

MONEY TALKS, HISTORIANS LISTEN FOR PEOPLE WITHOUT IT

The Transformation of Western Pennsylvania, 1770-1800

by R. Eugene Harper

Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991. Pp. xx, 273. Introduction, appendixes, notes, index, illustrations. \$39.95

IN THIS brief work, R. Eugene Harper examines the five counties of southwestern Pennsylvania — Westmoreland, Fayette, Washington, Allegheny, and Greene. Harper raises detailed questions about the pattern of land ownership in the region and analyzes the concentration of wealth. He also raises important questions about the area during a period of rapid change: what was the extent of tenancy? How many absentee landowners were there? Harper also is concerned with the process and progress of town development as well as occupational structures. A vital concern, he shows, is how the economic structure influenced the exercise of political power. His work makes a significant contribution to our understanding of community development in a frontier region of early America, providing a rich, detailed interpretation of the consequences of rapid economic growth.

The author's major findings may be summarized as follows: southwestern Pennsylvania passed rapidly from a wilderness to a frontier region, then to a "well-developed society" by 1800. Indeed, this transformation occurred in one generation. Even in its early years of settlement, many newcomers (about one-third) remained landless. From the 1780s to 1790s, land and other wealth became increasingly unevenly distributed. Moreover, tenancy increased from 12 percent of the taxpayers (1780s) to 20 percent (1790s). Landlessness increased, the economic order became more polarized, and political offices gravitated to those with greater wealth.

Harper, professor of History at the University of Charleston in Charleston, W. Va., employs quantification techniques to extract generalizations from tax assessment lists about economic and social progress. Using these methods and sources, among other measures of wealth, its creation, and its distribution over time, he informs us of the percentage of landowners, non-landowners, slave owners, and tenants, and the distribution of absentee ownership and taxable wealth owned by people in various occupational categories. In considering town development, Harper notes that the occupational structure of the area became more complex as change occurred.

One wonders if the trends in polarity, stratification, and complexity persist into periods of the region's history beyond 1800. And, while the tax lists help elicit the valuable discoveries presented here, what of the potentially large numbers omitted from tax assessment lists and undiscovered by other methods used by Harper? Still, he provides us with a valuable snapshot of

local society. This work, which was originally his Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Pittsburgh, includes numerous tables and informative maps which support the conclusions and generalizations in the text. It is a work of serious research and scholarly effort, and it is indexed well.

Much effort has gone into the writing of the history of community development in Philadelphia, Chester County, and southeastern Pennsylvania in the eighteenth century; the works of Susan Klepp, James Lemon, and Stephanie Wolf come to mind. Harper's book is an important contribution to scholarly literature aimed at understanding community development on the Pittsburgh side of the state, with special concern for economic advancement between 1783 and 1796. The author estimates there were 33,500 people in the region at the close of the Revolution (1783). By 1800, the number grew to 94,893. The population was mobile; the society ordered; and there was a strong degree of occupational diversity. Between 1770 and 1800, wealthy businessmen dominated industrial development, settled large land holdings, bought slaves, and built sawmills and grist mills. The entrepreneurial class monopolized the important political offices. There were many tenant farmers within a society of yeomen farmers and artisans. Harper's research discoveries assist in comprehending the economic and social transformation of a frontier society into a settled community.

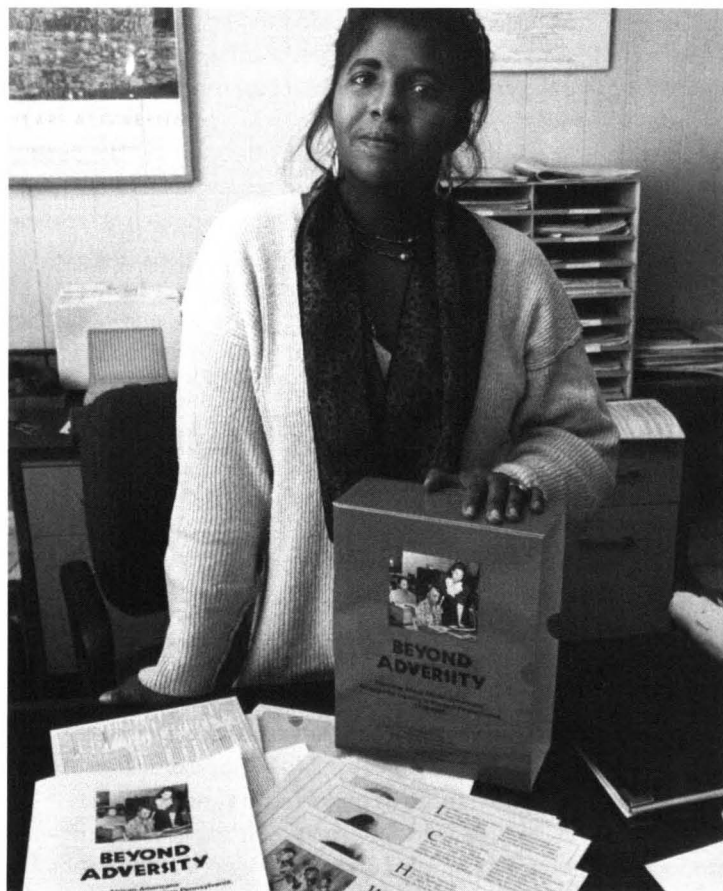
Southwestern Pennsylvania seems to have experienced economic and social trends similar to those evident in Lancaster County from the 1770s to 1790s. (I am aware of the similarities through my own research, presented in *Community Development and the Revolutionary Transition in Eighteenth-Century Lancaster County, Pennsylvania* [New York, 1990], especially chapter 9.) There, the average size of holdings of warrant land declined from 118 acres between 1771 and 1780, to 105 acres in the 1781-1790 period, and to 75 acres in the 1790s. The percentage of warrants for holdings of less than 100 acres shifted from 45.1 (1770s) to 54.9 (1780s) to 70.6 (1790s). Population pressures promoted westward migration. Hundreds of migrants trekked across the mountains from eastern Pennsylvania seeking 3,000-acre tracts at £5 per 100 acres. After the new purchase of 1768, southwestern Pennsylvania became heavily settled, between 1769 and 1774. After the Revolution, hundreds of additional newcomers poured into the region even though land prices had been raised to £10 for 100 acres. Land prices rose sharply in the East also. Economic opportunities in farming declined. The distribution of wealth shifted so that the upper classes held a greater proportionate share in the 1790s than they had owned in the 1770s. The upper 10 percent of the wealthiest taxpayers owned 31.3 percent of the wealth in 1771; by 1782, the top 10 percent owned 38.9 percent of the wealth and, in 1798, 44.4 percent.

Did these economic changes actually take place or do they seem to appear because of the particular types of sources used to compile the figures? There are a few other questions that need consideration. Harper argues strongly for the primary period in the transformation to a settled society in Western Pennsylvania being 1783 to 1796. The 1796 date seems warranted, but by doing so, he does rule out consideration of valuable economic and social data from the United States direct tax of 1798. The author raises many questions about the distribution of nationality and ethnic groups and ably presents other scholars' findings about these settlers and their numbers in the region, but he doesn't resolve the fundamental question of just how accurate the estimates are. Harper is at his best with biographical portraits of a few key men responsible for the economic and social growth of southwestern Pennsylvania. For some men, like Edward Cook, prominence in economic affairs led to political office-holding. But does this apply to all southwestern Pennsylvania office-holders up to 1800? Women are mentioned only peripherally — for example, as widows, on pages 26, 93, and 122. Yet women provided much labor in the rapid economic and social transformation of the region.

One would like to know more about the impact of economic change on the political structure. Indeed, most of Harper's evidence on politics is biographical data on key actors. Most of his main points on this subject concern the economic and social class status of politicians. One is left with many unanswered questions. In earlier interpretations, frontier, "back-country" sections have been seen as simply structured, economically and politically equalitarian communities — open societies with many opportunities for social mobility. But according to Harper, southwestern Pennsylvania by 1800 was highly stratified politically and economically. The author doesn't really tell us why his picture of the frontier region is so different from others. And although Harper forces a reinterpretation of western Pennsylvania political leaders such as Hugh Brackenridge, John Smilie, William Findley, and Albert Gallatin, one would like to see more from him about Anti-Federalism, the Whiskey Rebellion, the Bill of Rights, and the triumph of Jeffersonian Democracy in this region. ❁

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THE HISTORICAL Society of Western Pennsylvania recently completed a curriculum package titled *Beyond Adversity: Teaching About African-Americans' Struggle for Equality in Western Pennsylvania, 1750-1990*. The Society's fifth such project in recent years to focus on a regional history topic, *Beyond Adversity* examines the significant contributions of African-Americans to the history of Western Pennsylvania, and the struggles of individuals who labored and continue to labor to ensure the promise of equality for future generations. The package is intended principally for use in school grades 6 to 12, but social organizations, churches, and the general public will find the material useful and enlightening.

When African-Americans settled in Western Pennsylvania during the 1750s, they came as soldiers, wagon-makers, artisans, slaves, and free men and women. They brought a strong determination to succeed and to go beyond the adversity which they confronted daily. This determination was passed along from

**Patricia Mitchell, the
Historical Society's African-
American Programs
Coordinator, with the new
curriculum package, *Beyond
Adversity*, published by the
Society's Museum Programs
Department.**