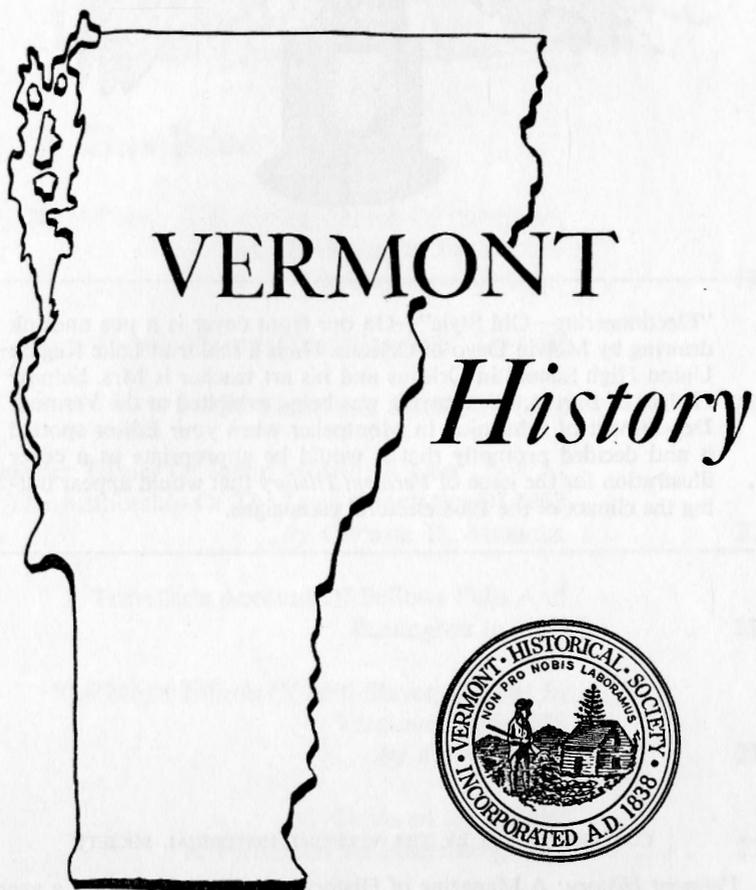


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## Jonathan Turner Or Justin Morrill: A New Look At The Authorship Of The Land Grant Act Of 1862\*

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THERE has never been any single law passed by Congress which had as much effect on American higher education as the Land Grant Act of 1862. Sixty-eight of the ninety-four state universities are land grant colleges, and one-third of all college students and one-half of all graduate students attend them.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, after one hundred years the question of authorship of the Act is still not settled. Although the Act bears the name of Justin Smith Morrill of Vermont, there is extensive acceptance of the claim by many leading historians, such as Henry Steele Commager<sup>2</sup> and Alexander McQueen,<sup>3</sup> that Jonathan Baldwin Turner was the authentic author.

The issue is complicated by the fact that Turner's biographer, Mary Turner Carriel (his daughter), and Morrill's biographer, William B. Parker, were both extremely biased. Parker either dismisses or ignores any evidence in favor of Turner, and Mrs. Carriel bases much of her evidence on conversations with her father, some thirty years after the passage of the Land Grant Act of 1862.

It is extremely difficult to look at the work of Jonathan Baldwin Turner objectively. Earle D. Ross described him as:

. . . typical of the reforming-agitator type of the middle period. . . His crusades were sufficiently diffused and varied . . . to include abolitionism, antimormonism, psychiatry, mesmerism, spiritualism, biblical criticism, monetary reform, inland speculation, antimonopoly, mechanical invention,

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1. "Land Grant College Enrollment," *School Life*, XLIII, (October, 1963), p. 13.

2. Henry Steele Commager, *Documents of American History* (4th ed rev.; New York: Appleton, 1948), vol. II, p. 412.

3. Alexander McQueen, *Historic America: A Calender of Progress in Picture and Story*, 1963, p. 2.

entomological, and agronomic experimentation, as well as education extension and reorganization.<sup>4</sup>

He goes on to picture the Turner Plan as having a lack of knowledge of technical institutes and deficient in "social realism, systematic organization, and scientific precision."<sup>5</sup> Edward D. Eddy, on the other hand, stated Turner "was early in his clear and insistent demand for new education."<sup>6</sup>

Who was Jonathan Turner? What was his plan for education? On what is based his claim for authorship of the Morrill Act of 1862?

Turner was born in Templeton, Massachusetts in 1805 and graduated from Yale in 1833. From 1833 to 1847 he was a Professor of Latin and Greek at Illinois College. He was one of the founders of the Illinois Teacher's Association, helped to pass the free school law of Illinois, and served as the head director of the Industrial League of Illinois.

In 1850 in a speech given at Griggsville, Illinois, Turner outlined a plan for an industrial college. At a mechanics' convention in Granville (November 1851) he presented the plan in more detail. The reaction was so favorable that the plan was published and circulated among other mechanical and agricultural societies. So much pressure was brought to bear on the state legislature that in 1853 it sent instructions to the state's congressmen to introduce a resolution based on the Turner Plan. The plan called for equal grants of land to be given to the states for the creation of industrial colleges (separate from the then existing classical colleges) that would offer an education to "all cultivators of the soil, artisans, mechanics, and merchants." Classical subjects were not to be offered at these schools because Turner believed that to teach Latin to a future farmer would be like teaching a minister how to plow.<sup>7</sup>

Justin Morrill entered the U. S. House of Representatives in December 1855, and two months later offered a resolution for the establishment of a national agricultural school comparable to the system of the military academies. On December 17, 1857, he introduced a bill, which when passed, would become known as the Morrill Land Grant Act. In spite of stiff resistance from the Southern congressmen, this bill passed in 1859; however, it was vetoed by President James Buchanan. When it reintroduced in 1861 (with the Southern representatives gone and a sympathetic president in the White House), it passed thirty-two to seven

4. Earle D. Ross, *Democracy's College*, Ames: Iowa State College Press, 1942, pp. 37-38.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

6. Edward D. Eddy, *Colleges for Our Land and Time*, New York: Harper, 1957, p. 23.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 23-26.

in the Senate and ninety to twenty-five in the House, and was signed by President Lincoln.<sup>8</sup>

There was no question of who wrote the Morrill Act until Mrs. Carriel published her biography in 1911, which contended that Turner was the author of this legislation. In 1912 Edmund J. James, President of the University of Illinois, said he could prove that Turner was the real author of the act.<sup>9</sup>

What was the proof? James listed it in four categories:

1. The language of the bill was Turner's.
2. Morrill was selected by Turner to introduce the bill.
3. Turner sent to Morrill all of the Illinois Industrial League's material and gave Morrill all possible aid.
4. There was an intimate acquaintance between Morrill and Turner.<sup>10</sup>

Let us look at each of these claims. The first is based on two very similar sentences. In the Morrill Act it reads: "To promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life."<sup>11</sup> In the Turner Plan it reads: "An industrial university for the liberal education of the industrial classes in their several pursuits and professions in life."<sup>12</sup> Similar? Very. What about the other claims?

On claim number two the evidence is contradictory and confusing. Writing in 1911, Mrs. Carriel mentions that in 1898 her father, Jonathan Baldwin Turner, made the statement that the Illinois Industrial League selected Morrill to introduce the bill.<sup>13</sup> No evidence other than his recollection exists; no correspondence by Morrill, Turner, or any member of the League. In fact, Morrill's recollection of 1894 in the events was stated in a letter as follows:

I do not happen now to know Professor Turner, though I do remember when my bills were before Congress a Western professor came to see me and heartily espoused the idea. It may have been Professor Turner. It is so long since, I have forgotten his name.<sup>14</sup>

Claim number three may have something behind it. In a letter written on November 28, 1865 Turner stated:

8. Ross, *op. cit.*, pp. 55-59, 66-67.

9. Edmund J. James, "Jonathan Baldwin Turner," *The Alumni Quarterly*, vol. VI (July, 1912), p. 188.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 188-91.

11. Commager, *op. cit.*, p. 413.

12. Mary Carriel, *The Life of Jonathan Baldwin Turner*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1911), p. 112.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

14. William B. Parker, *The Life and Public Services of Justin Smith Morrill* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1924), p. 280.

During this interval the Hon. Mr. Morrill first presented the bill to Congress. We forwarded to him all our documents and papers and gave him all of the aid and encouragement we could. He managed the cause admirably.<sup>15</sup>

Claim number four regarding the intimate acquaintance is based on a letter dated December 30, 1861 to Turner from Morrill. The entire letter reads as follows:

Dear Sir

I am delighted to find your fire, by the letter of the 15 inst., had not burned out. I presume I recognize Professor Turner, an old pioneer in the cause of agricultural education.

I have only to say that amid fire and smoke and embers I have faith that I shall get my bill into law this session.

I thank you for your continued interest, and am  
Very sincerely yours.<sup>16</sup>

Based on James's claims and supporting evidence, acceptance of Turner's authorship is understandable. Before reaching a final conclusion on this "Turner Thesis," however, the four claims should be evaluated along with an additional aspect.

The first claim that the wording of the Land Grant Act of 1862 was Turner's cannot be substantiated by just one similar sentence in an entire document.

With number two, there are only memories, which were questionable and, therefore, inconclusive.

Number three contains the strongest evidence. Obviously, if a bill is introduced into Congress which will create what you have been advocating for a number of years, you will give it strong support.

In the case of number four, one letter known to exist among the many that should have existed between two "intimates" does not strongly substantiate the claim.

Therefore, can Turner be accepted as the author of the Morrill Act based on the theory of James? I think not. Even if the evidence proved that Morrill was nothing but a spokesman, that Turner supported Morrill in the passage of the bill, and that the two were intimately acquainted, this would not be enough.

To do so one must go beyond James's statement on wording. If words are changed to conceal the true author and the ideas are the same, then one document can emanate from the other.

If it can be shown that the Land Grant Act of 1862 is the Turner Plan

15. Ross, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

16. Carriel, *op. cit.*, pp. 147-48.

reworded, then the claim that Turner is the author is a realistic conclusion.

This can be ascertained by a content analysis of both documents, taking the Morrill Act, dividing it into different categories, and then seeing how the Turner Plan fits into them.

The Morrill Act gave each State 30,000 acres per congressman, which when sold was to be invested in government or safe securities. Except for ten percent to be used in purchasing a site for the proposed schools, the rest of the fund was never to diminish. The use of the interest from the money was set forth as follows:

Each state which may take and claim the benefit of this act, to the endowment, support, and maintenance of at least one college where the leading object shall be, without excluding other scientific and classical studies, and including military tactics, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agricultural and mechanical arts, in such manner as the legislatures of the State may respectively prescribe, in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life.<sup>17</sup>

Where no such federal land existed, as in the older states, scrip was issued that was good for land in other States and territories.

The categories which evolve from the Act and their treatment by the Turner Plan and Morrill Act are as follows:

		<i>Morrill</i>	<i>Turner</i>
I.	Type of Grant	Federal Land	Same
II.	Amount of Grant	30,000 acres per congressman	Value of \$500,000
III.	How determined	By population	Equal
IV.	When land not available	Scrip issued	Not mentioned
V.	Use of Grant	State university	Same
VI.	Industrial	Yes	Yes
VII.	Classical	Yes	No
VIII.	Military	Yes	Not mentioned
IX.	Teacher training	Not mentioned	Yes

If the process were reversed and the categories were created from the Turner Plan, numbers IV and VIII would be deleted, since Turner does not mention either the problem of unavailable public land or the inclusion of military training. Also, another category would be added, because Turner wanted his industrial universities to be teacher-training institutions.

Of the nine categories listed, three are in agreement and six are not. This would seem to invalidate Turner's possible authorship.

17. Commager, *op. cit.*, p. 413.

If this alone—two-thirds disagreement—were not enough to disqualify Turner, it should be noted that two of the identical categories (a federal land grant to create State universities—I and V) have been included in every State Enabling Act passed by Congress, fifteen times before Turner proposed them.

This leaves just one section—industrial curriculum—which Morrill may have copied from Turner, but even this can be questioned. Turner was not the first to agitate for industrial education at the college level. One of the first, if not the first, was General Alden Partridge, Founder and President of Norwich University in Morrill's home state of Vermont.

Based on the above findings, the conclusion would be that Turner was not the author of the Morrill Act either by design on Turner's part or plagiarism on Morrill's.

Jonathan Baldwin Turner was a great leader in education during the nineteenth century, but to accept him as the author of the Land Grant Act of 1862 would be contrary to available evidence and unfair to the years of work by Justin S. Morrill.

A more valid conclusion would be that Morrill took the ideas of many individuals and documents, put them together in his bill, and after many years of work created the Act which bears his name.



“As Eugene Ashcroft [of Vernon] was hunting in the woods on Sunday, having his gun on his shoulder, it was caught by some bushes and thrown upon the ground in such a manner as to discharge the contents into his ankle, making an ugly wound; so much so that Dr. Gale, who was called, found it necessary to amputate the foot. Eugene had better been at Church.”

—from *The Vermont Record* (Brattleboro), November 17, 1865.