

## Advancing a Progressive New History

The present has hitherto been the willing victim of the past; the time has now come when it should turn on the past and exploit it in the interests of advance. The “New History” is escaping from the limitations formerly imposed upon the study of the past. It will come in time consciously to meet our daily needs; it will avail itself of all those discoveries that are being made about mankind by anthropologists, economists, psychologists, and sociologists. . . . It is inevitable that history should be involved in this revolutionary process.

—JAMES HARVEY ROBINSON, *THE NEW HISTORY* (1912)

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, American historical writing developed in ways that reflected scholars’ determined effort to enlarge the scope of the past and to cast light on the state of modern American society. Some influential historians, such as Charles Beard, constructed sweeping interpretations of American history that found in the past the roots of conflicts liberal Progressive reformers had located in modern industrial society. Others, such as Frederick Jackson Turner, mounted ever more frank arguments for the necessity of a deeply research-based social history. Even those who disagreed seemed alarmed at the advance being made by social and economic history and by new interpretations that challenged revered notions of American national history.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps more notable were the painstaking, detailed studies undertaken by historians who eschewed the broader debate and set to work carrying out the mandate for a history that emphasized social and economic facets of American society, often in an effort to illuminate the contemporary scene. Research that attended to the powerful impact of economic forces in shaping historical change, that explored the influence of the physical environment on social and economic development, that shifted the locus of attention from the East to the