

**Enterprise and Emulation: The Moral Economy of
Competition
in Early National New England**

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Leaf through any nineteenth-century history of a northeastern town, and you will find a line like this one, from Massachusetts: “[Silas Felton and Joel Cranston] were enterprising merchants,” “men of energy and public spirit” who “zealously labored to build up [the village.]” Or this one, from New York: “[Lucas Elmendorf] was the controlling spirit behind the enterprise to build the Neversink Turnpike.” Or this one, from New Hampshire: “Dr. Rogers was conspicuous in every public enterprise.” The names change but the message recurs, as if these antiquarian authors had access to the click-and-fill software we now rely on to turn out annual reports. Their passages follow an unspoken formula, situating the objects of praise within a common set of platitudes. Person X holds an honored place in the annals of Town Y, because he showed great enterprise and public spirit in helping to build (meaning to finance) Project Z, which as often as not was a turnpike made between 1795 and 1815. Indeed, if a town did not have a nearby turnpike by the latter date, then it is likely not to have a published history of itself.¹

At first glance, these syrupy obituaries for wealthy boosters may seem like dull reading, devoid of context, nuance, or any other quality historians value. What could be more banal than a Victorian author larding praise on the well-to-do businessmen who fashioned the market economy we all know to have taken form during the early nineteenth century? What could be more predictable or less instructive? Indeed, the repeated emphasis in these narratives on the “public spirit” of turnpike promoters sounds downright disingenuous, for it runs counter to what we now suppose, quite rightly, about free market capitalism. *As if* those who propelled market integration were motivated by public spirit rather than private gain! *As if* they had anything in mind besides a political economy that would make them rich(er)!

Of course, the question of motivation has long vexed those of us who study the economic and social processes known as the “market revolution or the “transition to capitalism” in rural America. Implicit to much of our work and explicit to the rest is our cumulative sense of what various people truly and fundamentally wanted and valued. This paper is no different, but it tries to focus, not on what “enterprising” figures were *really* after, but on how they argued for a new sort of society, and especially a new sort of

competition. In this way, I want to explore some simple but easily overlooked questions about the early national countryside, especially in New England: How did various people understand competition, whether between persons or communities? How did they perceive the social and moral costs and benefits of rivalry, whether in their own towns or in society at large? Through what means and to what degree did they accept or even celebrate the culture of bourgeois striving and national progress that prevailed by the second quarter of the nineteenth century?

I focus on turnpike ventures because these were the basic sinews of the market economy, the essential conduits for new volumes of trade and travel and commercial integration. Derived from eighteenth-century British efforts to harness public powers for economic development, turnpike companies dwelled in what Morton Horwitz has called a legal “twilight zone.” Armed with a public grant that enabled them to collect tolls and seize private lands through eminent domain, turnpikes were both subject to and beneficiaries of common law restrictions on “injurious competition.” They also encountered sharp and sustained resistance from townsfolk who were determined to control the pace and character of economic and social change within their communities and who were skeptical of the sweeping improvements that turnpikes promised. For these reasons, turnpike ventures open a new window for viewing the economic culture of the post-Revolution hinterlands.²

Turnpikes were billed as “public enterprises,” and indeed they did not bring much in the way of private gain to their promoters. But they were crucial to the triumph of a new culture of “emulation” in early national New England. While the legal status of competition remained unclear during the four decades bracketing 1800, its moral stock improved dramatically, courtesy of a new, expansive, and abstract conception of the public and the nation. By linking market centers together and encouraging the growth of village milieus, turnpikes and their promoters crafted a commercial ideal in which “enterprising” towns and people vied for one another to promote national greatness. Their opponents became the “narrow” and “selfish” ones, motivated only by mean-spirited envy rather than generous emulation. Whatever their true motivations for financing these roads, that is, turnpike boosters left a very real footprint on the moral and motivational economy of the new republic.

I. Boosters and Reformers

In eighteenth-century English common law, roads were stubbornly local and essentially private. Adjacent property-owners had legal claim to the road up to its center point, and repairs were subject to a raft of local rules and customs. For the expanding state and its unpredictable ally, the market economy, this posed a logistical problem like no other. Without the physical means to connect markets with metropolitan centers, the larger polity remained a vague presence or irritating fiction to many of its subjects. Put simply, much of the country remained remote: hard to access and to control. As early as 1663, but especially from 1750 to 1772, Parliament sought to remedy the problem by granting “turnpike” charters to those who paid for new and better roads and charged tolls to passersby. (The term derives from the pikes guarding the toll gates.) These trusts relied not only on the legal power to take private lands but also on the prior claim that roads lay across public domains.³

Did turnpikes have the right to compete with older roads or with one another? Common-law restrictions on “injurious competition” remained throughout the eighteenth and well into the nineteenth centuries, potentially defining new roads or other enterprises as “nuisances” to existing properties. These inhibitions derived from an exclusionary and static understanding of property, as opposed to the fluid, developmental model that would prevail in the following century. By creating turnpikes as public trusts, however, British lawmakers not only sheltered turnpikes from such prosecution but also criminalized attacks against the roads. To destroy a turnpike gate, in other words, was not only a private or civil wrong, but a crime against the public. In his *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, William Blackstone specifically mentioned such attacks, grouping them with other “riots” against the peace and prescribing a public whipping and three months in prison for the perpetrators. By the last third of the eighteenth century, turnpikes in Britain had won crucial recognition in court as public entities with wide claim to the spaces around them.⁴

No such turnpikes appeared in colonial America, where both capital and political power was either scarce or dispersed. In rural New England, especially, town governments that answered to many freeholders determined when and how a given road would be built or maintained. In this way, local communities claimed effective control

over a crucial dimension of economic life. Almost every outsider who cared to comment agreed that the results were deplorable. An English visitor to Vermont found so many roots and rocks in his way that his driver had to move “in a serpentine direction” at just two miles per hour. Even in the densely-settled country around Boston, an American traveler in 1790 found the roads “horrid.” The constant bumping, he noted, “jolted me Mountain high,” and was “sufficient to Murder any Honest Man.” In addition to the physical pain, the poor state of roads was a source of real embarrassment to those who judged themselves and their country by British standards. More to the point, perhaps, a decrepit road obliged them to leave their four-wheeled carriages in favor of a horse, forming an invisible but very meaningful boundary around each seaport. Once they ventured too far from the streets of Philadelphia, New York, or Boston, gentlefolk had to forgo a mode of travel that broadcast their status and carry on in a way that obscured it.⁵

With its legal protections to investors, the Federal Constitution announced a new regime of economic development, which American boosters were quick to embrace. The first American turnpike appeared in Pennsylvania in 1792; thereafter, they multiplied between the market centers of New England and New York. Generally speaking, the life-course of a turnpike went something like this: between five and fifteen men petitioned the state legislature for a charter, pledged money and sought subscriptions, hired nearby residents to build parts of the road and transient laborers to do the rest, and then set up toll gates to cover maintenance costs and return a profit. The roads used existing technology to widen and grade the roads and in some cases to pave them. And while their wide berth and relatively smooth surfaces amazed many country folk, the turnpikes’ real innovation was in their legal and financial structure, which freed road-making ventures from the tight purse-strings and local priorities of townsfolk.⁶

Unlike colonial roads and bridges, turnpikes relied on private wealth. Of the roughly \$30 million spent on turnpikes before 1830, only \$5 million came from state or national funds. Instead of tax money, these companies took a public charter from the states, enabling them to collect tolls and claim protection from potential nuisance, including competition. At the same time, those charters stipulated the number and spacing of toll gates, the maximum fees they could charge different vehicles, and the exemptions they had to offer to certain travelers. Charters further required that the entire

road “revert to the public” after its investors had recouped their initial expenses at around 10% interest and empowered state officials to investigate their books at any time. An early historian of the roads calls these profit-mellowing restrictions, “pretty severe.”⁷

“After the new [Federal] Constitution,” declared the fifty-nine founders of the Norfolk & Bristol Turnpike in 1802, “the attention of many persons was turned towards its improvement.” The best way to do so, they thought, was to form a paved artery between Providence and Boston, drastically reducing travel time between the two seaports. This was an unusually large turnpike company, but its organization and rhetoric were typical. The proprietors’ homes stretched from North Providence, where the industrialist Samuel Slater bought six shares, to Salem, where one founder appealed to “public spirited men of property.” The spirit of private gain clearly helped, as well: turnpike promoters not only hoped for direct profits from tolls (at least, as far as the states would allow) but also knew that greater travel would enhance the value of their lands and businesses. Almost half the Norfolk & Bristol subscribers I sampled had bought real estate along the projected route since 1793. Most were wealthy merchants from the seaports, but village tradesmen—including a hatter from the town of Dedham, whose shop and home would border the route—also signed on.⁸

More than those of social class, this and other turnpike projects crossed lines of party allegiance. In Dedham center, for example, both the Federalist Fisher Ames and his Jeffersonian antagonist and brother, Nathaniel, pledged money and support. These men detested one another for several good reasons, some personal and some political. In addition to the insufferable patrician whose cattle were always straying onto his brothers’ lands, Fisher became, in Nathaniel’s view, an Anglophile traitor to the Revolution. And Nathaniel, in Fisher’s view, would have everyone flying French flags and toasting the murder of kings and the end of law. But two years after they yelled at one another in the town streets during the heated election season of 1800, they lined up together for the Norfolk & Bristol. Leading men of many towns and both parties promoted turnpikes and other enterprises with startling unanimity—a reminder of how political choices had narrowed with the ratification of the Constitution and the defeat of the more radically democratic ideas of the Revolutionary age.⁹

“Roads are the principle channels of intelligence and business,” declared a Connecticut printer in 1797. Building more and better roads meant “awakening a spirit of enterprise—and taking actual possession of our natural and local advantage.” The author, “A Philanthropist,” sadly reported that the selfish interests of mere “individuals” had long curbed the progress of “great roads,” and that many towns wore “a very deformed and unsocial appearance” as a result. Yet the public-spirited would press on with their efforts to lay roads and clear countryside “till the face of the country exhibits a delightful appearance.” In March 1802, a week before the Norfolk & Bristol founders asked for subscriptions in his paper, the printer of Dedham republished a similar article that denounced “circuitous and bad roads” as barriers to “moral and intellectual improvement.” No republic, ancient or modern, had ever survived when its citizens were thus isolated from each other. Happily, state governments had recently shown “A SPIRIT of improvement, in shortening roads, building bridges, and cutting canals.” In effect, this article staked out the moral high ground for turnpike promoters: “*Public benefit* is the grand principle which operates in their measures.”¹⁰

What ideas and priorities did these words encode? How exactly were turnpikes “public,” and in what sense did they reveal “enterprise”? These questions are best considered within a wide-ranging shift in political and civic thought during the late eighteenth century. In traditional societies, the members of a given group decide the boundaries of their public, which stretch and bend to fit the inhabitants’ needs and movements. In modern nation-states, the opposite holds true; the borders of the polity decide who is a member. Of course, neither colonial nor early national America fits neatly into either category, and in most societies the resulting shift in geo-political orientation is both gradual and fitful. But the ratification of the Constitution marks as clean a break with customary boundaries as one will find in modern or early modern history. At a stroke, it reframed citizenship in terms of a national project, dismissing the “narrow” and “illiberal” interests of town, county, or state in favor of the elusive “People.”¹¹

For much of the eighteenth century, enterprise had conveyed an unseemly mix of selfishness and dishonesty. An enterprising man had something up his sleeve; he sought to better himself at the expense of unoffending “industry.” Economists and moral

philosophers had partly refurbished the term during the middle of the century by linking the commercial interests of enterprising people—their self-interest in the open marketplace rather than the darkened chamber—to the prosperity of the nation at large. The Federalists added a civic dimension to this economic passion, not only because their defining “enterprise” was a new polity but also because that polity supposedly looked past local interests in favor an extended good. Only those with a wide and imprecise view of the public, they argued during the ratification debates, were ready to undertake “extensive and arduous enterprizes for public benefit.”¹²

Far from a selfish design, enterprise could now entail the sacrifice of private (that is, local) concerns in the interest of the national society. The ultimate and avowed goal of these efforts was a fundamentally different landscape in which people interacted and competed in new ways. Instead of a “scattered” landscape of independent households and interdependent neighbors, each working for their own priorities and keeping to their own notions of comfort and competence, this new ethos called for an expansive society knit together by a new motive force: emulation. Often defined in opposition to envy, emulation was celebrated throughout the early national age as a “generous spirit” that “fills us with admiration for the great actions of others, and strongly excites us to try to imitate and even to surpass them if we can win.” In its ideal form, emulation was a form of competition that did not sink or lower anyone while “exciting” everyone with a new image or standard of excellence. “Nothing has a better tendency to elevate the mind,” counseled one theorist in 1790, “than to place those images before it, which, tho’ above our reach at present, yet appear not too far distant to encourage our hope of soon attaining the same excellence.” Emulation bore a close kinship with enterprise in that both took issue with local understandings of public good and private well-being.¹³

In towns with turnpikes and dense village centers, one town booster enthused, we find “more civility and civilization” and “more emulation” than in the isolated hinterlands. No longer bound to local understandings of value and worth, the people of the new republic should welcome comparisons with other towns and communities. No longer so isolated as to ignore one another, but still distinct enough to seek supremacy, towns and states were now part of what one promoter called a “race of competition” for trade and refinement. Indeed, the general argument for turnpikes stressed the virtues and

energy of emulation between *communities*, not individuals or households. Ignoring or transcending the legal questions that continued to surround competition, the call to emulation emphasized the moral and social benefits that would arrive when well-made roads conquered isolation and envy.¹⁴

II. Rage Against Turnpikes

The residents who lived along the projected seams of the extended republic agreed that roads were essential for the health and wealth of “the people,” however defined. Town roads multiplied during the commercial upturn of the 1790s, as did the new post roads that carried U.S. mail. These operated under customary local arrangements, with freeholders deciding how and when and where to build the roads through public funds and labor. They were very clear on their motivation: they sought better access to market towns and seaports. Freeholders in more isolated areas—those we might consider less “market-oriented”—were perhaps the most insistent on this point, for they did not *want* access to codfish, blankets, and coffee so much as they *required* such contact.¹⁵

Why, then, did Dr. Nathaniel Ames diagnose a “rage against turnpikes” in Dedham, Massachusetts just weeks after news of the Norfolk & Bristol hit the newspapers? Why did residents from its second and third parishes (outside the village) rally on three separate occasions during 1802 to elect a state representative who would oppose it? Why did townsfolk from nearby towns draft “Remonstrances” against the Norfolk & Bristol and order their delegates to “use [their] influence against a turnpike road going through this town”? Why did at least twelve such remonstrances reach the Vermont General Assembly from the years 1800 to 1804, involving hundreds of obscure citizens and substantial portions of the adult male population? Why, in short, did a Connecticut newspaper in 1797 unhappily report that turnpike plans “immediately” raised “a great cry” from the state’s otherwise quiescent masses? Dr. Ames blamed the “stupid apathy” of townsfolk, but the case against enterprise was just as current and complicated as the logic behind them.¹⁶

The remonstrances from Vermont offer the most thorough look at anti-turnpike thinking and accompanying ideas about competition and social change. As in Dedham, popular unrest in this state grew out of newspaper reports about projected turnpikes, then

spread during work exchanges, tavern talk, or town and parish meetings. On May 28, 1803, for example, the *Brattelboro Reporter* announced that two gentlemen from the town of Rockingham sought a turnpike charter to replace the post road that residents had gradually built since 1795. From August to September of that year, more than 250 residents of Windham County signed petitions against the projected road. This represents about one quarter of all heads of families from five different towns—no small feat, especially in the absence of any appreciable support from either Federalists or Jeffersonians. Probably written by a selectman, deacon, or another local leader, these texts made two general claims against the so-called Rockingham Turnpike: first, that it was an unnecessary addition to the Post Road; and second, that it would harm the residents by levying a new toll along that crucial corridor from household to market.¹⁷

Feeling “deeply concerned for ourselves and Posterity in opposing Speculations and wanton projects,” nearly 100 residents of the town of Guilford condemned the Rockingham first and most furiously. The proposed franchise, they declared, was “totally repugnant to the Genius of a free County, an Inlightened People and the good oeconomy of a State.” The hardships they had endured while “Peopling this once disolate wilderness” added moral depth to their outrage. After “many weeks and months of painfull Labour and Toil gratuitously done for the Publick,” they had prevailed in making town roads “passable and Good.” The post road satisfied their needs. How, then, could the state now side with the “Insolent Toll-gatherer” and ask them to pay for something they had already built for free? What would become of their “plantations” and “Posterity” if toll gates blocked every path to market? They closed their petition with an angry challenge to “any gentleman of the Coach or the Chariot” who supported this enterprise: “we Invite them to assist us in making and repairing our highways freely; but not in borrowing Gates from Tunis or Algiers to Incumber them.” By linking the turnpike to dark places that evoked slavery and tyranny, the petitioners turned nationalist pride against an enterprise framed in national terms. They also salted their document with the resentments that apparently followed in carriages’ wake.¹⁸

In Putney, 56 men signed another remonstrance against the same turnpike. Mostly farmers and tradesmen of middling wealth, they lived in neighborhood clusters all over the town, except in its village center. The great majority had lived in town for at least a

few years, which means that they had probably worked on the post road that the turnpike would duplicate or replace. As “freeholders, citizens, and Inhabitants of Putney,” they knew that town roads were “passable in General.” Thus the proposed turnpike was “entirely unnecessary and burdensome to the People.” And who were “the People”? Anyone traveling through their town, perhaps, or even any person traveling anywhere in the republic. Yet their concerns clearly centered on their townsmen; the entire text, in fact, follows from their stated identity as citizens of *Putney*, not of Vermont or the United States. They were “almost unanimously” opposed to the road, with “very few” exceptions. Only in their conclusion did they widen their rhetorical stance:

We further conceive that such a grant would produce no beneficial effect to the public but only contribute to fill the Pockets of Individuals without any adequate public utility—that it would tend to promote a Scheme of an evident antirepublican tendency and only calculated to oppress the farmers mechanics and the middling and lower Classes of the Community merely to advance a plan of speculation dangerous to the freedom of the People and destructive of that Liberty and equality which are the fairest features in the Constitution of the State of Vermont.

The general imagery here should be familiar to historians of Revolutionary and Post-Revolutionary America: the producing many and the calculating few, the honest farmer and the scheming speculator, the liberty-loving people and their self-interested enemies.¹⁹

Both the conviction that turnpikes were unnecessary and the fear that they would be harmful issued from a customary and adaptable notion of the public, one that also laid claim to revolutionary ideology. If the national public prescribed by the Constitution was a roof without walls, this one was a church without a chapel. It grew from the daily work exchanges and social visits that obtained across the New England countryside. It was built on the practical alliances between households that were fraught with tension and built along the common denominator of need rather than potential. Every household *had* to reach market, reasoned the Guilford petitioners. Thus, only the households together—represented as the town—had the right and duty to build and maintain roads. Any other project was a “scheme” or “speculation,” an unjust imposition by the few upon the many. And since the post road already satisfied the trading and travel needs of the people, the turnpike promoters must be seeking something other than the public good. By giving “to Individuals” powers that rightly belonged to “the Publick,” their charter violated the golden rule of civic life and revealed the dangers of enterprise.²⁰

It should go without saying that the egalitarian spirit of this smaller and more fungible public relied on the subordination of women to men, children to parents, minors to masters. But it does not follow that the petitioners were hold-outs of a less commercial economy or pre-national polity. To the contrary, their vigorous defense of their public rested on their newfangled right as independent citizens to gain property by accessing the market on their terms. Among the “many great advantages of a Republican Government,” declared one group of Vermont farmers, was “the Equal Right of acquiring and possessing property under good and holsom Laws.” Therefore, townsfolk should reap the benefits of the town roads they had built themselves, profiting thereby from the “Spirit of Industry [that] pretty Generally prevails.” Turnpike tolls, on the other hand, would wind up in “the Pockets of Individuals,” or in “the purses of a few individuals”—in secret places, hidden places, private places.²¹

Occasionally, anti-turnpike rhetoric cited the “injuries” to existing properties and businesses that would come with new traffic. According to one group of townsmen, the Norfolk & Bristol turnpike would divert trade from their inns and taverns, “injuring the property of a numerous and industrious portion of the community.” Opposition to turnpikes seems to have been most intense when they ran near to existing roads, as opposed to offering an entirely new path through rugged country. In this way, turnpike opponents echoed common law restrictions on competition as a public nuisance and an invasion of property rights. Yet the dominant tenor of the anti-turnpike “rage” was not a defense of older, static view of property or harmony but a vivid sense of local autonomy. Country dwellers opposed turnpike “enterprises” because they imperiled access to markets with their new tolls and because they seized control of economic and social change from the freeholders living in the way. Such external impositions forced changes upon household that valued their own independence more than the vague promise of emulation.²²

Indeed, at the bottom of these disputes is a disagreement about human and social potential, with one side calling for great and “exciting” changes in the way people aspired and competed and the other heeding concerns about the endless capacity for envy and greed and ambition. Put simply, turnpike opponents did not believe the stated motives of the turnpike promoters, deciding instead that those with the means to erect toll roads

chiefly sought to enrich themselves. Put simply, they had no confidence that a more rapid flow of trade and traffic, brought on not by their manifest needs but by the “private” designs of outsiders, would eventuate in a more prosperous society for all. This suspicion of human motives and potential, deeply rooted and effectively sustained by Calvinist religion and household labor, cast competition in an unflattering light. In a zero-sum world of diminishing returns and relative scarcity, competition and discord were facts of life, not cause for deliberate cultivation and celebration.²³

III. Outcomes and Narratives

Due in part to this opposition, many turnpikes—including the Rockingham—never gained a charter to begin work. Others got their charter but never broke ground; still others had to add new toll exemptions or alter their routes to cope with local complaints or public regulations. In all but a handful of cases, they failed to bring in enough tolls to cover the initial expenses, much less return any profit. Instead of reverting to the public as their charters prescribed, they remained in private hands, waiting for pay-offs that never came. Three factors explain how turnpike companies became non-profits. First, and as noted, the state limited their profit-making potential, reasoning, it appears, that roads belonged in some fundamental sense to the people-at-large. Second, “shunpiking,” or the deliberate evasion of tolls by way of local detours, became something of a pastime or art form, practiced by wide swaths of the population who evidently saw the tolls as unfair contrivances upon the inalienable rights of passage. (One turnpike booster noted a “spirit of settled hostility” among the people.) Finally, the roads simply overestimated the volume of traffic they could tap—another symptom of a common mismatch in early national life between commercial aspirations and pre-industrial conditions.²⁴

But the turnpikes kept coming, paid for by town leaders and eager villagers who were willing to front expenses in order to promote travel, drive their carriages, and lay claim to an emergent ethos of public good. Ultimately, the economic culture of early national households formed more of a filter than a barrier against these efforts. “Your Petitioners...are deeply interested in haveing a passable Road to...carry the Produce of their Farms to Market,” began one 1802 petition. Because the population in that area was thin, town roads would be slow to appear. “Tho opposed to the Granting of Turnpikes

unless in Cases of real Necessity,” they saw no alternative “in this particular case.” Over 100 residents from eight towns signed this petition. In one remote hamlet, every one of its fifty polls signed on for a turnpike that was “presented on liberal and just principles.” It offered “public benefit” for the simple reason that it made a new path to market, one that would not have opened any other way. For wealthier farmers and village tradesmen, moreover, the distinction between town roads that led to market and turnpike roads that led more quickly to market fell apart. Twelve years after the quarrel over the Rockingham, thirty petitioners from Putney noted that “the usual way” of repairing roads had failed. The only remedy, then, was “the enterprise or liberality of the Public or Individuals,” in the form of a turnpike.²⁵

Whatever the climate of local opinion, turnpike promoters had a decisive edge in social and political capital over anxious locals. The same Connecticut paper that complained of the “great cry” that greeted turnpikes also assured its readers that “persevering industry and prosperous enterprise” would eventually overcome “interest, prejudice, and ignorance.” Having spent three sentences to describe the opposing view, this article then spent sixty-three refuting the locals. In response to the fierce opposition that greeted their venture in February 1802, the Norfolk & Bristol founders went straight to the top, so to speak. The state legislature had initially heeded Dedham’s pleas and denied the charter. But the proprietors knew other legislators personally and lobbied out-of-session for a change of heart. By March, they had their charter. By the following March, Dr. Ames happily reported the turnpike “fast making” through town, thanks to the work of several hundred laborers, who are all but invisible in existing sources. Not even the deaths of two of these laborers during construction could curb Ames’ enthusiasm for the turnpike he had funded.²⁶

Across New England, some 170 turnpikes were built by 1810. State legislatures and courts made the legal climate progressively friendlier to the companies. Massachusetts passed a general incorporation law for turnpikes in 1805, and New York followed with a more comprehensive bill in 1811. By then, the Empire State had surpassed all rivals in internal improvements. Its 1,000 miles of turnpike road in 1810 became 4,000 miles by 1820, tying the vast hinterlands of the Mohawk and Hudson Rivers into a commercial network anchored by Manhattan. Everywhere, these roads

reduced hauling rates by some 50%, doubling the distance that farmers could drive to market and profitably return home. Everywhere, they fostered and sometimes initiated the growth of village centers. And everywhere, they physically and figuratively opened the countryside itself to more metropolitan influences.²⁷

It is within this general context of economic growth that the ascending status of turnpike boosters and other “enterprising” figures in popular memory can be understood. Far from the architects of a market-driven world that answered only to self-interest, they positioned themselves as carriers of a new public spirit. Rather than speculative designs for personal profit, they styled their efforts as public enterprises that would benefit the nation more than themselves. Of course, their perspective on the landscape and its needs carried the most power in the village centers where they lived. “This is the age in which little compact villages begin to arise in all parts of the country,” wrote a Dedham villager in 1827 of the turn of the century. Farmers had long dominated Dedham, he noted with more than a dash of resentment. But “a different state of things is about to arise,” in which “the influence of the villagers will be felt.” From the village point of view, at the literal crossroads of the new turnpikes, enterprising men were a far-minded and public-spirited few, surrounded by the selfish and provincial many.²⁸

As village centers became, in the words of one traveler, “the principal and most noted” parts of each town, the culture of enterprise and emulation took root. Many of the same people and constituencies who bankrolled turnpikes also built and chartered village schools and academies, where a competitive regime of classroom emulation surpassed older forms of discipline and pedagogy. By encouraging students to compete for public prizes and classroom adulation, school reformers enthused, these classrooms could “excite emulation” among young country folk. By so contriving this competition to convince each student that he *or she* could gain “distinction,” emulative schools could motivate young people as never before. The key was to find that “laudable spirit” whereby those “who are eminent for their improvement will be models of imitation for others,” after which “a generous ardor to excel will animate every bosom.” By the 1810s, agricultural reformers brought these same techniques and slogans to farming exhibitions, where proficient husbandmen or their wives might take home “premiums” and other tokens of victory.²⁹

Of course there were those who objected to this emerging culture. As early as 1791, one philosopher noted the ill effects of classroom emulation. The desire for preeminence, once endorsed, gave rise to “jealousy and envy, under the specious semblance of emulation.” Comparing students in deliberate and unnecessary ways only led to discord. What could be worse for the republic than to sow resentment into the rising generation? Others found emulation un-Christian, in that it purposely inflated the pride of some at the expense of others. “A degree of emulation, among literary institutions, is proper,” noted on pastor in 1818. “But when it goes to pull down one, in order to build another up, it is wrong.” Above all, these concerns agreed that human beings could not morally or properly handle any more rivalry than they already encountered, that “exciting” passions was tantamount to encouraging selfishness. To incite competition was to contrive a milieu in which “the excellence in view is comparative,” noted one writer in the Boston-based *Christian Observer*. This in turn led to that “*one* passion, so mean and despicable in its nature...that its advocate cannot be found.” He continued: “this passion—I need not say I mean envy—is the offspring and the almost constant attendant of emulation.” By detecting the seeds of social breakdown and discord within new efforts to foster emulation, such warnings recalled the grounded skepticism of anti-turnpike arguments.³⁰

Yet by 1815—with 1789, another watershed year in the strange career of the market economy—the work of enterprise and emulation banished these concerns to the margins of public life. Devotees of internal improvement spoke for an extended republic re-dedicated to the conquest of space. They also found an increasingly supportive context in which to do so. Corporations became, not public entities funded by private means, but fictive individuals who used tax money to build bridges, canals, and then railroads. They found no limits to competition in their way, with more and more courts turning to the precocious view of the New York Supreme Court in 1805: “the public, whose advantage is always to be regarded, [must not] be deprived of the benefit which always attends competition and rivalry.” These new enterprises used the “spirit of improvement” or “spirit of enterprise” to elide the very tangible damage they did to those in the way.³¹

Of course the dominant vehicles for this message were the National Republican and then Whig parties, while the Jacksonian Democrats raised the interests and virtue of

the independent freeholder to new rhetorical heights. At his inaugural speech in 1825, John Quincy Adams caught hell when he opposed the mighty “spirit of improvement” to the paltry “will of our constituents.” Would American leaders be “palsied,” he infamously asked, by so petty a concern as popular opinion? Democratic leaders milked this candid and rhetorical question for all the political capital it was worth. As Charles Sellers has memorably shown, anger against big plans hatched in high places was the basic fuel for “the Democracy” throughout the Jacksonian age. By then, however, a political economy that favored capital investments and commercial developments over local preferences or public regulations had insulated itself from most of what the Democracy could throw at it.³²

As antiquarians began to record an Age of Homespun that had vanished faster than anyone had imagined, they struggled to explain those who had stood against the Age of Enterprise. “We wonder somewhat at such an unwise obstruction to a useful progress,” noted one author of his town’s objection to the Norfolk & Bristol. A nineteenth-century history of one town refers to “riotous proceedings, by no means credible to those concerned” that a turnpike had triggered in 1800. A history of Windham County, Connecticut admits that many residents had been “terrified” or “greatly agitated” by new turnpikes. But after much “grumbling and resistance,” the people inevitably embraced the new roads, which revealed “that spirit of emulation and business enterprise that sprang into life with the Nation.” When railroads first appeared in the 1830s, another author noted, “it is said to have been opposed by the people of Brimfield.” Apparently they worried that railroads would diminish the market value of their horses and produce. But, the author assures us, the tale of local opposition “must be apocryphal, for no record can be found to verify it.” The public-spirited had assumed the burden of progress; the locals could bear the burden of proof.³³

What do turnpikes tell us about the moral economy of early national New England? What does the broader career of enterprise and emulation suggest about competition in post-Revolutionary life and culture? At the very least, it lends credence to William Novak’s observation that “the invention of public space was contested terrain in the early nineteenth century,” and that the front-page story for most citizens might have

been the expansion and redefinition rather than the decline or rejection of public authority. After all, turnpikes in the 1790s and early 1800s worked under a legal and political regime that took for granted the potential “injury” of competition and the manifest right of the public to regulate enterprise. After all, turnpike boosters’ rhetoric about “public spirit” turned out to be more accurate than they hoped or expected. They did not make money from their enterprises, and came as close as any group of capitalists in U.S. history to providing major investments without claiming major profits.³⁴

But if the pace and direction of change in the political economy of competition remained unclear in the early national years, the overall transformation of its moral economy was much more sudden and explicit. In a relative flash after 1789, a range of figures called for a new “spirit” to oppose the presumably narrow and envious ways of a household-dominated countryside. What people truly needed, this new ethos claimed, was exposure to external and abstract forms of excellence and achievement. What they really needed was to be “excited” and “awoken” and otherwise lifted from their local *mentalités*. Turnpikes offered an early and vital means to effect these changes, for they not only quickened the flow of trade and traffic but also encouraged the growth of village centers where people forgot their local moorings and entered a more vibrant “society.”

In an 1845 speech on agricultural reform given by the pastor and college president Edward Hitchcock, we get a sense of the lasting legacies of the early national campaign to “excite” enterprise and emulation. A product of village centers and village schools, Hitchcock was an ardent Whig who told his western Massachusetts audience to ignore those demagogues who encouraged people to think “as individuals, or in limited districts.” Because of their “selfish passions” and “sordid love of gain,” these people could not see that “the prosperity of one is the prosperity of all.” “The more railroads we have the better,” he argued, “for they will only bring the market nearer.” Having achieved moral advantage over its local doubters before the advent of industrial production and its attendant upheavals, competition in the sense of perpetual exposure to new standards took firm hold of national culture. The figures behind “public enterprise” laid claim to public virtue, holding on to it long after their ventures served any public purpose. Those in the way were hard to remember and easy to disdain: fearful and envious, too narrow-minded to consider the good of the wider public. Even—or especially—in our own time,

these stigmas still adhere to those who wonder if change, imposed and defined from without, really is their friend.³⁵

Notes

1. Charles Hudson, *Abstract of the History of Hudson, Massachusetts* (Hudson, Mass., 1877), 37; [Hudson Historical Society], *Bicentennial Scrapbook* (Hudson, 1976), 18, available at Marlboro Public Library, Marlboro, Mass; M. Schoonmaker, *The History of Kingston, New York: From its First Settlement to the Year 1820* (New York, 1888); Ezra S. Stearns, *History of Plymouth, New Hampshire* (2 vols., Cambridge, Mass., 1906), I, 467.

2. Morton J. Horwitz, *The Transformation of American Law, 1780-1860* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977), 113. For roads as sites of cultural innovation and conflict, see Terry Bouton, "A Road Closed: Rural Insurgency in Post-Independence Pennsylvania," *Journal of American History*, 87 (December 2000), 855-887 (hereafter *JAH*) and Greg Laugero, "Infrastructures of Enlightenment: Road-Making, the Public Sphere, and the Emergence of Literature," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 29, 1 (Fall 1995), 45-67.

3. Eric Pawson, *Transport and Economy: The Turnpike Roads of Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London, 1977); William J. Novak, *The People's Welfare: Law and Regulation in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, 1996), 121-22.

4. William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (4 vols., London, 1765), IV, 144-45 and III, 211-12. On injurious competition, see Horwitz, *Transformation of American Law*, 42-43, 109-26.

5. Glen B. Skillin, ed., "In Search of Cahoone: The Diary of John Francis," *Old-Time New England* 60 (Fall 1969), 65; English traveler quoted in Allan S. Everest, "Early Roads and Taverns of the Champlain Valley," *Vermont History*, 37 (Autumn 1969), 249.

6. Donald B. Klein and John Majewski, "Economy, Community, and Law: The Turnpike Movement in New York, 1797-1845," *Law and Society Review*, 26 (1992), 469-512; Donald B. Klein, "The Voluntary Provision of Public Goods? The Turnpike Companies of Early America," *Economic Inquiry*, 28 (October 1990), 788-812; Pauline Maier, "The Debate over Incorporations: Massachusetts in the Early Republic," in Conrad E. Wright, ed., *Massachusetts and the New Nation* (Boston, 1992), 73-117.

7. Frederic J. Wood, *The Turnpikes of New England and Evolution of the Same Through England, Virginia, and Maryland* (Boston, 1919), 32-33; Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1840* (New York, 1991), 41-45.

8. Turnpike Corporations, Undated (1802?) and List of Subscribers in the Norfolk & Bristol Turnpike, August 9, 1802, Box 1, Norfolk & Bristol Turnpike Papers, Dedham Historical Society; names matched with Raeone Christensen Steuart, *Massachusetts 1800 Census Index: A-Z* (Bountiful, Utah, 2000) and Grantee Index, 1793-1889, Norfolk County Registry of Deeds, Dedham, Mass.

9. Robert Brand Hanson, ed., *The Diary of Dr. Nathaniel Ames of Dedham, Massachusetts, 1758-1822*, (2 vols., Camden, Me., 1998), II, 709n; Samuel Eliot Morrison, "Squire Ames and Doctor Ames," *New England Quarterly*, 1 (Jan. 1928), 5-31. For bi-partisan support for turnpikes, see John L. Brooke, *The Heart of the Commonwealth: Society and Political Culture in Worcester County, Massachusetts, 1731-1865* (New York, 1989), 279-80. For the Constitution as the death-knell of a more radical and democratic politics, especially in regards to economic policy, see Terry Bouton, *Taming Democracy: "The People," the Founders, and the Troubled Ending of*

the American Revolution (New York, 2007) and Woody Holton, "Did Democracy Cause the Recession that Led to the Constitution?" *JAH*, 92 (September 2005), 442-69.

10. "Roads and Turnpikes," *Connecticut Courant* (Hartford), May 29, 1797; "Turnpikes," *Columbian Minerva*, March 10, 1802. See also John Lauritz Larson, "A Bridge, a Dam, a River: Liberty and Innovation in the Early Republic," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 7 (Winter 1987), 365.

11. David B. Knight, "Identity and Territory: Geographical Perspectives on Nationalism and Regionalism," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 72 (December 1982), 514-31; Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (1969; Chapel Hill, 1998), 471-518.

12. Terrence Ball, ed., *The Federalist, with Letters of Brutus* (New York, 2003), 161 (Federalist #35), 36 (Federalist #9); Isaac Kramnick, "The 'Great National Discussion': The Discourse of Politics in 1787," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 45 (January 1988), 28 (hereafter *WMQ*) and Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 507; Ralph Lerner, "Commerce and Character: The Anglo-American as New Model Man," *WMQ*, 36 (January 1979), 3-26.

13. *Encyclopédie* quoted in Martin S. Staum, "The Enlightenment Transformed: The Institute Prize Contests," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 19 (Winter 1985-1986), 163; Enos Hitchcock, *Memoirs of the Bloomsgrave Family* (2 vols., Boston, 1790), I, 127.

14. William Cooper, *A Guide in the Wilderness; Or, the History of the First Settlements in the Western Counties of New York* (1810; Freeport, N.Y., 1970), 19. Rivalry between states was a common theme in the pro-turnpike writings of Elkanah Watson in New York. See Klein and Majewski, "Economy, Community, and Law," 475-77.

15. Petition, July 12, 1799, Petitions Folder, Miscellaneous Concord Record, 1797-1907, New Hampshire State Archives; F. Harley Huddleston, "An Analysis and Description of the Early Road System of Deerfield, Massachusetts," (Research Paper, Historic Deerfield, 1971); Edith De Wolfe et als., eds., *The History of Putney, Vermont, 1753-1953* (Putney, Vt., 1953), 77-79.

16. Hanson, ed., *Diary of Dr. Nathaniel Ames*, II, 760, 765, 772; Willard De Lue, *The Story of Walpole, 1724-1924* (Norwood, Mass., 1925), 222; November 1802 Meeting, Dedham Town Records, 1793-1818, Dedham Clerk's Office, Dedham, Mass; Roxbury Remonstrance, 1802 (?), Box 1, Norfolk & Bristol Papers, Dedham Historical Society; "Roads and Turnpikes," *Connecticut Courant* (Hartford), May 7, 1797. See also Steven Robert Davis, "From Ploughshares to Spindles: Dedham, Massachusetts, 1790-1830," (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1974), 160-93 and Aaron R. Poplack, "'Road Rage': The Turnpike Debate in Dedham, Massachusetts, 1801-1803," (Honor's thesis, Colby College, 2005), 48-49.

17. Petition and Remonstrance of the Town of Shaftesbury, September 27, 1803, Volume 80, p. 12, Vermont State Archives (hereafter VSA); Remonstrance of Samuel Dwight and Others...October 18, 1804, Volume 80, p. 47, VSA. For resistance to the Rockingham, I used population figures from General List of the State of Vermont, 1800, Box B1, VSA, and matched them with the number of signatories on the five Remonstrances. I arrived at precise figures for Putney (56/228, or 24.6%), Guilford (96/312, or 30.8%), Danby (44/191, or 23%), and Marlborough (45/165, or 27.3%). The town of Brattleboro also submitted a Remonstrance to the state government, but included no list of names.

18. Remonstrance Against a Turnpike Road through Windham County, [Guilford], August 12, 1803, volume 80, p. 6, VSA.

19. Inhabitants of Putney Remonstrance [Against Turnpike from Rockingham to Massachusetts Line], Sept. 2, 1803, VSA. It is very difficult to gain a precise read on the wealth of Putney's petitioners, the Hardings included, because no tax list from the town exists for 1803. In fact, the most relevant list I found was the Putney Land Return of 1793. Obviously, the wealth of the petitioners would have changed over the span of a decade. Nonetheless, when compared with census data and with local maps, this list does provide a rough understanding of the petitioners. Of the 1803 petitioners who were taxpayers in 1793 (N=21), the average land holding was 92 acres; of those taxpayers who were not later petitioners (N=184), the average was 73 acres. But two wealthy petitioners—one with 222 acres, another with 285—distort the sample. Removing them, the average land holding of future petitioners was 79—average. Indeed, 11 of the men had less than average real estate. Many of the 56 who did not show up on the 1793 tax list were probably younger sons of Putney residents. A full 75% (42/56) were Heads of Families in Putney by 1800, and another 18% (10/56) probably had family roots in town by that date. Thus, only 7% (4/56) appear to have been newcomers when they protested the turnpike in 1803.

20. Petition and Remonstrance of the Town of Shaftesbury, Sept. 27, 1803, VSA; Remonstrance Against a Turnpike Road through Windham County, [Guilford], August 12, 1803, volume 80, p. 6, VSA; Petition and Remonstrance of the Town of Shaftesbury, Sept. 27, 1803, VSA.

21. Petition of Sundry Inhabitants of Rockingham, October 18, 1804, volume 80, p. 53, VSA; Inhabitants of Putney Remonstrance ("Pockets"); Remonstrance against the Petitions of Jason Duncan and Others, for a Turnpike, Sept. 5, 1803, volume 80, page 7, *ibid* ("purses"), VSA.

22. De Lue, *Story of Walpole*, 222. S

23. Daniel Vickers, "Competency and Competition: Economic Culture in Early America," *WMQ*, 47 (January 1990), 3-29; James A. Henretta, "Families and Farms: *Mentalité* in Pre-Industrial America," *WMQ*, 35 (January 1978), 3-32.

24. Klein and Majewski, "Economy, Community, and Law," 496 (quote), 505-6; P.E. Taylor, "The Turnpike Era in New England," (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1934), 205-65.
25. Remonstrance of [Salisbury], January 23, 1804, volume 80, p. 28, VSA and Petition for a Turnpike Road from Danby through Harwich to Dorset, Oct. 19, 1802, volume 80, p. 5, VSA, in which about eighty townsmen asked for a turnpike because the land between them and a market was too "thinly Settled." This was about double the number of their townsmen who signed the remonstrance against the Rockingham Turnpike the next year.
26. "Roads and Turnpikes," *Connecticut Courant* (Hartford), May 7, 1797; Poplack, "Road Rage," 49, 50-51 ("unceasing" and town warrant quotes); Hanson, ed., *Diary of Nathaniel Ames*, II, 783.
27. Taylor, "The Turnpike Era in New England," 205-265; Sellers, *The Market Revolution*, 41-45; Richard L. Bushman, "Opening the American Countryside" in James Henretta, Michael Kammen, and Stanley Katz, eds., *The Transformation of Early American History: Society, Authority, and Ideology* (New York, 1991), 239-56.
28. Erastus Worthington, *The History of Dedham, From the Beginning of its Settlement...to May 1827* (Boston, 1827), 83.
29. Clark Brown, "A Topographical Description of Catskill, in the State of New York," *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, First Series, IX (Boston, 1804), 116; Alden Bradford, *An Address Delivered at the Opening of the Academy, in Wiscasset, Maine, November 16, 1807* (Wiscasset, Me., 1808), 10-11; Mark Anthony Mastromarino, "Fair Visions: Elkanah Watson (1758-1842) and the Modern American Agricultural Fair," (Ph.D. dissertation, College of William and Mary, 2002). I discuss academies and the controversies they fostered in J.M. Opal, "Exciting Emulation: Academies and the Transformation of the Rural North, 1780s-1820s," *JAH*, 91 (September 2004), 445-70.
30. Robert Coram, *Political Inquiries: to Which is Added, a Plan for the General Establishment of Schools throughout the United States* (Wilmington, 1791), 103, 99-102; Alfred Ely, *A Sermon Delivered at Monson Academy* (Hartford, Conn., 1818), 13; "On Ambition as a Motive in Education," *Christian Observer*, 17 (August 1818), 517-19.
31. New York Supreme Court quoted in Horwitz, *Transformation of American Law*, 43.
32. See among many Sellers, *Market Revolution*, 41-45 and Harry Watson, *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America* (New York, 1990), 83-84. For a later protest against turnpikes: "Petitions Against the Bristol to Middlebury Turnpike, 1848," Folder 1, Manuscript Collections, Henry Sheldon Museum of Vermont History, Middlebury, Vermont.

33. Augustus A. Gould, *The History of New Ipswich, from its First Grant in 1786 to the Present Time* (Boston, 1852), 126-27; Ellen D. Larned, *History of Windham County, Connecticut*, 2 vols. (Worcester, Mass., 1874), II, 286, 309, 328; Charles M. Hyde, *Historical Celebration of the Town of Brimfield, Hampden County, Massachusetts, with the Historical Address of Rev. Charles M. Hyde* (Springfield, Mass., 1879), 68. For an example of protest in the towns cited by Larned, see, "Petition by Inhabitants of Plainfield, Canterbury, and Preston, [Oct. 1796]," Connecticut Archives: Travel, Highways, Ferries, Bridges, and Taverns, 2nd Series, 1737-1820 (17 vols., Hartford, 1928), VII, 55-56, CSL.

34. Novak, *People's Welfare*, 117 and 121-31.

35. Edward Hitchcock, *The Mutual Dependence Between Agriculture and Other Pursuits: An Address Delivered Before the Agricultural Societies of Hampshire and Hampden Counties in Massachusetts* (Boston, 1846), 12, 28-30, 34-35.