

*The Backcountry Towns of Colonial Virginia.* By Christopher E. Hendricks (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006, 240 pages, ISBN: 1-57233-543-2.)

Historians long deplored the colonial South's lack of urban development as a sign of the region's cultural and economic backwardness. The contrast with New England was glaring. Only in the last few decades, with help from geographers, has this belief in a laggard South relented. Carville Earle, H. Roy Merrens, Charles Farmer and others showed that what first looked like an underdeveloped landscape actually had its own harmony and efficiency.

Christopher E. Hendricks seeks to apply these insights, largely formulated within the Tidewater region, to the zone of eighteenth-century settlement, known as the backcountry. He organizes the eighteenth-century backcountry into four regions: the Piedmont, Southside, Great Valley, and Mountains. Within each region, Hendricks provides a good descriptive summary of town planning and promotion. Hendricks also incorporates negative evidence, proposed urban places that were platted but never built known as "paper towns."

Most of the interpretation is found in the first and sixth chapters that bracket the regional treatments. At times, the successive town stories threaten to take on the character of a directory or descriptive catalog. But Hendricks spends time on each star because his ultimate interest is their constellation. At least that's what he says in the introduction. Scholarly interest in "the chain of city, town, and village," what geographers call the urban hierarchy, has a substantial literature. Hendricks finds the central place theory of Walter Christaller useful for explaining the locational distribution of lower order places in the settlement system. The wholesaling or merchantile theory of Vance (and Donald Meinig) informs the creation of interior transfer centers connected to coastal entrepot cities. Hendricks also finds useful the staple theory of Earle and Hoffman, the idea that dominant products from the rural hinterland heavily influenced urban growth.

Hendricks elevates the idea that urban places exist because they serve particular urban functions to status as an independent theory, but many scholars would point out that this familiar insight really undergirds all urban systems thinking, including those mentioned above. The most common urban function is economic exchange, but government service, cultural institutions, and manufacturing, also contribute mightily to the growth of an urban place. Of course, once a place establishes itself in one function, it has an advantage in gaining additional functions and thereby compounds its growth.

These ideas remain more implicit than explicit in Hendrick's treatment of backcountry town development. The successive town stories remain almost entirely descriptive, with little analysis. Readers with an interest in the history of a specific town will probably find the descriptions interesting and well written. Most of Hendricks's research appears to have been in secondary sources, including many excellent local histories, and published primary sources. Documentation comes heavily from state-level government, particularly statutes and legislative petitions. Fuller use of local records would have been interesting. The result for this reader was a stronger sense of each town's external appearance than of local direction.

The theoretical framework carefully set forth in the introduction is not much in evidence in the book's concluding chapter. Urban function, a key concept, is treated in two paragraphs that summarize the findings but neglect any discussion of the significance

or wider applicability. Certain points of interpretation, moreover, seem questionable. Some readers will also dissent from the way backcountry town development is periodized. Hendricks detects two periods, the first from 1687 to 1783 of four private, manorial-type projects, and a second starting just a few years later in 1744 of a much more numerous strategy of town building by proprietors who provided civic amenities, generous credit, and active promotion. The periodization is reasonable, but the pattern is not explained and therefore contributes little insight into eighteenth century urban development.

Although the author declares that “Planned urban settlements account for the rapid expansion of colonial Virginia into its backcountry,” the book that Hendricks wrote lends this thesis little support. What Hendricks actually does is offer evidence that the popular assumption that towns are a product of, and follow settlement of agrarian frontiers is inaccurate. This has also been shown for later settlement zones. Second, and potentially more interesting, he suggests that a vernacular understanding of how to create a town was active well before the end of the colonial era. For this insight, as well as the local history Hendricks presents, this slim volume should find a niche.

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