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LOCAL SPECULATOR AS CONFIDENCE MAN: MUMFORD ELDRED, JR., AND THE MICHIGAN LAND RUSH

Susan E. Gray

In Herman Melville's *The Confidence Man*, a stranger offers a collegian an opportunity to speculate in the New Jerusalem,

the new and thriving city, so called in northern Minnesota. It was originally founded by certain fugitive Mormons. Hence the name. It stands on the Mississippi. Here, here is the map . . . There—there, you see are the public buildings—here the landing—there the park—yonder the botanic gardens—and this, this little dot here, is a perpetual fountain, you understand. You observe there are twenty asterisks. These are for the lyceums. They have lignum vitae rostrums.

But the collegian turns the stranger down flat—"Hardly think I should read my title clear, as the law students say"—and the stranger departs, commending the collegian for his "prudence," but insisting that the New Jerusalem is "bona fide."¹

Unlike the collegian, many nineteenth-century Americans would not have spurned an opportunity to buy into the New Jerusalem,

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¹ Herman Melville, *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade* (1857; rep., New York 1989), 65-66.

which is why the cloak of land speculator is one of the guises that Melville's confidence man wears. As a result, historians have long been concerned with the role of land speculation, particularly in the public domain, in the development of the nineteenth-century American economy. Critical of Turner's postulate about the availability of free land on the frontier and its central role in the creation of a democratic culture, such scholars as Paul Wallace Gates worked, in the 1930s and 1940s, to show that the land was not free, and that neither the method of its alienation, nor the consequences of its disposal were democratic. Who benefited from federal land? Certainly not the bona-fide settler, small purchaser, and would-be founder of a new farm in the wilderness, Gates contended. The disposal of federal lands was largely the work of speculators.²

These ubiquitous creatures, however, proved as hard to pin down as Melville's confidence man. As Gates pointed out, "the term 'land speculator' meant different things to different people in different sections." Nevertheless, Gates recognized basic types of speculators. Gates invoked the frontiersman's distinction between the resident speculator, whom he tolerated, and the absentee, whom he hated for failing to sell quickly or on credit. Greed motivated both the resident and absentee speculator. Greed blinded the "settler speculator" to the consequences of his actions: the delayed development of his community. In Gates's analysis of speculation during the land boom of the 1830s, the settler speculator was in effect suckered by the eastern absentee and his western accomplice, whose operations resulted in tenancy, poor land use, and crippling taxes. But if the settler speculator was duped, so was the absentee—he would have made more money if he had not made western development so inefficient.³

² For a thorough review of the literature on federal land speculation, see Robert P. Swierenga, "Land Speculation and Its Impact on American Economic Growth and Welfare: A Historiographical Review," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 8 (July 1977), 283-302. For Gates, see in particular his "The Role of the Land Speculator in Western Development," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 66 (July 1942), 314-333; "The Disposal of the Public Domain in Illinois, 1848-1856," *Journal of Economic and Business History*, 3 (Feb. 1931), 216-240; and "Land Policy and Tenancy in the Prairie Counties of Indiana," *Indiana Magazine of History*, 35 (Mar. 1939), 1-26.

³ Gates, "Role of the Land Speculator," 315-317, 327-333. The essay cited is one of Gates's fullest discussions of the land speculator as a frontier type. The key word in the title is "speculator," not "speculation," because the essay explicitly links the unsavory motivation of the historical actor to the deleterious effects of his

In the late 1950s and 1960s, such scholars as Allan and Margaret Beattie Bogue and Robert Swierenga found untenable the economic logic of Gates's contentions. The revised speculator bore little resemblance to the old confidence man that Gates had decried. To the Bogues, following the lead of mid- and late-nineteenth-century newspapers, a speculator was "an individual who purchased large acreages of unimproved land, intending to sell after land values had risen sufficiently to make their sale remunerative and who was not interested in working land as a personal enterprise or building up a longterm tenant estate." "The speculator," the Bogues argued, "is to be considered a type of investor." He was also, therefore, an absentee. As Swierenga discovered in his studies of large- (over 1000 acres) and smaller-scale (600-999 acres) government land buyers, the distinction between resident and nonresident buyers was moot, because the former did not purchase in their home counties. Applying the Bogues' formula for calculating an annual rate of return on investments in federal land, moreover, Swierenga established that speculation was good business. Returns compared favorably with alternate mid-nineteenth-century investments. In addressing the effect of speculation on western development, both Swierenga and the Bogues emphasized the positive role of the large-scale investor as a middleman between the credit-starved settler and the federal government.⁴

Gates's critics, in other words, shifted inquiry into the alienation of the public domain away from the morality of the speculator and toward the effects of speculation. For Gates, as a Progressive historian, the essential point was that the speculator was greedy, and behavior motivated by greed was necessarily harmful. By contrast, for the revisionists, who were rooted in social science methodology, motivation was revealed only through behavior and, unlike morality,

activities. The intent here is to examine Gates's portrayal of speculators as individuals, not to deemphasize his longstanding concern with the consequences for national development of a public land policy awkwardly designed both to encourage bona-fide settlers and to raise revenues. See Gates, *The Farmer's Age: Agriculture, 1815-1860* (New York 1960), 51-98, esp. 66-69.

⁴ Allan G. Bogue and Margaret Beattie Bogue, "'Profits' and the Frontier Land Speculator," *Journal of Economic History*, 17 (Mar. 1957), 1-24; Robert P. Swierenga, "Land Speculator 'Profits' Reconsidered: Central Iowa as a Test Case," *ibid.*, 26 (Mar. 1966), 1-28; Swierenga, *Pioneers and Profits: Land Speculation on the Iowa Frontier* (Ames, Iowa 1968); and Swierenga, "The Equity Effects of Public Land Speculation in Iowa: Large versus Small Speculators," *Journal of Economic History*, 34 (Dec. 1974), 1008-1020.

behavior could be empirically measured. Such premises encouraged the revisionists to focus on the equity and efficiency effects of large-scale land speculation. They did not ignore the old distinctions between resident and absentee buyers, settler speculators and bona-fide settlers. As Bogue explained in his essay on the Iowa claim clubs, both absentee and resident buyers speculated in government land.⁵ But because absentee and resident buyers behaved similarly, the revisionists tended to slight contemporary perceptions of these distinctions upon which Gates had, in part, founded his indictment.

Through a close study of government land buying by residents of three Michigan townships during the land rush of the 1830s, this essay reexamines the analytical categories of speculators. It also reopens the issue of the morality of the speculator, but as judged by his fellow settlers, not the historian. The point of departure is not how much land the settler bought, but what he ultimately did with it. The size of a resident buyer's purchase did not directly reflect his intent. The buyer, for example, who acquired more land than he "needed"—more than the quarter section deemed ideal for mixed farming—sometimes sold his "surplus" for cash to reinvest in his farmstead. Sometimes he used his additional land to establish his sons. The reverse was also true. Modest acquisitions did not always lead to the creation of farmsteads in the township of purchase. Several factors, over which the buyer did not always have control, affected how he disposed of his purchase: when and where he bought, whether he was farming cooperatively with other members of his family, and how well-off he was when he bought—his position in the life-cycle of capital accumulation. A healthy plurality of resident government land buyers in this study used the market in federal lands as a temporary investment, whatever their career trajectories.

The issue here is this: if much of the behavior of the resident buyers of government land conformed to Douglass North's definition of speculation as "buy[ing] an asset with a resale or rental value" and "guessing about the future value of that asset," how should these buyers be characterized?⁶ What distinctions can usefully be made among them? There are two ways to answer this question, both employed in this essay. One is to apply to resident buyers standards

⁵ Allan G. Bogue, "The Iowa Claim Clubs: Symbol and Substance," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 45 (Sept. 1958), 231-253.

⁶ Douglass C. North, *Growth and Welfare in the American Past: A New Economic History* (2nd ed., Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1974), 125.

of efficiency—effects on local development—and equity—effects on access to land—that revisionist scholars have erected to evaluate large-scale absentee speculators.

The other approach is cultural, and it returns us, at least metaphorically, to the shadowy world of Melville's *Confidence Man* in which no one is an innocent purchaser. The collegian who sneeringly rejects the New Jerusalem snaps up stock in the Black Rapids Coal Company because, he says to the stranger, "I like prosperous fellows . . . that talk comfortably and prosperously, like you. Such fellows are generally honest." This study argues that the settlers' views of speculators were not simple, that their perceptions, like the collegian's of the stranger, depended upon circumstance, and that their judgments were founded on a belief in a rough justice among sharp traders. The narrative traces the career of one speculator, Mumford Eldred, Jr.—government land buyer *extraordinaire*, premier merchant and leading citizen of Richland Township, and ultimately confidence man. Eldred's purchases offer a standard by which to evaluate patterns of federal land buying in the three townships. His story allows us to explore the cultural meaning of local speculation in government lands in antebellum America.⁷

A brief description of the effect of the land rush on the three townships is first in order. The decade of the 1830s encompassed one of the most intense periods of federal land alienation in American history. Over fifty-three million acres of the public domain between the Appalachians and the Mississippi River passed into private hands between 1831 and 1837. A locus of the land rush was the southern peninsula of Michigan, where purchases in 1836, the peak of the boom, accounted for nearly 15 percent of all federal land sold that year. The heart of the land rush in Michigan was the Kalamazoo Land District, the area south of the baseline and west of the principal meridian, where purchases in 1836 totaled over 6 percent of all federal land sold that year. Kalamazoo County, where Richland, Climax, and Alamo are located, was the center of the Kalamazoo Land District; the land office for the district was in Bronson, later Kalamazoo, the county seat.⁸

⁷ Melville, *The Confidence Man*, 64; North, *Growth and Welfare*, 125.

⁸ On the land rush in Michigan, see Willis F. Dunbar, *Michigan: A History of the Wolverine State* (Grand Rapids, Mich. 1965), 321-347; on the land rush generally, see Malcolm J. Rohrbaugh, *The Land Office Business: The Settlement and Administration of American Public Lands, 1789-1837* (New York 1968), 271-294. For Kalamazoo Land

The Kalamazoo Land District attracted such attention in the 1830s in large part because it encompassed most of Michigan's small, highly fertile prairies, the northeastern extensions of the great prairie triangle centered in western Illinois and eastern Iowa. Richland contained Gull, a crescent-shaped prairie that covered over two fifths of the township. Most of the rest of its land was at least marginal, well suited to the grain-based, mixed agriculture that the settlers practiced. Climax Township had a much smaller prairie of the same name and good oak opening land, but its southern half was swamp. Alamo had no prairie, was virtually without prime land, and was sliced in half by parallel bands of wet and dry sand.⁹

To understand the dynamics of government land buying in Richland, Climax, and Alamo, one must keep in mind several basic facts. First, the land was surveyed in the 1820s, before the arrival of the settlers. Second, although the earliest settlers in Kalamazoo County arrived in 1828, three years before the opening of the land office in 1831, preemption was not a factor in the alienation of Richland, Climax, and Alamo. Only a few families found their way to Gull Prairie in the spring and summer of 1830. Settlers first came to Climax Township in 1831, and not in any numbers until 1834. Alamo's first settlers arrived in 1835. For the most part, then, settlement and alienation of federal land coincided, which probably explains the lack of claim club activity in the townships. Finally, the temporal pattern of federal land alienation in the townships underscores the old truism that the best land sold first, to which should be added in this instance a corollary: and the resident buyers got it. Large-scale absentee buying in the townships was confined to the peak years of the boom after 1834. In Richland and in Climax, the majority of township lands was in resident hands by 1835. By contrast, purchases by Alamo residents accounted for less than 14 percent of all federal land alienated in the township before 1840.¹⁰

District sales, see "The Report of the Commissioner of the General Land Office, in Answer to the Resolution of the Senate of 22d January, 1847," *Senate Executive Documents*, 30th Cong., 1st sess., no. 41, 156-165, 251-253.

⁹ Albert F. Butler, "Rediscovering Michigan's Prairies," *Michigan History*, 31 (Sept. 1947), 267-286; *ibid.*, 32 (Mar. 1948), 15-36; *ibid.*, 33 (June, Sept. 1949), 117-130, 220-231. For a contemporary account, see James H. Lanman, *History of Michigan, Civil and Topographical in Compendious Form: With a View of the Surrounding Lakes* (New York 1839), 251-253. On soil types in the three townships, see Susan Elizabeth Gray, "Family, Land, and Credit: Yankee Communities on the Michigan Frontier, 1830-1860" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago 1985), 366-372.

¹⁰ Gray, "Family, Land, and Credit," 354.

What assets Mumford Eldred possessed when he came to Richland in 1830 are unknown.¹¹ No more than twenty years old, he had had little opportunity to accumulate capital of his own.¹² What little is known of his family in New York state suggests that he was unlikely to have received financial support from his father for his emigration. Mumford Junior was his father's second son by his first wife, and Mumford Senior had also produced five children by his second spouse. Eldred did have access to capital, probably from his uncle Caleb of Climax Township. Uncle and nephew arrived together in Kalamazoo County as the advance guard of a wholesale removal of Eldreds to Michigan. Caleb's family joined him on Climax prairie, as did his brother, Daniel, and his family, whom Caleb had earlier followed from Pownal, Vermont, to Laurens, New York. Mumford Senior and his second family followed Mumford Junior to Richland. Economic associations among the branches of the Eldred clan were longstanding: Caleb and Mumford Senior had once run a retail meat business in Green County, New York.¹³

Mumford Junior's first known effort to raise capital on the frontier—a cattle drive to southern Indiana in the spring of 1831—also indicates the backing of his uncle Caleb. Mumford Junior himself was unlikely to have financed the drive. That he led it shows that he knew his backers well, and had experience as a drover. Caleb had secured his own capital start by droving, and had for a time returned to the cattle trade before moving west. Caleb may have employed his nephew as a drover in New York state and continued the arrangement in Michigan. Mumford Junior may have been

¹¹ Several comments about the narrative are in order. First, Eldred's transactions, except for one involving a mortgage, were with warranty deeds, and show no evidence of the "time entry system." Second, unless otherwise noted, the primary sources for this essay are Abstracts of Deeds for Richland, Climax, and Alamo Townships, 1830-1860, at the Title, Bond & Mortgage Company in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and Assessment Rolls for Richland (1837-1839, 1844-1860), Climax (1844-1860), and Alamo (1845-1860) townships in the Archives and Regional History Collections at Western Michigan University, also in Kalamazoo. Partial tax rolls for Climax and Alamo townships for 1838 are reprinted in Samuel W. Durant, *The History of Kalamazoo County, Michigan* (Philadelphia 1880).

¹² Eldred's date of birth is unknown. The 1840 census lists him as between twenty and thirty years of age.

¹³ Eldred family sources include Durant, *History of Kalamazoo County*, 345-348; *The History of Allegan and Barry Counties, Michigan, with Illustrations and Biographical Sketches of Their Prominent Men and Pioneers* (Philadelphia 1880), 270-271; and Duane Hamilton Hurd, *History of Otsego County, New York, with Illustrations and Biographical Sketches of Its Prominent Men and Pioneers* (Philadelphia 1880), 26, 167-171, 220.

accompanied on the Indiana trip by Caleb's son, Stephen, who worked as a drover in the 1830s to finance his farm in Climax Township.

Eldred may also have obtained financing for the drive from Hazel Hoag, a Quaker from Vermont.¹⁴ The impetus for the drive was Eldred's impending marriage to Hoag's daughter, Phoebe. Eldred left for Indiana following the posting of the banns; the ceremony was performed soon after his return. In June, Eldred entered the northeast quarter of section 9, township 4 north—an apparent conversion of the proceeds from his cattle drive into real estate. The tract abutted a parcel of roughly 180 acres owned by his new father-in-law.

At the government minimum of \$1.25 per acre, Eldred paid \$200 for his property. He had also to contend with the costs of setting up a household and farmstead. Eldred financed at least some of these expenses by borrowing, probably from Hazel Hoag, but apparently did not do so by direct loan. In January 1832, Hoag deeded to Eldred a little over seventy acres. In December, Eldred sold 100 acres of his original claim to Richland settler William Y. Gilkey. Since the land involved was of a piece, Eldred's intent was not to consolidate his farm, but to restructure his indebtedness. He undoubtedly used the return from the sale to Gilkey to repay his father-in-law. The next year, Eldred again bought more land than he could afford and quickly sold part of it to pay for the rest. In June, he made two forty-acre entries of federal land—one adjacent to his main holding, and another that he sold a little over three months later to John W. Barton, who was probably an absentee. Thus, by borrowing from his uncle and from his father-in-law, Eldred took advantage of the low price of government land. By the end of 1833, he owned 172 acres of prime land, and appeared established as a farmer.

In October 1834, however, Eldred sold out to James Kirkland. In the hands of Kirkland's sons, Hugh and Thomas, the property became the basis of one of the largest, most prosperous farms in Richland.¹⁵ Days before this sale, moreover, Eldred bought from

¹⁴ James M. Thomas, *Kalamazoo County Directory with a History of the County from Its Earliest Settlement* (Kalamazoo 1869), 190.

¹⁵ Kirkland family sources include the *Portrait and Biographical Record of Kalamazoo, Allegan, and Van Buren Counties, Michigan* (Chicago 1892), 970, 973; and Henry Bishop, "Report of Memorial Committee: Kalamazoo County," *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society Collection [MPHSC]* (28 vols., Lansing 1874-1886), XXIX, 447.

Benjamin Cummings forty acres in section 19. The purchase made it absolutely clear that Eldred was not a farmer. Cummings, the inventor of a circular saw, had arrived in Richland with his family in 1831. In 1833, he had built a sawmill at the junction of Spring Brook and one of its feeder streams in section 19 and founded the village of Bridgewater. Eldred acquired mill, timberland, and village plat from Cummings. The property was attractive primarily because the mill was ahead of its competition. It was probably the first of two mills constructed in Richland in the 1830s. Another was built in 1833 in neighboring Ross Township. Eldred's interest in section 19 was purely extractive, as what little is known of Bridgewater indicates. The village, explains a Kalamazoo County history, "soon reached its maturity, and . . . when the timber was gone that furnished the sawmill it was abandoned."¹⁶

The mill at Spring Brook was the first of three major investments that Eldred made between his sale to Kirkland and the end of 1835. The second occurred early in 1835 when he and John D. Batchelder opened the first general store in Richland. The third was Eldred's acquisition of nearly 200 acres of farmland. These investments, a quantum leap in the scale and diversity of Eldred's interests, were linked by what had become a distinct, commercial program: maximization of short-term capital gains by rolling over property bought on margin with borrowed capital. A full picture of Eldred's maneuvers requires a close examination of each investment. It is easiest to begin with his acquisitions in land, the backbone of the operation.

In October 1835, Eldred bought 120 acres of federal land. The next month, Hazel Hoag deeded to him nearly eighty acres, and left the township. Eldred did not acquire these parcels unassisted. The proceeds from the Kirkland sale could not have been large enough to finance a mill, a store, and land. The evidence suggests that Mumford Senior was Eldred's backer. The father brought his family to Richland about the time that his son acquired the Cummings sawmill. He remained in the township until 1836, when he relocated on federal land in adjacent Allegan County. While in Richland, Mumford Senior bought no land, and no record has been found of any other investment. The obvious conclusion is that Mumford Senior helped finance his son's investments and used the return to

¹⁶ Durant, *History of Kalamazoo County*, 459-461.

establish himself in Allegan. Mumford Junior sold the land he acquired in 1835 just before his father left Richland.

The buyer for Eldred's 200 acres was Hezekiah Doolittle. Hezekiah was probably either the son or brother of Frederick Doolittle, who brought his family from Connecticut to Richland in 1836.¹⁷ Hezekiah's name appears on the deed, but the farm was Frederick's. Eldred's dealings with the Doolittles help to reveal the larger pattern of his investments. The Doolittle family struggled in Richland. Frederick's health failed. Until his death in the late 1840s, he appeared on the township tax rolls under the guardianship of his sons. Furthermore, the Doolittles acquired Eldred's property with a \$500 encumbrance that they were unable to pay. When Eldred threatened foreclosure, Frederick's sons, Benjamin F. and William, left home for wage work, while a younger son and daughter ran the farm. The family's finances were probably righted by the mid-1840s because both William and Benjamin began to pay township taxes as residents.

How much of the Doolittles' story was simply hard luck is impossible to tell. What is clear is that Eldred neither allowed the family much time to pay nor refinanced the debt. Buying and selling on margin, Eldred was hard up for cash, and he probably thought he could resell the farm if the Doolittles defaulted. In 1836, the peak year of the land boom, the sale to Doolittle accounted for less than half of the property that passed as paper through Eldred's fingers. In January, he bought forty acres of federal land that he sold the next month to Ruth, wife of H.P. Hoyt. Like Eldred's sales to the Kirklands and the Doolittles, this transaction was the start of another family farmstead; Hoyt acquired another eighty acres in the 1840s to complete the holding. Eldred also bought in January 200 acres in section 19 that he sold in April. Thus, in eight months he turned over 480 acres of land.

Eldred's dealings with the Doolittles and the Hoyts resembled his earlier transactions: purchases made at the government standard and rapidly resold to settlers. But whereas the cash such maneuvers generated had once been an end in itself, he now needed it to subsidize his other investments. The 200 acres that Eldred bought in section 19 extended his water rights on Spring Brook and increased his supply of timberland. Presumably, his original tract had been logged off, and he was eager to prevent the establishment of a rival

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 485; *MPHSC*, XVI, 221.

mill. The purchase strained Eldred's resources. His sale in April 1836 of his entire holding in section 19, including the mill, to Hosea B. Huston, was a forced retrenchment.

That Huston was one of the leading men of commerce in Kalamazoo County demonstrates how far Eldred had come in his quest for capital. Huston was the principal merchant of Kalamazoo village and had investments in land throughout the county.¹⁸ He was probably also the source of capital behind Eldred's and Batcheldor's store because he owned the license.¹⁹ Huston's and Eldred's known dealings were as follows: Huston's license was dated August 1835. He was, therefore, involved very early in the store's finances. Eldred's sale of the mill property in May 1836 was followed in November by the dissolution of his partnership with Batcheldor. In June 1837, the *Kalamazoo Gazette* printed a notice that Eldred would carry on the store alone.²⁰ Eldred apparently sold the mill property to satisfy the debt on the store and used the renewal of credit through Huston to remove Batcheldor from the partnership. Eldred then repurchased from Huston a quarter interest in the mill property in March 1837. Batcheldor, by contrast, seems to have lacked an alternate source of capital. His land transactions in Richland, for example, were limited to a forty-acre parcel bought in 1837 and resold in 1839.

Eldred's tax records for 1837 show his assumption of the costs of running the store by himself. He was assessed twice: first, for \$1035 personalty, including his share of goods from the store; then, for \$3040 in personalty and \$500 in buildings. Batcheldor's single assessment charged him with \$900 personalty. How long Huston remained a silent partner in the store is unknown, but Eldred certainly had control by 1839 because he owned the license.²¹ In any

¹⁸ On Hosea B. Huston, see Jesse Turner, "Reminiscences of Kalamazoo," *MPHSC*, XVIII, 570, 583; George Torrey, "Kalamazoo County," *ibid.*, I, 207; and E. Lakin Brown, "Autobiographical Notes," *ibid.*, XXX, 446, *passim*.

¹⁹ "List of the names of persons to whom licenses were issued the first quarter of the year," Bronson, Kalamazoo County, Mar. 1, 1836, Statements of Taxes Collected (State Archives Unit, Michigan History Division, Lansing). The record lists in Richland the firms of S. Mills & Co., Gray & Torrey, and Hosea B. Huston. The first was the dry goods and tailor shop of Sylvester and Willard Mills. Of Gray and Torrey, both Richland men, nothing else is known. Huston thus owned the license on Eldred's and Batcheldor's store.

²⁰ *Kalamazoo Gazette*, Apr. 15, June 2, 1837.

²¹ Richland Township Assessment Roll for 1837 (Archives and Regional History Collections); for the special tax list, see Statements of Taxes Collected.

event, Eldred's lock and stock takeover depleted his cash reserve, and he plunged again into the township land market.

By 1837, however, the Richland land market was very different from what it had been in 1831. Most federal land in the township had been sold, and most buyers for what remained were absentees. One of the few Richland residents to buy federal land in the township in the late 1830s, Mumford Eldred, Jr., adjusted his dealings to these changes. Formerly, he had concentrated on acquiring superior farmland for resale to settlers. Except for his mill property and a forty-acre parcel sold in 1833, his transactions had involved prairie or oak opening land and led to the creation of family farmsteads. Now, Eldred bought land wherever and sold to whomever he could. In January 1837, he bought forty-two acres of federal land in section 12, 160 in section 35, and thirty acres from Deacon Simeon Mills in section 23. In March, he repurchased the interest in his mill property and entered eighty acres of federal land in section 25. In July, he acquired a quarter section of school land in section 22. Eldred's total purchases for the year: 532 acres.

He began to sell in May. Willard Butterfield bought the parcel in section 25; Stephen Losey, forty acres of school land. Butterfield was licensed to sell "spiritous liquors" in Gull Corners and, like Eldred, was speculating in township land. Butterfield bought and sold 320 acres of land between 1836 and 1838. Stephen Losey was an absentee, as were J.H. Houghton, C.C. Boardman, and C. Noble, who in July bought the properties in sections 12 and 23. In August, Eldred sold his mill share to Frederick Booher, a county land dealer.²²

In 1838, Eldred pulled out of the Richland land market. Every year since the opening of the district land office he had bought land. This year, neither he nor any other Richland resident bought federal land in the township. Eldred still owned, however, 280 acres, and he took most of 1838 to sell them. His eventual buyers were all Richland residents, a good indication of the contraction in the township land market. Marsh Giddings, a lawyer, bought twenty acres from Eldred that he sold to his mother.²³ David Blanchard acquired eighty and

²² Record Book of Richland Township, Jan. 2, 1837 (Archives and Regional History Collections); George Torrey, "A Glimpse of Kalamazoo in 1846," *MPHSC*, XVIII, 590.

²³ On Marsh Giddings, see A.D.P. Van Buren, "Sketches, Reminiscences, and Anecdotes of the Old Members of the Calhoun and Kalamazoo County Bars," *MPHSC*, XI, 300-304; and *American Biographical History of Eminent and Self-Made Men: Michigan Volume* (Cincinnati 1878), 27.

Elihu Mills sixty acres. Blanchard would make a farmstead on his tract. Mills had various commercial interests in the township in the 1830s, including investments in land.²⁴ Of Samuel P. Graves, who in October bought Eldred's last 120 acres, it is known only that he paid taxes as a township resident in 1837.

Eldred's three purchases of land in Richland after 1838 were insignificant in the larger scheme of his commercial affairs. In 1839, he bought from and resold to Morgan Curtis, a township farmer, forty acres in section 29. These transactions probably represented a short-term cash loan in which Curtis's parcel served as security.²⁵ In 1842, he acquired from Charles E. Stuart, a lawyer in Kalamazoo village, and sold to William Dana, a Richland farmer, sixty acres in section 17.²⁶ Finally, in 1851, Eldred bought from John Hulce, a Ross Township resident, twenty acres in section 25 that were eventually sold at auction for back taxes.

By 1840, ten years after his appearance on Gull Prairie and still shy of his thirtieth birthday, Mumford Eldred, Jr., had arrived in Richland Township. He had parlayed a line of credit from his family into proprietorship of the only general store in Richland and an estate taxed as worth over \$4,000. This assessment made Eldred the second wealthiest man in Richland, where the mean valuation for all taxpayers in 1839 was slightly over \$1,000. He had also acquired a prominent role in the civic life of the township. First elected township clerk in 1836, Eldred served in six positions, including supervisor, in five years. Among the other holders of five or more township offices in the 1830s were such preeminent local men as the settlement founder, Isaac Barnes, and the deacons, Samuel Brown and Simeon Mills, known for their commercial orientation and church leadership. Unlike Eldred, however, all of these men were over forty in 1840, and three were over fifty. Eldred had climbed the ranks of local leadership as rapidly as his economic fortunes had risen.²⁷

Eldred's drive compelled the recognition of his fellow township residents, but perhaps not their love. Observe him after the presidential nominations of 1844. An ardent Democrat, Eldred

²⁴ A.D.P. Van Buren, "Pioneer Annals: Containing the History of the Early Settlement of Battle Creek City and Township, with Vivid Sketches of Pioneer Life and Pen Portraits of the Early Settlers," *MPHSC*, V, 237-259.

²⁵ Curtis's finances were precarious because he had just acquired a wife and a farm; Durant, *History of Kalamazoo County*, 476-477.

²⁶ Torrey, "Kalamazoo in 1846," 210.

²⁷ On Richland officeholders, see Gray, "Family, Land, and Credit," 133-141.

erected a large hickory pole in front of his store, forcing anyone who wished to do business with him either to walk under the pole or to climb over the railing. The incident, which "produced a good deal of bitterness," seems of a piece with Eldred's earlier years in Richland.²⁸ Acquisitive, high-handed, and restless, he had arrived in the township, but never really settled into it.

Eldred had several chances to take his gains from his speculations in land and to establish himself as a substantial farmer in Richland. Each time, he instead sold off his holding and plunged back into the market. For him, the land boom in Richland, not the township itself, constituted an investment opportunity. By the time that the boom ended, he had safely transferred his capital to his store. Again, the opportunity appeared for Eldred, as Richland's principal merchant, to identify his interests with those of the township, and for a few years he seemed to have done so. But by the early 1840s, Eldred was again concerned about his future prospects. In the winter of 1844-1845 he moved his store to Yorkville in neighboring Ross Township.²⁹

Mumford Eldred, Jr., was only one of fifty men who came to Richland in the 1830s and bought federal land, but he did so on a scale that dwarfed most of the other forty-nine. He made fourteen entries between 1831 and 1838, amounting to slightly over 1000 acres. Only four other men in the same period acquired more than 300 acres of federal land in the township, and these ranged from John F. Gilkey, who with eight entries bought a little over 830 acres, to Joseph Miller, who secured nearly 395 acres with four entries. The question is what the other buyers did with their purchases. Were their acquisitions the beginning of lasting investments in the township, or did they, like Eldred, participate in the land boom, turn over their properties, and move on?

The issue here is not the persistence in Richland of government land buyers compared to that of other early-arriving settlers. Mobility was a fact of life for township residents: almost two thirds of the government land buyers had left Richland by 1850, as had slightly

²⁸ Eldred erected the pole after the summer presidential nominations in 1844. The bitterness in the community arose during the local elections in May, when national party loyalties first affected the selection of township officers. The "champion" of the Democrats, Eldred attempted to control the election by bringing his followers in at the last minute in support of the abolitionist ticket. The ruse failed, and the Whig slate was elected. Durant, *History of Kalamazoo County*, 467.

²⁹ Eldred left Yorkville about 1859 to invest in mining enterprises in California.

over two thirds of the fifty taxpayers of 1839 who did not make federal entries. Nor is the issue what the buyers did with specific purchases. It is, instead, what is generally known of the buyers' activities in Richland—whether, for example, they built farmsteads in the township or behaved more like Mumford Eldred, Jr.. When the buyers are grouped by persistence—those who left Richland before 1839, and those who appeared on the 1839, 1850, and 1860 tax rolls—a striking pattern emerges in their use of township land.

The eighteen buyers who left the township before 1839 made a total of twenty entries of a mean 81.1 acres per parcel. Nothing is known of a third of these men. Five of the other twelve had family in Richland, but did not themselves stay.³⁰ Another six were apparently interested in non-farming investments. Three bought village lots. The other three were Mitchell Hinsdill, who left Richland to bid on pine lots in the Grand River country and eventually opened a hotel in Grand Rapids; George Thomas, who relocated in Ross Township, and had holdings elsewhere in Kalamazoo County; and John D. Batcheldor, Eldred's sometime partner. The last buyer was David Deming, a lawyer, who moved to adjacent Cooper Township.³¹

Among the thirteen government land buyers listed on the 1839 tax roll, but gone from the township before 1850, was Mumford Eldred, Jr. Like him, most of the other twelve did not treat purchases of federal land as an investment in farming in Richland. Excluding Eldred, the buyers made twenty-five purchases of an average of 86.1 acres per entry—figures indicating a heavier involvement in the land market than that of the buyers who left Richland before 1839. Nothing is known of two of the buyers; the sons of two others who died before 1850 built farmsteads in the township. The non-farming orientation, however, is clear for the other eight. Six invested in village lots: Isaac Barnes, the settlement founder; Philip Gray, a lawyer; Loyal H. Jones, who built a sawmill at Gull Lake; the

³⁰ Dauphin Brown, for example, was the son of the deacon Samuel, and William Upjohn, the brother of Uriah, both of whom remained in Richland in 1860. Ill health forced Dauphin to return to Massachusetts; William and his family pushed on to Iowa. *Ibid.*, 479-481.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 479-481; *Portrait and Biographical Record of Kalamazoo*, 261-264; Henry Bishop, "Report of the Memorial Committee: Kalamazoo County," *MPHSC*, XXVIII, 64-66; Mrs. S.L. Withey, "Personal Recollections and Incidents of the Early Days of Richland and Grand Rapids," *ibid.*, V, 434-439; *History and Directory of Kent County, Michigan, Containing a History of Each Township, and the City of Grand Rapids . . .* (Grand Rapids 1870), 118-119.

Reverend Levi S. White, Congregational minister without congregation; Isaac Briggs, deacon and justice of the peace; and the Widow Giddings.³² The other two buyers were Willard Butterfield, possessor of a township liquor license in 1835, and John B. Barnes, Isaac's kinsman.

When one turns to the eight government land buyers who remained in Richland through 1850, the pattern of township investment changes abruptly: all eight buyers built farmsteads. Only one buyer gave up farming in Richland for other employment.³³ Of the five who stayed, two died and three retired before 1860, and their families remained on the farms. The ten government land buyers who persisted to 1860 differed from them mostly in longevity. The group included, incidentally, the most active buyers after Eldred: Samuel Boyles, who acquired 520 acres in five entries, and John F. Gilkey. Eight of the buyers were listed as farm operators on the 1850 and 1860 agricultural censuses; one was listed on the 1850 census, then retired from farming, but remained on the tax roll. The tenth buyer, and an exception to the rule, was Chauncey W. Calkins, who bought forty acres of federal land in the 1830s, but was then employed as a clerk by his future brother-in-law, Mumford Eldred, Jr. When Eldred left Richland, Calkins became the principal merchant for the township.

Profiles of government land buyers in Climax and Alamo townships put the Richland cohorts into sharper focus. Because the occupation of Climax and Alamo occurred in the latter half of the land boom, the townships' taxpaying populations of the late 1830s were much smaller and contained a far higher proportion of government land buyers than did Richland's. Thirty-two (69.6%) of Climax's forty-six and sixteen (50%) of Alamo's thirty-two taxpayers of 1838 had made federal entries, compared to thirty-one (38.3%) of the eight-one Richland residents on the 1839 roll. The persistence of government land buyers on the 1838 rolls in Climax and Alamo, moreover, was far higher than for all other taxpayers. Whereas in

³² The Reverend White came west in 1832 after being released by his Sandisfield, Massachusetts, church. Josiah Gilbert Holland, *History of Western Massachusetts: The Counties of Hampden, Hampshire, Franklin, and Berkshire* (2 vols., Springfield, Mass 1885), II, 572; *History of Berkshire County, Massachusetts with Sketches of Its Prominent Men* (2 vols., New York 1885), II, 508.

³³ Rockwell May, a lawyer, sold his spread in 1849 and opened a store in Gull Corners. He later moved to Kalamazoo to sell dry goods. *Portrait and Biographical Record of Kalamazoo*, 514.

Richland, the persistence to 1860 of government land buyers who appeared on the 1839 roll was 37 percent compared to 32 percent for all other taxpayers, in Climax 65.6 percent (21) stayed in the township, as opposed to 21.4 percent (7) of the other individuals on the 1838 roll. Eight of the nine survivors to 1850 from the 1838 Alamo roll, and all three who persisted another decade, bought government land.

The explanation for these differences in persistence among Richland, Climax, and Alamo government land buyers is the more limited agricultural potential of Climax and Alamo and the relative lack of non-farming investment opportunities in those townships during the early years of settlement. Climax's mixed agricultural prospects encouraged a high rate of persistence for early-arriving settlers who acquired prime, government land and a lower rate for those who came later. Alamo's indifferent soils were associated with generally low rates of persistence, although the few individuals who did stay bought government land. Furthermore, neither township attracted many non-farming investors. Neither Climax nor Alamo had platted towns. The Eldred family owned the property that became Climax Corners; Alamo Center was for years simply a nucleus of settlement in the center of the township. Alamo had neither mills nor merchants until the 1850s. Climax's merchant, and owner of the sole township liquor license, was Daniel B. Eldred, Caleb's son and a government land buyer who left the township in the mid-1840s. His position was eventually filled by William Sawyer, also a government land buyer, whose career in the township was erratic. Bankrupted in the early 1840s, Sawyer recouped his losses and built a steam mill in 1848. He then sold out, but returned to the township in the early 1850s and opened a general store.³⁴ A lumbering operation was also begun in Climax in the 1850s by Joseph and Abraham Sager, the sons of Frederick Sager, a government land buyer who died in the township in 1852.

Under these circumstances, the profiles of government land buyers in Climax and Alamo, unsurprisingly, both resemble and differ from the Richland profile. In all three townships, the longer a buyer persisted, the greater the chances of his association with a farmstead. Twenty of the twenty-one buyers in Climax and all of the

³⁴ Durant, *History of Kalamazoo County*, 38. See also the bankruptcy deeds of July 25, 1843, in Kalamazoo County Deeds, Books G and H (Kalamazoo County Courthouse).

Alamo buyers (3) who appeared on the 1860 roll were also listed in the agricultural census. The Climax and Alamo profiles differ from the Richland profile in the cohorts of buyers who left the townships before 1850. Little trace exists of the non-farming orientation characteristic of the Richland buyers.

The clearest pattern is one of family connections. Four of the nineteen buyers who left Climax before 1838 had family who remained in the township, as did two of the seven who did not persist to 1850. Five other buyers who left before 1838 probably represented two families—the Kelseys and the Lays. In Alamo, two of the four buyers gone before 1838 had relatives who made farmsteads in the township. Lebbeus and Dan S. Ball, among eight buyers on the 1838 roll who did not persist to 1850, were two of four brothers who came to Alamo to farm cooperatively while their mother kept house for them.³⁵

Differences in the behavior of government land buyers in Richland, Climax, and Alamo were a function of the townships' potential for development. The substantial presence of non-farming investors in Richland raises the question of the equity and efficiency effects of their participation in the federal land market, of their relationship both to the buyers who established farmsteads, and to the township's development. The size of parcels purchased by farming and non-farming investors suggests an answer. While the size of purchase was not directly related to whether a buyer established a farmstead in the township, the relationship was not random.

Of the twenty Richland buyers who built farms, three quarters acquired from the federal government either far more or far less than the 160 acres deemed optimal for mixed farming. Eight (40%) bought only forty acres, while seven (35%) purchased more than a quarter section. Something other than the availability of land guided the buyers' behavior. Twelve of the twenty farmsteads (60%) can be linked to family farms operated by brothers or fathers and sons. Persistence of government land buyers in the township who established farms was inversely related to their involvement in family farming. Nine of the twelve (75%) did not persist to 1860, of whom four died, three retired, and two left Richland. In contrast, seven of the eight buyers who cannot be linked to family farms persisted to 1860. Thus, how much land a buyer acquired was, at least in part, a function of his position in the life cycle of capital accumulation, which

³⁵ Durant, *History of Kalamazoo County*, 296.

in turn depended enormously on the prospects of and relations within individual families.³⁶

By contrast, the buying patterns of the thirty non-farming investors show no such sharp distinction between the men who bought a little land and those who bought a lot. Six (20%) acquired forty acres of land. Over half (53.3%) purchased over forty acres and up to a quarter section, compared to 25 percent (5) of the farming investors. Proportionately fewer non-farming investors (26.7%) bought more than a quarter section than did farming investors (35%). Most non-farming investors, moreover, were not members of Richland farming families. Only two (6.7%) had family who established farms, although over a third (11) are known to have had kin in the township. These figures suggest that many non-farming investors were undercapitalized and, for whatever reason, lacked family support to develop their purchases. Or, they may simply have decided that acquisition of a modest parcel in the midst of the land boom was a good, temporary investment. Either or both of these explanations could easily apply to twelve (67%) of the eighteen buyers who registered less than a quarter section (usually eighty acres) and who left Richland before 1839. Most of the buyers (8 of 11) who remained in the township until the 1840s, however, bought at least a quarter section, and these were the men whose commercial orientation—investments in mills, stores, and town plats—is not in doubt.

Two points need to be made about these early men of commerce in Richland Township. First, as land dealers they were instrumental in the consolidation of farms. There was a planned obsolescence to their participation in the economic life of the township. Once they had sold their holdings, they were left with capital for which they had to find another use. Second, as providers of township infrastructure, they competed with one another. Richland contained at least four town plats in the 1830s, and at least two saw mills. Once the contours of development had been established, the township had room for relatively few non-farming investors. In the competition for these places, Mumford Eldred, Jr., emerged victorious, one of the most securely lodged of Richland's commercial men. He had successfully converted his holdings into the first store in the township, located the store in the winning plat, got rid of his partner while liquidating his

³⁶ On family farming in Richland, Climax and Alamo, see Gray, "Family, Land, and Credit," 170-190.

debt on the mill, and even managed to get himself made postmaster after the developer of a rival plat, who had held the position, left the township.

The role of Eldred and other non-farming investors in Richland helps to explain Gates's distinction between the settlers' toleration of local speculators and their abhorrence of absentees. What made the latter such objects of hatred was their anonymity, which threatened the settlers' autonomy and their ability to tell whether the speculators' promises were true. Never mind that the settlers were usually themselves speculating. Sharp trading was not in itself reprehensible. It was considered in the antebellum period the hallmark of a type of American initially defined, as Constance Rourke has shown, as a national figure *vis-à-vis* Europe, and then as a regional one.³⁷

That figure, of course, was the Yankee—shrewd, laconic, itinerant, with his eyes always on the main chance. As Neil Harris argues in *Humbug*, his biography of P.T. Barnum, the Yankee was a master of the deal. The Yankee Barnum saw his business, first as country merchant, and then as professional showman, as a matching of wits. His aim was to put one over on his customers, knowing full well that if he did not, they would do the same to him. Barnum's genius, in his American Museum, was to sell the delicious sensation of being duped. His customers happily paid to see Barnum's wonders because they thrilled to guess how the tricks worked.³⁸

Harris emphasizes the continuity between Barnum's roles as merchant and showman. Barnum was in both a known commodity; his customers knew what to expect when they dealt with him. Similarly, Mumford Eldred, Jr., was known in Richland; he lived there for nearly fifteen years, and his fellow residents rewarded him for his sharp practices by making him a civic leader. Both Barnum and Eldred had to deal according to certain rules. In Barnum's case, he had to remain consistent to his public's knowledge that he was fooling them. Once, for example, Barnum went to great trouble and expense to obtain a white elephant from Thailand. In the interim, the owner of a rival circus painted white an ordinary elephant and put it on display. Sensation. The beast from Thailand was an utter flop. The public preferred the much whiter illusion.³⁹

³⁷ Constance Rourke, *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (1931; rep., Tallahassee 1986), esp. 3-32.

³⁸ Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum* (Boston 1973).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 266-270.

Eldred's case is more mundane, but no less interesting. He had made his capital in Richland; he was therefore one of Richland's own. He was supposed to conform to the interests of the township as a whole. The problem was not that Eldred left Richland, but that he did so in a way perceived as damaging to the township. Judged by a purely economic standard, however, not only Eldred's leaving, but his style of departure were consistent to his pursuit of capital. Eldred had speculated in the first stage of the township's development and, having used up his opportunities, wanted to try again elsewhere.

Return to Richland a few years before Eldred's departure. About 1841, Stephen Cummings and Simeon Howe rented a grist mill at Yorkville, intending to grind, barrel, and ship east locally produced wheat.⁴⁰ To enhance his local standing, Cummings proposed that Richland residents make to him subscription pledges in flour for the purchase of a bell for the Presbyterian church steeple. Cummings made his proposal to the community at large, not solely to the Presbyterian congregation, and unlike Mumford Eldred, Jr., nemesis in the events that followed, he was not a church member. For the township inhabitants, who accepted Cummings's offer, acquisition of a bell was clearly an act of community self-definition and a proclamation of the importance of their place. The Presbyterian church stood in the center of the village, in the heart of the township. Gull Corners was the most prosperous trade center in northeastern Kalamazoo County. The bell's symbolic resonance was so powerful that residents of Ross Township, led by Mumford Eldred, Jr., would try to take it for their own.⁴¹

In the spring of 1842, Cummings took the subscription paper to Troy, New York, where he attempted to purchase a bell from a Mr. Meneely. The latter refused to accept the post-harvest paper, but offered to take his pay from Cummings in flour if the Richland merchant would himself take the paper. Cummings agreed to Meneely's terms, and the bell was duly delivered. The New Yorker's caution proved well founded. The harvest of 1842 was poor, and Richland settlers delivered late only a portion of the promised flour to Cummings, by then operating without Howe. To make matters worse, Cummings's overhead halved the return that the settlers had

⁴⁰ Cummings and Howe were listed on neither the tax rolls of the 1830s nor the census of 1840, but were living in Gull Corners in 1842. Durant, *History of Kalamazoo County*, 469.

⁴¹ The story of the Richland Presbyterian bell is drawn from the eyewitness account of the Reverend Milton Bradley. *Ibid.*, 474-475.

anticipated from their crops.⁴² When Cummings's business failed, he left Richland for Wisconsin.

What Meneely got in payment for the bell from the bankruptcy settlement of Cummings's business is unknown. In any event, the debt on the bell was not satisfied, and Meneely had no legal means of holding the bankrupt Cummings to his obligation. Moreover, Meneely had no claim on the Richland community because he did not hold their paper. Two parties, however, derived some satisfaction from Cummings's financial downfall. The first was the subscribing Richland residents who had got off cheap. The second was Mumford Eldred, Jr.

When Cummings went under in the winter of 1842-1843, Eldred bought out the store's stock. He also bought the Yorkville mill. The next winter, he moved his store to the village, where he got himself made postmaster for Ross Township. Eldred intended to make Yorkville, instead of Gull Corners, the locus of trade for the northeastern portion of the county. By moving to Ross Township, Eldred had pitted the economic prospects of his new home against those of his old one. It was soon apparent how deliberately competitive his relocation was. Eldred decided to acquire the Richland bell to call people to Yorkville. He wrote to Meneely that Richland would give up its bell and that he, Eldred, would settle Meneely's debt.

Rumor of Eldred's intentions leaked across the Ross Township border to Richland. In May 1845, the disquieted session of the Presbyterian church sent a representative to Eldred to learn the truth. The emissary found Eldred and a party of men ready to ride on Richland. Eldred and his posse found a crowd of angry Richland residents waiting for them at the church. When Eldred attempted to force entry into the church, the bell began to ring "as it was never rung before." From all over the township, men and boys responded to the alarm. Eldred and his men retired in defeat. The Richland residents then hastily settled their debt with Meneely.

Several details of this incident need emphasis. The first is who legally owned the bell. None of the actors, except for the long-suffering Meneely, who simply wanted his money for goods delivered, had a clear claim. Until the Richland residents settled with him, Meneely owned the bell. Both the Richland residents and Eldred thought they could claim the bell, and in their reasoning they were both self-serving; they were both engaging in sharp trading. The

⁴² *Ibid.*, 462.

Richland residents considered that since they did not have to pay Cummings, did not owe Meneely, and had possession of the bell, it was theirs. Enter Mumford Eldred, Jr., who played two roles in the incident—as bona-fide purchaser and as confidence man. He combined both in his letter to Meneely: he would buy the bell, but first he would get it from Richland; or rather, Richland would give the bell up. Eldred did not intend to pay for the bell until he had it in his possession. In his attempt to seize the bell, Eldred acted neither as its owner, nor as Meneely's agent. Eldred's position was thus precisely the reverse of that of the Richland residents. While they had the bell, they did not need to pay for it; for Eldred to pay for the bell, he had to possess it. When Eldred failed to seize the bell, the Richland residents paid Meneely because it was easier to get a clear title than to fend off Eldred. Had Eldred's scheme worked, the Richland residents would have been without legal recourse to get the bell back.

The second detail is that Eldred did not act alone in his attempt to seize the bell. He had the help of at least some Ross Township residents. Eldred had lied to Meneely about Richland's willingness to give up the bell, but his posse could have been under no illusions about their mission. They were going to put one over on a rival township. Had their roles been reversed, they would doubtless have been as outraged as the Richland residents. It seems not to have occurred to them that Eldred might later do unto them as he was about to do unto others. The Ross Township residents had in Eldred a sterling demonstration that the pursuit of capital knew no communal boundaries, but they chose to believe him, anyway.

This willingness to believe recalls the nightmare vision of antebellum American society recently evoked by Karen Halttunen in *Confidence Men and Painted Women*. Halttunen uses the image of the Yankee as a trickster of many disguises to explain the pervasive status anxiety of middle-class Americans in a rapidly urbanizing, industrializing, and hence increasingly impersonal society. The dilemma of middle-class Americans, she argues, was that of a reader of Herman Melville's *Confidence Man*: who was real? How many masks could a stranger wear, and once they had been stripped away, what was left? Halttunen concludes from her reading of domestic advice literature that middle-class Americans resolved their dilemma by applying standardized tests of "sincerity," which of course ironically also became masks.⁴³

⁴³ Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven 1982), esp. 1-55.

The story of Eldred and the bell, by contrast, emphasizes that the nightmare of what was real was not restricted to the urban middle class. It was the pursuit of capital that transformed the known into the unknown because it removed the individual from his community. The confidence man (or men) operates on Melville's steamboat because the *Fidèle* makes so many stops that the passengers change continually and therefore remain anonymous. One could argue that this anonymity was pervasive on the frontier; remember that one of Melville's confidence men is a land speculator. But the point about Eldred is that he never operated outside of a community. He moved from one community to another. He became unknown in Richland and known in Ross, which is why he was able to get a posse to help him seize the bell. This is also why, perhaps, to return to Gates's paradox, Americans on the frontier complained bitterly about absentee speculators, but not the local variety. They were all versed in the rules of sharp trading.