

Introduction

THE AMERICAN FRONTIER has long been the object of historical inquiry. Even before Frederic Jackson Turner reshaped the field in the early 1890s with his essay *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, the frontier already occupied a special place in the American imagination. Indeed, much of nation's written history to that point centered in one form or another on the westward movement of Euro-American newcomers and the collision of cultures that occurred along the borderlands of the United States. Turner expanded on that narrative in an attempt to make sense of the processes at work along the frontier and, for better or worse, to assess the frontier's impact on the development of the American nation. Jackson prefaced his analysis by asserting that the physical frontier had come to an end; in essence, however, the scholarly study of the frontier was just beginning. Indeed, while many of Jackson's assertions about its significance have been challenged, repudiated, or revised, the frontier remains, from a scholarly perspective, a wide open, vibrant part of the historical landscape.

At a fundamental level, there is something about the frontier that still appeals to scholars seeking to understand its place in the American experience. This is especially apparent for the colonial frontier, which has enjoyed a considerable amount of scholarly attention over the past several decades. Recasting the colonial periphery alternately as the backcountry, borderlands, and/or contact points, historians and students of early American history have wedded emerging trends in social, cultural, and environmental history to more traditional forms of political, economic, and military inquiry to create a more complete, and much more complex, story of the frontier experience in early America. The infusion of new trends in scholarship into the existing historical literature has produced a blended history of the backcountry that simultaneously confirms, contradicts, and contextualizes our understanding of the frontier as a place and a process in American history. This new understanding has been further enhanced and complicated by specialized regional and local histories that have demonstrated striking similarities and profound differences across

time and space on the colonial borderlands, in the process revising, and at times redefining, our understanding of the regional variations in colonial America. Moreover, new spatial and temporal designations emerging from studies of specific frontier regions, such as the mid-Atlantic and Ohio Country, have complicated the longstanding regional classifications of the New England, middle, and southern colonies.

The eighteenth-century Pennsylvania backcountry occupies a prominent place in this historical literature, with scholarship on the subject steadily trending upward over the past few decades. This special issue of the *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* is a byproduct of this scholarly updraft, as it is unattached to any particularly poignant historical anniversary or commemoration. Rather, the essays in this special issue seek to highlight recent accomplishments in the field while pointing toward new avenues of inquiry.

Much of the modern scholarship on the eighteenth-century Pennsylvania backcountry has focused on the interplay between native peoples and colonists. The initial essay of this special edition—my own contribution—offers a reflection on the recent historiography of Indian-colonial diplomacy and sociocultural interaction. Beginning with the 1999 publication of James Merrell's *Into the American Woods*, scholars have woven new threads into the detailed tapestry of the negotiations between natives and newcomers in Penn's woods. Yet, rather than simply recounting the thrusts and parries of the recent historiography in a standard format, I have sought to test the interpretations of these scholars thematically against the loose parameters of cross-cultural mediation envisioned by Richard White in his seminal study *The Middle Ground* (1991). On the surface, William Penn's Peaceable Kingdom would appear to be an ideal litmus test for models of accommodation and cooperation. Yet, as a host of scholars, beginning with Merrell, have demonstrated, if a middle ground existed on the eighteenth-century Pennsylvania frontier, it was a much darker place than might be anticipated.

The two remaining original essays bring breadth to our exploration of the Pennsylvania backcountry by moving beyond a focused examination of Indian-white relations and interjecting political, economic, and imperial consideration into the discussion. Patrick Spero begins this process by shedding light on a little-known, but fascinating, border conflict between Pennsylvania and Maryland known as the Conojocular War. Pennsylvania's colonial borders were a source of nearly unrelenting strife, especially in

the thinly populated peripheral regions of the colony, yet these border conflicts have received little modern scholarly attention. The transgressions of Connecticut settlers in the Wyoming Valley during the American Revolution have been recently scrutinized in detail by historians, while the border dispute with Virginia in southwestern Pennsylvania during the second half of the eighteenth century has received less focused attention. Yet, as Spero notes, the earlier boundary dispute between Pennsylvania and Maryland has been largely neglected. Spero seeks to correct this deficiency by shedding light on the political significance of the Conojocular War, both locally and provincially, while offering important considerations about Pennsylvania's expansion policy and the shifting, self-interested nature of loyalty along the eighteenth-century frontier.

Marcus Gallo's essay compliments Spero's work by examining another sort of sociopolitical development along the West Branch of the Susquehanna River during the revolutionary era. There poor Scots-Irish migrants created a *de facto* squatter republic, based on an internally developed system of "Fair Play" wherein labor and improvements to the land provided a basis for occupation. This new frontier framework functioned effectively as long as the squatter population remained manageable, but, as Gallo demonstrates, it did not create a particularly egalitarian community. Competition and self-interest remained key characteristics of the squatter republic, as men and women strove within the Fair Play system to define the limits of aggressive competition and protect every individual's access to opportunity. With the American Revolution came change, and, despite the squatters' efforts to co-opt the Patriot cause as protection for their frontier land claims, the removal of colonial land restrictions resulted in a wave of settlement to the region, fracturing the community created by the Fair Play system and destroying the fledgling squatter republic. As Gallo observes, the entire process provided an early model for patterns of occupation, usurpation, and consolidation of the hinterlands of postrevolutionary America.

Both Spero and Gallo demonstrate that the Pennsylvania backcountry remains a vibrant field of study with many paths yet to explore. Together, they demonstrate the importance of intercolonial competition, social conflict, political manipulation, and, perhaps above all else, the pervasiveness of self-interest along the eighteenth-century Pennsylvania frontier. Moreover, both Spero and Gallo have tapped into some of the underutilized source material available for researchers throughout the common-

wealth. Much of the remaining space in this special issue is dedicated to illuminating some of those sources for historians and students alike. David W. Maxey begins this section with a thorough examination of the papers of Samuel Wallis, a canny, self-promoting frontier entrepreneur and land agent. Maxey intertwines a brief biographical sketch of Wallis into an illuminating overview of the collection, housed at the Muncy Historical Society and, in microfilm, at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, as well as the history of its preservation. Interestingly enough, a focal point of both the essay and the collection is a curious receipt for payment from Wallis to none other than Benedict Arnold—a payment delivered after the latter's infamous treason was uncovered.

What follows Maxey's more exhaustive essay is a generous sample of shorter introductions to numerous "Hidden Gems," a diverse assortment of little-known yet valuable sources that provide insight into the Pennsylvania eighteenth-century backcountry. Some of these gems come in familiar forms: written primary documents culled from numerous archival collections, including journals, letters, business ledgers, travelers' descriptions, and court records. Among the glimpses into life in the Pennsylvania backcountry provided by these sources are a Presbyterian minister's record of communion practices, a trader's description of pathways leading west from the Susquehanna River, and the letters of a minister detailing, among other things, the growing resentment among backcountry settlers against Indians. Other sources shed light on lesser-known events or aspects of frontier life, such as the importance of translation in business transactions and the role of slavery in western Pennsylvania. Collectively, these pieces illustrate the great value that remains in archival sources and offer compelling insights into how even small details can reshape larger narratives.

In addition to traditional written sources, the "Hidden Gems" section reveals other avenues for exploring the Pennsylvania backcountry. Colonial-era maps, in particular, often offer compelling or complementary clues about familiar stories, such as Andrew Hamilton's deceptive sketch-map of the 1737 Walking Purchase or Joseph Shippen's map of the Susquehanna River, which details the physical features of the river as well as the location of Indian villages during the 1750s. In addition, the relentless advance of digital archiving has made maps more accessible than ever for researchers, as demonstrated by the wonderful collection of warrantee township maps available as PDF files from the website of the

Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. Examining museum artifacts, such as the Kittanning Destroyed Medal, one of the earliest decorations awarded for military accomplishment in American history, can offer important insights into the historical context of events in Pennsylvania's backcountry as well as the ways and means by which these events are recalled and commemorated. A historic location or site can also be a hidden gem, as demonstrated by the short introductions to Fort Rice and the Joseph Priestley House, both surviving testaments to differing aspects of military and civilian life in the eighteenth-century Pennsylvania backcountry.

This small but compelling collection of hidden gems provides only a brief glimpse into the many resources available for researchers in archives, museums, historical societies, and, increasingly, on the internet. Indeed, as more archival sources are digitized and made available online, it is highly likely that many more such gems will be discovered by future students and scholars. Coupled with the essays in this issue, readers will, it is hoped, find inspiration in these sources for continued research into the Pennsylvania backcountry. Given the recent trends in the historical literature and increased access to a wider variety of sources than ever before, the future of scholarship on the eighteenth-century Pennsylvania frontier would appear to have a very bright future.

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