

Book Review

Edited by Tom Costa

The Planting of New Virginia: Settlement and Landscape in the Shenandoah Valley by Warren Hofstra. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004. Pp. x, 432. \$25.00 paper. ISBN 0-8018-8271-0

By the early to mid decades of the eighteenth century, colonists in Britain's North American colonies had begun to penetrate the North American interior. No longer tied to the Atlantic seaboard, England, through its colonists, began to exert its imperial influence along a vast frontier. To the colonists, this frontier region was the backcountry, a term reflecting a general mentality among the colonists that political and economic centers were situated in Europe. However, as Warren Hofstra convincingly argues in his work *The Planting of New Virginia*, the development of the backcountry in the Shenandoah Valley foreshadowed the development of future frontiers in America. That is, the Shenandoah backcountry, connected both physically and metaphysically to the Atlantic seaboard and to England, became somewhat progressive as it developed economically and socially. It did so in a manner that became a model for later western expansion areas of the United States. While colonists looked east, the future of what America would become was unfolding to the west.

Warren Hofstra's examination of the Shenandoah Valley makes two important contributions to the historiography surrounding the American frontier. First, Hofstra successfully sets the Virginia backcountry within an imperial context. Hofstra convincingly demonstrates how three primary concerns affected British imperial policy and helped the Virginia government encourage settlement throughout the Shenandoah Valley. Fears concerning French expansion in lands west of the Appalachians, fears about Amerindian raids against Eastern Virginia, and fears about slave rebellion in Eastern Virginia and the possibility of escaped slaves creating maroon settlements in territory closer to Amerindians all came together to produce a desire

to establish a buffer between western lands and the more established east. Such fears allowed larger issues related to the political, economic, and social climate of the Atlantic World to shape the settlement of the Shenandoah Valley during the 1730s.

The second way in which Hofstra contributes to the historiography surrounding the American frontier serves as the heart of the work and builds on the imperial context surrounding the settlement of the Shenandoah Valley. Hofstra outlines an interpretive model for the study of the American frontier that suggests the settlement of the Shenandoah Valley “in many ways epitomizes” middle America. Central to this argument is the transformation the region underwent in which dispersed, “open-country neighborhoods” morphed into a town and country landscape. Hofstra demonstrates that eastern Virginia and European economic and political forces shaped the development of towns throughout the region, as opposed to local economic forces or central-place theory.

The evolution toward a town and country landscape occurred in three phases and was intricately woven with imperial issues tied to Amerindian raids against the region and French expansionist visions. The first phase of settlement of the Shenandoah Valley found families dispersing themselves along tracts of land that had access to water and that contained land of both good and poor quality. The second phase in the development of the Shenandoah Valley witnessed the emergence of the county system of government throughout the region, as well as the creation of county towns. Winchester came to figure prominently in the region as events surrounding the Seven Years’ War turned the town into a “strategic place” and allowed it to become an important feature of the military and then, only later, the economic landscape. Hofstra explores how an exchange economy developed during this phase, thus creating a backcountry intricately linked to a vast economic network driven not so much by a motive for profit, but for basic necessities. During the third and final phase of the development of the Shenandoah Valley, the region’s economy moved away from an exchange economy and toward a commercial economy. It was during this phase that an interdependent relationship grew between the towns in the region and the surrounding countryside. Cash increasingly became integral to the economy as opposed to neatly balanced ledgers that reflected an exchange economy. More than the

need for or the export of consumer goods, Winchester developed as a commercial center only after its development as a strategic place during a war that spanned the Atlantic World. Farmers in the region began to improve their property only after a larger commercial revolution gripped the Atlantic World economy and as the market for grain across the Atlantic grew. External, more than internal, forces sparked the development and growth of towns in the region.

Hofstra's argument against central-place theory, his tracing the development of the Shenandoah Valley through an Atlantic World context, and his tying the backcountry to an imperialist agenda, make *The Planting of New Virginia* an important contribution to backcountry studies. Rather than isolated and self-sufficient, as the Frederick Jackson Turner Frontier Thesis suggests, Hofstra's study of the Virginia backcountry clearly supports the image of the frontier family as coexisting within a larger economic and political system. The representation of the backcountry as interdependent economically is truly indicative of the economic culture of the frontier in American history. For example, as the frontier expanded beyond the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia, justices throughout the Upper Valley went to great lengths to develop an infrastructure that would support similar interdependent relationships. With networks linking the area to the coastal Tidewater, the region maintained an import/export relationship that solidified its interdependency within the Atlantic World. Clearly, as Hofstra suggests and as findings related to the settlement and development of the Upper Valley indicate, the concept of Turnerian self-sufficient homesteads dotting the frontier landscape does not apply to the eighteenth century Virginia frontier regions.

Some historians may quarrel with Hofstra's conclusions that capitalist, or commercial, economic features began only in the third phase of the region's development, when cash became an important element in the economy. Farmers began to grow a surplus of wheat, for example, for sale in the towns that were developing across the region. These towns became the economic centers that allowed for the commercial economic characteristics in the region to advance. Thus, a proto-capitalist spirit only began to emerge at the end of the eighteenth century.

Central to this commercial economy was the use of cash. Hofstra views the injection of cash into the economy as the driving force be-

hind the movement away from an exchange economy. Absent from Hofstra's examination is the role ordinaries, or taverns, played in the economic development of the region. Outside of a brief discussion about how ordinaries served as a potentially corrupting force to Washington's troops stationed in Winchester during the Seven Years' War and how tavern keepers were selling alcohol to soldiers in exchange for regimental supplies, Hofstra fails to explore the ways in which taverns provided credit to farmers to allow for economic expansion, allowed farmers to tie themselves to larger markets, and acted as distribution centers for locally produced products. Tavern keepers possibly took into account labor, delivery, spoilage, and profit, even if the product was being exchanged for other goods as opposed to cash, as well as compensating for bad debts, when they set the prices of their products. If such a dynamic was taking place within the taverns of the Shenandoah Valley, then a somewhat capitalistic mentalité was in existence along the backcountry at least within this segment of the population. As farmers took advantage of credit and purchased goods that were priced according to the hidden costs associated with those goods and the desire for profit, then through extension those farmers too were involved in a somewhat commercial and capitalistic economy. The use of cash is not the sole indicator of a commercial economy, and, as evinced by the Upper Valley where a similar hierarchy of towns failed to materialize, the development of market centers was not a necessary component for a frontier region to become locked into an interdependent economic relationship with larger economic webs. Without any discernable towns, the settlements along Virginia's western waters were able to export a variety of goods as early as the first settlers entered the region.

Hofstra's work adds much to the historiography of the backcountry and the development of commercial forces in America. His use of metaphors and engaging stories about events along the backcountry make this work not only informative, but entertaining. Readers interested in the development of the backcountry and in early Virginia history will be hard-pressed to find a better history of the Shenandoah Valley than Hofstra's *The Planting of New Virginia*.

B. Scott Crawford
Director of Education
Art Museum of Western Virginia