

Review of Warren R. Hofstra, *The Planting of New Virginia: Settlement and Landscape in the Shenandoah Valley*.

The problem with the backcountry, and to a lesser extent with backcountry studies, is implicit in the term itself. By definition the backcountry was undeveloped, marginal, remote, in a word peripheral to the ostensibly more important concerns and developments along the seaboard. In the eighteenth century the immigrant people of the “back parts” were significant insofar as their bodies shielded coastal communities from imperial rivals and hostile Indians or buttressed the white population against slave uprisings. Likewise, the historical mainstream has relegated backcountry colonists to a supporting role in a grand drama centered on slave societies, the Atlantic economy, transatlantic cultures, and the imperial crisis. In this book, Warren Hofstra gives this early American narrative a Turnerian twist, placing what was once peripheral at the center of the national story. Unlike the townless plantation region of Virginia’s tidewater and piedmont, the Shenandoah Valley, Hofstra tells us, evolved into something quintessentially American: a landscape of town and country, carefully ordered and fully integrated into the market economy, a landscape that survived the industrial revolution and proliferated across the continent in the nineteenth century. The American heartland had its origins in the early backcountry.

New Virginia was the region just west of the Blue Ridge mountains, consisting of a handful of settlements stretched along the Shenandoah Valley (Hofstra’s particular focus is on the Opequon settlement). The planting of these settlements, Hofstra reminds us, was at once an economic and political process. It was driven by both the desire among small farmers for fertile, well-watered, affordable land with which they could

achieve competency, and the desire of colonial and imperial authorities to establish a western buffer against the French and their Indian allies. Within this dual context a story unfolds. In the 1730s, colonial officials created and enforced land policies that limited speculation and concentration, thereby enabling settlers to acquire choice lands in quantities sufficient to maintain a comfortable subsistence. Predictably, policies designed around the needs of small farmers stimulated immigration, and within little more than a decade the Valley had evolved into a landscape of dispersed farms and open-country neighborhoods. Although it lacked a political or economic center, this settlement system supported a vigorous local exchange economy and a growing population of independent yeoman households.

Imperial concerns continued to redraw the landscape in the decades after settlement. In 1742, despite more than a decade of peaceful coexistence between white settlers and Indians, heightened fears of a French-Iroquois alliance provoked a skirmish in the Valley that in turn prompted the first steps toward centralization. In order to better secure property and organize Valley inhabitants for defense, the Virginia assembly rushed to establish new counties in the region and appointed Winchester as a county seat. Still, Winchester played a purely political and administrative role in the region; it had no market function, nor did it alter the local exchange economy. During the Seven Years' War, however, Winchester was made a garrison town. Constructing and manning the garrison, along with the military's demand for flour, infused cash into the local economy and established an outside market for wheat.

By the end of the war, conditions were ripe for the economic transformation of the Shenandoah Valley. The emergence of the Atlantic wheat market in the 1760s

provided the occasion for local merchants to organize trade between Valley farmers and coastal merchants. The imperial crisis temporarily disrupted this process, but by the 1790s the Valley was experiencing an economic boom, exporting massive quantities of flour, importing more consumer goods, and purchasing slaves. By 1800 the old exchange economy was yielding to a commercialized, cash-based system. Production remained dispersed throughout the countryside, but Winchester was situated at the commercial and civic center of the region, surrounded by a constellation of crossroads, hamlets, and villages, creating a landscape in which town and country were integrated and interdependent, a landscape that by 1800 was already established in Kentucky and would soon characterize the American heartland.

This book has many strengths. It bears all the marks of a mature scholar who has devoted his career to his subject and understands it intimately. Hofstra is at his best in his thick descriptions of the forests, farms, roads, paths, mills, houses, barns, crops, and people that inhabit his landscape. His description of the exchange economy is masterful, as are his accounts of Indian-white relations and their complex dynamics. In a refreshing turn away from theory, Hofstra avoids the shopworn arguments about the yeomanry, class, and the rural transition to capitalism, preferring simply to tell the story of small farmers practicing their livelihood and letting the implications speak for themselves.

There are weaknesses, though they are few. As cultural history, *The Planting of New Virginia* is rich but very conventional. Yet Hofstra deploys a fashionable cultural history jargon that has a disingenuous ring. The landscape “compose[s] a text embedded with the mentalities of [its] creators” (117). Its story is “encoded” and “engraved on the land” (51); it can be “read” by analyzing the material culture settlers “attached” to it

(131). This language is hollow because the method is not inductive, and so “text” itself becomes a metaphor, and a rather thin one at that. Hofstra’s use of mechanical metaphors in describing this landscape is much more effective . Also, this study largely ignores the social history of new Virginia and completely neglects its religious history. But these are hardly weaknesses, given the strength of its political, economic, and cultural analysis. We can only be thankful that Hofstra left some work for the rest of us.

The Planting of New Virginia is by no means fully representative of the early American backcountry or even the southern backcountry. The author acknowledges its limits, noting in particular that the sectional tensions that characterized the Carolinas is largely absent here, and that accommodation, not conflict, more accurately describes life on the Virginia frontier. All the same, it is a book with which any treatment of the backcountry will have to contend. It brings a larger dimension to the story of the backcountry, placing it squarely within the political and economic context of the Atlantic world. It integrates the story of Indians and European settlers, showing how the destiny of both was in part determined by distant forces. It describes the evolution of a town and country landscape that must now take its place in the historical narrative alongside the plantation south and the industrial north. It brings the periphery to the center of the story, making a strong case that middle America has its origins in the Virginia backcountry. Like Robert Mitchell’s pathbreaking study of the Shenandoah Valley a generation ago, Hofstra’s is certain to become the definitive work in the field.

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