Enterprise in Motion in the Early American Republic: The Federal Government and the Making of Thomas Worthington

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In his inaugural address, President Bill Clinton distilled a central narrative of some two centuries of American history into these few sentences:

> When George Washington first took the oath I have just sworn to uphold, news traveled slowly across the land by horseback and across the ocean by boat. Now, the sights and sounds of this ceremony are broadcast instantaneously to billions around the world. Communications and commerce are global. Investment is mobile. Technology is almost magical. And ambition for a better life is now universal [5].

As those lines were delivered, I was immersed in the extensive paper collections of Thomas Worthington, reconstructing how an ambitious young man forged his social, economic, and political power in the "Western Country" of the Early American Republic.[1] With one ear to President Clinton's words and with both eyes straining over those of Thomas Worthington, I got a surprise: Worthington, I realised, would have been perplexed to hear that "news traveled slowly across the land" in his *own* times. And he would have identified wholeheartedly with the President's description of *ours*: "Communications and commerce are global. Investment is mobile. Technology is almost magical. And ambition for a better life is now universal." This paper explores that surprise.

Thomas Worthington and many other young men of his circumstance and generation used the new national government to propel themselves and their connections over the expanding spaces of the Early Republic. Such men would be the first to master the intricacies of federal land sales. They would capture for themselves federal offices all over the West, ranging from deputy

[1]Thomas Worthington, with John Breckinridge and William C. C. Claiborne, is the focus of my dissertation, "Power in Motion: Western Success Stories of the Early Republic." In their high public office (and in the subsequent preservation of their papers), these men were outstanding, but in strategy and style they were typical of hundreds of young men fortunately-placed to seek their fortunes in the first western territories and states.

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surveyorships to territorial governorships. Very quickly they would also gain the power to dispense such offices to others. And they would make canny use of the postal system for the regular and far-reaching exchange of news, credit, and favors that both their public and private business operations required. They were, naturally, enthusiastic and influential advocates of the "almost-magical" technologies to come. But they made their way in the trans-Appalachian West almost entirely *before* those developments had begun to alter the "slow world of George Washington." Men like Thomas Worthington used the systems launched by the federal government to create a world which they could perceive *already* to have the qualities extolled in twentieth-century inaugural addresses: well-oiled commerce and communication, mobile investment, and universal ambition.

This study from the inside of Worthington's papers out, always explicating rather than skimming over the preoccupations that actually dominate his correspondence and memorandum books, in order to trace just how the federal government worked in the making of Thomas Worthington. I hope in this way to shed a different light on both major actors of this story---on the government itself as well as on Thomas Worthington. The result is necessarily untidy: a sketch of several kinds of relations and their many uses, at once commercial, personal, and public.

Because *un*tangled, sorted out and summarised, such relations would be stripped of their essential quality, this paper offers instead an important few samples of Worthington's operations in some, at least, of their original complexity. First, it shows an early stage of the making of Thomas Worthington in the years surrounding his 1798 migration from Berkeley County, Virginia, to the Northwest Territory. Second, it shows him operating within the mesh of obligations and opportunities of U. S. Congressional service. It introduces some connections between the federal government and the Ohio and Mississippi River trade in which Worthington was involved. Finally, it uses the experience of this successful citizen of the Early Republic to comment on what President Clinton, (articulating an American axiom), called the universal "ambition for a better life."

In the late 1790s, young Thomas Worthington seemed to be settling down. He married Eleanor Swearingen, an orphan like himself and heir to a somewhat larger estate, and ordered china and mahogany tables from Baltimore [24, I, 1-5 and 10-5-1796]. Actually, he was preparing not just to settle but to *move on* to settle. He had already begun to accumulate land on several trips north west of the Ohio River and had developed a friendly business correspondence with the chief surveyor-settler-speculator of the territory [13, pp. 132-38].[2] Young Thomas Worthington had acquired land, a propitious wife and genteel trappings, and some important western contacts; but the key to his future was a federal appointment.

To win the post of deputy surveyor of the Northwest Territory, Worthington mobilized resources that were simultaneously traditional and

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[2]These early dealings were in Virginia Military rather than federal lands. However distinct the results, the *processes* of locating, surveying, registering and patenting were virtually identical in the two systems and Worthington, like most western speculators, would become expert in both.

commercial, and local and far-reaching. He was not very usefully connected through his own family, but his wife's uncles were leading local Federalists. One, her guardian Abraham Shepherd, would soon win a fine federal plum, supervising the construction of the Harper's Ferry Arsenal canal [19, pp. 43 and 49]. The Worthington farm was next-door to that of George Washington's brother Samuel, and other Washingtons lived in the neighborhood. As Worthington plotted his future, Samuel Washington, junior, borrowed a hundred pounds from him; a "Mr. Washington" wrote from Richmond to Philadelphia to recommend him for the deputy surveyorship; and, of course, another Washington was meanwhile the font of all federal appointments [24, I, 10-3 and 12-16-1796]. Surveyor General Rufus Putnam soon wrote to Worthington: the young man need not "trouble [him]self further" as he had been "early recommended by a gentleman of Virginia on whose recommendation I can relie" [24, I, 12-1-1796]. Worthington hurried to Philadelphia anyhow to secure the appointment. There another Virginian wrote helpfully to him: since the new Surveyor General was "from the Western country," perhaps influence from Kentucky Congressmen would help? He enclosed letters of introduction---and thus began an ambitious young man's long and fruitful connection with the U. S. Congress and with leaders of the trans-Appalachian West whose ranks he would soon join [24, I, 1-1-1797].

Having won his appointment, Worthington, with his wife and baby, several of their kin, and eighteen newly-manumitted former slaves, moved to the new town of Chillicothe on the Scioto River. While working at his government surveying job, he had several tracts of land cleared, raised cattle, and established two grist-mills. Meanwhile, his contacts with the federal government proliferated. He had just arrived in the county when the residents of Chillicothe petitioned Congress for a change in public land regulations. It was Worthington who sent the petition to Philadelphia, enclosing it in a letter to his acquaintance Senator Brown of Kentucky. Responding to report on the progress of the petition, Brown asked Worthington for advice about some Scioto land he had just bought [24, I, 7-6-1798]. Transactions over Brown's Ohio land would continue over several years, requiring frequent correspondence. Letters from the Senator always contained the latest news of western concern and sometimes a newspaper from the national capital [24, I, 2-20-1801]. Worthington's letters communicated the needs of the northwest frontier.

Reporting that he had sold some of Brown's land, for example, Worthington had also asked the Senator to inquire about establishing a post office for Chillicothe. Brown replied that the Postmaster General had agreed to the request but wished Worthington had "named a suitable person to keep the office" [24, I, 2-14-1799]. So recently a supplicant for office himself, Worthington was, amazingly, being offered the power of patronage along with lessons in its use. Just starting out on the "frontier," far from the seat of government, Worthington was well-placed to learn how connections with the federal government were made and what they were made of.

By 1801 Worthington reckoned that his mills were grinding about two-thirds of the county's flour. On his plantation in the hills above Chillicothe, he was building a large cabin and moving his family out of town. In local politics, he was working for the removal of Territorial Governor St. Clair. But mostly,

he was occupied literally doing "land office business" after being appointed superintendent of public sales and register of the new Chillicothe land office.[3]

This federal position, it seemed, brought Worthington a great deal of trouble and precious little profit. Just as the sales began, he wrote desperately to Joseph Nourse, the registrar of the Treasury Department, that the necessary ledgers and paper had not arrived, and also that he was afraid to send the proceeds through the mails [23, I, 5-2-1801]. He anticipated trouble of another kind as well: the month before the sales were to begin, he had requested Governor St. Clair to send "particular instructions" for the conduct of the sale because "Much public anxiety is excited on the subject." When no instructions arrived, he began the sales with the land law as his only guide [23, I, 4-8-1801]. And, as he must have expected, his conduct of them was swiftly attacked by local Federalists. He wrote to the Secretary of Treasury defending his procedures, only to have to write all over again when he heard that the new administration had named a new Secretary, Albert Gallatin [23, I, 5-11 and 5-20-1801]. Meanwhile, Worthington was trying to resign the office: the pay, $5 a day, was "inadequate to the services rendered the Publick," and the fees he collected only embroiled him in controversy. The compensation scarcely covered the expenses of hiring clerks and running an office and was, he concluded, "not adequate to the trouble by any means" [18, p. 41; and 23, I, 7-3 and 8-21-1801].

This seems a dreary chapter in the story of the federal government and the making of Thomas Worthington---until one takes a closer look at the mass of successful transactions in which the quotable complaints are embedded. If Worthington's office was "a Burthen," his land sales were a terrific success: he remitted to Washington over $400,000 in revenue. It is not clear whether Worthington took advantage of his post to buy choice public lands for himself.[4] But he was making a good deal of money at the time from his mills and the sales of his early land speculations, and it was his land office business that gave him contacts and opportunity for investment. Joseph Nourse, his most frequent correspondent in the Treasury Department, became Worthington's personal business agent: Worthington engaged Nourse to put thousands of dollars into government stocks at six percent [23, I, 3-20, 5-20, 6-6, and 7-15-1801]. Meanwhile, his land office business made Worthington a natural contact for private business transactions initiated from the East as well. In a letter appointing Worthington to a new post as Inspector of the Revenue for the western section of the Territory, Gallatin asked him to take care of taxes due on Gallatin's Northwest Territory lands [25, II, 8-10-1801]. Gallatin was soon buying more northwestern land through Worthington [25, II, 10-1-1801].

The controversy over Worthington's land sales would seem to show that a federal appointment could jeopardise rather than enhance one's local power. But in a barrage of letters to Washington City, he managed not only to exonerate

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[3]The system in which Worthington, as land register, was the "direct link between purchaser and the government," has been detailed by Malcolm J. Rohrbough [16, p. 28 and passim].

[4]As Rohrbough has noted in his discussion of the "relaxed attitude" of the times toward "conflict in office," "There was no law against it" [16, pp. 28-29].

himself but to strengthen his position in the process. For example, he invited Senator Brown and another Kentucky Congressman to visit him on their way to Washington and then wrote to Secretary Gallatin to suggest that the Kentucky Congressmen be empowered to investigate the controversy for the Treasury Department as they passed through Chillicothe [23, I, 9-15 and 9-25-1801]. And in the end, the controversy over his conduct of the land sales actually strengthened his (partisan) local influence: a few months after the land sales, he was chosen as an "agent of the people of the Northwest Territory" and set off to Washington to battle St. Clair's territorial government.[5] Three years after his move west, and only a few months since the change of federal administration, Worthington had made himself so expert in the processes of federal land sales and so well-connected to national leaders like Albert Gallatin that he was really an obvious choice to represent Ohio interests in Washington. Worthington would return to the capital the next year as an advocate for Ohio statehood, and for eight more winters as a United States Senator.

In the early days, as everyone knows, Washington City was not much of a destination: it was muddy, ill-built, overcrowded, and damnably inconvenient. This common impression, drawn from contemporary accounts and from memoirs, was given classic expression a century ago by Henry Adams [1, pp. 23-24]. More recently, the physical portrait has been powerfully linked by James Sterling Young to a political thesis. Jeffersonian Washington was not only inconvenient but also irrelevant to the real centers of power: it was "government at a distance and out of sight" [26, p. 35]. Such views ignore the multiplicity of workaday government contacts and contracts that this study traces. They paint the new national capital from a vantage point both eastern and (influenced by later expectations of the federal government) retrospective. Seen from the *West* through the actual operations of those who served there, early Washington City takes on a different character.

The journey between the West and Washington City, usually made in November or December and again in March or April, could, of course, be unpleasant. But Thomas Worthington always used it well. In 1810, for example, he stopped in the state capital, then at Zanesville, where he spent his evening with about thirty legislators and had breakfast with fifteen or twenty more. These meetings had many purposes, for the legislators as well as for Worthington. Many would request that he attend to their land patents. Those hopeful of federal appointments tried to buttonhole him for a word. Even while travelling to the capital once with his wife and five of his children, Worthington managed to "do some business" en route, inquiring about land for a Baltimore friend, writing letters ahead to arrange his affairs, and, after leaving his family behind for a longer visit in Virginia, meeting Henry Clay in Frederick for the ride into the city [23, I, 10-1811].

Most often Worthington stopped in Berkeley County on his way to Washington, to take care of business and to renew family ties. Some were

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[5]Though neglected in this short paper, partisan politics was, of course, important. Worthington, like most young "western men" of his generation, considered himself a man of "good republican principles." What he meant by this is explicated in Drew Cayton's study of early Ohio [4, pp. 68-109].

sentimental ties but those that have survived on paper mostly testify to their mutual commercial usefulness: Worthington could check on the merino sheep which he had purchased near Washington during previous sessions and which a relative was temporarily keeping for him; he could take care of loose ends from old debts and the settlement of family estates; and he could advise an uncle about the prospects for "supplying the federal City with fine fruit" [24, II, 1-13-1802]. Not every western Congressman hailed from a homeplace as close and well-connected to Washington as Berkeley County, but for the many who had been part of the mainstream of migration from Pennsylvania, Maryland and western Virginia, service in Congress was an opportunity to maintain their "eastern" ties. For them, as for Worthington, the inconvenient journey to Washington could be transformed into a convenience.

From the beginning of each session, Worthington was occupied with a combination of public and private business. Petitions must be presented to Congress and guided through to some action. Each petition would generate correspondence as constituents inquired and Worthington kept them informed on its progress. One of the first chores of each session was to deposit land surveys with the Secretary of State who would issue the patents. Often, while "nothing material" was occurring in Congress (a common annotation in his Washington City diaries), Worthington would be doing a great deal of business. In January, 1811, he received his first batch of letters from Ohio just under three weeks after he had set out. On the following Saturday, the next day free from the Senate, he "did business at the public offices," presumably running errands requested in the letters. That very evening, he received fourteen more letters from Ohio, several including land business (the details of which he recorded in his memorandum book before he released them to the Secretary of State). Again, he "rode to the public offices and did private business," as he put it, for his friends and constituents [23, I, 1-1811 and 2-1811]. Saturday excursions could also be used for purely private business: he might deposit money in the Bank of Columbia in Georgetown or buy another merino ram [23, I, 4-14-1812].

By following the lead of Worthington's recorded preoccupations in this sample of his Washington business, I have neglected government policy (as opposed to the processes of government). Congressional issues of war, diplomacy, and federal land law were, of course, absolutely critical to trans-Appalachian citizens. I have stressed that every letter that passed between Ohio and Washington contained private business; it is also true that every letter contained some information or opinion about western and foreign affairs. The very abundance of the surviving correspondence shows the vital bonds between Washington City and the trans-Appalachian west while virtually every letter also shows how inextricably policy and interest were linked to form those bonds. Worthington---and representatives like him---formed the nexus between questions of policy (in which their local knowledge made them influential) and interest (in which their own multifarious enterprise as well as those of their connections involved them). Worthington's influence on land policy is an example. He was early named to committees on the subject, and, just thirteen years after his modest deputy surveyorship and ten years after his work as land register in Chillicothe, he was chairman of the Senate Committee on Public Lands. In 1812

he introduced the bill that established the General Land Office and his brother-in-law became its first Commissioner.

The issue of free navigation of the Mississippi River is another example. Western men had always considered the free trade of agricultural products down the Mississippi as their natural right. Since it was a right that could only be won and protected by the national government, public policy and private western interests must always converge. Western political leaders again formed the nexus. In 1801, when he was milling two-thirds of the local flour, Worthington was already sending that flour, along with his pork and whiskey, down the Scioto, the Ohio, and the Mississippi to New Orleans. In times of military activity, Worthington's public and private business converged most explicitly. In the fall of 1812, as he left Ohio to serve as a U. S. Senator, he had deposited $1800 in the bank, a payment from his New Orleans agent for supplying flour to General Wilkinson in New Orleans. Shortly after reaching Washington, he directed his Ohio miller to buy two or three thousand bushels of wheat that season, and he sent fresh instructions to his New Orleans agent [23, I, 10-18 and 11-4-1812]. At such times, Washington City was the center of the Mississippi River trade.

Thomas Worthington's correspondence amply demonstrates both vital interest in national government policy and the importance of the *processes* of that government.[6] The processes could not have been carried out, nor the policy communicated between constituents and representatives, nor the far-flung enterprise of men like Thomas Worthington even attempted, without another feature of the federal government, the United States Post Office. Thomas Worthington made constant and clever use of the postal system. The franking privilege made the errands and transactions that filled his days in Washington not only possible but financially attractive to his constituents; Congressmen, as holders of that privilege, were again at the very center of a vast network. Similarly, it was the government-subsidized rates for newspapers that allowed western leaders and their constituents to take an amazing amount of shared, richly detailed, up-to-date information for granted. Men like Worthington held a powerful central position on every level of the composition and dissemination of newspapers. While in Washington, they could influence and even create the policy that was reported in the national papers. When they wished to be sure to get their own views across at home, they could send letters and enclose documents to be printed by the western papers. And, (not to be underestimated) they and their franking privileges were the mechanism that made long-distance subscriptions to national papers possible: taking care of constituents' subscriptions to the *National Intelligencer* and to Duane's *Aurora*, and recording

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[6]For a rare appreciation of the *processes* of national government, see the work of Noble E. Cunningham, Jr. [6]. In contrast, see James Sterling Young: "Almost all the things that republican governments do which affect the every day lives and fortunes of their citizens, and therefore engage their interest, were in Jeffersonian times *not* done by the national government.... An institution whose involvement in the internal life of the nation was limited largely to the collection and delivery of letters could hardly have been expected to be much in the citizens' consciousness...."[26, pp. 31-32].

and corresponding with the subscriber about each transaction, was a routine part of every western Congressman's service.[7]

The confluence of westward ambitions and federal policies that made the fortunes of men like Worthington did not last. In the teens, after a long run of European wars, world food prices, along with the whole complex of markets and financial arrangements predicated on them, began to collapse. Worthington continued the mode of operations that had served him well in better times: he dealt with the United States Government to keep himself and his enterprise in motion. In the 1820s, with decreasing success, he negotiated contracts with the Departments of War and Navy to send supplies to New Orleans, St. Louis, Nachitoches, Baton Rouge, and Fort Smith. Every spring he had a flatboat built and often accompanied his shipments of pork, flour, corn meal, whiskey, candles, vinegar, salt, soap, beans, and apples to New Orleans. On return trips, he might stop, as in 1820, to do business in New York, Philadelphia, Washington, and Shepherds Town, and, as his health deteriorated, at Saratoga Springs. He died in New York City in 1827, on a return trip from New Orleans.

But even as he carried out his enterprise in the old patterns, Worthington recognized their inadequacy. On the national and state levels, he was an influential proponent of improved transportation; as Governor he tried to lead Ohio to set painful priorities in a contracting economy. (These shifts form the framework for Harry N. Scheiber's study of the Ohio Canal era [17]). He could see that the old and technologically primitive Mississippi trade belonged to a peculiarly favored era and that the seemingly solid bases for expansive, optimistic, commerce-embracing Jeffersonianism had evaporated but, meanwhile, in his everyday private business, he had no choice but to carry on as always.

This paper has stressed the centrality of the federal government in the making of one enterprising western man and, though only indirectly, in the development of the trans-Appalachian West. From one perspective, that thesis is obvious enough. As the organizing power of the Northwest Territory and as the diplomatic and military power that would protect it, of *course*, the federal government was central to trans-Appalachian destinies. Of *course*, men like Worthington, for both public and private reasons, had to develop and maintain strong ties to Washington.

But there is a powerful competing narrative. Approached from the Turnerian point of view which still, willy-nilly, sets the terms of most scholarly debates "western men" like Worthington either became or pretended to become the leaders of the opposition to the central government, a force which represented the "efforts of the East to regulate the [democratic] frontier" [20, p. 35]. Worthington, in fact, has always and only been considered as an early *state* political leader, the champion against territorial government and "father of Ohio statehood" [4, pp. 65-80; 18]. Several recent studies have suggested promising ways to navigate between these conflicting narratives--between the obvious importance of the federal government to the West and the tradition of western opposition to it [2; 3; 11; 14; 15]. My work, I hope, will also contribute a fresh

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[7]Richard R. John's forthcoming book promises to end the historiographical neglect of the early postal system [8].

approach to western men like Worthington who simultaneously excoriated and made such good use of the federal government for themselves and for their connections.

Conclusion

The "significance of the Early Republic," Gordon S. Wood has written, was that "Hundreds of thousands of very ordinary people were very busy buying and selling in order to realize...'the almost universal ambition to get forward.'" In his new book, Wood has celebrated the "scrambling, prosperous, enterprising society," which emerged, "not because the Constitution was created" but, again, "because ordinary people, hundreds of thousands of them, began working harder to make money and 'get ahead'" [21, p. 13; and 22, pp. 325-26]. Wood's synthesis restores to the period the vital qualities of commercial energy and sheer movement that have often been so strangely absent from the literature. By taking the Constitution out of the picture, though, Wood has hooked one of the leading actors of the Early Republic, the federal government, right off the stage. And in enthusiasm for his "scrambling, prosperous, enterprising" America, Wood has returned us precisely to President Clinton's inaugural address: to that cherished but dubious link between the bustle of commerce and communication and the universal, (by implication, successful), "ambition for a better life."

Wood has described the world of the Early Republic exactly as men like Thomas Worthington themselves saw it. But, (by maintaining a silence worthy of an inaugural address on the possibility of failure). Wood's work suggests that one might simply multiply a success story like Worthington by hundreds of thousands and come up with the significance of the Early Republic. Worthington's experience, I believe, shows the problems with that implication.

In terms of his access to the communications and transportation systems of his day, Worthington was not an ordinary American at all but rather an early version of the business executive who has mastered every known device for negotiating across space and time: from credit cards to the phone, Fax, Lexis, Nexis, Federal Express, and Express Mail. The businessman today is privileged to have the "instantaneous" and "almost-magical technology" of President Clinton's inaugural sketch at his fingertips. Men like Thomas Worthington recognized that they had the same and made excellent use of it.[8] In theory, the communication and transportation structures of our society, from highways to faxes---all heavily supported if not initiated by the federal government---are accessible to all, just as in theory they were available to ordinary men and

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[8]This essay has worked outward from the everyday experience of an individual and therefore in conclusion considers the issue of opportunity from the same point of view: what were the possibilities for enterprising individuals during the years that Worthington was making his career? From another angle, that of the economic development of society, one might reasonably conclude differently: that, however restricted the instruments of enterprise, those who wielded them helped to develop the society. The eventual effect, then, would be wider commercial opportunity. This line of argument is well-represented in articles by Naomi Lamoreaux and Nathaniel Leff [10; 12].

women of the Early Republic. The actual situation is and was different.[9] In Worthington's time, correspondence was for people who could afford the postage and who had established connections to write to. In the explosion of print culture in the Early Republic, many could read newspapers but very few could manipulate their contents. As the archives voluminously attest, many aspired to the federal appointments that made men like Worthington, but few achieved them. The experience of Thomas Worthington demonstrates just how difficult it would be for hundreds of thousands of ordinary people to "get ahead" in the Early Republic.

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