

Land After Whiteside

A Changed Land

Americans in 1833 inhabited a very different landscape than the one they first encountered in 1779. They felt much less alienated from an unfamiliar natural landscape inhabited by “savages,” instead seeing it as a pleasant, almost Edenic land. They were the rightful inheritors of the land, associating it with Egypt. The American Bottom had been tamed.

In this taming though, significant ecological changes were already apparent. Bears, moose, bison, wolves, and cougars were either gone or rapidly disappearing from the American Bottom and surrounding prairies. Other animals would soon follow. In their place were pigs, cows, and horses, who brought with them fences, weeds, and widely spread settlements. These homesteads and towns turned the forests and prairies into crop fields and pastures, leading to hotter summers and colder winters. The patchwork of prairie and woodlands was replaced with rigid rectangular borders imposed by the Northwest Ordinance. The land itself was less fertile and eroded more easily, with increased water runoff that left upland creeks dry. The Mississippi River was widening and moving laterally and by the mid-nineteenth century would destroy many French colonial towns.

How did these two changes, the cultural and ecological, occur side by side? Though I have largely argued, using Cronon as a basis, that the ecological changes resulted from the increasing influence of capitalism, the blame does not rest solely with the Anglo-Americans’ economic system. For one, many of the changes resulted from the use of livestock, a human practice millennia older than capitalism. Clearing forests and grain agriculture were also not direct products of capitalism.¹

Yet, it was capitalism that made agriculture so pervasive and expansionist. Once market connections were established, farmers grew crops at a much greater rate than they would if they were just grown for themselves. Livestock were raised for similar reasons. Capitalism and colonialism were deeply intertwined; the economic forces that originally brought the French and later Anglo-Americans to North America. The colonial model promoted resource exploitation and shipment to the “mother country.” Thus, the land and its resources became a

commodity to be exploited for profit, an economic system that, ultimately, favored infinite growth on finite resources, a self-destructive force on the environment.

We must not forget the beliefs of the Anglo-Americans themselves about these changes and what they meant. For settlers, “improvements” were a means of “taming the wilderness;” of establishing control over the landscape away from Indians. The link between this ideological perspective and capitalism lies in the initial alienation settlers felt among French and Indian culture and an unfamiliar wilderness. Anglo-Americans thus sought connections to more familiar parts of the country to the east to better establish control over the land. These connections were initially economic, as Morrison shipped flour from the American Bottom down to New Orleans and east to Pittsburg. The market economy itself alleviated alienation.

This is an inverse of the way Karl Marx uses alienation to describe industrial economies. For Marx, industrial workers under capitalism were alienated from the means of production; they did not own the products of their labor or even the labor itself.² In some sense this was initially true for Anglo-Americans; they were alienated from farming the American Bottom due to Indian warfare. Yet as they alleviated this alienation, they created a new form of alienation from the land; in which they did not directly utilize the farm products they produced, instead selling them for an abstract profit. This transformed both human and natural communities.³

Though agriculture and industry are often viewed in conflict, with agriculture seen as more in touch with nature, the ecological damage to North America began long before the industrial revolution arrived. Cronon even argues in the conclusion to his work that while the industrial revolution is often blamed for rapid alterations to America’s ecosystem, the changes began much earlier in the farms and homesteads of colonial America, and it did not stop there. It continued, as their cultural descendants spread westward to the American Bottom and the Goshen settlement, all connected in a global capitalist economy that, Cronon writes, caused both colonists and Indians to begin “a dynamic and unstable process of ecological change which had in no way ended by 1800,”⁴ or 1833. This process still has not ended.

For a history of the Whiteside Cemetery itself, see [Whiteside Cemetery](#).

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1. William Cronon, [*Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*](#). (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 162.
 2. Karl Marx, [*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*](#).
 3. Cronon, [*Changes in the Land*](#), 170.
 4. [*ibid.*](#)