

Queen (City) of Feast, Queen of Famine:
Economic Structures and Agency in the “Fall” of Cincinnati

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Cincinnati in 1850 was at the summit of a sixty year period of explosive and unprecedented growth that made her the unquestioned leader among Western cities¹ So prodigious and remarkable was the “Queen City’s” rise that boosters spoke confidently of her destiny as the great inland metropolis of America. Yet only 5 years later the city had begun to stagnate relative to her Western competitors, and in the following two decades she would relinquish the scepter of hegemony to St. Louis and Chicago, respectively. How and why did this happen? Popular mythology, informed by scholarly accounts, has tended to attribute Cincinnati’s “fall” to the failure of Cincinnati’s boosters, businessmen, and entrepreneurs to respond adequately to the threat of the railroads. The city, long dependent on its river, was simply too slow to react to the new transportation technology, and was consequently left without sufficient connections to compete for economic supremacy. But is this correct? Might such an explanation put too much stock in the agency of individual Cincinnatians? Are there alternative explanations that remain to be postulated?

Cincinnati’s Population Growth

Year	1800	1810	1820	1830	1840	1850	1853	1860
Population	795	2,540	10,000	24,000	46,383	115,000	165,000	160,000

This paper seeks to challenge the traditional notion that the apathy of Cincinnati boosters and entrepreneurs caused the city’s relative stagnation. This is not an entirely novel

¹ Please pardon my attribution of the female gender to the City of Cincinnati; I couldn’t resist the old-fashioned romanticism!

argument; such a challenge has been made, in passing, by at least one other author. However, this paper hopes to offer a more thorough, fleshed-out assessment of the matter, and in this it is unique². The paper begins by exploring the growth of Cincinnati to 1850. Following this, the accounts of two authors expressing the traditional viewpoint are presented. Next, evidence is presented to the contrary, and the paper concludes with a revised explanation for Cincinnati's fall from grace.

From its very conception, Cincinnati was inextricably bound to the logic of capitalism and economic growth. In the area that would become the state of Ohio, the future site of Cincinnati lay within a tract of land that had been surveyed, subdivided, and exchanged as a commodity by John Cleves Symmes and Benjamin Stites. Thus conceived through land speculation, Cincinnati was soon settled; due to a convergence of favorable and serendipitous circumstances, most notably the decision of the government to place the Fort Washington military outpost at the fledgling locale, Cincinnati quickly emerged as the most important settlement in the vicinity.

Of tremendous importance in the early growth of Cincinnati was her location on the Ohio River between Pittsburgh and New Orleans, which positioned the town along one of the fastest, most important transportation routes of the era. Situated almost directly opposite the Licking River, she also had water access deep into Southeastern Kentucky.

Moreover, in the Miami Valley she controlled a large, fertile hinterland – “an immensely rich natural breadbasket” that included large parts of Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana, and

² For an example of a “challenge”, see Terry, C. (2002) “The Most Commercial of People”; though I assert that my paper is unique, one never knows what other works might be lurking out there on the same subject!

extended into West Virginia, Missouri, and Illinois. Cultivated by farmers, these areas produced maize, grains, grasses, and timber, and Cincinnati was the preferred market. The convergence of these factors led to Cincinnati's growth as an important node in a triangle trade with the Eastern and Southern markets. Eastern goods were shipped downriver to Cincinnati, agricultural goods and produce were in turn shipped to New Orleans, and finally shipped by sea back to the East coast.

This trade was lucrative, and it turned Cincinnati very rapidly into a buzzing, extremely active commercial mart. There were large, even "exorbitant" profits to be made, and mercantile operations flourished. Meanwhile, Cincinnati grew from a tiny trading post in 1790, to a burgeoning entrepot of nearly 10,000 in 1820. With the arrival of the steam engine technology and the steamboat subsequent to it, the efficiency of market exchange via the Ohio was greatly facilitated, and Cincinnati's growth was further stimulated. Yet Cincinnati was more than just a mercantile center. Early on grain surpluses from farmers were distilled into flour in town mills, and by the mid 1810's there was a concerted push to increase manufacturing in Cincinnati. Part of this was due to the high price of Eastern goods because of the cost of transport over the Alleghenies; Cincinnatians realized that savings were to be had if some of these imports could be produced indigenously. The other reason for the push toward manufacturing was a general sense that diversification of the economy was desirable. But manufacturing enterprise was a harder sell and took longer to develop than commerce, for the simple fact that it was risky, capital intensive, and less "easy" than investments in real estate and trade (Aaron, 1992). Nevertheless it eventually came to Cincinnati, and although its initial rise was stifled by the Panic of

1819, by the 1820's a diverse array of industries had established themselves. Here again the rich Cincinnati hinterland proved advantageous: white oak provided the raw material for the manufacture of furniture and carriages, corn and grain for the production of whiskey and flour, hogs for the pork packing industry. Pork packing was easily the dominant industry by the 1820's, and a good example of how primary industries can generate others. Indeed, the "hooves, hides, bristles, and viscera" discarded by the slaughterhouses became valuable raw materials for the production of candles, soap, brushes, chemicals, leather, and glue, and the need to package and ship pork product led to the development of a subsidiary barrel making industry³ (Abbott, 1981).

As the city evolved, its manufacturing base continued to grow and diversify, eventually employing steam power and mechanization to stimulate greater productivity and scale. By 1838 manufacturing had a strong foothold in the local economy, and by the 1840's it had quietly come to rival trade and commerce as the city's economic base.

Another vital piece of the puzzle in Cincinnati's growth involves transportation. In order to facilitate more rapid exchange, investments were needed in what David Harvey calls the secondary circuit of capital, or (more precisely) the built environment for production (Harvey, 1985). In the 1820's, 1830's, and early 1840's, Cincinnati made fixed capital transport investments of this nature primarily in canals, roads, and turnpikes. Beginning with the Ohio State legislature's authorizing of the Miami Canal in 1825, Cincinnati, and indeed Ohio as a whole, embarked on a large-scale internal improvements project (Goodrich 134-6) Federal, State, and local aid combined with private capital to create a

³ From such candle and soap making industries, Proctor and Gamble was born

network of roads and canals facilitating the flow of trade throughout Ohio. By 1851, 14 roads totaling 514 miles extended from Cincinnati (Greve, 1904). Most notable among the canals were the Ohio and Miami, both designed to connect the interior of Ohio to Lake Erie and the now completed Erie Canal. The former canal extended from Portsmouth in the South to Cleveland in the North, while the latter connected Cincinnati to Toledo and the Lake. These internal improvements, imposed upon the surrounding geography, represented a kind of “2nd nature”, to use William Cronon’s (1991) term; the effect of this second nature was to further augment Cincinnati’s economic advantages by creating tentacles that increased the speed and efficiency of exchange. Although these internal improvements often fell short of making interest payments to the holders of State bonds, they nevertheless contributed substantially to the economic development of the region and, at least in the case of the Miami Canal, proved to be “enormously profitable” for the City of Cincinnati (Goodrich, 1960; Glazer, 1999)

One would be remiss not to mention the role of boosters in Cincinnati’s rapid development. The booster of the Antebellum Northwest was distinguished from the booster of the East or South in that he concerned himself almost exclusively with “population, money-making, and the volume of trade” (Abbott, 1981). As the Queen City grew dramatically and quickly surpassed Lexington, Louisville, and Pittsburgh, the leading citizens of Cincinnati gloated about their city’s past exploits and future prospects in an attempt to advertise for future growth. In the 1830’s and 1840’s, booster ideology “filled the pages of local newspapers and guidebooks...appeared in private letters and diaries, and...often served as the theme of public speeches”(Glazer, 1999). Some

boosters used hyperbolic, grandiloquent language or made bold assertions, claiming, among other things, that “the future destiny of Cincinnati cannot be less than the London of the Western country” (Wade, 1959). But many gave reasonably accurate inventories and accounts of the Queen City’s economic growth, hoping to impress their readers and listeners and attract private capital investments (Abbott, 1981). Among the most important of these publicity generators were Daniel Drake’s *Picture of Cincinnati* in 1815, Edward Mansfield and Benjamin Drake’s *Cincinnati in 1826*, and Charles Cist’s volumes on Cincinnati in 1841, 1851, and 1859. While these publications primarily targeted an American audience, overseas another type of booster was working a subtler boosterism that also impacted Cincinnati’s development. Cincinnati benefited in the 30’s and 40’s from large influxes of German immigrants, and many were persuaded to settle in Cincinnati by the glowing reports of Germans who had visited the Queen City. To cite one prominent example, Gottfried Duden’s *Bericht uber eine Reise nach den Westlichen Staaten NordAmerikas*, which spoke glowingly of Cincinnati, “convinced thousands upon thousands” of Germans to migrate to the American West, and has been called “the most important piece of literature in the history of German immigration” (Tolzman, 1993)

If Cincinnati’s rapid growth was rooted in advantageous geography, burgeoning commerce and manufacturing, enthusiastic boosterism and internal improvements, and above all the profit making motive, her lag in the 1850’s is reducible more or less to a single immediate reason: the railroad. Indeed, there is general consensus among scholars and historians that the railroad, with its radical transformation of geography, was the “great disturbing cause” in reducing the prominence of the Queen City. Some, however,

while acknowledging the role of the railroad, have made the further claim that Cincinnati could have maintained her status had her businessmen and leading citizens worked together to respond to the new challenge. The first such account was an article published by Sherry Hessler in 1962. Her analysis, while complex, rests on a distinction between Cincinnati's entrepreneurship before and after 1850. In the 30's and 40's, she argues, the city's leaders "were quick to organize public and collective works of all kinds, to enlist the aid of the state and the federal government, and to tax themselves in order to provide the basic transport improvements". As a result, in this period massive amounts of public and private dollars were invested in roads, canals, and the first Cincinnati railroads. After 1850, however, Cincinnati was afflicted with an inertia that caused private investment to slow dramatically. Those in the know pleaded for Cincinnatians to take heed of the importance of the railroad to the city, but their pleas were disregarded. Why did this happen? Hessler's primary explanation is that merchants and industrialists located along the Miami Canal raised such a fuss about protecting the importance of that body of water, that they inhibited the construction of railroads. She further speculates that the powerful Ohio River interests may have objected to increased competition from the railroads as well. Thus, "in an effort to preserve and protect their great investments...Cincinnatians of the 1850's stifled new basic investments". "The Queen", Hessler concludes, "simply abdicated" (Hessler, 1962).

A second account is offered by Abbott (1981). Abbott's argument similarly rests on a separation of Cincinnati into two distinct periods. Prior to the late 1840's, he asserts, Cincinnatians invested heavily in transportation, thereby assuring the continued growth

and prosperity of their city. Around 1848, however, the Queen City witnessed a “decay of civic entrepreneurship”, a “rheumatic and infirm” sense of initiative due in part to the increasing withdrawal and selfishness of the city’s elite. Writers and editors prodded and urged the construction of more railroads, but Cincinnati simply “showed itself unwilling to expend the necessary energy and money”. Also important was the shift in booster writing from concrete, coherent strategies for economic growth, to vague and nebulous compilations

Interestingly, Abbot offers a third and somewhat divergent explanation for Cincinnati’s shortcomings – internal conflict. The Queen City by the 1840’s was quite large and heterogeneous, and this in turn bred conflict amongst and between all sorts of groups. Natives looked down upon Germans, Christians scorned Jews, labor began to squabble with capital, abolitionists clashed with pro-slavery advocates, and businessmen fought amongst themselves. The German community itself was so diverse and heterogeneous in terms of class and religion that it was anything but the picture of cohesion. All of this added up to inhibit and restrict Cincinnati’s growth and expansion.

According to Abbot, then, Cincinnati’s lack of enterprising individuals and a strategic economic program, combined with its increasing internal divisions, stifled the city’s growth and ambition. Cincinnati had become “too fat – both too big and too rich to sustain a unified and vigorous campaign of economic development (Abbott, 1981).

What does one make of these arguments? Were Cincinnati businessmen really “bored” and “inert”. Did they simply ignore the calls of economic expansion out of apathy? Could they have acted more decisively to maintain the Queen City’s status as the largest Western city?

In forming an answer to these questions, it is first important to gain an understanding of Cincinnati’s railroad enterprise in this period. Cincinnatians became seriously interested in railroads in the mid-1830’s, even as canals were still being built. The Queen City’s prosperity had always been contingent primarily on its linkages with Southern markets, and in 1836 serious efforts were underway to build a railroad connecting Cincinnati to the Southern seaport of Charleston. Also in the works by 1835 was a railroad that would extend Northward from Cincinnati, eventually connecting to Sandusky on Lake Erie. This railroad would give the Queen City expedited access to the Erie Canal and its ties to Eastern markets, as well as establish a bond with Sandusky, a city that was then thought to be heading toward major port status (Condit, 1977). Unfortunately for these ventures, the financial Panic of 1837 hurt their momentum and, in the case of the Cincinnati Southern railway, postponed its construction indefinitely. The connector to Lake Erie, however, was soon back on its feet and under construction, and in 1843 the Little Miami Railroad began operating trains along its first stretch of track.

In 1846 the Cincinnati, Hamilton, and Dayton Railroad was incorporated with the intent of joining Cincinnati to the prospering city of Dayton. The line to Hamilton was finished in 1846, and the tracks reached their terminus in 1851. The Cincinnati and Marietta, a

line intended to link Cincinnati with its fellow Ohio River town to the East, was put under construction in 1851. Also in that year work began on the Ohio and Mississippi, which would unite Cincinnati with St. Louis in the West by 1857.

Cincinnati, then, was clearly building railroads and establishing connections with markets old and new. It is difficult to determine whether private investment really experienced a precipitous fall after 1852, but by 1860 Cincinnati was “well served in every direction but south...and if anything suffered from an excess of capacity” (Terry, 2002). In 1862 the Queen City was part of a rail network with linkages to Dayton, Toledo, Sandusky, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Wheeling, Lexington, East St. Louis, and Chicago. Nevertheless, Cincinnati had not built the quantity of radial lines necessary “to make it the hub of Western commerce” (Terry). In considering whether blame for this circumstance should be attributed to Cincinnatians for their delinquency or lack of foresight, it is important to first consider the role that access to capital may have played in this.

Railroads were a hugely capital intensive undertaking, and financing them could be a difficult undertaking. David Harvey (1985) notes that individual capitalists, left to their own devices, will tend to “underinvest” in the secondary circuit of capital, including transportation infrastructures. As such, the State can play an important role in the development of the secondary circuit, and in fact did play such a role in the development of 19th century internal improvements. As noted previously, Ohio during the Jacksonian and early Antebellum periods invested heavily in transportation infrastructures. Some of these investments were pure public works, while others were “mixed enterprise” –

essentially subsidies of private efforts at internal improvements. The so-called “Plunder Law” of 1837 authorized the State to provide financial backing to privately owned turnpikes, canals, and railroads, and among the beneficiaries of the almost \$3,000,000 in state aid disbursed through this law was the Little Miami Railroad. Yet Ohio by this time had invested so heavily for so long that it had strained its resources, and mounting debt coupled with the Panic of 1837 led to the repeal of the Plunder Law in 1840. The State was able to complete those public works that were already in progress, but private enterprise now had to look elsewhere for support (Goodrich, 1960).

Railroad entrepreneurs thereafter turned to local government for aid. Greater than 100 special laws were enacted to authorize such aid, and Cincinnatians took advantage. The City subscribed to \$200,000 of stock in the Little Miami, loaned the Marietta and Cincinnati \$100,000, and subscribed \$200,000 in the Ohio and Mississippi leading out West. An additional \$1,000,000 would have been given to that same railroad had Illinois “been willing to authorize passage across the State” (Goodrich, 1960).

But in 1851 the State turned the spigot off entirely, adopting a new Constitution that year prohibiting both state and local subsidy of private enterprise. Moreover, the Constitution stripped private railroad companies of the tax-exempt status they had formerly enjoyed.

Henceforth Ohioans would be completely reliant on private capital to build railroads¹.

Other states of the Northwest Territory had undergone similar crises as Ohio, and cut off state aid to private companies. For example, Indiana and Illinois both had to scrap ambitious internal improvement programs in the 1840’s due to unfavorable financial

conditions. Yet in neither of these States, nor in a number of others, was *local* aid prohibited as it was in Ohio starting in 1851. The counties and cities of Indiana thus contributed some \$1,750,000 to railroad projects, facilitating the “rapid development which gave to the state more than 2,100 miles of railroad in 1860”. Similarly in Illinois, cities contributed more than \$4,000,000 in public financing, thereby providing “substantial aid to the railroad building of the decade”. Missouri entrepreneurs had the good fortune of being permitted to draw not only on local aid, but on State aid as well. In the 1850’s Missouri localities extended some \$8,335,000 in aid, most of it coming from St. Louis and its county, while the State raised a whopping \$23,701,000. In sum, Missouri aid represented an estimated three quarters of total construction costs, thus dramatically reducing the burden upon private capital (Goodrich, 1960).

Federal aid as well appears to have been more available to emerging Western states than to Ohio and Cincinnati. With increasing national interest in railroad development and frontier expansion, as well as a desire to help nascent, resource constrained governments with internal improvements, the federal government in this period seems to have shifted the bulk of its largesse to areas further West than Cincinnati. In 1850, for example, Congress aided development on a scale not seen before when it granted large swaths of federal land for the purpose of facilitating railroads between Mobile, Alabama and Northern Illinois. Two years later, Arkansas and Missouri were granted federal land to build five railroads, and in 1856 and 1857 a colossal 24,000,000 acres were granted to aid at least 35 projects in the “Western and Gulf States” from “Minnesota to Louisiana” (Goodrich). Aid in the form of federal land grants was quite a benefit to those attempting

to finance the construction of a railroad: with the land as collateral, companies could issue loans viewed as “safe”, with the result that “many eagerly invested” (Veenendaal, 2003).

As stated previously, railroads required massive investments of capital – and government could be an important source of such capital. Yet after around 1850, Cincinnatians appear to have been largely without the benefit of local, state, or federal aid to their railroad endeavors. Private capital from now on would be left on its own to finance important transportation projects, doubtless an onerous burden. It must be conceded, however, that these conditions certainly wouldn’t have made it *impossible* for local railroad entrepreneurs to get their projects funded. The Cincinnati, Hamilton, and Dayton, incorporated in 1846 when municipal aid was still available, eschewed public assistance and sold stock to fund the entire venture. It is important to consider, then, the trends of *private* capital railroad investment in Antebellum America.

Above all else, discussion of private investment in railroads warrants recognition of the vital role played by Eastern capitalists. Groups of investors from the East, particularly Boston and New York, were an indispensable source of capital in financing western roads. In this way, Eastern capitalists came to have wide influence on the development of the West, often taking ownership and management control of railroads, and making decisions that would have important effects on geography. Cincinnati was one of the first western cities to benefit from the attention of Boston investors when, experiencing difficulties in 1845, the Little Miami Railroad turned to wealthy Bostonians and sold

\$200,000 in bonds. Not long thereafter, however, these investors appear to have shifted their interests further west. In the late 1840's, a group led by John M. Forbes took ownership of the Michigan Central Railroad, running East-West from Detroit across the lower portion of the State. Easterners were similarly influential in the chartering and construction of the massively important Illinois Central Railroad beginning in 1851, and they soon "came to control most of the railroad networks centering on Chicago"(Cronon, 1991). Indeed, as their financial commitments deepened, some Eastern capitalists found it increasingly in their best interests to involve themselves in the development and extension of a western rail network. Forbes and his group are particularly representative of this type of "developmental" railroad investor. As they became involved with the plight of the Michigan Central, they adopted an entrepreneurial approach to the further development of the line and its network, by extending it incrementally westward to Chicago, and facilitating its connection to New York. They also took a keen interest in new railroads West of Chicago connecting to the Mississippi, aiding in various components of the Chicago, Burlington, & Quincy line including the Peoria and Oquawka, and the Aurora-Mendota. Nor was the Mississippi the western boundary of this group's ambitions: already by the 1850's they were involved with two railroads even further West – the Hannibal and St. Joseph, and the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad (Johnson & Supple, 1967).

As time passed, Forbes became "deeply committed to the concept of an east-west system...even at the cost of short-run losses", and the capital of he and other Easterners followed accordingly (Johnson & Supple). The progressive extension of the rail network

was due in part to this deep commitment, a commitment that had major implications for regional growth and development. This type of entrepreneurial-managerial involvement on the part of Eastern capital does not appear to have focused on Cincinnati and Southwest Ohio, at least not to the extent of the cases just mentioned

The “developmental” investment of Forbes and others begs the question as to *why* this investment was based near Chicago in an East-West direction. Using the Forbes group as an example and a proxy for other eastern capitalists⁴ (including New Yorkers), part of the answer is that this investment was contingent on a number of circumstances. For example, the initial purchase of the Michigan Central came with it a binding contract to extend the line to Lake Michigan at a later date. In addition, early financial difficulties with the M.C. led Forbes himself to take the presidency of the road, which in turn led him to become more deeply involved with the road than he had ever foreseen; finally, the East-West orientation of the road upon purchase made it natural that extensions would be in one of those two directions.

Yet despite this degree of contingency, the more fundamental reason for the Forbes group’s continued developmental interest in the East-West rail network appears to involve the underlying economics and profitability of the network. The region was quickly becoming populated at the time, with Michigan increasing in number by nearly a third in the years 1840-1845, and the population density of Illinois increasing from between 6 and 18 persons per square mile in most parts of the state in 1840, to between 18 and 45 persons per square mile in almost half the state in 1850 (Johnson & Supple,

⁴ This is, of course, not scientific, but it is necessitated at the moment due to time constraints

1967; Merk, 1978). Equally if not more important was that the land in this area, especially the upper Mississippi Valley, was immensely fertile, and capable in particular of tremendous corn and wheat production; Illinois in 1850 was producing a surplus of some 40,000 bushels of corn and wheat, and by 1860, Illinois farmers would produce more of these two foodstuffs than any other state in the nation. Combined with increased food demand in Southern, Eastern, and European markets due to factors such as industrialization and the Crimean War, this represented a distinct economic advantage. In order to unlock the full economic potential of the state and the region, faster transportation facilities were needed, and the investors in such facilities stood to benefit reciprocally from the increased flow of goods. As time passed, the Forbes group developed “an increased appreciation of the West’s potential” (Johnson & Supple, 1967). The words of Forbes, the quintessential capitalist, are perhaps most telling: “While we have been aware that a different course might have led to more profitable results at the moment, we believe that the *true policy* has been pursued for *securing permanent success* to our Company”. And again: “the *manifest economy* in working the (Michigan Central) Road, which has grown out of its gradual improvement and our increased experience, *indicates an advance that is independent of accident*” (emphasis added). Forbes, who should have known, clearly saw that sustainable, long-term profits were to be reaped where an extended East-West rail network was patiently sown connecting Chicago to Detroit to Cleveland to the East coast; furthermore, he saw that these profits were not based on chance or luck, but rather were written in the economic code of the East-West trade itself.

Nor must we rely entirely on the experience of Forbes and his extended developmental interest to explain the attractiveness of western rails to eastern capital. A good example is the Galena and Chicago Union Railroad, which extended into Chicago's fertile hinterland and subsequently became among the most profitable roads in the U.S. Providing an average dividend of 16% between 1850 and 1855, it ensured "that Eastern capital would be forthcoming to build Western railroads which would tap the Mississippi River trade" (Belcher 1947; Johnson & Supple, 1967; Cronon, 1991).

The implications of these railroad investment patterns for the development of cities were enormous. The commerce generated by the rich agricultural spoils of the upper Mississippi Valley and its environs was much sought after, and cities that lay in its path stood to benefit greatly (Belcher, 1947). Prior to 1850, St. Louis was still the primary market for these spoils. It soon became apparent, however, that this trade would switch from a southerly direction through St. Louis and New Orleans, to an easterly direction through Chicago and New York. Thus, via the rails and the investments of eastern capitalists, the commerce of the agriculturally prized upper Mississippi Valley came to have an East-West orientation, with Western goods sent most efficiently to eastern markets, and those markets in turn shipping goods back out West. Consequently, cities just to the North of Cincinnati such as Toledo, Cleveland, and Buffalo became suddenly important as nodes of commerce and trade. In contrast, Cincinnati's geographical situation relative to this new trade was hardly auspicious. Sharing a border with Kentucky, the Queen City was located on the very southern edge of this emerging trade network (See Appendixes). As such, the city was "bypassed by much of the new traffic",

and suffered “serious harm” as a consequence (Butler, 1971). Whereas Cincinnati had formerly occupied a strategic location along a vitally important trade route between New Orleans and the Northeast, altered winds of trade had now relegated her to a much lesser status. The North-South trade upon which the Queen City’s prosperity had been based was no longer primary, and as a result Cincinnati’s position as a broker between North and South diminished in importance. This is evidenced by the fact that the Queen City was slowest in developing rail connections with the South; difficult terrain coupled with sparsely populated territory (in Kentucky) made railroad development in that direction a relatively unattractive option for private capital (Terry, 2002; Butler, 1971). With these changes in trade, then, the Queen City was stripped of much of her monopoly power, and forced to watch as cities over which she had previously held an economic advantage equaled or outpaced her (Terry, 2002).

As mid-century neared, Cincinnati was in an unenviable position in terms of getting the critical mass of railroad connections necessary to maintain its position as the largest city in the West. The State of Ohio withdrew its aid for railroad projects in 1840, while the city was cut-off in 1851. This left private enterprise to fend for itself in the provision of Ohio railroads, whereas in many other states private capital was still very much induced and supplemented by municipal aid. Nor did the major railroad investors – wealthy capitalists from the East coast – seem particularly keen on investing in a rail network centered on Cincinnati. Rather, they focused their investments increasingly on the network further northwest – that which had Chicago and the East coast as its primary termini. These investments both reflected and promoted – in a mutually facilitative

fashion – the economic importance of the Great Lakes region; the agricultural and demographic promise of the region induced private capital to build railroads connecting to eastern markets, and those investments in turn allowed for the rapid development of the region. What emerged was a transition from an old North-South flow of trade, to a new East-West pattern in which those cities fortunate enough to lie in its path were the new recipients of prosperity, the new central places. Cincinnati was at a latitude too far south to fully capture the benefits of this new commerce, and the city suffered accordingly.

Hessler and Abbot claim that had Cincinnatians been quicker to realize the threat of the railroads – had they been less myopic, less selfish, and exercised more public spirit – they could have ensured for their city the continued status of western hegemony. But such assertions seem to attribute far too much power to a few individuals to affect very powerful structural circumstances. Cincinnatians *did* invest, and they *did* build railroads; moreover, the city benefited from those railroads, registering gains in population up until the mid-20th century. But with shifts in the laws of commerce, Cincinnati was no longer the indispensable entrepot and distribution center that it once was; to remain as such would have required a Herculean effort to preempt other cities in building a massive rail system fanning to all parts of the city's hinterland. This might conceivably have forced trade from the West to flow through Cincinnati on its way to the East. But with capital constraints, and competition from other cities desirous to improve their connectivity as well, this was likely impractical, or at least an extraordinarily difficult task which no boosters, businessmen, or city should be blamed for failing to accomplish.

It must be admitted that Cincinnati's first rail project, opened in 1843 before many other cities had developed any rails, might have been better placed geographically to augment Cincinnati's market area (See Appendixes). Rather than extending northward and connecting to Lake Erie, it might have reached west into the hinterlands of Indiana or even Northeastern Illinois. But in the late 30's when the railroad was chartered, a connection to the Erie Canal and the East coast seemed vitally important. Indeed, contrary to the assertions of writers like Hessler that Cincinnati was too beholden to its river, the Little Miami is evidence of an awareness of the importance of other modes of transportation. Nor was it obvious at the time that the Chicago region would absolutely explode in 15 years – even Forbes, the savvy investor, could not in 1848 be brought to believe that the windy city would have as many as 200,000 inhabitants twenty years later (Johnson & Supple, 1967). Even if it *were* conceded that this first attempt at railroads in Cincinnati was a missed opportunity, one would have to attribute blame to Cincinnatians in a completely different time period (mid-late 1830's) than that which Hessler and Abbot cite (late 1840's, 1850's).

If we can dismiss Hessler and Abbott's general claims regarding Cincinnatians' "tepid boosterism" and failure to act, we can cast serious doubt on some of their more specific claims as well. Hessler, for example, postulates that Cincinnati canal and river interests were a major determinant in the Queen City's fall from grace. In neither case, however, does she cite specific examples of cases where these canal and river interests blocked railroad development. Similarly, Abbot presents a neat argument about how Cincinnati's

heterogeneity produced conflict that in turn inhibited growth. But other than vague descriptions of this conflict and mention of a bond issue toward which some citizens were antagonistic (but which still passed), he too fails to present sufficient evidence to validate his claim. Nor does he adequately explain how the difference in boosterism between Chicago and Cincinnati was responsible for the differences in their growth. Though he marshals plenty of evidence to show that Chicagoans were particularly boastful in the 1850's and beyond, nowhere does he demonstrate that their effusiveness led directly to Eastern rail investments that wouldn't have happened otherwise.

In truth it was not action or inaction, conflict or harmony that caused Cincinnati's relative decline. It was rather her temporal and geographical situation – time and space – that displaced her from the top of the urban hierarchy. The railroad was to be the great arbiter of central places, and both time and space deemed that it would not make Cincinnati the metropolis of inland America. In 1820 Ohio was at or near the edge of American frontier expansion, and was about to embark on an internal improvements campaign the likes of which states further west were not yet prepared to undertake. Had railroad technology been ready at this time, Ohio's massive investment would have gone toward railroads rather than soon to be obsolete canals, and Cincinnati might have monopolized control over its hinterland in the way Chicago eventually did. But the railroads did not become a force until Ohio's canal building expenditures were well underway, and by that time the tide of migration and agricultural fertility was beginning to shift further west, and other western states were becoming more ambitious. By that time also, Ohio had exhausted her resources on turnpikes and canals, and was consequently forced to prohibit local aid to

railroads at exactly the time (1851) when Cincinnati most needed to attract capital to develop her rail connections. Finally, the Panic of 1837 was also quite bad timing for the Queen City, in that it postponed railroad development and thereby reduced any advantage in terms of readiness that Cincinnati may still have had at that date.

Geographically, as has been discussed Cincinnati was situated in a no-man's land, hugging the North-South divide when greater proximity to the East-West flow of trade was demanded. Cincinnati thus lost her monopoly on trade, and became a monopolist of only her own little tri-state region (Terry, 2002). Had the flows of trade from the West been such that they passed through Cincinnati – a city which is, in fact, at a latitude that makes it more or less centered between Canada and the Gulf – then the Queen City may have maintained her status at or near the top of the urban hierarchy. Had the rich upper Mississippi Valley, for example, been geographically situated further to the South, this trade might have flowed through St. Louis to Cincinnati on its way to the East.

Taking this argument one step deeper, ultimately Cincinnati did not develop into a railway conurbation because to do so would have flown in the face of an emerging geography of capital. The economic reality – the reality adhered to by the logic of capital and surplus value – did not favor Cincinnati. Spatially and temporally she was disadvantaged relative to Chicago, which was, quite simply, a better site for capital accumulation. Capitalists and investors – many of them from the East – saw that the greatest opportunities for return lay in the Chicago region, and more specifically in a rail network from Chicago to its eastern markets. They saw that the fertile soils of the Great

Lakes area had tremendous economic potential, and they invested appropriately to this logic. Cincinnati was doubly disadvantaged in that private capital could not even be induced through municipal aid. Capitalists, then, invested where their capital was most likely to flourish, and in so doing wrote a new nature, a capitalist 2nd nature, on the landscape, thus creating a substantially altered geography of capital. This is not to say that geography is entirely structural and preordained, but rather that there are boundaries within which capitalism, with its inherent profit maximization, must necessarily act. In the race for municipal “greatness”, Cincinnati lay outside of those boundaries, and as a result was more or less consigned to 2nd rank.

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