Marxing the Westward March: A Case Study on a Marxist Approach to Family History and Great Plains Migration

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Abstract

This article provides a new look at conducting family history research from the perspective of historical materialism (Marxism). Instead of typical family histories isolating and atomizing the individual and family oral accounts which center the "great man" of the past, this work provides an analysis firmly rooted in class conflict and how individuals directly receive their conditions as mediated by the past. This specifically takes family history in the American western migration as a way to reconceptualize conducting this type of historical research, and using family stories, legends, and oral traditions as a window into the class ideologies present both in the present and the past moderating how they were shaped and transmitted, and what stories were regarded as important (especially in erasing the memory of indigenous peoples who had lived in the originally settled areas).

Keywords: Family history, Allen family, westward migration, manifest destiny, colonialism.

Introduction[1]

Shortly after the founding of the United States and the success of the Revolutionary War, which we can in part see as a bourgeois revolution (a landed, capitalist class of white men being the ones to primarily benefit), the move toward westward migration and expansive colonialism was exacerbated greatly. In agrarian society, this took the shape of settler-colonialism and despite family histories depicting these events in the isolation of the family itself (i.e., “my grandpa moved he and his family from X to Y”), the reality is that these were mass events, and they were also class events.

In this article, I seek to provide a paradigmatic case of how family history of migration (specifically from my own maternal family) into the Great Plains might be analyzed in a Marxist sense. In doing so, my hope is to provide the following: (1) a case of how family history research is aided by Marxist historiography, and (2) how family histories in turn must be conceptualized not in isolation, but as a part of grander historical narrative. This sets this approach apart from

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[1] I want to thank Dr Janet Graham and my classmates in the graduate program of University of Nebraska-Kearney for their feedback on this project which made it what it is. I would also like to thank specially Patti Unruh, Patricia Lee Allen, Mary Jane Warner, and Cindy and Ray Hildinger who all gave me access to their family collections of artifacts, letters, photographs, and other archival materials which made this paper possible. Lastly, I want to thank my partner Gabby V. Bourgeois for their help in editing this article for publication. All American federal documents, population schedules, census records, etc. were accessed using Ancestry.com.

most family history works, which often take the shape of the individualistic genres of biographies or are performed by amateurs who take notions of capitalist entrepreneurialism and individualism as the given drivers of historical progress (i.e., idealism distortions).[2] Family history, which is often microscopically focused on specific family narrative, instead of proper family contextualization (as being a part of the broader masses) inherently limits the ways in which they are conceived historically, and therefore also has permitted family historians the pleasure of downplaying the role of the average American family in the expanse of imperialism. Instead, the American family is aggrandized, and the pioneer narrative is a source of industrious and entrepreneurial pride.

This essay both means to serve as an intervention and an innovation.[3] In this case, I will focus on contextualizing the Allen family (my ancestors), and their migration from rural Michigan to the plains of Kansas, where they were among the early settlers. In doing so, my hope is not to isolate or atomize them but utilize their history as paradigmatic of how class and socio-economic dynamics as a whole functioned move American families westward, with them as a case study. Instead of reconstructing the individual personality of Amasa Allen (my grandfather), I instead seek to understand him as a part of a broader socio-economic development and see how historical progress brought about the changes in his life (rather than the individual supposedly bringing about history with his "greatness" as family histories often portray ancestors).

Michigan and Agro-Industrialization

Farmers are a difficult subject in Marxist analysis in no small part because depending on their material circumstances, they might be a part of any number of classes (peasantry, proletariat, petty-bourgeoisie, etc.) and as a result, there has also been difficulty in generalizing any approach to them. To some extent, we can speak of a peasantry as existing in the Americas, and even into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, some of these colonized lands still maintain(ed) a peasantry.[4]

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[2] For an example of this see, Kirk Polking, *Writing Family Histories and Memoirs* (Cincinnati: Betterway Books, 1995), which takes a rather characteristically individualist approach to history.

[3] This intervention is, of course, more than simply one of family history but of critical theory in general, and the declaration of the "death of class" by many leftist theorists since the late-twentieth-century and the collapse of most properly understood socialist governments such as the USSR, China (under Deng Xiaoping's capitalist reforms), etc. This has been discussed at length by Ellen Meiksins Wood, who notes the particular affinities this has with conservative politics like those of Thatcherism, see Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Retreat from Class: A New 'True' Socialism* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 182. The theories of postmodernism have likewise intervened upon a grand narrative of history, and thus disputing the centrality of class conflict in determining the progress of history as well, but unsuccessfully in my view, see various entries in Wood and Foster, see in particular Ellen Meiksins Wood and John Bellamy Foster (eds), *In Defense of History: Marxism and the Postmodern Agenda* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997), pp. 17–25, 135–149.

[4] The peasantry being an often land-owning/tilling mass of people who, due to their agrarian status, lack much political purview outside of their local confines (the village). As Abimael Guzmán explains, "It is a class because of objective conditions, it is a class in itself, it exists as a reality because of common interests, but it is not a class for itself, as it is not politically conscious or organized to defend its own interests and that is why it looks for someone to represent it," see *Selected Readings from the Works of Gonzalo* (Washington, DC: Germinal Publications, 2021), p. 276, cf. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), pp. 123–124. The government typically satisfies this role (Guzmán, *Selected Readings*, 276) or a political party. In the United States, the conservative parties have long taken up this status since the start, with the conservative parties generally representing

Today, there is no peasantry to speak of in the USA, and within capitalist societies world over there is an ever increasing burden on the peasant class, itself a holdover of feudalism, to become ingratiated into the capitalist system for which they typically fall into one of two classes due to this pressure: 1) petty-bourgeoisie, if they are successful enough and commercialized enough to hold onto their land and then industrialize their farming becoming and so begin accruing surplus capital, or 2) they are un-landed and must become a part of the proletariat, the wage-earners.[5]

Figure 1: (L to R) Thaddeus H. Allen, Harriet E. Allen, Mary Ann (Otis) Allen.

This situation was already playing out in the Midwest settlements upon the start of agricultural development. As Page and Walker instead have argued, there was not a firm industrial revolution in the Midwestern United States because these areas began to be settled on the outset with the investment and intertwining of industry.[6] This contention means that we necessarily must

agrarian interests, but particularly among the emerging rich peasantry which were consolidating themselves into semi-feudal lords via the institution of slavery.

[5] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Penguin, 1993), p. 107; David Harvey, *A Companion to Marx's Grundrisse* (London: Verso, 2023), pp. 108–9; China Miéville, *A Spectre, Haunting: On the Communist Manifesto* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2022), pp. 57–58.

[6] Brian Page and Richard Walker, 'From Settlement to Fordism: The Agro-Industrial Revolution in the American Midwest', *Economic Geography*, vol. 67, no. 4 (1991), pp. 282–315, at 282.

reconceptualize the class status of Midwesterners who were migrating westward in the nineteenth century, and the reasons why this occurred.

The Allen family provides a case example. Thaddeus Houghton Allen (1809?–1893[7]) was himself the product of family migration. His father, Elijah Allen, had moved the family alongside family friends (the Putnams and Thomases) into New York, where they settled first in Herkimer Co. (where Thaddeus' older sister Prudence was married to Parley Putnam[8]) and then migrated with the Putnams further westward into what is now called Clayton in Jefferson Co., NY. The reason for their move from Vermont to New York is likely also related to political conflict, as during the late 1700s, huge debate existed as to whether Vermont should be declared an independent state or remain with New York, debates which could often lead to bloody outcomes.[9] This coincides with the migration into New York, and implies the family may have maintained New York loyalties, and this would have created intense social upheaval in their native Vermont, necessitating the change of location.

Thaddeus Houghton Allen (or "Hote" as he was called) himself then moved onward. His eldest brother Seth Allen appears to have inherited the family farm, which left Thaddeus landless. For a time, he continued in New York, but the family uprooted after the death of his first wife (Lucy Clark) and his remarriage to Mary Ann Otis (1826–1894) in 1844 (Thaddeus and Mary pictured in figure 1). They moved next to Canada where several of the children were born, including Amasa Allen, and where Thaddeus himself began a farm and was also a fur trapper, according to family memory.[10] The move to Michigan is another unknown but there were probably a multitude of factors, including seeking better farmland and also more mild weather. The move occurred a few months after Thomas Jewett Allen was born, probably around September of 1854.[11] They moved to a placed called Avoca, in Kenockee Township, St. Clair Co., MI, which had been settled beginning primarily in the 1830s.[12] The area still, however, retained the presence of the Native Chippewa tribe well past this point, and so a reminder of the colonialism which gave rise to the settlement of the area was constant. Regardless, Thaddeus who had left his son (also named Seth) in Canada to made the estate there, came and established himself on a large amount of farmland (the homestead of which still stands between S Fargo Rd. and M-136), which at this point was evidently still unclaimed due to the low number of settlers in the area. With the family also went members of the Durphy family (whom they had boarded with in Canada, according to the 1851 Canadian Census). A year later, the township was officially organized.[13] Industry

[7] His specific birth-year is a matter of firm debate within the family, as his obituary, gravestone, and a brief biography all give different years, days, and months. It is only known with certainty he must have been born in either 1807 or 1809, but what month or day is anyone's guess.
[8] Hamilton Child, *Geographical Gazetteer of Jefferson County, N.Y., 1685-1890* (Syracuse: Syracuse Journal Co., 1890), p. 380.
[9] Broad Brook Grange, *Official History of Guilford, Vermont 1678–1961* (Guilford: Town of Guilford, 1961), pp. 44–69.
[10] This was recorded independently by Waunita Jewell Allen and Elaine Booth in private documents held by the family.
[11] This is based on a preserved obituary for Thomas Jewett Allen (retained in the Allen family documents, held by Patricia Allen in Deford, MI) which records that the move occurred shortly after he was born.
[12] Coleeta Vesper, *Memory Trail: An Early History of Kenockee* (Port Huron: Acorn Press, 1976), p. 3.
[13] Vesper, *Memory Trail*, p. 3.

development was immediate, and in fact was the formation of settlement in the area, first centered on lumber production,[14] and other signs soon followed including a highway commission, and township voting records indicate that road and bridge construction were highly valued.[15] The connection to industry was further shown by the trade of lumber being directly tied to Detroit (where it was hauled during the winter over the frozen river system).[16]

However, despite this, much land was available for purchase and development, which Hote Allen tended to with great detail. In 1876, land records (in the U.S., Indexed County Land Ownership Maps, 1860–1918) showed that Allen owned three plats of land all next to each other. The 1870 Selected Federal Census Non-Population Schedule revealed that Hote Allen owned 160 acres of land, 30 of which were improved (that is, developed for agriculture) and 130 which were undeveloped just within Kenockee Township. Family records have indicated that he further owned land in Lapeer Co., including an apple orchard.[17] Unlike the landowner class which extracts rent from partitioning out land to contracted agricultural capitalists, the Allens toiled the land themselves as with most farmers, however there are strong indicators that they also had hired hands which situated Thaddeus Allen more and more among the petty-bourgeois class of farmers. However, the one issue which still complicates this is politics and the political consciousness and savvy of the family, for which there is not much to indicate that Thaddeus Allen himself was heavily involved.

Figure 2: Allen Family Homestead, Avoca, MI.

[14] Vesper, *Memory Trail*, p. 3.
[15] Vesper, *Memory Trail*, p. 4.
[16] Vesper, *Memory Trail*, p. 3.
[17] This is further indicated by a biographical record stating "Mr. Allen […] was always a farmer, owning two good farms," see *Biographical Memoirs of St. Clair County, Michigan* (Logansport: Bowen, 1903), p. 350. No author is listed for this source.

By the 1860s, the family was beset with another crisis which faced the entirety of the United States "north": the Civil War. The burgeoning abolitionist and progressive Republican party had made inroads at this point in the North, which had led to its victory in the Presidential election with its nominee Abraham Lincoln. Thaddeus Houghton Allen was evidently taken with this party, but how he became involved is unknown, and biographical records only indicate that he remained a lifelong member alongside his son-in-law Orlando Brown.[18] Three of his sons (all by Lucy Clark) served in the Civil War: Calvin Allen, Luther Allen, and Merritt Allen, the latter of whom never returned home. Likewise, his daughter's fiancé Andrew McAuley also never returned, dying in Salisbury Prison (a Confederate prison camp) from disease or starvation, the details of which were given by his cellmate, Lisle Harrison.[19] All details following this indicate a strong dedication to the Republican party emerged within the family thereafter, however and Orlando Brown in particular was active both as a party treasurer and a constable, and was a charter member of the Archive Madison Post of the Grand Army of the Republic in Avoca.[20]

Figure 3: Amasa Nelson Allen.

[18] *Biographical Memoirs of St. Clair County*, p. 350.
[19] Lisle R. Harrison, "G. A. R. Veteran Seeks Comrades," *The Times Herald* [Port Huron] 28 December (1921), p. 6.
[20] *Biographical Memoirs of St. Clair County*, p. 350.

By the time that Amasa Nelson Allen (1852–1947, pictured in figure 3) was an adult in the 1870s, life had therefore taken a very specific shape and character. His father, Hote Allen, had acquired large swathes of land, much of which he probably could not manage entirely by himself, and in fact it is highly likely that his land in Lapeer Co., and even some in Kenockee was, like the farm in Canada, dished out to a number of his remaining children. Likewise, Amasa Allen had fourteen living siblings, most of whom were older than him. Additionally, the last third of the century in Michigan began to see radical changes in farm life (as with the whole of the USA), and furthermore changes were occurring in the government as well.

Causes for Migration

American farmers by this point were therefore forced into a state of enterprise and entrepreneurialism due to the close ties to industry, and the shift of American economy to an industrial basis, particularly in the wake of the Civil War. As a result, those farmers who had persisted up to this point even in a faux-peasantry state were put under intense pressure due to this shift in economy. As Rome stated, "As American agriculture became part of a commercialized world economy in the late nineteenth century, farmers were forced either to succeed as entrepreneurs or lose their farms," which happened to many.[21] Material conditions made this increasingly difficult for people to start new farms, easier for established farmers to buy up and monopolize land and therefore incentivized the need for expansion.

At the same time, the Civil War had brought about a new form of class conflict and conflict of two competing modes of capitalism. In the South, where the mass plantation owners were also mass slave owners, they were a bourgeoisie and quite distinct from the petty-bourgeois farmers of the Midwest,[22] who were engrained within the agro-industrialism that had defined the settlement, and the full-on bourgeoisie of the New England, and now heavily industrialized states. Faulkner, as a result, described the entire situation as a bourgeois revolution led by the Republican party, which sought to incentivize privatization and create a truly industrial capitalist society. The South, now facing global competition in cotton, and becoming outdated by industry of the North, could only survive through aggressive expansion which was being limited by Northern politicians. Likewise, industry required its own expansion. As Faulkner writes:

> The Republican programme expressed the aspirations of the fast-growing capitalist economy of the North and the fast-expanding pioneer communities of the West. Central planks were higher tariffs to protect US industry, free farms for new settlers, and government subsidies for railroad construction.[23]

[21] Adam Ward Rome, 'American Farmers as Entrepreneurs, 1870–1900', *Agricultural History*, vol. 56, no. 1 (1982), p. 37.
[22] See Karl Marx, *On America & the Civil War*, trans. Saul K. Padover (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), pp. 91-92; See also Ken Lawrence, *Karl Marx on American Slavery* (Touglaloo: Freedom Information Service, 1976).
[23] Neil Faulkner, *A Radical History of the World* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), pp. 249–50.

The expansion into the West became essential to the Republican cause for a variety of reasons. Economically, expansion was necessitated for the growth of capital and consolidation of a single United States economy of bourgeois capitalism. Where politics were concerned (which both serves and influences the economic base in a paradoxical way[24]), the settling of the West was also necessary as a counter to the conservative and stubborn South, whose almost entirely agriculture based economy, built upon slave labor, was seen as incompatible with free industry.[25] And in fact, this system was incompatible to varying regards, as the political and economic aspirations of this bourgeoisie declared, at least provisionally, "Free soil, free speech, free labor, free men."[26] But in reality, the expansion into the west was actually an example of mass primitive accumulation. Finding those lands rich in resources and potential and also facing the problem of competing modes of production in the South and North, the response to begin settling further west and expanding market options through the exploitation of land, and suppression of the indigenous populations would push the aims of eventual privatization. In time the proletarianization of the settler farmers would take place after integration of the territories, urbanization, and industrialization.[27] The westward expansion was quickly monopolized by railroad companies, who not only bought up masses of land (to then sell to the settlers), but also controlled means of transportation. The results of this were, of course, in the industrial North's favor. Settler states and territories increasingly voted to outlaw slavery, as they were populated more and more by Northern white people, and European immigrants funneled through northern, anti-slavery states. Likewise, the majority of unclaimed land was in anti-slavery states.[28] It therefore became self-perpetuating and necessitated conflict as neither side could peacefully resolve the incompatible economies.

This expansion of northern industrial aims competed and threatened the mode of production in the South, which was only able to survive, as Marx noted, through forced expansion.[29] Two competing powers vying for the same territorial expansion meant that war was unavoidable, as these two systems of capitalism were incompatible. The agrarian, slave-economy of the South would be replaced by the industry-capitalist economy of the North. The Confederates therefore launched secession and in doing so also sought to stimy all labor-based power in their own states and in the territories it occupied: "Inside the slave states proper, it supplants the hitherto

[24] As Mao wrote, "But it must also be admitted that in certain conditions, such aspects as the relations of production, theory and the superstructure in turn manifest themselves in the principal and decisive role," see Mao Zedong, *Four Essays on Philosophy* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1968), p. 58. See also Communist Party of Perú, *On Marxism-Leninism-Maoism: Study Guide Edition* (No Publisher Listed, 2024), pp. 14–15; Redspark Collective, *Mao Zedong's 'On Contradiction': Study Companion* (Paris: Foreign Languages Press, 2019), p. 61 for commentary.

[25] Not that the South saw it this way. In fact, indications were that they sought to eventually industrialize but use enslaved people as a pre-formed labor class, which would feed both agriculture and industry mutually, see John Majewski, *Modernizing a Slave Economy: The Economic Vision of the Confederate Nation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

[26] Faulkner, *A Radical History of the World*, p. 250.

[27] Karl Marx, *Capital*, trans. Ben Fowkes (3 vols.; New York: Penguin, 1990), part 8 for an extensive discussion of primitive accumulation. See also Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) [People's War], *Marxist Political Economy: An Introductory Course* (India: High Tide Publications, 2024), 169–71.

[28] Paul Frymer, *Building an American Empire: The Era of Territorial and Political Expansion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), pp. 141–42.

[29] Marx, *On America & the Civil War*, pp. 92-93.

existing democracy with an unrestricted oligarchy of 300,000 slaveholders."[30] Marx rightly predicted that if successful, the dissolution of the Union would not occur, but a reorganization of it under the dominion of the oligarchy.[31] The petty-bourgeoisie of both sides tended to favor much the ideals of the bourgeois oligarchs of their respective modes of capitalism, as they thought they stood to benefit from their victory.

As such, this was the primary American bourgeois revolution, so to speak, and one which the Allen family, like many a Northern Midwesterner, was caught up in. These economic differences led to unequal economic (dis)advantages between the two sides. The act of westward expansion, in particular, upheaved the balance between the two and the Great Plains became a breeding ground for violence (infamously, Bleeding Kansas). Most relevant for our discussion here is the Homestead Act of 1862, which gave special permissions to USA adult citizens (or "intended citizens") to acquire 160 acres of land, but on the specific condition they had never taken up arms against the United States government (a prohibition which subtly excluded, at least tacitly, the South from taking part in westward expansion and thus ending slave expansionism).

At this point, we can fast forward now to Amasa Allen's adulthood. In Michigan, industrialization was expanding, good and ready to plow farmland was becoming rarer, and the hardships were already great for many in maintaining their family farms (let alone being successful capitalists and expanding to multiple). Up to this point, we have contextualized Amasa Allen's life in the still largely agrarian areas of Michigan under the careful management of his father. But shifts had occurred in no small part due to the rise of commercialization and the shift toward industry in the economic base of the United States since the Civil War. By the 1870s, farmers' magazines and almanacs were beginning to warn them of the need to get with this industrialization and commercialization, to capitalize efficiently on their farms.[32] In the Midwest, the effects of this were already being seen and the family was even exemplifying this, with the buying up of large amounts of real-estate in multiple areas, developing multiple farms, and thus also accruing a profit off of the excess which they sold. The successful results of this can be seen valuation of Thaddeus Allen's estate in 1893 upon his death, at some $12,475 (as found in the valuation in his final will, accessed via Ancestry), or approximately $445,586.21 as of writing.[33]

The mass of owned but undeveloped land from Thaddeus attested to the difficulties in investing in farming in Michigan. Thousands upon thousands of acres remained to be claimed, but they were overgrown with timber, filled with rocks, or otherwise near swamp and necessary to drain. Amasa knew this well as his first property signed over to him was a parcel of land from his

[30] Marx, *On America & the Civil War*, p. 93.
[31] Marx, *On America & the Civil War*, p. 93. He also predicted that if slavery returned to the north, it would be the Irish and German immigrants reduced to this labor, since they were already the more profound underclass of readily accessible labor to exploit for free, and often repressed into the same ghettos of society.
[32] Rome, "American Farmers as Entrepreneurs," p. 38.
[33] Michigan. Probate Court (St. Clair County); Probate Place: St Clair, Michigan, *Michigan, U.S., Wills and Probate Records, 1784-1980* (Ancestry.com, 2015).

father (approximately 40 acres or less).[34] We can guess it was from the undeveloped portions of Thaddeus' land. But in Port Huron (not far from Avoca), railroads were soon opened into the west, in no small part thanks to immense subsidies from the USA government, starting with Abraham Lincoln's Pacific Railroad Act. With them, the railroad companies acquired huge amounts of land from the federal government, only to then turn around and sell it cheaply to would-be pioneers, luring them into the West with mass advertisement (Popp 54-55).[35] We should likewise not neglect the family's Republican Party ties, which would have likewise given them some likely political awareness of these new homesteading opportunities.

It is no surprise to find that Amasa Allen was, therefore, easily lured out west, particularly also because of the influence of his own family. Amasa, thankfully, left a brief account of his journey (which I partially reproduce here):

> Soon after supper on March 1, 1876, my brother-in-law Nick Ditmere and I left Port Huron Michigan for Kansas. We could not buy a ticket direct to Sedgwick, so after riding second class (in the smoking car) and buying another ticket from Newton to Sedgwick for 60 cents we arrived here about midnight March 3. […]
>
> We went to a Mr. Merrill's for the night. The house stood about where Mr. Bruington lives. I came only to see what the country was like but when I learned that I could take 2 ponies, break an acre of land and raise a crop on it in 12 months, decided it was better than several men spending a few months clearing a small piece of timber and then years before it was really ready to cultivate.
>
> I still have the trunk I brought with me. On January 31, 1878 Miss Rhoda Greenleaf Quiett and I were married. We went directly to our home. Soon after I came I bought a relinquishment of a Mr. Ridley and had moved the one room across the slough and had lathed and plastered it.[36]

It was also not only his brother-in-law, but soon his half-brother Elijah Ledgo Allen and family, a brother Thomas Jewett Allen and wife, his sister Demaris (Allen) Fry and her family would also all move to Kansas as well, and most of them around the same area of Sedgwick, and all within the span of a few years.

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[34] This is from land deed from 1870 registered "St. Clair, Michigan, United States records," images, FamilySearch (https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CSLF-J3KY-N?view=explore : Feb 9, 2026), image 115 of 632. Image Group Number: 008194941.

[35] Richard K. Popp, "Cultivating the Romance of Place," in *The Routledge Companion to Advertising and Promotional Culture*, ed. Matthew P. McAllister and Emily West (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 53–68, at 54–55.

[36] The details of this letter are unknown. It is signed "Amasa Allen" and was evidently sent to the *Sedgwick Pantagraph*, as it contained the introductory line "Dear Pantagraph Friends," but its date is lost. Patti Unruh (the great granddaughter of Amasa Allen) found a copy of the letter in Sedgwick, Kansas at the Sedgwick Public Library, and then transcribed it. Her transcription is what is reproduced here. A summary of this letter is also found in Patricia Unruh, 'Amasa Nelson Allen: Sedgwick, Kansas', *The Homesteader*, vol. 1. No. 2 (2005). At: https://web.archive.org/web/20110726144617/http://www.hcgsks.org/Homesteader/Homesteader02.pdf.

In these lands, it is notable that a semi-peasant lifestyle and then an emergence into a petty-bourgeois class was far more plausible. As Amasa recounted, because the land was so successful for growing, it meant that production could begin immediately. And there is every indication that Amasa had intentions of being more than a simple peasant subsistence farmer of old (though life probably began in this fashion in Kansas, until he could accumulate surplus capital), but like his father, would be an industrious farmer. Still in our possession, for instance, is a ticket he purchased to the World's Columbian Exposition held in 1893:

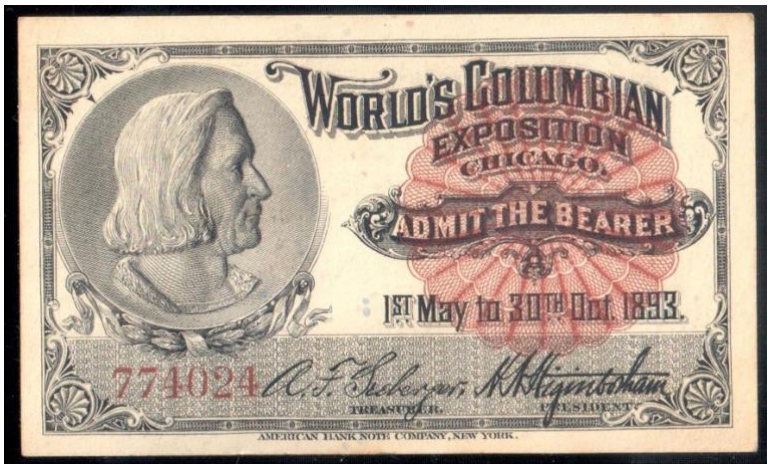

Figure 4: Amasa Allen's World's Columbian Exposition Ticket.

This event showcased everything from culture and arts to the growing industrial techniques that were being innovated and would have showcased to Amasa Allen what was soon to be available. If this is indicative of his earlier self, which by his own letter this seems accurate, Amasa Allen was from the start of his pioneer days set on his own entrance into the petty-bourgeois class, and seeing the largely "available" Sedgwick, Harvey Co., Kansas as prime real-estate for his start. Simple family farming this was not, and it is this aspect which perhaps many family historians should abandon in particular. Families choosing to settle the West were not, in fact, looking to be subsistence family farmers, or emulate the old peasantry, but were a part of the agro-industrialization of the United States, seeking to enmesh themselves in the emerging bourgeois ideal of entrepreneurialism, which had specifically launched the mass settling of the west.

Sedgwick, Harvey Co., Kansas and Amasa Allen

As noted above, Sedgwick was seen as "available" land to Amasa Allen. His own letters and accounts give no indication that he had a mind for the indigenous inhabitants of the land. The land, of course, was long inhabited before he ever showed up and the government promises of free land (or railroad promises of cheap land) were of course true only by virtue of the inherent eliminationist nature of settler colonialism. Wolfe's summary description of settler-colonialism and its traits is useful as a starting place here:

> In common with genocide as Raphaël Lemkin characterized it, settler colonialism has both negative and positive dimensions. Negatively, it strives for the dissolution of native societies. Positively, it erects a new colonial society on the expropriated land base—as I put it, settler colonizers come to stay: invasion is a structure not an event. In its positive aspect, elimination is an organizing principal of settler-colonial society rather than a one-off (and superseded) occurrence. The positive outcomes of the logic of elimination can include officially encouraged miscegenation, the breaking-down of native title into alienable individual freeholds, native citizenship, child abduction, religious conversion, resocialization in total institutions such as missions or boarding schools, and a whole range of cognate biocultural assimilations. All these strategies, including frontier homicide, are characteristic of settler colonialism.[37]

Settlers and settler logic was built on elimination but an elimination through the assumption of the impermanence of Native populations. And because they were conceptualized as impermanent, savage, uncivilized, etc. their removal was therefore justified and the notion of permanence and therefore a sense of indigeneity was instead conferred to settlers themselves.[38] Furthermore, the nature of capitalism which infused settler colonialism itself also perpetuated this expansionism and eliminationism, as agriculture would enable larger populations, and larger populations would then bring urbanization, which in turn would bring mass industry, and therefore bring more immigrants, again necessitating more land for housing (and then in turn more farmland as the populations would outgrow the original stock of farmers' ability to produce). Thus, to keep supply up with demand, but also maintain the permanence of the farms, this would lead to multiple events: 1) the move towards agricultural industrialization of the land, and 2) the mass expansion over Native lands, and their annexation to the settlers in need of this land. This would, in turn, lead also 3) to mass ecological disaster as capitalist farmers sought to extract as much from the land as possible (which the Great Plains would see the full effects of in the Dustbowl[39]).

Amasa Allen's place in this was therefore part of the eliminationist settler colonialism, and in this he was almost certainly, at least partially, aware as well. The area of Sedgwick had been settled long prior by Native tribes, principally the Wichita.[40] Sedgwick itself was only a few years old when Amasa arrived (only being incorporated formally in 1872), and the early history of Sedgwick is, as a result, littered with the reminder of Native presence, in particular raids which

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[37] Patrick Wolfe, 'Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native', *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol. 8, no. 4 (2006), p. 388.
[38] Wolfe, 'Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native', pp. 395–396.
[39] Marx notably predicted this in the first volume of *Capital* writing, "Capitalist production collects the population together in great centres, and causes the urban population to achieve an ever greater preponderance. This has two results. On the one hand it concentrates the historical motive-power of society; on the other hand, it disturbs the metabolic interaction between man and the soil, i.e., it prevents the return to the soil of its constituent elements consumed by man in the form of food and clothing; hence it hinders the operation of the eternal natural conditions for the lasting fertility of the soil," see Marx, *Capital*, p. 1.637. For commentary, see David Harvey, *A Companion to Marx's Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Verso, 2010), pp. 233-35; Terry Eagleton, *Why Marx was Right* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), pp. 229–30.
[40] Jim Lloyd, *Sedgwick, Kansas: Through the Years* (Newton: Mennonite Press, 2023), p. 12.

would occur well into the late 1870s.[41] As such, the rich land which he could develop, plow, plant, and harvest in a mere twelve months, was the land which he probably knew was taken from indigenous people.

Whether he participated in any direct violent action against the Native populace is uncertain, but this would hardly have been out of the ordinary for the pioneers, who regularly formed posses and mobs directed at Native settlements. Accounts from near that time, in fact, indicate there was a temporary mass exodus to the city of Wichita during an "Indian scare" in 1874, in which "more than 1,000 people" left temporarily before returning to their homes on the occupied land a few days later.[42] Local historians of the area of Sedgwick assert further that raids occurred in the early days of settlement and establishment of the city.[43] Despite this, no family history from the Allens records any hint of the indigenous people.

Priority in the family recounting of this history was always given to the pioneering of Amasa Allen and focused specifically on the hardships and difficulties which he and his family faced in their settlement of the Great Plains in Kansas. Little attention is given in most family histories to the legacy which this history of pioneering was built upon: the elimination of the indigenous peoples and claiming their indigeneity for the settlers themselves. Ideologically, there are many ways to explain this.

Since all sources (oral or written) bear the mark of the ideological constraints of the society which they are produced within, and are necessarily, as Mao says, reflections of class society,[44] it bears therefore mentioning the very class based nature of these sources and of Amasa's own self-conception in his letter. These reflect the petty-bourgeois mindset of his family and his entrepreneurial goals and so characterize his self-narrative. This likewise characterized how the story was therefore passed down through successive generations, who inherited only this partial, and ideologically confined story (which became successfully degenerated until only his individualistic migration remained on the lips of his descendants). This erasure of the indigenous populations and their narrative in favor of the petty-bourgeois one in turn meant there was an amnesia passed down. This characterizes many such family histories, sans those which instead depict the ardent heroism and valor of a noted ancestor in the face of a barbaric horde of the "savages" or similar. The Allen family "history" (that history which is passed down) is of the former type.

Amasa's establishment in Sedgwick was also entangled in the capitalist conception of family relations. Kelle and Kovalson importantly note that as families are a place of joint consumption, this also implies a need for production and income to account for this possibility of

[41] Linda Smurr, *Harvey County, Kansas, History* (Newton: Harvey County Historical Society, 1990).
[42] Frank Wilson Blackmar, *Kansas: A Cyclopedia of State History…* vol. 2 (Chicago: Standard Publishing Company, 1912), p. 663.
[43] 'The Villages of Harvey County', *The Homesteader*, vol. 1. No. 2 (2005). At: https://web.archive.org/web/20110726144617/http://www.hcgsks.org/Homesteader/Homesteader02.pdf
[44] Mao Zedong, *On Literature and Art* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1967), p. 18, cf. Evgeny Zhukov, *Methodology of History* (Moscow: USSR Academy of Sciences, 1983), 186.

joint consumption.[45] Successful farms, likewise, also necessitate manpower. Lastly, these are all combined with the general sexual drive for reproduction, for which family units (formed via marriage) provide the (accepted) social basis in capitalist society. As a result, this leads to the expansion the family for both economic and social gain. Amasa Allen's family was extensive after marrying Rhoda Greenleaf Quiett (1859–1904), with twelve children (though only nine made it past infancy) being born to the couple. Characterizing the particularly non-familial attitude Amasa had, his son William L. Allen wrote to his niece Effie (Allen) Hildinger: "You know, he [=Seth Allen, his elder brother[46]] has been more father to me, Effie, than my own dad ever was" (dated September 1942, sent from Langdon, Kansas to Deford, Michigan). The family was therefore not characterized by closeness between parent and child, and monetary issues between Amasa and his children are also known to have been prevalent in later times.[47]

Bringing about a large family on this land further made settlement a permanent and sedentary act, at least as far as an agrarian family is concerned. Not being proletarianized, the Allen family could establish itself as among the early pioneers, the "original" inhabitants of the Great Plains of Kansas (as the indigenous people were thoroughly displaced both in land and their place in history), and therefore, shift its history from settler-colonialism's genocidal elimination, to that of the hardworking, entrepreneurial spirit. This petty-bourgeois ideal would be foisted on the successive generations. Seth Allen (Amasa's eldest son) would take up the work of becoming a business owner, and particularly for industrial farm equipment, supplying local farmers with both labor and rented machinery (labor incidentally extracted for free from his youngest sibling William often[48]). Extensive financial stubs and bank records were kept by the Allen family of Seth's business, enough to reconstruct a shrewd and erudite businessman, and various letters show he was unafraid, like his father, to extract debts from family members.

Concluding Remarks

The success of the family's successive generations would finally depend on their ability to withstand (and ingratiate themselves into) the onset of monopoly capitalism and industrialized agriculture, which did not happen. Today, there remain no Allen family businesses descended from Thaddeus Houghton Allen, nor longstanding family farms, as the increasing proletarianization of family farmers occurred, forcing more and more to urbanize.[49]

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[45] V. Kelle and M. Kovalson, *Historical Materialism: An Outline of Marxist Theory of Society* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973), pp. 68–69.

[46] Due to confusion, I will clarify yes there were at least three people named Seth Allen in the family: Seth the brother of Thaddeus, Seth the brother of Amasa (and son of Thaddeus), and Seth the brother of William (both sons of Amasa). Originality was not the Allen strong suit.

[47] This resulted in William Allen eventually being ostracized by his father in fact.

[48] This is indicated in another letter from William Allen to Effie Hildinger, which is undated. However, it probably was written in March or early April of 1943, as it is referenced in a letter from Alva Allen to Effie Hildinger, dated 25 April 1943. Alva Allen was Effie's younger brother and the eldest of Seth's sons.

[49] Harvey, *A Companion to Marx's Grundrisse*, p. 278.

And yet the petty-bourgeois family narrative remains in the class memories of his descendants, a reflection of both the origin of this story and the aspiration of the successive generations. The capitalist ideal of a world where opportunity and individualistic entrepreneurialism could triumph is romanticized in family history, and pioneer stories are no less instances of this (whether they be stories of triumph over the land, over the "savage Indian," or of hardship and perseverance). It is a history which can ignore the class character of Amasa Allen's migration, the genocidal background of settlement, and the irony that his migration was only possible because of, literal, government handouts of cheap/free land to service the burgeoning industrial capitalist revolution and resource exploitation of the West. In short, these narratives serve to reify capitalist idealism, whereas a Marxist analysis showcases a more complicated history, and one which the family cannot be so easily absolved from.

Figure 5: (L to R seated) William Allen, Amasa Allen, Seth Allen; (standing) Lucy Allen, Sannah Allen, Francis Allen Eleanor Belle Allen.

This analysis elucidates and upturns this narrative and instead provides a historically grounded and materialist investigation both into an individual family history, but also using this as an exemplar of the causes and motivations for migration into the Great Plains in general. It is my contention, therefore, that both for historians in general and family historians in particular, a Marxist approach can serve to upend capitalist notions of the family and their role in the march of history, as shown in this essay.