 1907 conference on geography and history and what happened afterwards



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Abstract

The year 2013 marked the sesquicentennial of the birth of Ellen Churchill Semple, at one time a towering figure in American geography. Like almost all of her geographer contemporaries in the first decade of the twentieth century, she was a stout defender of 'geographic influences' in history. This article examines a failed attempt by professional historians to give geographers a hearing at the American Historical Association in a critical 'Conference' on the relevance of geography to history, in 1907. Organized by Frederick Jackson Turner, it was the first time professional historians in America had given Miss Semple a public opportunity in which to defend her views. How and why it turned out to be an intellectual disaster, and how its major participants changed their views later, is the subject of this paper.

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This article, originally a brief paper marking the Ellen Churchill Semple sesquicentennial in 2013, situates Semple at the centre of two important moments in the history of American geography. One was the late nineteenth and early twentieth century attempt to position human geography as the scientific study of 'geographic influences' in the programmes of the new American universities after 1870. The other was an attempt to promote interdisciplinary dialogue, particularly with historians, many of whom had adopted the 'geographic influence' stance as part of the attempt to account for historical processes, and others who had found that 'scientific' approach a simplistic and misleading analysis.

The 1907 annual meeting of the American Historical Association (hereafter AHA) took place in Madison, Wisconsin from 27–30 December. For it, Frederick Jackson Turner had organized a 'Conference' on the relations of history and geography. Although, as we shall see, numerous individual historians in the late nineteenth century and later argued for the salience of geographical ideas, this was the first time the AHA, founded in 1884, had scheduled a formal exchange of ideas between historians and geographers, in the hope of establishing common

ground. Turner's hopes, the views of the participants, and the aftermath for its leading figures, are the focus of this paper.

The background

Around 1870 American geographers had begun to narrow the scope of their discipline and to redefine it as primarily a field belonging to the physical sciences, with a claim to special expertise in 'geographic influences', or the conditioning effect of 'geographic factors,' particularly physiography and climate, on human activity. During the 1880s and beyond they succeeded in developing graduate and research programmes in the new or expanding American universities, normally beginning under the aegis of natural history or of geology, and culminating in the first independent American doctoral department of geography, at the University of Chicago in 1903. Some younger American historians began to examine older tropes of geography as the 'handmaid' or as one of the two 'eyes' of history (the other being chronology) and to see the claims of the 'new geography' of that period as providing possibilities for a more 'scientific' interpretation of history. An early attempt to make geographic methods more widely known to historians occurred during the 1880s at the Johns Hopkins University, whose President was the geographer Daniel Coit Gilman, and encouraged both by him and by his Professor of History, Herbert Baxter Adams. Adams

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placed great importance on the salience of geography for his history graduate students.¹

One byproduct of this interest was an influential anthology edited by the Johns Hopkins Professor of Psychology, G. Stanley Hall, who commissioned a series of essays on *Methods of Teaching History*, first published in 1883 and, with some revisions, was republished six times, as late as 1902. The usefulness of geography for the teaching of history is mentioned in several essays and was the focus of a short (4-page) chapter entitled 'Physical Geography and History'. Hall had initially asked Gilman to write it, but after making a few notes Gilman, a master of the geographic bibliography of his time, turned these over to historian J. Franklin Jameson, Hopkins' first doctoral degree holder, who had been retained to teach a course on that subject and to assemble a library of geographical material, housed in the history department. Gilman, however, refused to allow his name to be used on it. Jameson also refused, on the grounds that he 'did not originate it and it isn't a credible thing anyway', and Hall published the essay anonymously. Besides its bibliographic recommendations, the essay argues that 'the influence of physical geography upon history is a matter no one can afford to neglect'.²

Other historians (and economists trained in the methodology of historicism in Germany, such as Richard T. Ely), had also seen contemporary developments in geography as essential to the study of history. The historian Burke Hinsdale allotted geography a separate chapter in his *How To Study and Teach History*, first published in 1893, identifying geography both as a spatial relation and as 'a historical cause of great potency and value'. In 1895 the Harvard historian Edward Channing had addressed the National Education Association on 'The Relation of Geography to History', in which Channing had asserted 'Without a knowledge of [geography] it is impossible to understand [history]'. J.W. Larned, in his *Literature of American History: A Bibliographic Guide*, published in 1902, included a section on 'Geography and Physiography', drawing on a list provided to him by Harvard's physical geographer, William Morris Davis. Channing's colleague, Albert Bushnell Hart, began his review of Albert Perry Brigham's *Geographic Influences in American History* and Ellen Churchill Semple's *American History and its Geographic Conditions* in the *American Historical Review* [hereafter AHR] in 1904 by complaining that 'though geography is well known to be the handmaid of history, their relations are too little noticed by experts in either subject'. Channing and Hart's influential *Guide to the Study of American History*, first published in 1896, contained sections on historical geography, beginning with the statement 'No important subject connected with American history has been so neglected as the historical geography of the United States'. A later section suggested that 'without an adequate knowledge of the

physical and historical geography of the United States... the historical student is all at sea'. Other historical scholars during the period made similar comments.³

The organizer: Frederick Jackson Turner

Of all the influential historians of the first decade of the twentieth century who were advocates and students of the 'new geography' of the period, Frederick Jackson Turner of the University of Wisconsin stands out. As a graduate student at Johns Hopkins, Turner had made use of the 'Geographical and Statistical Bureau' attached to H.B. Adams' history seminar room, and had taken courses with Ely. In the spring of 1889 Turner had taken the course on 'Physical Geography and History,' that year coordinated by the brilliant 18-year-old graduate student Charles Homer Haskins; Gilman himself gave the first lecture.

During his first years as a faculty member at the University of Wisconsin, Turner had sat in on a physiography course taught by his colleague Charles Van Hise. His papers during that period, most famously with his 'Influence of the Frontier in American History,' often stress the importance of geography. In 1897, in a lecture to the Geographic Society of Chicago titled 'Influence of Geography upon the settlement of the United States' (his first to a geography audience), Turner had contended 'the master key to American history is to be found in the relation of geography to that history'. And in January 1905 Turner published a review of Semple's and Brigham's books together, as Hart had, but in the *Journal of Geography*, his first appearance in a geographical journal. In it he praised Semple's analysis of 'the geographic forces which determined the growth of the United States to a continental power', and concluded 'When the American historian shall unfold the combined influences of geography acting on western expansion and shaping society to the resources of these vast [physiographic] provinces... we shall come nearer to an understanding of the meaning of our nation's history'.⁴

The presenters

Ellen Churchill Semple had been a serious student at Vassar College and had graduated in 1882 both as the class Valedictorian and its youngest member. After a stint teaching in her sister's school in Louisville, KY, she took her master's degree at Vassar in 1891. Subsequently, while her mother's companion on a European trip, she met an American student who had taken a doctorate in philosophy at the University of Leipzig and told her of a brilliant and dynamic professor of geography there, Friedrich Ratzel, who in 1882 had published the influential first volume of his *Anthropogeographie*. Semple decided to study with the master in

¹ For a general overview of modern American geography in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see W.A. Koelsch, *Academic geography, American style: an institutional perspective*, in: G.S. Dunbar (Ed), *Geography: Discipline, Profession and Subject Since 1870: An International Survey*, Dordrecht, Neth., 2001, 245–279. For geography in the earlier years of the Johns Hopkins University, see W.A. Koelsch, *Geography and the Classical World: Unearthing Historical Geography's Forgotten Past*, London, 2013, 321–328 and references.

² [D.C. Gilman and J.F. Jameson], *Physical geography and history*, in: G.S. Hall (Ed), *Methods of Teaching History*, Boston, MA, 2nd ed., 1885, 223–226; Jameson, Diary, entry for 18 May 1883, J. Franklin Jameson Papers, U. S. Library of Congress [hereafter JPLC]; reprinted in: M. Rothberg (Ed), *John Franklin Jameson and the Development of Humanistic Scholarship in America*, Vol. 2, *The Years of Growth, 1859–1905*, Athens, GA, 1996, 97; A.G. Bogue, *Frederick Jackson Turner: Strange Roads Going Down*, Norman, OK, 1998, 134–135. For Hall's interests in school geography, see W.A. Koelsch, G. Stanley Hall, child study, and the teaching of geography, *Journal of Geography* 101 (2002) 3–9.

³ B.A. Hinsdale, *How to Study and Teach History*, rev. ed., New York, 1898, 92; J.W. Larned (Ed), *The Literature of American History: A Bibliographical Guide*, New York, 1902; reprint, New York, 1966, 23–32; E. Channing, *The relation of geography to history*, in: National Education Association, *Journal of Proceedings and Addresses, Sessions of the Year 1895*, St. Paul, MN, 1895, 192–196; A.B. Hart, *Review of Geographical Influences in American History and its Geographic Conditions*, *American Historical Review* 9 (1903–1904) 571–572 [hereafter AHR]; E. Channing and A.B. Hart, *Guide to the Study of American History*, Boston, 1896, 48–54, 169–171, 227–231, 309–310.

⁴ For Turner's interest in geography, see R.A. Billington, *The Genesis of the Frontier Thesis: A Study in Historical Creativity*, San Marino, CA, 1971 and his *Frederick Jackson Turner: Historian, Scholar, Teacher*, New York, 1973; Bogue, *Frederick Jackson Turner* (note 2); R.H. Block, *Frederick Jackson Turner and American geography*, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 70 (1980) 31–42 [hereafter AAG]; Turner to C.L. Skinner, 15 March 1922, in: W.R. Jacobs, *The Historical World of Frederick Jackson Turner, with Selections from his Correspondence*, New Haven, CT, 1968, 54–62; Turner, *Geographical interpretations of American history*, *Journal of Geography* 4 (1905) 34–37; and W. Coleman, *Science and symbol in the Turner frontier hypothesis*, *AHR* 72 (1966) 22–49. Quote from Turner's 1897 lecture is from Block, Turner, 36; the unpublished paper is in the Turner Collection, Huntington Library, San Marino, CA (hereafter TCHL). On Turner's taking Haskins' course on Physical Geography and History at Johns Hopkins, see Koelsch, *Geography and the Classical World* (note 1), 324 and references.

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