

*A Muslim
in Victorian America*

A sepia-toned portrait of a man with a full, dark beard and mustache, wearing a white turban and a dark suit jacket over a white shirt and tie. He is looking slightly upwards and to the right.

THE LIFE OF
ALEXANDER RUSSELL WEBB

UMAR F. ABD-ALLAH

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The Life of Alexander Russell Webb

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2006

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Oxford New York
Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

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Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016
www.oup.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Abd-Allah, Umar F.

A Muslim in Victorian America : the life of Alexander Russell Webb /
Umar F. Abd-Allah.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13 978-0-19-518728-1

ISBN 0-19-518728-8

1. Webb, Alexander Russell, 1846-1916. 2. African American
Muslims—Biography. 3. Islam—United States—History—19th century.
I. Title.

BP80.W43A64 2006

297.092—dc22 2005035280

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

*To my mother, Grace Marian Marmon-Landgraf,
a daughter of the American Revolution*

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Preface

“Many hands make light work.” So many persons worked so open-handedly on this project that I cannot possibly show them the appreciation they deserve. I would like first to extend my thanks to Theo Calderara, Stacey Hamilton, Norma McLemore, Julia TerMaat, and other members and collaborators of the professional staff at Oxford University Press. I am grateful to the Nawawi Foundation of Chicago, where I work as chair and scholar-in-residence, for its passionate backing of this project and steadfast support. I remain obliged to Mr. Timothy Winter of Cambridge for his invaluable assistance, especially in bringing previously unknown material to light, and am always indebted to Drs. Sherman Jackson of the University of Michigan, Ingrid Mattson of Hartford Seminary, and Marcia Hermansen of Loyola University for their encouragement and advice.

I have benefited from the invaluable assistance of dedicated editorial and research assistants. Let me begin by thanking Asra Yousufuddin, Omer Mozaffar, Ibrahim Abusharif, and Asma Tasnim Uddin, all of whom freely expended enormous amounts of time and energy in highly professional editorial assistance. Similar prodigious contributions were made by many others, among them: Adnan Arain, Affan Arain, Dilara Sayeed, Hanane Korchi, Humaira Basith, Lubna Dabbagh, Mazen Asbahi, Mohammed Hasan Ali, Naazish Yarkhan, Nadiyah Mohajir, Qaid Hassan, Sabahat Adil, and Tabassum Siraj. For invaluable computer training and assistance, I express my thanks to Tariq Mohajir, Eiman Abdalmoneim, Tanvir Mallick, and Kareem Shelton.

Fareeha Khan, Feryal Salem, Asma Tasnim Uddin, Mohammed Hasan Ali, Omer Mozaffar, Sami Catovic, and Asra Yousufuddin deserve additional thanks for their fruitful labors in searching out, securing, and helping me utilize rare primary and secondary materials. I am obliged to Samina Malik of the Lahori Ahmadiyya Community of Plain City, Ohio, for her assistance in providing primary source materials relevant to Webb's correspondence with Mirza Ghulam Ahmad. I thank Dr. Muhammad Isa Waley, curator of the Persian and Turkish Collections at the British Library, for valuable information on Webb's British colleague Abdulla William Henry Quilliam. I extend my special gratitude to Muhammad Abdullah al-Ahari of Chicago for providing me from his private collection on Islam in America with a copy of Webb's 1892 diary and his two pro-Ottoman booklets. I also thank Edmund Arroyo for accompanying me on a laborious trip to Missouri in 2002, where we toiled in search for relevant historical records on Webb's years there.

I extend my cordial appreciation to Mary Howell, Columbia County historian, who cheerfully gave my research assistant Muhammad Hasan Ali and me many hours of her time, clarified historical details pertinent to Webb's New York background, provided valuable photographs, and was tremendously helpful in directing me to additional archival material. I thank Sally Alderdice and the accommodating staff of the Claverack Free Library and Reading Room. Similar recognition goes out to Joshua Hall, research intern at the Stockbridge, Massachusetts, library's Historical Collection, who spent weeks locating records on the long-obsolete Glendale Home School, where Webb studied as a boy. Sharon Canter of St. Joseph's Historical Collection gladly put at my disposal the valuable historical resources of the St. Joseph Public Library. I found the same supportive spirit from Joe Christopher and Sue Schuermann at the Journalism Library of the University of Missouri, who prepared, of their own accord, all relevant materials available in the School of Journalism so that our time could be utilized to the fullest. At the St. Louis Public Library, Noel Holaback, Joseph Winkler, Keith Zimmer, and other members of the staff of the History and Genealogy Section were immensely cooperative, often bringing to my attention invaluable materials of which I had not been aware, including rare nineteenth-century aerial maps of St. Louis from the time of Webb's residence in the city. My thanks to Randy Blomquist and the other cordial personnel at the St. Louis Historical Society and to Dusty Reese and Tom Gruenenfelder at the Archives Department of St. Louis City Hall. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to Elaine M. Doak, head librarian of the Special Collections at Truman State University, for helping me locate rare facts relating to Webb's years in Unionville, Missouri, which helped uncover his previously unknown marriage to Laura Conger.

Finally, I express my gratitude to several Turkish colleagues and friends, among them Dr. Ibrahim Özdemir of Ankara University and his associates, who secured for me several documents on Webb from the Ottoman Archives

during a visit to Istanbul in 2000. I express my thanks to Dr. Sevket Pamuk, professor of economics at Boğaziçi University, for his unhesitating scholarly assistance in answering questions relative to nineteenth-century Ottoman currencies. Dr. Said Kaya of the Istanbul Center for Islamic Studies provided me with a valuable contemporary study of Webb in Turkish based on Ottoman Archival documents, and my special appreciation to Nukhet Arkasu of the University of Chicago for translating all relevant Ottoman and Modern Turkish materials.

Behind acquisition of the illustrations in this work lay the labors of Humaira Basith and Sabahat Adil. In addition to thanking them both, special words of gratitude are due again to Mary Howell, Columbia County historian, for putting her entire stock of historical photographs at our disposal and freely allowing us to make use of the two illustrations that we finally chose of downtown Hudson and Claverack College as Webb knew them. Chicago's Newberry Library produced the bulk of the photographic work in the book, many of which fell within public domain but were reproduced by the Newberry Library and others of which were provided with the special permission by the Newberry Library from its uniquely rich collection, namely, the 1893 photograph of Webb with turban and a series of illustrations from the Chicago World's Fair: the Ottoman Commissioner, the Ottoman Pavilion, and the Bazaar of Nations and "Streets of Cairo." Newberry reproduced the photographs of Eugene Field pictured with Francis Wilson, Hajee William R. Williamson, and the 1901 photograph of Webb with the fez and Ottoman medallions. I extend particular thanks to the Eugene Field House of St. Louis for generously granting permission to reproduce the Eugene Field photograph just mentioned. Special thanks to the New York Public Library for its provision of the 1892 photograph of Webb in Indian dress along with special permission to use it. Thanks are due Aasil Kazi Ahmad for his skillful portraits—all of which fell within public domain—of William Henry Quilliam, Lord Headley, and Lady Cobbold, from the less-than-ideal originals we found available. Again, I would like to thank Humaira Basith for her reproduction of the coversheet of the 1893 *Moslem World*, which was acquired from the St. Louis Public Library. Finally, abundant thanks for the book's three maps—nineteenth-century New York and environs, Webb in Missouri, and Webb's 1892 tour of the Orient—and the Victorian American Timeline. All were original creations copyrighted to the Nawawi Foundation and resulted from the diligent collaboration of Muhammad Hasan Ali and Hanane Korchi on the maps and Dilara Sayeed and Nadiyah Mohajir on the timeline.

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I

The Yankee Mohammedan

It was late summer 1893. The Chicago World's Fair had reached its final weeks. One of the most imposing of all such fairs, it transformed Chicago into an oasis of "wonders and miracles," as if the city had been reborn like a phoenix from the ashes of the Great Fire of 1871. At center stage stood one of the great events of the nineteenth century: the First World's Parliament of Religions, a major watershed in American cultural history.

The parliament set out to foster religious pluralism to a degree largely unprecedented in the American experience. It captivated enthusiastic audiences with lectures on the world's major religious traditions. For the most part, these presentations were delivered by articulate adherents of Eastern faiths, who came from abroad and were born into the traditions they presented. The presentation on Islam was the exception. Islam's official representative at the parliament was Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb, a prominent native-born American convert to the faith and leader of one of the earliest Islamic movements on American soil.

On September 20, a wet and chilly Wednesday morning, crowds that had gathered outside the parliament's main auditorium, Columbus Hall, rushed in as soon as the doors swung open to hear Mohammed Webb, dubbed in the press as "the Yankee Mohammedan," deliver his first lecture. It was widely known that Webb had served as American consul in the Philippines. His conversion to Islam there in 1888 and his subsequent sponsorship of the American Mission and numerous public lectures in the Orient had won him national and international notoriety.

Webb unapologetically espoused his newly adopted faith in terms that made clear he saw no contradiction between it and his deeply rooted American identity. Many of his Victorian American contemporaries had heard of him in the press and wanted to hear the story of his religious odyssey. Although Webb's speech that morning, as on the following day, was occasionally disrupted by the corpulent and bothersome Boston missionary Reverend Joseph Cook and his followers—whose outbursts proved to be an annoyance for many other representatives of nontraditional religions and purveyors of unconventional opinions at the parliament—Webb's audience was, for the most part, “intelligent, sympathetic, quick to appreciate, and applaud.”¹ He identified with them naturally and emphasized his belief in their fairness: “I have faith in the American intellect, in the American intelligence, and in the American love of fair play, and will defy any intelligent man to understand Islam and not love it.” Webb repeatedly emphasized that Islam and “the Arabian Prophet” had for generations been misrepresented to Americans, making it difficult for them to comprehend his new faith or why he had chosen it. Still he proclaimed his faith in the American character: “I feel that Americans, as a rule, are disposed to go to the bottom of facts and to ascertain really what Mohammed was and what he did, and when they have done so, I feel we shall have a universal system which will elevate our social system to the position where it belongs.”²

Alexander Russell Webb (1846–1916) believed himself to have gone “to the bottom of the facts” regarding Islam. Having adopted it as a private faith and personal fulfillment of his identity as an American, he stands as one of the outstanding figures in the early history of Islam in the United States, and his legacy constitutes a valuable point of reference for all Americans today, and especially for those in the growing Muslim community of the United States. Webb was born and raised in Hudson, New York. His character and religious disposition bore the stamp of religious individualism and nonconformity typical of the Mid-Atlantic cultural ethos of nineteenth-century New York.

After the Civil War, Webb made his way west to Chicago, established a jewelry business, but lost everything in the Great Fire of 1871. Although his home was not in the fire's path, Webb's first wife, Laura Conger, disappeared in the chaos of that terrible night. No subsequent record of her has been found, and the story of Webb's first marriage remains one of the unsolved mysteries of his biography.

Webb's next major move came in 1874, when, with the financial support of Laura Conger's father, he moved to Missouri and got started in the newspaper business. Through the next fourteen years, he made a name for himself in Missouri journalism at a time when the state was taking a leading role in defining the standards of modern American journalism.

Webb regarded himself as a liberal and lifelong ardent supporter of the Democratic Party. In 1887, President Cleveland, the first Democrat to be

elected president since the end of Reconstruction, appointed Webb as American consul to the Philippines; he served in Manila until 1892. Webb did not seek the position for purely political reasons. By the time of his appointment, Webb's career in St. Louis had spanned more than a decade, and, during these years, he became deeply involved in the city's Theosophical Society, through which he developed an avid interest in spiritualism and world religions. Like many of his generation, Webb looked upon the Orient as the romantic embodiment of the deepest and most lasting religious truths. With profound conviction, Webb believed that his appointment to the Philippines would give him direct access to the spiritual wisdom of the East. No doubt, this choice was naïve, for the Philippines at the time were under Spanish colonial control. The Catholic Church was dominant and did not look with favor on the presence of non-Catholic missions or representatives of non-Christian faiths.

The Philippines did, nevertheless, afford Webb access to information about Islam that he had not had in the United States. Shortly after his arrival in Manila, he decided to embrace Islam, having already contemplated that possibility in St. Louis without taking the final step. In Manila, Webb discovered the writings of prominent Muslim modernists of India from the Aligarh Movement, especially Sayyed Ameer Ali. In 1891, Webb began to correspond with the *Allahabad Review* in India about Islam, setting in motion a series of steps that would lead to his resignation as U.S. consul and his attempt to set up the American Mission.³

Through the press and personal correspondence, Webb was able to link with a number of prominent Indian Muslim merchants who promised to sponsor his mission with five years of financial support. At their behest in 1892, Webb resigned his diplomatic post and made a tour of Rangoon and various cities in India, promoting and seeking support for his mission.

Webb returned to New York in February 1893 and set about establishing his mission in Manhattan, immediately attracting front-page headlines in the *New York Times* and other American newspapers. Webb's movement lasted from 1893 until early 1896. He worked diligently, speaking extensively at private parlor gatherings—his preferred means of discourse—and delivering public lectures in a number of different states. His Moslem World Press published Islamic journals of good quality and offered for sale a wide selection of other publications on Islam.

Webb's reception in America was generally positive. Subscriptions and letters of support came from all parts of the country. Webb's chief obstacle, however, was inadequate financial patronage. Webb was probably overconfident in his assessment that his mission could be financially self-sufficient in five years, and his Indian supporters were unable to maintain their commitments for more than a few months. It became clear to Webb toward the end of 1893 that he could not depend upon his Indian patrons. He turned to the Ottoman

embassy in Washington to keep the mission alive. He visited the Ottoman ambassador, Mavroyani Bey, in Washington, forged a lasting friendship with him, and earnestly implored him for Ottoman support to keep the mission alive. Mavroyani Bey's correspondence with Istanbul reflects the esteem he felt for Webb and the urgency of the aid he requested. Turkish aid did finally come, but it was too little and too late. Financial squabbles divided Webb's poorly paid staff, some of whom accused Webb of misusing funds.

The *New York Times* seized on the allegations, although ultimately it exonerated Webb after one of its reporters discovered him and his family in the Catskills living destitute in Ulster Park, New York, and attempting to keep the mission alive through correspondence and publication of a highly abridged form of its journal. After enduring poverty and suffering loss of personal status and family prestige, Webb suspended his mission in 1896.

He moved to Rutherford, New Jersey, where he resumed earlier careers in journalism and commerce, frequently commuting to New York on business. Webb lived the last twenty years of his life in Rutherford. He took active part in civic life and quickly attained standing in the New Jersey Democratic Party. The party nominated him to run for U.S. Congress in 1898, but he deferred in favor of another candidate, William Hughes. Appointed as Honorary Ottoman Consul General to New York in 1901, Webb traveled to Istanbul on special state invitation. Sultan Abdul-Hamid II gave him the honorific title of "Bey" [Sir] and decorated him with two Ottoman orders of merit. Webb is the only American to ever receive such an honor.

Webb was generally well-liked, and his genial personality won him friends wherever he went. In 1902, shortly after his return from Turkey, Webb presented a public lecture in Rutherford titled "Constantinople and Turkish Home Life." The local press assured readers that despite Webb's many honors and awards, he remained the same "pleasing personality" familiar to the people of Rutherford.⁴

Webb never returned to his earlier Islamic missionary work, but he remained a Muslim until the end of his life and made no effort to hide his identity as "an American Mohammedan."⁵ During his last years, Webb suffered from diabetes; he succumbed to the disease at the age of seventy in his Rutherford home after an exhausting commute from New York on October 1, 1916.⁶

Catching the Public's Eye

Webb was handsome and had a pleasant voice. Physical appearance has various meanings in different times and cultures, but looks were indeed one of several Victorian preoccupations. "Phrenology," the study of facial features for signs of mental ability and character, was a widely accepted popular "science."

Modern American culture tends to emphasize pure physical attraction, but Victorian America was interested in appearance as a fundamental indicator of the inner self. For Victorians, sketches, photographs, and verbal descriptions of Webb were not incidental details; they were telling pieces of scientific evidence disclosing hidden insight into his intelligence and integrity.⁷ Victorians did not only want to hear what Webb had to say but also wanted to see what he looked like and how he dressed.

Webb was not hampered by any lack of self-esteem and advertised “fine half-tone portraits” of himself for 15 cents, postage included.⁸ Fortunately, his looks left a positive phrenological impression. He was photogenic, and, by the standards of the time, his photographs came out remarkably free of the rigidity and “crushing dignity” characteristic of many Victorian portraits, which left later generations with the impression that they never smiled. In fact, Victorians were not encouraged to smile while being photographed. It is hard to hold a smile for long, and exposures took several minutes. Photographers generally advised against smiling and often clamped their customers’ heads in iron braces to ensure firm posture.⁹



FIGURE 1.1. Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb (1893)

One Victorian phrenologist writing under the pen name Stiletto provided a full “scientific” statement of Webb’s physiognomy for *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated*, one of America’s earliest and most popular illustrated journals. Stiletto’s observations were based on the 1893 portrait of Webb dressed in white turban and Western suit, gazing romantically toward the horizon. The portrait was displayed alongside Stiletto’s analysis:¹⁰

A face indicating a calm and deliberate mind, a nature never superficial in its emotions or intentions. When stirred it is deeply and overwhelmingly moved, and an intention once conceived is steadily and patiently carried out. His eyebrows indicate thought and some degree of shrewd calculation. Ideality is largely developed where the head broadens on either side of the brow, and there is suggested a species of mental inertia or dreaminess, while the listening ears drink in high-sounding words and rolling phrases. Beneath his eyes is a gift of language. Not of sparkling, brilliant, or rippling words, but a slow, steady, and deliberate utterance, forcible because the speaker is apparently swayed by convictions and emotions so intense that their depth checks rapidity and seeks outlet in impressive rather than dashing eloquence. There is a distinct absence of definite expression in his countenance, and yet the mind is capable and ready, the intellect deliberate and stable. Such absence of expression can only be explained by motives deep-seated and subtle intentions, and is probably the keynote of the entire nature. He will only permit to be visible that which he wishes to be seen, and wears his countenance as a mask to his personality rather than as an indication of the individuality of the inner man.¹¹

Most people concurred that Webb was attractive and dignified. William Williamson, a young Englishman whom Webb helped escape torture at the hands of Spanish colonial prison guards in Manila (and who later embraced Islam independently of Webb’s influence), remembered him as “a pleasant-looking man.”¹² The *New York Herald* described Webb as “florid faced, with big, sparkling eyes and a luxuriant beard.”¹³ The *New York Times* portrayed him as a man of poise and presence, although it insinuated that there might be some question about his racial pedigree:

A person of dignified though gracious bearing. His skin is tanned, and there is about him, especially in his movements, an Oriental air. He has large brown eyes and a dark brown beard of moderate length. He speaks easily and with directness and earnestness. He is of average height, and just a trifle stout. There is a suggestion of suppleness rather than briskness in his gait. His face is almost dark enough

for him to be mistaken for a light Hindu, and he talks with a slight foreign accent. With a fez he would easily pass for a Mohammedan.¹⁴

Emory Tunison, an early Muslim American biographer of Webb, represented him as a “dark, sturdy [man, of] medium height,” while, for Clay Lancaster, he was a “handsome [man] with finely chiseled features.”¹⁵

It is said that Victorian American men and women “dressed to the teeth.” But more attention was probably given to the face and head than anything else, and both genders displayed “striking imagination in designing their own heads.”¹⁶ Webb was no different and often designed his head imaginatively with various types of Muslim head coverings. He wore glasses, at least while reading, but preferred to be photographed without them.¹⁷

Webb kept a beard all of his life. Keeping a beard is obligatory in Islamic law, but, for nineteenth-century American men, beards and mustaches were standard. It only became customary to be clean-shaven in the next century.¹⁸ On seeing an as yet unidentified photograph of Webb, Nadirah Florence Ives Osman, another early Muslim American biographer of Webb, remarked: “I have been touched by the sight of his last photograph, taken shortly before he passed away, a likeness that displays his shining, resigned face, crowned with snowy hair, as he stands in the midst of his family, his beard still uncut in the shaven America of 1916.”¹⁹ Here, Osman is clearly inferring from Webb’s bearded appearance as an old man that he had remained loyal to his faith, a matter that his family confirmed for her.

Tunison and several others had the impression that Webb appeared before the Parliament of Religions “dressed in turban and robe.”²⁰ *The Chicago Tribune* drew a caricature of Webb in a turban, robe, and Oriental sandals.²¹ In fact, Webb appeared at his parliament speeches in a red fez and a Western suit.²² He did, occasionally, don full “Oriental garb,” but it was not his habit. A reporter from Calcutta’s *Mohammedan Observer* paid Webb a private visit for an interview at his guesthouse in the city and found him “dressed in Mohammedan [sic] costume.”²³ The photograph of Webb in the frontispiece of his book *The Three Lectures* portrayed him in full Indian Muslim dress, and many of his contemporaries and later researchers—some of them, no doubt, basing their opinion on the photograph in *The Three Lectures*—were under the impression that he preferred traditional Muslim dress. The *San Francisco Argonaut* described Webb as one who, “to signify his change of belief, has decked himself in Oriental fashion.”²⁴

Richard Turner draws the conclusion that Webb “always wore Indian clothing, including a white turban.” In Turner’s view, Webb preferred Indian clothing because he regarded Western attire as a sign of decadence and believed that wearing it “could ultimately lead to the moral corruption of Muslims.”²⁵ Webb in fact held no such view and almost always wore Western

garb. He did, however, indicate some distaste for Oriental Muslims' aping of Western dress and discarding their traditional customs. In India, he repeatedly expressed his dislike of Westernization and its effect on colonized Muslims, one hallmark of which was Western dress. He viewed Muslims who blindly imitated the West, adopted its dress, and abandoned their own as servile and unworthy of their rich heritage. He believed them to be the furthest removed from a genuine Islamic ethos: "The only Mohammedans in all the East who drink intoxicating beverages are those who have been educated in England and wear European clothes. Their contact with Christian nations has demoralized them, and they have drifted away from their religion."²⁶

But in America and abroad, Webb rarely appeared publicly in full Oriental dress, which sometimes disappointed his audiences. After one of his first parlor appearances in New York to speak "of the beauties of the Mohammedan religion," the *New York Herald* remarked with surprise and apparent regret that Webb had presented himself that night in stylish Western "evening clothes" and not the "Arab dress" they had expected.²⁷ In India, when a "fanatical Mussulman" insisted that it was Webb's "duty to adopt the Mussulman dress at once lest [he] should be mistaken for a Kafir [disbeliever]," Webb's reaction was: "Poor, benighted creatures! They have no more idea of the true spirit of Islam than the cows or horses."²⁸ When a popular Sufi in India remarked during an initial visit that he would prefer to see Webb wearing "Arab costume" in their next meeting, Webb jotted down in his diary: "I hardly think he will."²⁹

In the Middle of It All

Webb's life was steeped in Americana. Despite his later affinity to the Turks in particular and the Muslim world in general after his conversion to Islam, he continued indisputably to identify himself as an American. From his first years onward, Webb moved in proximity to many of the settings, symbols, and historic personages that shaped American identity and were crucial parts of the nation's history. When I began work on his biography, I was impressed from the outset with his penchant for always ending up "in the middle of it all." To give an account of Webb's life is not only to discover an unexplored chapter in the history of Islam in America but to walk with him down some of the momentous corridors in our national history.

Webb regarded himself to be an average American. He was not overly educated and never an outstanding financial success. He was an astute spectator but rarely, if ever, a principal actor in the events that transpired around him. Yet Webb's biography repeatedly finds him either in the midst or proximity of the significant events of the time. On hearing these details of Webb's life, one of my friends commented in good humor that Webb was

a sort of Muslim Forrest Gump. The parallel does a disservice to Webb's intelligence but is not without a ring of truth.

Martin Van Buren was the favorite son of Webb's native Columbia County, and, although Van Buren's estate was a few miles away in Kinderhook, he spent much time in Hudson. His son John, New York's attorney general, was also a familiar face in Hudson. John Van Buren was a leading national figure in the Democratic Party and could have succeeded his father to national prominence had it not been for his early death.³⁰ Former President Van Buren was an active member of the First Presbyterian Church, to which the Webb family belonged. As a young man, Webb must have seen the Van Burens frequently.

A prominent Webb family then living in neighboring Claverack preserved the Bible upon which General Washington was said to have taken his presidential oath of office. It was an heirloom of the family's forebear, General Samuel Webb, one of Washington's aides in the revolutionary war. During his youth, Webb often walked by the Old Courthouse on Hudson's outskirts, where Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr practiced law.³¹ The Revolutionary War hero Marquis de Lafayette visited Hudson in 1824 during his tour of the United States and was given a festive banquet in the city, which unfurled a banner over his seat of honor:

We bow not the head,
We bend not the knee,
But our hearts, Lafayette,
We surrender to thee.³²

Hudson's native soil was imbued with images imbedded in the national consciousness and early American literature. Washington Irving's celebrated stories "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and "Rip Van Winkle" had familiar settings for Webb. Van Winkle belonged to the lore of Catskill, just across the Hudson River, and the same village was coincidentally associated with Samuel Wilson, whose story, according to local tradition, inspired the national emblem of "Uncle Sam."³³ James Fennimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* was set even closer to home. The Hudson River Valley was Mohican territory, and the tribe's last stand had taken place just outside Hudson in a seventeenth-century battle with the Iroquois.³⁴ The *Clermont*, Robert Fulton's early steam-powered craft, was funded by Robert Livingston of Columbia County and took its name from his Clermont Estate, not far from Hudson. During its maiden voyage up the Hudson, the *Clermont* made a historic stop at Livingston's estate to take on firewood.³⁵ Once a busy whaling port, Hudson took pride in its old Nantucket roots. Melville's epic *Moby Dick* appeared during Webb's boyhood, and its theme and Nantucket setting evoked tangible associations in Hudson's collective memory.

Most of Webb's adult life before his conversion to Islam was spent in Missouri journalism, where, at the pinnacle of his career, he worked at the

Missouri Republican, where Mark Twain had begun his career much earlier. Webb apparently knew Twain and personally invited him and several other dignitaries to one of his first highly publicized parlor talks on Islam in February 1893. By that time, Webb had become a popular, though amusing subject in the *New York Times* and other American newspapers. Mark Twain knew of Webb's mission, and his well-known reference to "Missouri Moslems" in *Tom Sawyer Abroad*, which appeared in 1894, a year after the parliament, may well have been written with Webb in mind and probably evoked images of Webb for many American readers of the book in the 1890s. In Twain's narrative, Huck Finn asks Tom Sawyer about "Moslems" after their encounter with a troupe of whirling dervishes in Egypt. Huck recounts: "And when I asked him what a Moslem was, he said it was a person that wasn't a Presbyterian. So there is plenty of them in Missouri, though I didn't know it before."³⁶

Webb grew up at a time when New York State and neighboring Massachusetts had established themselves as pioneers in American culture, actively shaping national consciousness and laying the foundations of a distinctive national identity. During the generation before Webb's birth, American national culture began to come into its own, taking a course independent of the European models that had dominated the colonial period.³⁷

The Hudson River School (1825–1875) was the earliest distinctive post-revolutionary school of American art and architecture. Webb's native Hudson-on-the-Hudson was one of the movement's principal centers and an artists' haven during Webb's childhood and early manhood. Frederic Edwin Church, a leading figure of the school, was closely identified with the city, often resided there, and remodeled the First Presbyterian Church to which the Webb family belonged. Like the literary movement of the time, the Hudson River School drew its inspiration from the New World's natural beauty, especially that of the Hudson Valley and the adjoining mountains of western New England. Proudly nationalistic, it immortalized on canvas many stunning views of the Catskills panorama as seen from Church's Persian-styled Olana Manor, three miles outside Hudson. For Webb, such stunning views were familiar sights.³⁸

When Alexis de Tocqueville visited America in the 1830s, he failed to notice its budding literary movement and wrote, "The literary genius of Great Britain still casts its rays deep in the forests of the New World." But within a decade and shortly before Webb's birth, Tocqueville revised his assessment by taking note of Washington Irving, James Fennimore Cooper, and William Ellery Channing, the American "apostle of Unitarianism."³⁹ Webb was an avid reader from childhood and knew well the national literary figures of the time, but, in addition to their general appeal as works of art, the emerging American literature of the time spoke powerfully to Webb's consciousness because its setting was often the surroundings of his native region.

	Webb's Life	Political Developments	Cultural Developments
Early Victorian Period 1820–1850	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1846: Webb's birth. 1864: Webb enrolls in Claverack College. 1869: Webb goes to Chicago. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1850: Enactment of Fugitive Slave Law. 1854: Bleeding Kansas. 1857: <i>Dred Scott</i> decision. 1859 Abolitionist John Brown raids Harpers Ferry. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1847: Hudson's whaling economy cannot be revived. 1847: Frederick Douglas publishes <i>North Star</i>. 1851: Death of James Fennimore Cooper.
Middle Victorian Period 1850–1870	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1870: Webb marries Laura Conger. 1871: Webb's business burned out in Chicago Fire. 1871: Laura Conger disappears from records. 1872: Webb Loses religion. 1874: Webb comes to Missouri; editor of <i>Unionville Republican</i>. 1876: Webb at <i>St. Joseph Gazette</i>. 1877: Webb enters St. Louis Journalism. Marries Ella Hotchkiss. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1861–1865: The Civil War. 1865–1877: Reconstruction. 1876: Little Bighorn, Custer's last stand. 1877: End of Reconstruction. Beginning of the "Jim Crow" Era. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1852: Harriet Beecher Stowe publishes <i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i>. 1859: Darwin publishes <i>The Origins of Species</i>. 1860–1861: Pony Express (St. Joseph, Missouri). 1862: Death of Henry David Thoreau. 1864: Death of Nathaniel Hawthorne. 1869: Trans-Continental Railway completed. 1881: Death of Ralph Waldo Emerson. 1885: Chicago builds first skyscraper. 1886: Completion of Statue of Liberty.
Late Victorian Period 1870–1901	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1881–1883: Webb leaves journalism for the circus and the stage. 1881: Webb begins study of Oriental religions. Becomes a Buddhist. ca. 1883: Webb joins the Theosophical Society. 1883–1887: Webb returns to journalism at the <i>Missouri Republican</i>. 1888–1892: Webb appointed U.S. consul to the Philippines. 1888: Webb converts to Islam. 1890–1892: Webb corresponds with Indian Muslims. 1892: Abdulla Arab, Indian Muslim merchant, visits Webb in Manila, to lay the foundations of the American Mission. 1892: Webb's Oriental tour. 1893: Webb inaugurates the American Mission in Manhattan. 1893: Webb represents Islam at the Parliament of Religions. 1896: The end of Webb's American Mission. 1901: Webb appointed Honorary Turkish Consul General to New York. Visits Turkey. 1916: Webb's death. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1890: Massacre of Wounded Knee. 1896: <i>Plessy v Ferguson Decision</i> establishes racial segregation as national policy. 1914–1918: World War I. United States does not enter until 1917. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1891: Death of Herman Melville. 1890s: The telephone has become an indispensable part of America Life. 1892: Death of Walt Whitman. 1893: Chicago World's Fair and Parliament of Religion. 1903: Orville and Wilbur Wright—flight at Kitty Hawk. 1910: Death of Mark Twain. 1912: Sinking of <i>Titanic</i>. 1915: Alexander Graham Bell inaugurates first transcontinental telephone service. 1916: Henry Ford's "Model T" has become a national mania.

FIGURE 1.2. Rough Victorian American Timeline

Cooper and Irving were New Yorkers and broke the ground for a distinctive American literature, inscribing the themes and imagery of their native state on the American imagination. Irving's humorous *History of New York* appeared in 1809. Its narrator, the fictional Diedrich Knickerbocker—as much a pedant as Ichabod Crane—presented his own eccentric history of New York since the world's creation. In *Sketches*, which came out in 1820 and contained “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” and “Rip Van Winkle,” Irving experimented with the short story, helping to craft it into one of American literature's most successful genres. Cooper grew up in the Alleghenies in a frontier town northwest of Hudson and fostered a romantic picture of the wilderness and its people in *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) and *Deerslayer* (1841).

Interestingly, both Irving and Cooper took note of Muslims. Cooper hailed a 1645 victory over the Barbary pirates by a crew of Massachusetts seamen as “the first American naval battle.” It prefigured the nation's triumph over the North African regency of Tripoli in 1815, which in many eyes established the young republic's status as a nation among nations. In *Salmagundi*, Irving created the character of “Mustapha Rub-a-Dub Keli Khan,” a fictional Barbary pirate on parole in New York, who, in his sundry reflections on public manners and morality, determines that America is more a “logocracy” or “government of words” than a government of the people. While serving as diplomatic attaché to Madrid from 1826 to 1829, Irving fell in love with the lore of medieval Muslim Spain and wrote *The Conquest of Granada* (1829) and *The Alhambra* (1832), both of which left their mark on Webb. Later, as ambassador to Spain, Irving published an influential but hastily written and poorly researched work titled *Mahomet and His Successors*, which Webb knew and frequently commented on.⁴⁰

Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau—all New Englanders from Massachusetts—built on the broad literary foundations of Irving and Cooper. In *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Hawthorne confronted the unforgiving legalism of Puritan religiosity. Emerson, an eminent Unitarian turned Transcendentalist, greatly influenced the literary expression and religious thought of his contemporaries, including Webb. Emerson advocated that each person seek an intensely individual path to religious truth, an ideal that Webb himself would emulate. Thoreau, Emerson's friend and disciple, undertook his own spiritual journey and recorded it in *Walden* (1854).

Herman Melville and Walt Whitman, New Yorkers roughly of Webb's generation, were particularly successful in molding the American literary imagination and articulating the nation's sense of self. In truly Mid-Atlantic spirit, both rejected institutionalized religion as the overseer of America's conscience. They celebrated the majesty of America's unspoiled nature and the native virtue and wisdom of its common people.⁴¹ Whitman was deeply influenced by Elias Hicks, an early abolitionist and Quaker leader whose

radical theology had even divided the local Quaker congregation of Hudson, New York. Webb liked to quote from Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, which typified the individualistic and nonconformist spirit of nineteenth-century New York. Whitman "[cocked] his hat as [he] pleased indoors or out" and found God's signs in everything, even a handful of grass: "I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord / . . . Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic."⁴²

Where Webb Belongs in History

Although *A Muslim in Victorian America* is the first in-depth study of Webb's life, his importance has been recognized for some time, especially in academic circles. More than twenty years ago, Akbar Muhammad emphasized the need for exhaustive research on Webb "to illuminate the early social and intellectual history of Islam in the United States."⁴³ In the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, an examination of Webb's legacy for American Islam has taken on additional significance in light of Webb's relatively broad-minded spirit, his frank opposition to fanaticism, and his lasting civic commitment. But where exactly does Webb belong in the history of Islam in America?

In 1945, Dr. Emory Tunison, an American convert to Islam and secretary of the New York Islamic Center, resoundingly proclaimed Webb to have been "the first American Muslim."⁴⁴ Although unique in Muslim American history, Webb was not the first Muslim on American soil, nor was he even the first Anglo-American to adopt Islam or dream of bringing it into the consciousnesses of other Americans. Tunison lived half a century before the presence of West African Muslims among America's slave population came to general attention in the late twentieth century. Although they represented a small percentage of the enslaved Africans brought to America, West African Muslims made up a "distinctive minority" because they were often literate and came from relatively cosmopolitan backgrounds, as exemplified in the lives of Job son of Solomon, Yarrow Mamout, and "Prince" Ibrahim.⁴⁵ Seeking to rectify this oversight with regard to Webb, Fareeha Khan, who did her master's thesis on him at the University of Chicago, describes him as an early white convert to Islam in the United States and noteworthy example of an American who embraced Islam with no links, direct or indirect, to the older legacy of the religion among the enslaved Africans of the antebellum era.⁴⁶

The earliest records of indigenous European-American conversion to Islam have been found in Canada. Although little is known about them, John Love, a native of Ontario, and John and Martha Simon, a couple who immigrated to Ontario from the United States, registered themselves as "Mahometans" in the Canadian census around 1871.⁴⁷ A few years later but still several years before Webb's conversion, an American missionary identified only as the Reverend Norman embraced Islam in Turkey and returned home

with the intent of establishing an Islamic mission. In 1896, the eminent British Orientalist Thomas Arnold referred to Webb's conversion in the first edition of his classic work *The Preaching of Islam*, but he carefully noted that a Methodist clergyman named Norman had been sent to Turkey from the United States as a Christian missionary but ultimately embraced Islam instead. In 1875, the Reverend Norman returned to the United States to propagate his newfound Islamic faith.⁴⁸

Arnold took his information from a French Orientalist, Joseph Garcin de Tassy, who had mentioned Norman in an annual review of Indian literature for the year 1875. Citing the British Indian press, Garcin de Tassy noted the shocking discovery of several British conversions to Islam in India. Also expressing alarm at the precedent, the *Bengalore Examiner* declared: "Few people will be able to believe that Europeans in Hindustan have abandoned the Christian religion in order to turn themselves into Mussulmans and have thus dishonored their countries; but the matter is only too true." Garcin de Tassy then cited the *Indian Mail's* report of the Reverend Norman scandal: "What is even more astonishing is the perversion of a Methodist missionary named Norman, who had gone to Constantinople to preach the Gospel but who embraced Islamism and is now preaching it in America."⁴⁹ In 1984, Akbar Muhammad first drew scholarly attention to Norman's story. But other scholars were slow to take note, and it is not uncommon even today to find references in their works to Webb as the first American convert to Islam and indigenous propagator of his adopted faith.⁵⁰

I wavered a long time myself before assigning Webb a label. It seemed wise at the outset to liberate him, insofar as possible, from the contentious adjective "first" and to look instead for something less impassioned, such as "early American spokesperson of Islam." All the same, Webb does deserve the prestige of standing first and foremost in several areas of the modern history of Islam in America. The vision and scope of Webb's work were distinctive. In 1895, when he and his family were living in penury in the Catskill Mountains and his mission was on the brink of total financial failure, an Indian Muslim reader of Webb's *Moslem World* wrote to assure him: "I am sure that you will, in spite of all the opposition and difficulties in your way, push on and not at all care for people who go against justice and honesty. There is no doubt that God will help you, and that in the history of the Islamic propaganda in America your name will stand first and foremost."⁵¹ A month later, Webb's good friend and supporter Hajee Abdulla Browne, a British convert who was editing the *Egyptian Herald* in Cairo, offered similarly encouraging sentiments:

Dear Brother Webb:

Peace be with you.

Very many thanks for the always welcome *Moslem World*, a valuable aid to the good work you have so nobly undertaken.

No one knows better than I the many difficulties that surround such efforts as yours, and I trust that the day is coming when all Islam will recognize the services you are rendering to the cause we all have at heart. If our Moslem brethren generally could grasp the true value of your labors, they could not but enter heart and soul into the task of aiding you, and I trust and hope that the time is not far off when they will do so; till then you must only labor on, but ever with the certainty that the best and surest reward awaits you in the hereafter.

With salutations to all the brethren in America,

Hajee A. Browne⁵²

In other ways, too, Webb stood first and foremost in the history of Islam in America. From the beginning, he sought to give his work an international perspective by creating a link between America and the Muslim world. Seira Shalton, who wrote her master's thesis on Webb at Arizona State University, emphasizes the international dynamic of his vision: "From the podium and in the press, Webb assumed the responsibility of becoming Islam's spokesperson in America and a liaison to the rest of the Islamic world."⁵³ This perspective is reflected throughout Webb's speeches and writings and culminated in his appointment as Honorary Turkish Consul General to United States in 1901. Richard Seager, an authority on the First World's Parliament of Religions, notes that this Ottoman honor reflected the status Webb had attained in the eyes of the contemporary Muslim world.⁵⁴

As a pioneering herald of Islam in the United States, Webb may rightfully be called America's first Muslim editor and the founder of the North American Islamic press. His newspapers and journals were widely read not only in the United States but also in Europe, Asia, and Africa. Their period of circulation (1893 until early 1896) was relatively short, yet few attempts at Muslim journalism in America lasted longer until the latter part of the twentieth century, when the American Islamic press came into its own.⁵⁵ Webb's editorial work was of credible quality and even today compares admirably with North American Muslim journalism.

Webb's participation in the First World's Parliament of Religions of 1893 constituted a singular claim to fame. As indicated earlier, he was the only Muslim—and an indigenous one at that—to represent Islam at that great watershed in American cultural history. But his public appearances on Islam's behalf extended far beyond the parliament, and he evinced a readiness to travel widely throughout the country to lecture on his faith. Like many Victorians, Webb had a preference for informal parlor talks at private homes but also lectured in diverse public arenas and gave regular weekly presentations in the opulent lecture room of his Moslem World Building at 458 West Twentieth Street in Manhattan.

With reading circles in New York, Washington, D.C., and California, Webb's Islamic society demonstrated a distinctive structure and an interesting strategy that antedated by a full generation America's early-twentieth-century Islamic missions.⁵⁶ In light of Webb's organizational work, Jane Smith and others have designated him as the founder of New York's "first documented Islamic institution."⁵⁷ Smith adds that he established the "first Muslim house of worship" in America.⁵⁸ Webb's Manhattan mosque on the third floor of the Moslem World Building in Chelsea was, in fact, inaugurated a full seven years before the Syrian and Lebanese Muslim immigrants of Ross, North Dakota, began to hold communal prayer services in their homes in 1900. The mosque in Ross, sometimes called "the first American mosque," was not built until 1920, two years before the construction of the so-called "mother mosque" of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, which remains functional today.⁵⁹

Webb's speeches, pamphlets, and books frequently drew attention to his spiritual journey to Islam, and, in light of this work, he has been characterized as one of the precursors of Islamic conversion narrative in the West.⁶⁰ But, perhaps as much as for anything else, Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb deserves to be counted first and foremost among American Muslims as a public representative of the faith who attempted to take interpretative control over his faith and speak of it with personal authority; he attempted to forge a viable Islamic self-definition and authentic indigenous identity within the norms of an increasingly pluralistic world.

Jane Smith concludes that, although Webb was "extremely serious in his dedication to Islam and his desire to bring its message to his native country and city," his efforts left no "lasting effect on the religious culture of America."⁶¹ Similarly, J. Gordon Melton observes that although Webb, like the proponents of America's first Buddhist and Hindu missions, used the Parliament of Religions as a platform for announcing his mission, his undertaking, unlike theirs, never succeeded in establishing a lasting movement with an unbroken spiritual pedigree traceable to the parliament. Webb's legacy, in Melton's view, was largely forgotten after his death.⁶²

Much of what Smith and Melton say can be conceded for the short term. Although the story of Webb's conversion and Islamic mission in America were hot items in the early 1890s press, Webb faded quickly from public memory, and his legacy long remained hidden below academic radar. Five years before Webb's death, Samuel Zwemer established a Protestant missionary journal bearing the same title as Webb's journal, the *Moslem World*, but it was dedicated to diametrically opposing goals. Between 1920 and 1960, both it and the *International Review of Missions* presented several studies on Islam in America without a single reference to Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb.⁶³ Strikingly, no mention of Webb, not even an obituary, appeared in the early issues

of the London-based *Islamic Review*, which began in 1913, or in its American counterpart, *The Moslem Sunrise*, which was inaugurated in 1921.

All the same, Webb was not utterly forgotten after his death, and his life served as an inspiration for at least a few Muslim Americans. In 1943, the Webb Memorial Committee held a tribute in his honor at Manhattan's Steinway Hall.⁶⁴ There had probably been at least one earlier Webb memorial, although the 1943 meeting appears to have been the last.⁶⁵ Two Muslim American converts spoke in Webb's commemoration at Steinway Hall: Dr. Emory Tunison and Nadirah Florence Ives Osman. Osman had come to know of Webb in 1931 while in Turkey after someone in India mailed her a copy of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's *Teachings of Islam*. The preface had been written in 1910 by Muhammad Ali, a prominent Lahori Ahmadiyya⁶⁶ leader and scholar. Ali paid tribute to Webb, whom he identified as a New Jersey resident, and thanked him for valuable editorial assistance in the final draft of Ali's English translation of the Qur'an. Osman exuberantly declared:

No one can imagine how joyful I was to see this reference to an American convert to Islam from New Jersey, for I had been born in that state myself, and many of my relatives were still living there. It comforted me, far away in a distant land, as though he were approving the position I had taken, as a convert to Islam. It is always remarkable, even to myself, why I did not write immediately, or even later, directly to Muhammad Ali to enquire about him. However, 1910 was a long way removed from 1931. A whole war lay between. I had the feeling that he must be dead. It was only later, when I met Dr. Tunison, that I found in his enthusiasm again the echo of Muhammad Webb's name. Since then I have found, with Dr. Tunison, the simple stone that marks his grave, and seen the vine of ivy that swards his resting place.⁶⁷

In the end, though, Webb's merit does not hinge on his having been first in various aspects of American Islamic history, nor has it been diminished by the fading of his memory for most of the twentieth century. Webb's very human and very American biography is edifying for its own sake. Until his death, he remained a prototype of pluralism and civic involvement. More generally, his life constitutes a true-to-life reflection of Victorian American history.

His adoption of Islam in late-nineteenth-century America was utterly out of the ordinary, but the manner in which he pursued it was not. Webb embraced Islam in the spirit of classical American individual initiative in religion.⁶⁸ Moreover, Webb regarded his conversion as a perfectly natural alternative for himself and any other American who chose it. He never became deeply learned in Islam yet was creative in his application of what he knew. With an instinctive

American naturalness, he assumed authority in the interpretation of his adopted religion, rejected “fanaticism” and bigotry, and never felt himself duty-bound to follow any “irrational or backward” formulations associated with the faith wherever he might encounter them. Webb founded his life and his vision for Islam in America on the same broad spiritual ethos through which he himself initially made his journey to the faith.

2

Hudson Valley Roots

The Big Picture: Victorian America

The lives of human beings reflect the times in which they live, and one can see clearly the influence of the Victorian period on Webb. Not only was he characteristically Victorian in outlook and behavior, but many aspects of his biography make full sense only within the Victorian context.

Like other historical eras, the Victorian age is a construct of historians. They differ in their dating of it, although the lengthy reign of Queen Victoria (1837–1901) always constitutes a convenient reference. Webb was born in the era's early phase, attained manhood during its middle period, and lived out most of the remainder of his life during the late stage.

The Victorian age was a “crucial turning point” in modern history, a major transition from the largely agrarian, premodern past to massive industrialization and urbanization. It was an era of imperialist global expansion, a self-consciously new age marked by distinctly novel ways of looking at the world. Although Victorian America remained an epoch of Protestant hegemony and its core values emanated from the dominant culture's belief in work and progress, Webb's generation was one often engaged in radical reinterpretations of society, nature, the self, and society.¹

It was during the Victorian period that America came of age, gradually emerging as a world power and a major player in international affairs.² Webb witnessed these changes firsthand, although his four years as U.S. consul in the Philippines reminded him

repeatedly that, in the eyes of established powers, the United States was still far from ranking as a peer.

During Webb's childhood, the nation completed its continental expansion from Atlantic to Pacific. A year before his birth, President James Polk annexed Texas and triggered the Mexican War (1846–1848), which ended in a humiliating defeat for Mexico and cession of most of its northwestern territories to the United States. Such monumental changes had local significance for Webb. Hudson's General William J. Worth, a hero of the War of 1812, won national acclaim in the Mexican War and served as Mexico City's military governor.³ By coincidence, a prominent nineteenth-century memorial to General Worth stood in Manhattan directly in front of the location of Webb's first mission office at 1122 Broadway. By 1912, four years before Webb's death, the forty-eight contiguous states had become a single union, making the United States one of the largest and potentially most powerful nations on earth.⁴

The unprecedented metamorphosis from a rural to an urban nation of burgeoning industrial cities was one of the principal revolutions of the period.⁵ The Hudson Valley of Webb's childhood was little different from the agrarian landscape familiar to George Washington. All of that changed with the Civil War, which marked the beginning of industrial America and the emergence of new technologies and ways of thinking. The nation moved rapidly toward urbanization, and, by the time Webb reached old age, the number of American towns and cities had increased sevenfold.⁶ In high buildings, elevators supplemented staircases and ushered in a panorama of unprecedented towering structures. City skylines extended upward toward the clouds, and, in 1885, Chicago inaugurated the era of the skyscraper.⁷

Life on the Hudson River

To tell Webb's story without speaking of the Hudson River would be like writing about Mark Twain without mentioning the Mississippi. Webb grew up only a few minutes' walk from the great river's banks, and his identity was deeply rooted in the river and its history. Like other Hudson youths, he could have recounted at length an array of river stories and legends, including those of the Nantucket whalers who first settled his town. Like most of the city's children, however, he saw the river not as a historical symbol but as a focal point of fun. Throughout the year, it offered a variety of sports and games. Year-round fishing opportunities included ice fishing when the river froze over. The river was excellent for swimming and boating, and, in the dead of winter, it provided ice skating and ice boating. The river's main channel was usually open to navigation, and boats were required to cross the river itself. In harsh winters, however, the river occasionally froze over, providing a special occasion for Hudson families, who seized the opportunity to cross the river on

foot, sleds, in sleighs, or on iceboats. There were no bridges, and daily ferries transported people, announcing their comings and goings with deafening whistle blasts that filled the streets of Hudson.⁸

Webb's native Hudson-on-the-Hudson owed its existence to the river. During his childhood, the Hudson ranked indisputably among America's most vital waterways. It was not only the backdrop of Webb's sense of himself but was central to America's emerging national consciousness. It was the central symbol of the Hudson River School, for which the city of Hudson was a principal center, and was a key image in early American literature.

Located about a hundred miles north of New York's Upper Bay, Hudson-on-the-Hudson was established in 1785. Its history did not go back to the colonial period, but the city had been chartered just two years after independence and prided itself on being among the first municipalities incorporated in the newly established United States.⁹ What colonial roots the city might boast of were rooted in New England and not New York, since its founding fathers were mostly pacifist Quaker seamen from Nantucket.

After the Revolutionary War, England's continued hostility toward its former colony exposed the American merchant marine to regular predations. As in the story of Melville's *Billy Budd*, British men-of-war would seize American ships, impose heavy taxes upon their owners, and press their crews into service. Because of its location far out in the Atlantic, Nantucket was dangerously exposed to English attacks.

For Nantucket Quakers, armed resistance was out of the question, but their economic losses were also unacceptable. In 1783, their leaders banded together to find a commercially viable haven. They decided upon Hudson, which at the time was a small Dutch waterfront known as Claverack Landing. Many of the new families came to Hudson by sea. Some dismantled their old houses in New England, numbered the timbers and frames, loaded them on their ships, and brought them upriver to be reassembled in Hudson.¹⁰

Webb was born in Hudson at a time when history had already begun to pass it by, but, as was the case with many up-and-coming cities, there had been little indication of Hudson's looming fall from greatness during the early period. Soon after its foundation, it had moved into the forefront as a prominent American seaport, and from 1790 until 1815 it was designated an official port of entry to the United States. Famous ships from around the world docked in its port, which could accommodate more than twenty-five seaworthy ships at a time and boasted a number of first-rate shipyards. Hudson became a magnet for regional commerce and international trade and was praised throughout the nation for its precociousness. The *New York Journal* spoke of its rapid growth as "something unheard-of and marvelous."¹¹

Hudson's commerce was primarily based on regional products. New York City was its major market, although the port also traded actively with the Old South and the Caribbean and maintained commercial links with Europe.

Whaling had never prospered in Hudson as it had in Nantucket, and even before Webb's birth it was more a matter of nostalgia than profitability. Still, Hudson outfitted many great whaling ships that plied the southern seas, often returning with tales richer than their catch. But Hudson's attachment to whaling was strong, and in 1829 it made a concerted attempt to revive the industry, which led to the formation of the Hudson Whaling Company. A year before Webb's birth, the corporation failed suddenly, bringing huge financial loss and an abrupt end to Hudson's whaling dreams.

By 1847, economic decline had set in and the city's maritime greatness faded into little more than a memory. One Hudsoner despaired: "The days of [Hudson's] prosperity have long since passed away. Its wealth has diminished, its business sources have dried up, and almost every vestige of its former glory has disappeared."¹²

As Hudson turned away from the sea, its aspirations turned inland, especially toward the vast wilderness beyond the Alleghenies. The new-fashioned railroads interceded to fulfill its westward-looking dreams, rendering obsolete what remained of the city's maritime past. By the 1850s, the old waterfront was virtually closed for business.

During the first decade of Webb's life, Hudson undertook major railway construction. In 1851, Webb probably took part with Hudson's other children in the grand festivities welcoming the Albany–New York line. Speeches and celebrations lasted through the day, culminating in a grand public banquet for more than fourteen hundred. A local reporter declared: "We reached Hudson amid the booming of cannon and the cheering of thousands. There was more enthusiasm manifested here than at any previous stopping-place. Banners and flags waved in every direction, and the utmost enthusiasm prevailed." Soon, Hudson emerged as a central cog in the New York rail system. By the time Webb was a young man, he could board a train in Hudson for Buffalo and from there proceed to Chicago.¹³

New York and the Mid-Atlantic Cultural Genius

One of the most important developments in America's English-speaking colonies—a phenomenon with parallels throughout the British colonies—was the subtle, development of cultural undercurrents. This cultural drift ultimately led to the creation of a viable, indigenous sense of New World identity sufficient to wean America from its transatlantic roots and enable it to negotiate New World challenges on its own. Such cultural developments not only made it possible for British American colonies to survive in the wilderness but laid the foundation for revolution and a coherent nation-state.¹⁴

I opened this chapter by saying Webb was a Victorian. He was, more precisely, a Victorian from America's Mid-Atlantic cultural zone. To understand



FIGURE 2.1. Webb's New York and Surrounding Area

him, it is important to have an appreciation of those qualities of the Mid-Atlantic that make it distinct from anywhere else.

In the thirteen British American colonies along the Atlantic seaboard, three zones of pan-British (early American) culture emerged: New England, the Mid-Atlantic, and the Old South. Each region matured into one of the core areas of American cultural genesis. Webb's New York, in company with New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware, constituted the Mid-Atlantic.¹⁵ Each main cultural area corresponded to a primary center of seventeenth-century Protestant settlement: Massachusetts (Puritan), New York (Dutch Reformed), and Virginia (Episcopalian).¹⁶

By the time independence came, certain outlooks had become characteristic of each zone. In New England, Puritanism engendered introspection, a commitment to external moral conventions, and serious civic commitment. The Mid-Atlantic was markedly different. It had a deeply innovative religious character, one that was as heterodox if not as heretical as New England was orthodox. The Mid-Atlantic was also known for its Yankee pragmatism and robust individualism embodied by Walt Whitman. Given its overwhelmingly agrarian nature and dependence upon slave labor, the Old South was inherently conservative, patriarchal, and elitist. Its cultural ethos was also, not surprisingly, linked to the imperative of preserving white exclusivity and racial supremacy.¹⁷

Webb's township and the Hudson Valley in general constituted a distinctive subcultural zone of the Mid-Atlantic. Hudson had ethnic and cultural roots in Nantucket, which were further strengthened by proximity to the Massachusetts and Vermont borders of New England. This special relation to New England made Hudson and much of the Hudson Valley an overlapping cultural zone, where Mid-Atlantic and New England culture came together.¹⁸

In addition to Hudson's Nantucket roots, it was also the case, more generally, that most British Americans who settled the Hudson Valley during the late eighteenth century had originated from New England. American cultural historians often mention the theory of "first effective settlement" to explain local regional consistencies. According to the theory, the initial groups to settle a region—the Puritans of New England or Dutch of New York, for example—generally set primary cultural norms that affect the assimilation of newcomers, whatever their background. In Webb's region, the first effective settlers were Dutch Protestants, and they left a stamp of pragmatism, relative broadmindedness, and a "religious civility" surpassing other colonies.¹⁹ Hudson's first effective settlement, however, had been at the hands of the Nantucket Quakers, and they made it a point to imprint the city with their own distinctively New England flavor, which, although blended with the region's overall Mid-Atlantic temperament, can still be sensed in the city today.²⁰

Mid-Atlantic Religious Innovation and Webb's Formative Period

Hudson's religious institutions represented the most common Mid-Atlantic denominations: Presbyterians, Methodists, Dutch Reformed, Lutherans, and Baptists. As founders of the city, Quakers were especially strong. The Hudson's Proprietors—the leading members of its founding families—were mostly members of the Society of Friends (Quakers), and the Quaker Meeting House was, naturally, the city's oldest church. True to Quaker tradition, the Proprietors welcomed all denominations to the city and donated sites for their houses of worship and religious schools.²¹ The Freemasons, a quasi-religious society, were an important part of Hudson, as they were elsewhere in the United States, and established a lodge there in 1786. Roman Catholics arrived in 1847, a year after Webb's birth, and founded a thriving congregation. In 1855, the city's African-American minority established the Zion Methodist Episcopal Church and continued to expand their numbers during Webb's early manhood. A small group of Jews, apparently newcomers to Hudson, incorporated as an official congregation in 1868, shortly before Webb left for Chicago, and built a synagogue two blocks from his home.²²

The First Presbyterian Church was Hudson's second-oldest congregation and is one of its largest and most prominent churches even today. As mentioned earlier, former President Martin Van Buren was an active member, often officiating in various minor capacities.²³ Although reared as a Presbyterian, Webb made during his early manhood what appears to be his first independent religious choice: he joined Hudson's Episcopalian Church. He claimed, however, that the change had been motivated not by theological considerations but by consideration of the attractiveness of the congregation's young ladies.²⁴

Religion has always been deeply rooted in the American experience. Tocqueville, who visited America during the Second Great Awakening, observed that religious commitment exercised more influence over the United States than any nation on earth: "It is religion that gave birth to the Anglo-American societies: one must never forget this; in the United States religion is therefore intermingled with all national habits and all the sentiments to which a native country gives birth; that gives it a particular strength."²⁵ Webb's formative period took place during the last years of the Second Great Awakening, a time when "religious exuberance was at an unusual pitch" and the "democratization" of Old World Christianity was brought to its completion.²⁶ The religious expression of the time was as highly diverse as it was individualistic, presenting "alternative views of religion, the rights of women, patterns of eugenics, and the like."²⁷

The Second Awakening was an age of “uncompromising dreamers.” Religious millenarians and utopians multiplied throughout the United States, seeking a new moral order and “taking their models from some perfect past and their direction from some perfect future.” They spread out over the nation to establish religious communes where the pious, often after “long treks to the new promised colonies or kingdoms,” could make a new beginning. Townships grew up around their religious experiments and still bear names like Zion, Aurora, Bethel, and Zoar, which reveal their religious origins in the spiritual enthusiasm of the period. Such communities were so widespread during Webb’s formative period that it would have been difficult to find an American who had neither participated in nor lived within range of them.²⁸

Webb grew up in ready proximity to some of the most important religious experiments of nineteenth-century America: Shakers, Mormons, Adventists, and Perfectionists. There is no question that the religious ambience of the times helped form the attitudes and expectations that guided Webb through life.

Columbia County and eastern New York were rich in religious enthusiasm, but over the Catskills in central and western New York lay the “burned-over district,” so-called by later historians because of the frequency with which it was “struck by evangelical lightning.” The district witnessed the “first major *intra*-American blending and fusion of regional cultures” and, remarkably, it matched the old core area of the Iroquois Confederacy, which fostered marriage alliances and other contacts with white settlers.²⁹ It was also a springboard for westward migration and a major source of Midwestern culture. Few other parts of America generated such diversity of consequential religious movements and intense followers, and the fervor of religious renewal did not persist anywhere as long as it did there.³⁰

New York’s religious movements manifested characteristics typical of the evangelical individualism of the Second Awakening, combining a powerful sense of personal biblical authority with original interpretation. This independent evangelical spirit empowered ordinary Christians to take direct part in the world of preaching, revival, and missionary work. The Second Great Awakening created democratic religious communities that nurtured a strong “we-feeling” within their ranks and often succeeded in spreading their missions abroad by producing “tremendous expansionary energy” in their followers, but which, to the displeasure of many mainstream Protestants, also fueled communitarian and exclusivist sentiment.³¹

Presbyterians, representing the predominant Mid-Atlantic denomination, were major participants in the First and Second Great Awakenings and were among the earliest churches to master the “competitive revivalism” of American religion and adopt “a New World orientation.” They were predictably nationalistic and made little attempt to maintain ties with their denominational brethren across the Atlantic. Ambrose Searle, a British colonial governor of New York, “smelled Presbyterians at the bottom of the colonial conspiracy,”