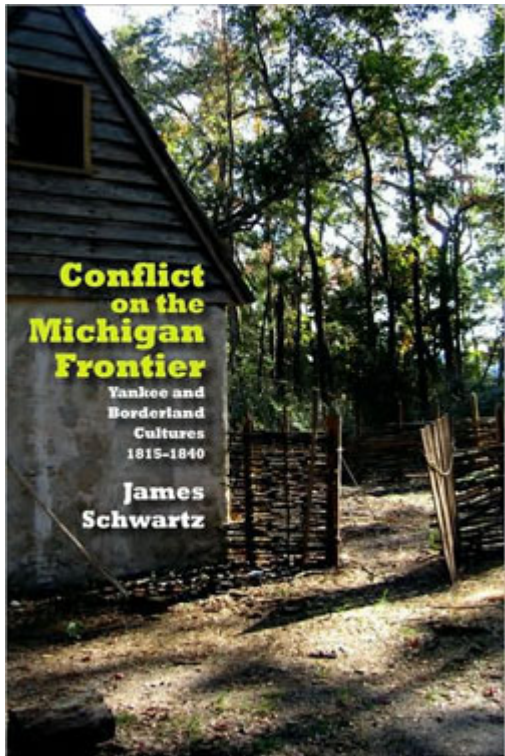


# Concord on the Michigan Frontier



James Z. Schwartz's *Conflict on the Michigan Frontier* picks up where Richard White's *The Middle Ground* leaves off: in 1815. At the close of the War of 1812, White has argued, the "middle ground" (the metaphorical and geographical site of political and cultural mediation between Indians and colonists) disintegrated. Schwartz aims to discover what happened to politics and culture in Michigan in the ensuing decades.

Schwartz's argument is this: with the influx of unprecedented numbers of Yankees into the Great Lakes Basin after the war (especially after the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825), Michigan's long-standing "hybrid" or "borderland" traits underwent a systematic "civilizing" process (4, 92-94). East-Coast newcomers waged war on the "savageness" of Indians, the "wildness" of backcountry whites, and the "lawlessness" of the West. They were determined to eradicate "inferior" and "dangerous" cultural practices and political attitudes, and in their stead impose order, restraint, and authority. In other words, Schwartz seems to argue, the machinery that hastened the middle ground's destruction continued to run through the mid-nineteenth century, concurrently eroding "frontier" politics and culture and inflicting and enforcing northeastern forms. But unlike White, Schwartz is less interested in how long-standing residents of Indian and French extraction responded to these erosions and coercions, and more interested in the actions and successes of the New England and New York transplants who masterminded them.

The Yankees' war on Michigan was fought, Schwartz argues, with a two-pronged strategy: constructing both "formal" and "informal" boundaries. "Informal"

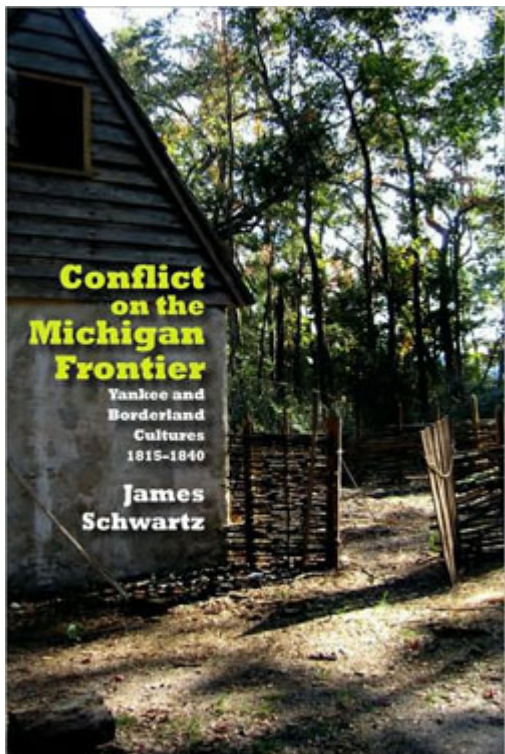
boundaries were “cultural restraints” created by “families, newspapers, public opinion, and churches” to separate Yankees from everyone else (4, 143). Chapter four tells the familiar story of Yankees’ efforts to “tame” the Potawatomi and other Indian groups through mission schools, reservations, and removal to Kansas—which Schwartz tells without benefit of native perspectives (79-80). He is more persuasive and innovative in chapter five, which covers the implementation of social reform movements within white society. He reveals how Yankee evangelicals used Michigan’s new media (newspapers) and new institutions (schools and churches) to impose morality, manners, temperance, and piety on non-Yankee whites (105-106). Such aims were not meant just to fortify Michigan’s moral fiber, but also to instill social and political order (128-129).

“Formal” boundaries—those “enacted by legislatures and administered by law courts and other official institutions” (143)—are the subject of the first half of the book: the campaigns for an elected assembly and voting rights (chapter one), the establishment of Michigan’s southern boundary (chapter two), and the debates over the legitimacy of banks and land speculators (chapter three). In building these boundaries, Yankee transplants may have contained or “civilized” native Michiganians, as Schwartz argues. But their chief foes in these instances—territorial officials, speculators, and bankers—were themselves transplanted Yankees (14-15). What Schwartz actually proves in these chapters is just how complicated it is to sort and generalize about Yankee agendas, strategies, attitudes, and behaviors.

The difficulty of generalizing about Yankees in Michigan is perhaps most evident in Schwartz’s final chapter, on the cholera epidemics of 1832 and 1834. The epidemics, and the panic and violence they produced, expose the “mounting discord between urban and rural settlers” (130). Yankee Detroiters contended that cholera was not a contagious but rather a social disease. Instead of establishing quarantines (the prevailing rural strategy for disease-containment), city-dwellers organized “campaigns to police and sanitize the poor” (135 and 137). For those Yankees in rural areas, cholera represented the toxicity and anarchy of the city, transmitted figuratively and literally from Detroit to outlying communities. The rural/urban divide over the epidemiology of cholera, Schwartz shows us, resulted in a heated political battle between Whigs and Democrats over “how far local officials could go in defending borders designed to protect their communities from urban contagion” (131). The value of this kind of study, Schwartz assesses, is to demonstrate just how important the tensions along geographic and social borders were (142). But it also serves to complicate the “conflict” story of the previous chapters. Yankees appear on all sides of the cholera debate, perhaps united in their “abhorrence” of Michigan’s Indian and French populations, but divided by location, disease theories, containment strategies, and opinions about appropriate government intervention (137).

The theme of government intervention is also predominant in chapter two, which traces Michigan and Ohio’s armed conflict over ownership of Toledo (1835-1836).

The standoff may have had to do with a territory's fears of a large state's unchecked power, as Schwartz contends (32, 51). But Michiganians—Yankees and non-Yankees alike—were also still bruised from Ohio's 1803 elevation to statehood (despite not having had the 60,000 residents requisite for consideration). Ohio's successful, if unusual, bid prompted Congress to disband the Northwest Territory and cast Michigan into the newly formed Indiana Territory. The change stripped Michigan of the representation it had previously enjoyed and fostered resentment, both against Ohio for its favored status and against Congress for its injurious disregard. Slighted Michiganians then began a vigorous campaign for their own territory—which they were awarded in 1805. Michigan's fears of and bitterness toward Ohio, in other words, began at least three decades before 1835.



James Z. Schwartz, *Conflict on the Michigan Frontier: Yankee and Borderland Cultures, 1815-1840*. De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009. 192 pp., \$30.00.

With the exception of the Toledo War, what is largely absent from Schwartz's book is a full sense of the "conflict" alluded to in the title. This results from Schwartz's interest in the actions of the Yankees determined to create an "American" society in Michigan. As such, the sources upon which the argument relies (such as the anonymous letters published in various local papers in support of the boundaries) convey much more consensus and complaisance than existed. In reality, many nineteenth-century Michiganians (particularly in older settlements like Detroit and Monroe) were not Yankees lately arrived from the east. They were descendants of the earlier Indian, French, and British populations—practitioners of what Schwartz calls in his title the "borderland cultures." These were the peoples whom the Yankees accused and attempted to

cure of “wild” and “barbarous” behaviors. Certainly they were not in dazed and grateful support of these “civilizing” and “ordering” efforts. But there is no sense in Schwartz’s book of how Yankees’ actions were perceived or received. Although he submits that “ordinary settlers and Native Peoples tweaked and changed these [Yankee] rules when possible to meet their own needs,” those stories of modification and resistance are not his subject (150).

The East Coast institutions and lifeways that Yankee transplants were determined to graft onto the Michigan landscape mostly, but not entirely, took hold (143). The “legal, ethical, and social boundaries” that newcomers constructed were surprisingly faithful reproductions of East Coast originals (150). Anglo-American cultural boundaries, however, were much more difficult to enforce (149). Indeed, Detroit’s French-language newspapers—evidence of ongoing resistance to Yankee cultural boundaries—endured through the early twentieth century.

The value of *Conflict on the Michigan Frontier*, Schwartz observes, is its contribution to the ongoing debate about “whether pioneers created a new culture in the West or simply transplanted their traditional Eastern ways to that region.” Schwartz posits that Yankees “inadvertently created a regional culture that was predominantly Eastern, but that also contained Native and French and western elements” (150). Perhaps, and more accurately, Yankees contributed to an already “hybridized” regional culture, layering their own cultural practices over preexisting Indian, French, British, and other forms. As Michigan became increasingly “Americanized,” East Coast forms would ultimately win out. But the deliberate and uneven processes of syncretism and erasure—begun more than a century before the Yankees’ arrival—would continue long after Schwartz’s end-date of 1840.