

# BOOK REVIEWS



## **Frontier Country: The Politics of War in Early Pennsylvania**

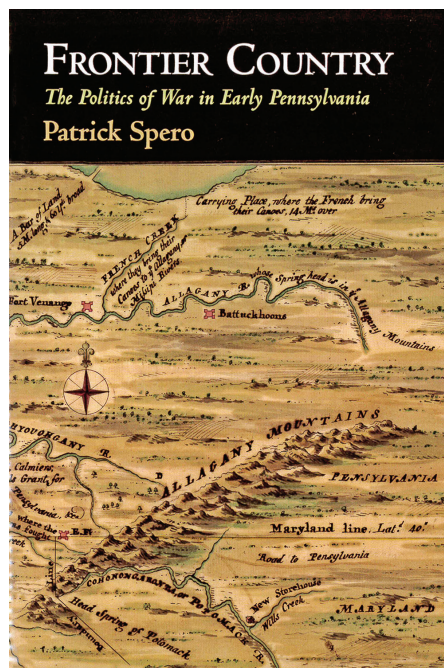
By Patrick Spero

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When researching and writing about history, it is not always enough simply to read the words from the past. One must consider how the meanings of those words have changed over time. In *Frontier Country: The Politics of War in Early Pennsylvania*, author Patrick Spero uncovers the meaning of the word *frontier* to residents of early Pennsylvania, demonstrating how the development of frontiers shaped the colony and the new United States.

Unlike today with our romantic ideas of them as places of opportunity and settlement, residents of early Pennsylvania viewed frontiers as dangerous and terrifying. These were areas between opposing enemies, vulnerable to attack, created during periods of war or conflict. The process of “becoming a frontier country” at times could even extend to include a group or an individual’s identity. Indeed, a frontier country was more than a place of sparse new settlement; it was what the colonial government of Pennsylvania actively worked to avoid throughout the late 17th and 18th centuries. In this context, Spero builds a narrative of the development of Pennsylvania from a peaceful and prosperous colony, to one that by the time of the Revolution, was a failed state rife with instability. This, Spero expertly argues, was the result of colonial Pennsylvania’s inability to govern its frontiers. The failure to do so not only aided in the patriots’ ability to unify opposing groups leading to the Revolution, but also remade the government of Pennsylvania, as it finally became a frontier country.

Weaving big-picture history with stories of individuals and small groups, Spero’s chronological telling of Pennsylvania’s past is enlightening, relatable, and engaging. Beginning with the arrival of William Penn at what would become Philadelphia, *Frontier Country* touches on the development of

various colonial governments in Pennsylvania and intra-colonial divisions that began early on. He shows the lengths colonial officials went to ensure peaceful and prosperous trade with indigenous tribes, bringing prosperity to the whole colony. Eventually, inter-colonial conflicts such as Cresap’s War, little known even by the 1760s, are shown to play a crucial role in the formation of frontiers.

The watershed moment for this narrative, however, is the Seven Years’ War, which unleashed a level of violence not yet experienced in the colony. Through this, Spero demonstrates how disillusioned and self-described frontier inhabitants successfully took the reins of local government in the western parts of Pennsylvania. Seeing opportunity in the colony’s weakness, Connecticut and Virginia invaded and occupied large swaths of Pennsylvania’s territory. As Pennsylvania’s ability to govern within its own borders crumbled in the early 1770s, Spero brings the reader to a crescendo whereby eastern patriots unite with western frontier people to topple imperial rule and remake the colony’s government in their image. The most revolutionary moment for Pennsylvania, he shows, is how this process allowed Pennsylvania to continue to exist.

A masterful work shedding light on what one reviewer called “the f-word” of American history (frontier), *Frontier Country* is comprehensive in scope and well researched. Of interest would be further exploration of loyalist or Tory sentiment, if any, on the frontiers. Nevertheless, in his work, Patrick Spero gives us a deeper understanding of the people and places that made up early Pennsylvania, reminding us of the complexity of the past and the omnipresence of change. 