ONE does not have to live long below the Mason and Dixon Line—south of the Pennsylvania border—to realize that there is such a thing as a Southern tradition in the interpretation of American history. Like most traditions it is compounded of varying proportions of fact and fancy, but there it is in any case. The small boy in Alabama who still learns that the South won all the battles of the Civil War—only to lose the War after all—may some day study this drama in more critical fashion; but it is likely that he will always see American history from the Southern angle. It is, indeed, largely this particular historical perspective that makes him a Southerner and that consequently marks off the South as a distinct section in the Union today. In like manner, one need not linger long west of the Pennsylvania border to realize that there is a Middle Western slant on our national past. Here in this region, it is seriously

* This editorial is based in part upon remarks made in a symposium held by the American Historical Association at Washington in December, 1939, of which Professor Ralph Gabriel of Yale University was chairman. I am indebted to the several other gentlemen who participated for various suggestions, and also for helpful critical comments to Professor G. W. Pierson of Yale University.
stated, the United States has been made what it is—something distinc-
tively American rather than the transplanted Europe which lingered
on along the Seaboard. Under the guise of a “frontier interpretation,”
in which the very word frontier has frequently been used as synony-
mous with “the West,” this tradition has influenced much of the na-
tional history written during the last generation.

There remains the region to the north of Pennsylvania, and it is
unnecessary to go there at all in order to feel the force of the historical
tradition which has radiated from that center to influence the entire
country. There is nothing new in the New England story. Most Amer-
icans imbibed it along with “the three R’s” when they first scanned
“The Courtship of Miles Standish” or memorized “Paul Revere’s
Ride.” Scholars “down East” have frequently implied that it was
really New England puritanism, rather than the frontier, that made
the American nation.¹

Three important historical traditions, then, have developed to the
south, to the west, and to the north of Pennsylvania. But what of the
Keystone State itself and of the smaller adjacent states of New Jersey
and Delaware? Where is the “Middle Atlantic” tradition in American
history? Of local sagas there is a plenty—the memory of Quaker
colonies, the wonder of Pennsylvania German farms, the fascination
of Philadelphia in Franklin’s day—but there seems to be no one story
that unites the people of these three commonwealths in such a com-
mon sectional consciousness as flourishes on all sides of them.

It might not be amiss, if space permitted, to inquire into the reasons
for this lack of a tradition in the Middle Atlantic area. For the mo-
moment, however, the more pressing question relates not to origins but
to consequences. How has this lack affected historical perspective, in
looking back over the development of the Middle States in general
and of Pennsylvania in particular?² Would not their story be better
known, and perhaps be viewed in a different manner, if American his-

¹ Compare, for example, F. J. Turner’s strong statements about the unique rôle of the
frontier with the equally sweeping generalizations in Perry Miller’s recent New Eng-
land Mind (p. viii) to the effect that puritanism—apparently New England puritanism—was
“the most powerful single factor in the early history of America.” He also refers (p. ix)
to the “New England Puritans as founders of an American nation.”
² Pennsylvania has been particularly neglected, in that no serious cooperative history
of the State has ever been attempted; whereas a valuable series of this sort is now ap-
ppearing for New Jersey.
tory had been written largely by a "Pennsylvania school" of historians?

In an attempt to answer this query, one may take as a text any of the other traditions noted. Consider, for example, the picture of "The Flowering of New England" as it has been presented by writers in that section. This may well suggest what such a treatment contributes to the prestige of one region, and what it may also imply for the reputation of another. It has long been assumed in New England, and widely accepted elsewhere, that this region became during the nineteenth century the center of all that was best in American culture. In a day when classical allusions meant so much, Boston became "the Athens of America." So widely has this view been held that few have questioned the tradition as such; inquiry has been directed rather towards such subsidiary questions as relate to origins and details. As a starting point in the analysis, then, one may consider the question of origins. Whence came this cultural achievement east of the Hudson? How can it be explained upon historical grounds?

It must be assumed, first of all, that there was something unusual about the "Flowering of New England" as compared with the cultural attainments of other parts of the country. If not, there is no reason why such a title should be employed; one might just as well discuss the efflorescence of the whole Seaboard, to say nothing of the really American Middle West. Granting this, the explanation of the unusual distinction of New England for the given period (about 1820–1860) must be found in certain factors—or in combinations of factors—which were more or less peculiar to the region.

Economic influences were certainly at work. One can hardly imagine that the cultural level attained in the Boston area could have been built on anything less substantial than the rapid growth of wealth and population there, which was in turn based upon the whole expansion of industry and trade. These developments, however, were not in any way peculiar to Boston. Both New York and Philadelphia excelled it in these respects. In like manner, political influences may have played their part in the story, but there was nothing very unusual here in the Boston experience. Again, international contacts doubtless proved stimulating to the Bostonians—scholars seeking German
libraries and doctors walking the wards in Paris—but such contacts were not unknown to other Americans.

What was peculiar to New England, apparently, was neither its economic, political, nor international experience, but rather its religious background. Calvinistic puritanism, with its moral and social implications, "carried on" there in one form or another into the nineteenth century. It is true that Calvinism was breaking down in Boston and the neighboring towns after 1800, and that it was just in this region that the flowering process was most apparent. Conversely, there was apparently less evidence of it in the more orthodox Connecticut. Perhaps it was the disintegration of puritanism, rather than the system itself, which produced a cultural soil so favorable to the blossoms of the forties. Or, to change the figure, one might suggest that thoughtful Bostonians had been so long suppressed by a narrow and intolerant religion, that their final release therefrom was sudden and correspondingly spectacular. Perhaps enlightenment was a more gradual and continuous process in the more tolerant centers. In such an interpretation, nevertheless, the theological tradition continues to be of primary significance. As has frequently been pointed out, even those leaders who like Hawthorne consciously revolted against puritanism cannot be explained without some reference to it.

This is not to say that the religious influence should be considered in isolation from other phases of New England life with which it was necessarily interrelated. It is rather the particular combination of the religious tradition with certain other factors which will explain the story. Consider again the fact that Calvinism had been common to most parts of New England, whereas the "flowering" was primarily associated with the Boston area. Sharing in the inheritance, why did not New Haven and Hartford bloom in similar profusion? If it was indeed their orthodoxy which held them back, just why were they so relatively conservative? And if other factors were involved, what were they? Here one thinks once more of the possibility of economic influences. In terms of population and wealth, Boston held a distinct advantage over the Connecticut towns.

The interplay of economic and religious forces also becomes apparent if Boston is compared with more distant parts of the country. The Massachusetts center shared its Calvinistic tradition with the Presbyterians of the South as well as with the Congregationalists nearer
home. It is probably true that Southern culture was not the equal of the Bostonian, although this contrast could be easily exaggerated. Granting this, it is easy to point out in explanation that the South lacked the racial and cultural solidarity of New England. More than this, there was no urban center in the region equal to Boston, and hence no comparable social-economic basis upon which to rise to higher things. Perhaps one should say, therefore, that the Boston achievement is to be explained by an unusual combination of economic, social and religious circumstances.

There remains the question: Can we make any distinctions in the relative importance of these three factors? Perhaps this can be done only in terms of a particular philosophy of history—a matter which cannot be entered into here. It is at least possible, however, to suggest which the most important factors were in differentiating Boston from any other given center. Economic contrasts certainly set it apart from the Presbyterian domain in western Pennsylvania and Virginia. When, on the other hand, one compares the “Athens of America” with the two largest American cities of that day—call them in similarly ancient terms Sodom and Gomorrah, or what you will—the religious differential again seems the most significant. Neither New York nor Philadelphia had quite the same intellectual tradition as had the New England emporium.

Calvinism, to begin with, stressed a tradition of learning. A learned clergy was essential even in a wilderness Zion: hence Harvard College. Compare this with the Philadelphia story, where a mystical Quaker influence was long dominant. No one seems to have believed that the “inner light” needed a college education. A learned clergy, on the other hand, preaches and writes, and these practices soon became an essential part of the Puritan way. So, too, did that “New England conscience” which was at least in part an expression of Calvinist zeal. The Boston leaders were still preaching, writing, and searching their souls in 1850, albeit in a more liberal and refined manner than had their forefathers of 1700.

If this religious explanation of the New England flowering is valid, one may expect to find negative as well as positive evidence in support of it. There were phases of culture in which the Puritans of Massachusetts did not excell, and in which they therefore did not hand down an outstanding tradition. It is not desirable, in making this point,
to overstate it. The usual generalization that puritanism discouraged the fine arts calls for qualification. There was creditable music in Boston in the later eighteenth century, and architectural forms were by no means neglected. Yet it is difficult to find Yankee music comparable to that of the contemporary Moravians in Pennsylvania; and one may well feel that the Georgian buildings of Philadelphia display a distinctly higher level of taste than do their counterparts in Boston. Even in science there is nothing suggesting superiority in the latter city, despite the important work which was done there. In the opinion of so good an authority as Jefferson, the outstanding physical scientist of his day was Rittenhouse of Philadelphia; and it is frequently forgotten that the most original biologist and medical man of that period hailed from Charleston, South Carolina. In general, the original preëminence of Philadelphia is still attested by the priority of many of its institutions devoted to the arts and sciences.

Unfortunately, those who have devoted themselves to building up the New England tradition seem to have felt at times that this called for the deprecation of what had been accomplished in Philadelphia and other centers. Thus Mr. Van Wyck Brooks observes that early cultural leadership in William Penn's city had been achieved "thanks to a good Bostonian, Benjamin Franklin"—an ironical remark, presumably, but not necessarily devoid of serious intent. He adds that even this leadership due to a good Bostonian—just how good is not clear—was a thing of the past as early as 1815.\(^3\) Again, Mr. Norman Foerster, writing some years ago in *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, casually declared that by 1825 Philadelphia had lost "what literary glories it had ever had."\(^4\) In a word, the creation of a tradition in one section has involved the danger of underestimating other regions by way of contrast. This is a natural tendency, but one that any area lacking a potent tradition of its own can hardly afford to ignore.

Another aspect of these deprecatory processes is the assumption that, at least after 1820, the slump in Philadelphia culture was such that no further comparisons are necessary. Meanwhile, it is assumed that New York had not yet really arrived. Hence the Boston of the best days was clearly in a class by itself. Here again an objective analysis of facts calls for qualification. One may grant, taking various cri-
teria into consideration, that there was a literary superiority in the Boston area in which all Americans take a certain pride. There were, to be sure, a number of striking figures like Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, and Edgar Allen Poe who were primarily associated with the middle cities; and later critics have sometimes rated these men more highly than they have Hawthorne, Emerson and Lowell. Be that as it may, the Bostonian preëminence becomes less apparent as one looks from literature to other phases of intellectual endeavor. As a means of emphasizing this point, one may pose bluntly the thesis that neither in its music, nor its painting, nor its architecture, nor its science was the Boston of 1840 clearly superior to either New York or Philadelphia. In the case of science, indeed, the New Haven of Silliman's day comprised a center worthy of comparison within the New England area itself.

It is of course difficult to debate such matters, particularly in regard to the fine arts where personal taste is such a persuasive factor. Bostonians may sincerely feel that their city exhibits finer examples of Greek Revival forms than the old buildings of Girard College and of the Second United States Bank, and it will be difficult to prove them right or wrong in this conviction. In science, on the other hand, it is possible to be a little more objective. No one wishes to argue whether Joseph Leidy or Asa Grey was the more important biologist; but it is clear that Philadelphia continued to be the chief medical training center of the nation throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, and that a preëminence in training carried at least some implications for research and writing as well.

The myth of a general slump in the position of Philadelphia, both economic and cultural, has sometimes been accepted even by Philadelphians themselves. After about 1820, the story goes, trade decreased and culture declined. Industry came in, but manufacturing promoted smugness and provincialism rather than the cosmopolitan culture of commercial days. As a matter of fact, Marion Brewington has lately shown that trade actually increased in the ensuing era, but this has been overlooked because of changing forms. Industry led to wealth, and some of this wealth eventually encouraged cultural achievements. The city grew rapidly, and its reputation as a scientific center increased.

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in some respects between 1820 and 1860. It is true that local architecture lost the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome, but a similar lapse in classical taste occurred throughout the entire country. One suspects that the impressions of a peculiar decadence now sometimes recalled have been due largely to two factors; first, the fact that New York did forge ahead rapidly in population and wealth; and, second, that the New England tradition has credited that region with a similar surpassing in the cultural field. Again it behooves the Quaker City to look to a tradition of its own.

If these observations are valid, one may return to the story of the Boston "flowering" with the observation that this represented an important but limited preëminence in three phases of culture; that is, in literature, in liberal theology, and in certain phases of social reform. Why, then, was this city so frequently viewed as the one outstanding center of American civilization? The answer is not far to seek. The particular phases of culture in which Boston excelled happened to be those which made the widest appeal to the educated public throughout the nation. The Americans of 1840 were still a theologically-minded people. Channing and Emerson ministered to the paramount interests of the intellectuals of their day. In the North, moreover, increasing numbers were caught in the current of humanitarian reform. Hence the appeal of Dorothea Dix and of Harriet Beecher Stowe. And of all the arts and sciences, finally, literature was by far the best known. There was some popular interest in music, and in science for that matter, but nothing comparable to that displayed in belles lettres. The poet Longfellow was the friend of every school child, but the biologist Joseph Leidy was pretty much unhonored and unsung outside his own profession. Oliver Wendell Holmes, both a poet and a biologist, was known largely in the former rôle despite the superiority of his brilliant medical essays over most of his effusions in verse. Among the scientists, only the more or less romantic naturalists like Audubon and Agassiz had much of a vogue.

In noting the popular appeal of literature, moreover, it should be recalled that this included the historical writings of the period; for history was then viewed as a branch of literature rather than as one of the social sciences. Literary gentlemen "down East" wrote the history of the land as well as its verse—which was entirely creditable in
Itself—and Yankee school teachers carried the story far and wide throughout the land. The result was that a New England version of the national epic became widely current and survives to some extent to this day. Even Virginians, with all their local pride, can usually tell more of the Mayflower story than they can of the ships which brought the earlier migration to their own shores. All this added greatly to the popular reputation of the northeastern section.

What we are dealing with in this “Flowering of New England,” therefore, is not simply the objective course of human events between 1820 and 1860, but also a subjective question as to the meaning of the word “culture.” Defining this in primarily literary terms, it can be claimed with some plausibility that New England—or, more exactly, the Boston area—attained to greater heights than did any other center in that day; and that it did so largely through the response of the Puritan heritage to the opportunities afforded by increasing population and wealth. But all this will have to be reconsidered on a broader scale, if we extend the denotation of “culture” to include the other arts and sciences which now, at least, seem so significant. One may sum up the whole matter by observing that Boston once excelled in cultural achievement by the simple device of defining culture in terms of those things in which Boston excelled.

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