ONE

"Bind the Republic Together"

CANALS, RAILROADS, AND THE PARADOX OF AMERICAN PROGRESS

> Let us bind the Republic together with a perfect system of roads and canals. . . . Let us conquer space.
>
> JOHN C. CALHOUN, 1817

THE STORY OF CANALS AND railroads, westward expansion, and national progress holds an enduring place in the pageant of American history. In many respects, canals and railroads were the ultimate technologies and symbols of nineteenth-century America. The building of these early "internal improvements" promised the triumph of U.S. labor and manhood over wilderness, distance, and time.[1] Nothing better symbolized this march toward the future than the jubilant May 1869 Golden Spike celebration at Promontory Summit, Utah, which marked the joining of the Central Pacific and Union Pacific railroads. While this event honored one of America's greatest technological achievements, numerous lesser-known celebrations both preceded and followed the triumphant transcontinental ceremony. As early as the 1825 completion of the Erie Canal, Americans envisioned internal improvements as the key to progress and distinctiveness. When subsequent canals, turnpikes, and railroads reified these dreams of progress, Americans interpreted such improvements as the inevitable "blessings of liberty" writ large.[2] Canal and railroad company officials, politicians, religious leaders, and journalists were even bolder in their predictions of continued progress. More than merely enhancing the wealth and reputation of the nation, they argued, internal improvement projects would "bind the republic together," eliminate sectional differences, transform America into a powerful continental empire, and raise up God's kingdom on earth.[3]

Nineteenth-century Americans of every background considered the process of western expansion as one of the country's foundational experiences, as

instrumental as the American Revolution in shaping a national identity and charting a course for the future. Transportation projects simultaneously accelerated and validated such expansion, helping naturalize it as uniquely American. Thus, canals and railroads made the West a moving epicenter of progress; the cloud of dust, ripple of a current, puff of steam, and the transit of goods and people became its most visible manifestations.

In America's historical imagination, toil and triumph against nature and overwhelming odds characterizes such achievements as the Erie Canal and the transcontinental railroad. America's debt to the perceived architects of these technological marvels was great. Triumph transformed canal and railroad entrepreneurs into visionaries whose work brought the nation bountiful riches and did the Lord's bidding. Celebrated for their spirit and perseverance in "building" the nation's infrastructure, they found respect for looking to tomorrow and creating a future. Mountains named in their honor and statues raised in towns were fitting tributes to their patriotic efforts. For generations, most indexes of American history supported and reinforced this narrative of progress.

Yet, if this is the historical memory, it is conveniently stunted. What of those whose bodies strained and broke under the load of such glories? What of those men beyond the din and fanfare who appear only in old photographs with faces blurred and indistinguishable? In their lives and deaths in the mud, muck, and mountains is another history of American achievement. These barely visible and forgotten, ordinary men, "unskilled" immigrants from Ireland and China, Mormons, and native-born American workingmen rank, as well, as the creators of national growth and progress. Their experiences and voices, along with those of the privileged and well connected, are the subjects of this study. I examine the rise of western canals and railroads to national prominence through the menial labor of countless men, largely hidden from view because they left virtually no paper trail, who strung together livelihoods at the economic fringes of society. These men both endured and shaped the dark underbelly of progress. This book examines the contest for control of American progress and history as distilled from the competing narratives of canal and railroad construction workers and those fortunate enough to avoid this fate.

The idea of progress was imperative to Americans in the expansion-minded nineteenth century. Yet the right stuff of labor had to be consistent with the national imagination. Early nineteenth-century supporters of internal improvements praised a labor force composed of virtuous, American-

born small farmers who worked overtime to build canals and railroads during lulls in the agricultural cycle. But such part-time digging and tracklaying had proven insufficient for projects that sought to promote the "general utility." Moreover, no one wanted to imagine a class of independent American men relegated to the status of ditchdiggers. For those deemed closest to God because of their nearness to his fertile soil, the brutish labor of digging ditches and laying track could only deny farmers both their independent status and holy calling. Early nineteenth-century American values suggested that republican "free men" were beholden to no one, and only independent adult white males who produced for themselves and their kin qualified for political manhood.[4]

The fact that northern and western states gradually relaxed property qualifications for suffrage by the time the Erie Canal was under construction did not diminish an earlier conception of citizenship, standing, and even personhood that distanced menial laborers, and particularly immigrants, from the American ideal, regardless of the work in which they were engaged. Scholarship on nineteenth-century political theories, namely classical liberalism and republicanism, has exposed the hypocrisy inherent in laws regulating citizenship at the state and national level. Just as universal manhood suffrage replaced property ownership as the litmus test for voting rights, forms of second-class citizenship emerged, denying personal liberties and opportunities for political participation on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, and gender. States went so far as to insert the word "white" into statutes governing voting rights. At the same time, forms of civic inequality and national identity took shape from the deep-seated belief that America was by rights a white, Protestant country and that true American citizens were native-born men with Anglo-Saxon ancestors.[5]

Of course, one's occupation could only contribute to his social dislocation. Wielding pickaxes and shovels to clear swamps, dig ditches, move rocks, and build roadways was the work of the desperate "laboring poor," not of free and independent American men. Even worse, canal digging, in particular, had always been associated with unfree labor. Southern canals relied almost exclusively on slave labor, and as early as 1817 New York sanctioned the use of convict labor to haul stones on the Erie Canal.[6] Race and labor put Irish immigrants in a double bind, and for the first half of the nineteenth century they reacted with hostility to narratives comparing them to unfree African Americans. The Irish immigrants and enslaved and free black men who toiled under oppressive conditions on the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal in the

1820s proved that common laborers—and the capitalist system—entertained no visions of racial harmony. As one visitor to the canal noted in 1826, "The Irish and Negroes are kept separate from each other, for fear of serious consequences."[7]

The ongoing search for able-bodied men who could move earth and construct transportation networks flung American capitalists all over the country and even overseas. America needed men willing to relocate to the periphery of the nineteenth-century industrial world, to the distant and unforgiving western frontiers of canal and railroad building. This proved a formidable task. Railroad companies in the mid-nineteenth century complained endlessly about a "deficiency of hands," while also noting that they were "deluged with applicants" for the highly coveted positions of engineers, machinists, conductors, telegraph operators, and clerks. Companies found that Americans were unwilling to risk their lives and reputations for a bare subsistence, shoveling dirt in these ditches of progress. It was a miserable, dangerous, unsteady, and apparently uncivilized form of wage labor.[8]

Consider, for a moment, the titles conferred on the men who performed the most incredible feats of construction in the nineteenth century—canals, railroads, dams, bridges, and turnpikes. From the popular British term for navigation workers, in the United States a "navvy" was literally seen as a human earth-moving machine.[9] Immigrant laborers on canals ("navvies") and railroads ("gandy dancers" for track workers) were unfairly categorized by the companies as "casual" or "common" laborers. These terms were euphemisms for "unskilled" workers, which, when applied to immigrants, particularly Irish, Chinese, and Mexicans, implied that their work was the type that any strong, able-bodied man could perform.[10] On such "common workers" or "hands," the late David Montgomery noted in *The Fall of the House of Labor,* his definitive study of capitalism, labor relations, and workers' control, that "these men had no name, except perhaps the colloquial *ditchdigger.* What does the lack of a suitable name tell us about the place of such laborers in America?" As Montgomery argued, America's name for these common laborers "reminds us that wherever they worked, they were strangers. Sedentary Americans knew songs and legends about them, but shunned personal encounter" except when they had to "defend their communities against the alien invasion."[11]

Still, progress demanded such hard labor to secure the place of the native born. The rapid physical and economic growth of the United States in the nineteenth century eventually unleashed an unbridled form of early capital-

ism. American employers turned to immigrants as cheap labor to plow fields, construct canals and railroads, dig mines, and operate machinery in the country's emerging factories. This was the "free labor" that slavery's apologists such as George Fitzhugh and James Henry Hammond frequently condemned. Much like the Atlantic coast states had done in the colonial era, western states and territories in the nineteenth century made every effort to entice immigrant workers to their ditches, tracks, towns, and fields. Without these newcomers from Europe and Asia, the nation's vast riches could not have been exploited as quickly and cheaply. Leonard Dinnerstein and David M. Reimers note that these immigrants' "strong backs and steadfast enterprise were necessary to turn American dreams into American accomplishments."[12] This quotation, while true in part, reads awkward. It also makes for a rather problematic history. Canal and railroad construction offers one of the most significant examples of this labor trend, yet just how "American" were these accomplishments if the workers producing them were considered anything but?

To succeed, America had to rely on the most "un-American" kinds of men—far from respectable citizens—to build the transportation networks so vital to the nation. The following chapters interrogate the problem of progress, its inner workings and outward appearance, from the 1820s forward. Though western residents embraced plans to bring canal and railroads to their localities, they treated the approaching diggers and tracklayers as unwelcome invaders, unworthy of citizenship. To confront the reality that "uncivilized" workers were physically bringing progress to the West, local communities sought, in earnest, ways to celebrate and redefine the very nature of canal and railroad progress. If transient laborers interpreted their efforts and struggles as self-sacrificing and manly, community members pointed discouragingly to their reckless behavior in shanty towns and construction camps as evidence of their unfitness for citizenship. According to native-born citizens, canals and railroads indeed marked a triumph and were solely attributable to the independent, civilized, entrepreneurial, hard-working, and masculine character of *Americans.* Opinion makers spun this dominant narrative, identifying destitute, transient, and immigrant laborers as necessary but uncivilized, unmanly, drunken, violent, and unproductive. In the process, and in denial, true Americans, great and small, laid claim to national progress while distancing foreign-born and working-class men from the fruits of their labor.[13]

In exploring workers' encounters with race and ethnicity, masculinity, and progress in the American West, I am particularly interested in questions

of identity, power, and nation in the context of the massive transportation projects that advanced America's continental empire. Heretofore a rather elusive scholarly quest, it nonetheless highlights how workers' understood themselves and their work over space and time and how elite and ordinary Americans understood and described this diverse array of workers and the canals and railroads they built. Beginning with the nineteenth-century arrival of Irish immigrants to America, both before and after the Great Famine, and continuing well into in the latter decades of 1800s with waves of Chinese and Mormon workers, the racial discrimination and class, religious, and cultural prejudice aimed at these groups were fierce and pervasive. Scholars have charted this history in considerable detail, particularly in relation to individual culture groups in America. But an emphasis on canal and railroad construction, the definitive symbols of American expansion and progress, as well as a focus on moving frontiers, adds significant elements to these histories. Frankly, we know too little about how labor and progress *worked* from the perspective of those laboring in the ditch and on the track.

This book is as much about immigrant and native-born construction workers as it is about the very idea of American progress, particularly as it relates to western history. But the problem of *creating* progress cannot be separated from the problem of *defining* it, and the building of canals and railroads in the American West provides a lens through which to analyze both aspects of this dilemma. At its core was the challenge of physically creating and expanding an American empire through transportation projects that promised to conquer distance and time, link towns and distant hinterlands, increase the flow of goods and people, create new markets and consumers, and facilitate economic development on state, regional, and national levels.

This physical task of creating progress thus sounds straightforward, but the reality was quite messy—even in the West, that place of boundless freedom and unlimited opportunities. First and foremost, American progress was built on the backs of people deemed second-class citizens at best. Its dark underbelly was punctuated by grueling labor, low wages, suffering, and survival. Not only was canal digging and railroad building physically demanding, but these occupations were inherently dangerous and violent. Pain and misery, while ubiquitous in this type of labor, are thorny historical subjects due to their disturbing character and the way they elude the historical record. Workers moved earth but were also subject to its unrelenting forces. They were exposed to cycles of blistering hot and bone-chilling cold weather as they toiled in knee-deep muck, braved water-borne illnesses, chipped away at

solid granite, and endured hard rock blasts and cave-ins. Anyone who has experienced the stickiness of the Great Lakes region in summer, the temperature extremes in Utah and Wyoming, and the snows of the Sierra Nevada understands well the challenges these workers faced.

Workers also faced the constant pressure of their section bosses to finish the job—in an occupation where blunt force, rapidity, and technology didn't always harmonize. Railroads, in particular, were praised as a novel technology that would annihilate the space and civilize the wilderness of the West, but they too often annihilated the men building them instead. In the late nineteenth century a man was more likely to die working on the railroad than by any other cause.[14] In this sense, railroads carried a far more lethal character than guns in the American West. One railroad historian has recently highlighted "the irony that the tools of civilization were themselves instruments of acute suffering."[15] In 1889 President Benjamin Harrison critiqued the Iron Horse's civilizing influences in his first message to Congress, when he compared the violence of railroad work with that of war. "It is a reproach to our civilization," Harrison argued, "that any class of American workmen should, in the pursuit of a necessary and useful vocation, be subjected to a peril of life and limb as great as that of a soldier in time of war."[16] This book reckons with the violence and pain that permeated the lives of transportation workers, whether endured or inflicted, using their experiences to reconsider canal and railroad progress as a realm of trauma and not merely one of triumph.[17]

Nevertheless, Americans interpreted and celebrated progress—as a cultural construct—in ways that removed both the strain of muscle and the stain of exploitation. Canals and railroads ostensibly united the North and South; the East and West; and, more important, people from diverse backgrounds. In addition to valuable goods, they helped spread cherished institutions and ideals—freedom, democracy, and capitalism among them. Finally, they were unprecedented technological achievements that turned American dreams into a reality that allegedly benefited everyone. Common transportation workers were routinely overlooked and bypassed on this thoroughfare of national progress.

Thus, for the workers who reaped few benefits and were not considered American at all, progress was double trouble. Its consequences were physical as well as intellectual. Its relationship to American expansion, empire, and the public good provoked significant questions and concerns. Who toiled and struggled; who commanded and prospered? Who was honored, and how

were they remembered? Like the daily struggle for control on the railroad and canal, the contest for control of history and memory was genuine and hard-fought. What proponents of canals, railroads, and expansion saw as inevitable, perpetual progress that embodied American greatness, others (whose gritty fingerprints marked these accomplishments) confronted—and complicated—this progress in their daily exploits. The process of progress, of building and celebrating, of remembering and distancing, required hard work. From any angle or perspective, it makes for an uncomfortable history.

The American West figures centrally in this history of progress and the men who helped build, define, and commemorate it. To mold rugged frontier regions into a functioning continental empire was no easy feat, and such a massive undertaking was sure to elicit admiration around the world. With so many ethnic and religious groups, social classes, and cultures in the West, the idea of working together to build a transportation empire was too powerful of an impression for cultural and political commentators to resist. Timing was everything. Just as canals and railroads promised to unite the continent and cement America's empire, postwar migration and expansion to the West helped popularize the notion that the western frontier was a symbol of independence and an incubator of democracy. Readers familiar with Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis no doubt understand the power of this frontier narrative.[18] The building of these internal improvements accelerated a new peopling of immigrants and emigrants (from Europe, China, and all parts of the United States) on a wageworkers' frontier notable for its sheer diversity.[19] These groups of workers, whose brains and brawn built transportation networks, would test the limits of racial democracy in the American West, that hallowed place of ostensibly endless possibilities, a proving ground for national progress, and, for some, even a site of Americanization.

This book explores an untold history of American progress. It examines moving frontiers of unskilled construction labor on canals and railroads in the American West from the 1820s to the 1870s.[20] Investigating western, labor, ethnic, gender, and environmental histories, it situates the experiences of an assortment of "others" alongside dominant narratives of nineteenth-century progress. In doing so, it salvages the largely overlooked stories of suffering and survival that facilitated U.S. imperial expansion. This book presents a comparative dimension, long missing, in which Irish workers are considered with the Chinese, Mormons, and native-born American citizens who helped build transportation networks in the nineteenth century. It

therefore marks a significant methodological departure from previous scholarship. My comparative case studies of Irish laborers on canals and railroads in the U.S. Midwest and Irish, Chinese, and Mormon workers on the transcontinental railroad in the Mountain West and Far West reveals that canals and railroads were not *ends* of progress but moving spaces of conflict and contestation. In contention, I argue, were immigrant and native-born construction workers on one hand and groups of elite and ordinary citizens on the other, who clashed over the meaning of work, progress, manhood, and citizenship. Navigating geographic and cultural boundaries, I argue that the building of massive transportation projects entailed a reconstruction of these cherished yet unresolved ideals. Transient immigrant construction workers found ways—on the job, in construction camps, in recreation, protest, and violence—to redefine their role in American progress and refashion their inherited notions of work, manhood, and citizenship. American citizens, however, used canals, railroads, and the wilderness they ostensibly conquered to rehash notions of "civilization," to reconstruct boundaries of citizenship and manhood, and to distance the work of unskilled immigrants while praising the industrial progress they helped create.

With its focus on work, masculinity, and citizenship in the nineteenth-century U.S. West, this book critiques inherited and recycled notions of American progress and civilization. Using the lenses of gender, class, race, and ethnicity, this study moves immigrant workers to the foreground of national progress, assesses their cultural conceptions of work and manhood, and charts the evolution of these imported notions in the American West as workers confronted local class and ethnic fault lines. Citizens and immigrant workers were more often viewed as adversaries than as counterparts in the creation of canal and railroad progress, and each group built what I call "communities of contestation" through which to interpret their experiences. Though canals and railroads were central to the American experiment in technological, cultural, economic, and geographic expansion, an uncomfortable reality sullied the building of these projects. Their builders, many citizens argued, were among America's most uncivilized, even savage, persons. To help unearth the struggles of immigrant canal and railroad workers, this book juxtaposes their experiences with narratives that distanced them from America's frontiers of progress. Thus, it moves beyond the trenches of immigrant labor to address the labor of popular writers, illustrators, and cultural commentators who performed the important work of celebrating American progress.

Generations of historical scholarship on canals and railroads has revealed much about their design, promotion, construction, management, economic and political impact, and legacies.[21] Still, there is an alternative yet equally relevant story to tell that involves work, progress, and difference. Few studies of canals and railroads have examined how the contributions of "unskilled" workers were often interpreted through class, racial, ethnic, and gender stereotypes and how these contributions were likewise distanced by journalistic coverage and celebrations that praised everyone but the actual builders.[22] Today's Americans continue to celebrate progress in myriad ways without really considering the invisible labor that physically creates it. An obsession with the end result or product, rather than the process, has continued to dominate American thinking and politics whether the questions pertain to capitalism, new labor markets, immigration, or low-wage work that serves the public good. Critiquing the process is a risky proposition, for it disrupts the idea of American exceptionalism. Through an examination of internal improvements, this book thus historicizes, in some ways, the ongoing cultural debate over American progress, labor, immigration, ethnicity, and national belonging.

This book draws on a very small but significant body of literature that offers insights into workers' lives; emphasizes the dirt, grime, and subordination of unskilled construction workers; and critiques America's early transportation revolution.[23] Peter Way's *Common Labour* merits special mention. In the only book-length study of canal labor in America, Way focuses on the eastern United States and Canada, portraying the world of transient canal diggers as one of proletarianization and exploitation. While he emphasizes how unskilled workers used this alienation to foster a sense of community, Way nonetheless concludes that canallers were relatively powerless. Their resistance (by fight or flight) was generally futile, and throughout the canal era they were "unable fundamentally to alter their condition."[24] *Common Labour* articulates a less romantic paradigm of working-class consciousness than studies of skilled workers, white male craftsmen, and the urban laboring classes have revealed.[25] Indeed, Way's portrait of America's lumpen proletariat is a somber one, framed in Marxian categories of capitalist oppression and alienation. But to suggest that common and brutish work made construction workers powerless unduly pacifies these men and silences their role in—and perceptions of—national progress.[26]

While recent studies have shifted scholarly emphasis from transportation and business history to labor and social history, problems and opportunities abound. With few exceptions, much of this scholarship relies on a conven-

tional framework in which the work of a single canal or railroad company is documented from start to finish. Ironically, it was precisely this concentration on the end result—the completed canal or railroad—that first led company officials, and then historians, to praise high-ranking employees and forget the contributions of common workers. Moreover, no western version of this story has been attempted. A focus on western expansion, an incorporation of canals *and* railroads, and an emphasis on multiple groups of immigrant and native-born construction workers helps us rethink the centrality of the West and its diverse cast of actors to the story of American industrial development. Likewise, just as canal and railroad promoters pointed to the unifying features of transportation projects, my successive frontiers framework suggests that regional diversity and historical contingencies—the "many Wests" approach—still merits analysis continental in scope.[27]

In deviating from organizational schemes based solely on transportation networks or isolated groups of workers, the comparative frontiers framework this book uses is one that spans distance, culture, and time. For this reason, Irish workers appear over time and place in each part of the book. As early as the creation of the Erie Canal, Irish workers were the mainstay of internal improvement projects, but their role and image has been subjected more to popular stereotypes than to critical analysis. The most influential studies of Irish immigrants focus on citizenship, politics, political culture, and whiteness. No book-length studies are devoted to unskilled Irish workers, especially transportation workers in the U.S. West.[28] In examining the role of Irish construction workers in the West and using a comparative lens through which to explore their interactions with and experiences alongside Mormon, Chinese, and native-born American workers, this book reinterprets the history of America's indispensable "others."[29]

This book builds on recent literature that explores how working-class men constructed masculinity and confronted challenges to their manhood. In revealing how languages of manhood and notions of manliness shaped class perceptions and work experiences, scholars have demonstrated the importance of gender and identity in America's transition to industrial capitalism in the nineteenth century. But there are some problems with this literature on men's history, and while readers should not anticipate a fresh, definitive rebuttal in this book, my hope is that its subject and scope will generate new questions and interpretations.

Most gendered analyses of industrial development focus on the deskilling of urban craftsmen and their separation from the traditional workplace and

concomitant loss of control over production. These changes, along with the expansion of immigrant groups into the workplace and political arena and challenges to the structure of patriarchy, precipitated a so-called crisis in masculinity.[30] In the case of workers, this crisis was actually fourfold and involved the issues of work, class, gender, and race. Skilled male workers in various trades responded to social and technological transformations by refashioning the meanings of manhood. They crafted a collective identity of "worker" that was thoroughly raced and gendered. Most important, they organized to defend their manly identities.[31] Equating manliness with "respectability" and in opposition to femininity, blackness, and common laborers, skilled white workers in nineteenth-century America articulated an idealized notion of working-class manhood that required continual demonstration and validation and thus remained unresolved.[32]

Historians have not yet reconciled the problem of overtheorizing the languages and usages of masculinity in their subjects, particularly when they fall outside of the turn-of-the-century critiques of modernity and overcivilization familiar to anyone interested in Teddy Roosevelt's reinvention. Gail Bederman, who understands that period better than most, argues that gender is not only socially constructed but an "ongoing project," a historical and ideological process through which "individuals are positioned and position themselves as men or women."[33] She modifies the notion of a "crisis" in masculinity with what she and other gender historians interpret as an "obsession" with masculine authority on the part of middle-class men.[34] Men continually remade themselves, in the process co-opting the once-disparaged physicality and savagery of lower-class men (including nonwhites) and blending it with the white manliness valued by the rest of society for its restraint and self-mastery. For middle-class men, masculinity alone could not distinguish "bodies, identities, and power," but when reformulated with attention to race and the discourse of "civilization," *manliness* held the potential to shore up and advance white dominance in all facets of American life—public and private, civil and political.[35] Such a discourse is relevant to the study of masculinity, particularly when considering that the most visible and prolific writers or voices on the topics of labor, immigration, and American progress identified with the middle class and its views.[36]

Yet where do unskilled workers, particularly immigrants, fit in this narrative of masculine formation, this history of men and male identity? Influential works on masculinity that identify the aforementioned "crisis" say comparatively little about those working-class men engaged in menial wage labor and

even less about immigrant men. With so much emphasis placed on the middle class, historians studying men on the margins of society, those without the leisure to document their gendered insecurities, face a rather daunting task. Did canal diggers drink to excess to numb the pain of their harsh workdays, to carouse with coworkers, or to nurse a pathological obsession with proper masculine formation? Did men become railroaders to make a living or to fend off gender anxieties and reinvent a muscular form of outdoor masculinity? Did railroad workers' success in building America's continental empire validate a deep-seated quest for imperial power or basic recognition as capable men worthy of citizenship and gainful employment?

Although scholars of labor, immigration, and masculinity have often identified the workplace as a key site for the construction of male identity, historical interpretations of the nineteenth-century American workplace unfortunately tend to exclude many workers. Labor historians have depicted this workplace as primarily urban and dominated by artisans, trade unionists, and labor politics. They have, however, rightly critiqued "free labor" as an ideological construct popularized by men who were far more likely to hire labor than to perform it.[37] The challenge is to broaden this picture, incorporating native-born, immigrant, and transient workers, skilled and unskilled, and a workplace that was, quite literally, in motion on remote frontiers of the American West. Few studies have exceeded Gunther Peck's *Reinventing Free Labor* in this regard. Peck argues that immigrant workers' notions of manhood in the American West were unstable due to the transitory nature of their labor, the demands of their bosses (notably immigrant padrones), their ties to Europe, and familial expectations. Peck interprets the process of masculine identity formation in the West as "manhood on the move."[38] Locating workers' understandings of manhood and solidarity in mobility itself, he departs from studies of immigration and migration that highlight the importance of established ethnic enclaves.[39]

But to build on the concept of the wageworkers' frontier and explore the meanings of labor and manhood, it is imperative to address the evolution of worker masculinity over space and time. For Peck, "manhood on the move" related less to workers' notions of progress in contention with American elites than to their memory of ancestral homelands and resistance to the undue control exercised by their immigrant padrones. This book differs from Peck's transnational approach, for new ideas of manhood developed in the Midwest, Mountain West, and Far West, where masculine identity was not simply internal to class and ethnicity but actively contested by different class,

ethnic, and religious groups. On these frontiers of progress, construction laborers grafted new identities to old as they battled to brand both manhood and progress. Moreover, workers' claims to masculinity were contested not only by their counterparts and employers but by the public at large. Throughout this period American citizens as well as immigrants used railroads and the wilderness that they ostensibly conquered to reconstruct boundaries of citizenship and manhood and lay claim to history in the making. Beyond men in motion, these were communities in contestation.

The following chapters explore the moving frontier of canals and railroads and consider this contest for authority. The Irish, Mormons, Chinese, and native-born Americans defended their manhood and their stories of progress against ostensible superiors: company officials, political and religious leaders, newspaper editors, and all who had a connection to—or an investment in—a conjured public image of internal improvements and western progress. The first half of this study introduces the paradox of progress on canals and railroads in the nineteenth-century American West and examines Irish laborers on three competing yet historically neglected projects: the Wabash & Erie Canal in Indiana, the Illinois & Michigan Canal, and the Illinois Central Railroad. The second half focuses on the experiences of Utah's Mormons who helped complete the transcontinental railroad in 1869 and on the Union Pacific's and Central Pacific's Irish and Chinese construction workers in the Mountain West and in California. Across time and space America's moving transportation frontier featured a clash of cultures that defined a nation, an elite, and multitudes of unskilled workers.

This conversation over progress and manhood is not always discernible. Loud are the voices of the articulate and the propertied. Their forums, such as speeches, editorials, and sermons, are open to view. The ordinary workers, however, leave fainter tracks. Like their images in old photographs, their words are often indistinct. Yet we can glean their thoughts from a diverse collection of sources. When workers spoke loudly in protests and strikes, we can hear them and gauge the reactions of employers and community members. Canal and railroad companies have records that offer clues about the workers' lives, but they are rarely complete and too often biased. More fruitful are letters and memoirs that help to unearth the lives of construction laborers. Newspapers figure prominently in this project, for it was through them that individuals—workers and otherwise—discussed the importance of canal and railroad labor and the meanings of progress, citizenship, and manhood. Workers' petitions, though rare, are especially rich sources that

document laborers' efforts to challenge their employers, protect their economic interests, and defend their value to society. Equally revealing are the writings of priests and missionaries who occasionally ministered to and pacified transient construction laborers. Yet religious figures, much like political and community leaders, more commonly deprecated the role of canal diggers and railroad builders. Their thoughts, along with the perceptions of contemporary journalists, travelers, and artists, reveal the inherent tensions that dominated frontiers of transportation labor. Miscellaneous sources such as workers' songs, notes on canal and railroad celebrations, and town and county histories help bridge the gap between the vocal and the silent, the visible and the disregarded.

After the completion of artificial waterways and the driving of final railroad spikes, dignitaries, tourists, journalists, and illustrators crafted narratives that reimagined the indispensable yet unskilled laborers as cultural curiosities, unmanly and reckless slaves of industry, or as mere accessories to uniquely American triumphs over nature. Far from a Turnerian frontier where immigrants became Americanized, frontiers of transportation labor witnessed the separation of unskilled transients and immigrants from this ideal, despite their engagement in work central to national development and Americanness. Workers fought back, laying claim to a rightful place in the success of America. In the contest of words and images, charge and countercharge, emerged conflicting narratives of labor, manhood, citizenship, and progress. If one dominated the American imagination, it does not deny identities that sustained the vulnerable and the subordinated in their daily struggles. It is to these frontiers of progress, these conflicting cultures of work and manhood, triumph and pain, which we now turn.