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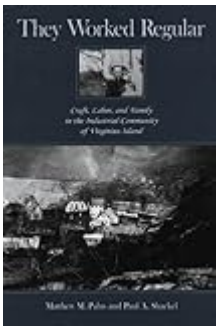

Matthew M. Palus, Paul A. Shackel. *They Worked Regular: Craft, Labor, and Family in the Industrial Community of Virginius Island.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006. xxiv + 147 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57233-444-1.

Reviewed by Tommy D. Lee II (Department of History, East Tennessee State University)

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A Place for Public Memory?

In a deceivingly slim volume that belies the complexity and ambition of their endeavor, anthropologists Matthew M. Palus and Paul A. Shackel seek nothing less than to challenge Americans to confront their industrial past and to reappraise how the history of the American working class can be integrated into the national public memory, a goal that has been a central element of numerous authored and coauthored publications by Shackel.[1] In the early nineteenth century, a privately owned, industrial, and residential community evolved on Virginius Island in the shadow of the U.S. armory at Harpers Ferry, West Virginia. The Shenandoah River offered a ready supply of water power, and the island represented some of the only land available for private, industrial development immediately adjacent to the federally owned properties at Harpers Ferry. Although now partially overgrown with vegetation and dotted by ruins, Virginius Island thrived with activity in the mid to late nineteenth century and continued to support industry and residents into the early twentieth century. By focusing on the Virginius Island community in *They Worked Regular*, Palus and Shackel seek to "show the relationship between changing management techniques in a small nineteenth-century industrial community and the changes experienced in daily life by workers and their community" (p. xiii).

Yet Palus and Shackel strive to achieve a great deal more than undertaking a simple case study of an industrial community. Guided by the concerns of the new social history (perhaps no longer so new), the authors employ the results of several years of archaeological excavations on Virginius Island to recover the story of the voiceless working-class residents of the island and offer a corrective for the exclusion of the working-class experience from existing historical accounts of island life. In addition, they seek to contextualize the revised story of Virginius Island within regional and national patterns of industrial development. But the central question of *They Worked Regular* is how the labor heritage of Virginius Island is to be remembered, interpreted, and researched. "Our goal," they write in the last sentence of the book, "is to provide a more inclusive story of the place with the hope that it will also become part of the national public memory" (p. 112). The authors' concern with national public memory consumes an entire chapter and leads

them to critique and offer correctives for interpretation and research on Virginius Island, which is administered by the National Park Service (NPS) and specifically the staff of the Harpers Ferry National Historic Park. *They Worked Regular*, then, is intended as "a template for future investigations of other industrial communities" (p. 15).[2]

Based on historical treatments of Virginius Island and the occurrence of floods that left clear delineations in the archaeological record, Palus and Shackel divide the history of the island into three periods. In the first era, lasting from the early nineteenth century to 1854, entrepreneurs like Lewis Wernwag began the industrial development of the island, and under Abraham Herr's sole ownership the island community became strongly paternalistic. In the second era, 1870 to 1889, paternalism weakened on the island under the ownership of Jonathan Child and John McCreight. Finally, from 1889 to 1924, Virginius Island suffered from neglect under absentee owner Thomas Savery of Wilmington, Delaware.

As Palus and Shackel acknowledge in a descriptive tour of present-day Virginius Island that begins *They Worked Regular*, the NPS has sought to preserve several remnants of the island's industrial past from total decay and has placed interpretive signs at points across the island. The first efforts to assess the cultural resources on the island occurred in the mid-1960s. In the 1970s and 1980s, excavations revealed more buried structures, and in 1991 further excavations focused on the social history of the island at three sites–the Wernwag house, the house of Wernwag's partner Jesse Schofield, and row houses built by Herr in the 1850s. The excavations produced glass and tableware, pollen, faunal material, phytolith material (used to identify plants formerly present at the site), and evidence of spatial relationships on the island.

For the first era, only the Wernwag house site contained sufficient evidence for interpretation. However, pollen evidence revealed a variety of hardwood trees on the island, the presence of weeds commonly found in areas disturbed by construction activity, and the absence of grasses that would have reflected efforts at landscaping. Archaeologists found no evidence of a garden on the property, but excavations revealed that the Wernwag family ate large quantities of berries and domesticated mammal meat, primarily beef, and likely suffered from intestinal parasites. Only two wine bottles were found at the site, but shards of tableware reflected the use of intricate table settings by the family. The upper-class Wernwag family, conclude Palus and Shackel, participated in the growing consumer society of their day.

Evidence from the second era reflected a steep decline in the number of arboreal species on the island, again likely a result of industrial development. In the late 1860s and 1870s, McCreight and his family resided in the former Wernwag house, a choice that, according to Palus and Shackel, confirmed the status of McCreight in the community. Small quantities of grass and lily pollen found in pre-1870 deposits suggest some effort by the McCreight family to landscape and thus distinguish their residence from nearby working-class dwellings. Palus and Shackel see this effort as a clear indication of changing social and class relations on the island. Bones and seeds found on the property from the era revealed the continued presence of berries and quantities of meat in the diet. Mammal bone remnants continued to be the most numerous animal remains found, but pigs provided the largest biomass. Few medicine bottles were found, but wine bottles constituted a high proportion of the glass vessels. Finally, archaeologists found a large proportion of undecorated plates among the ceramic material that nonetheless reflected a preference by the users for multiple courses and intricate table settings.

If the items excavated at the Wernwag House site reflected the material culture, habits, and environment of the well-to-do McCreight family during the late 1860s and 1870s, other sites shed light on working-class life during the same period. At the Schofield House site, occupied by workers after the late 1870s, archaeologists found that mammals made up over 95 percent of the biomass eaten by the family who resided there. The distribution of berry seeds reflected the presence of berries in the working-class diet as well as the cultivation of berry vines. As might be expected, there were fewer tableware items. At the West Row House, pigs and goats accounted for over 26 percent of the biomass, but bone fragments indicated market processing, suggesting that Virginius Island workers purchased rather than raised their meat and were integrating into the wage-oriented, market economy. Archaeologists found no evidence of gardening at the site. At both the Schofield site and the West Row site, however, archaeologists found only two sizes of plate, suggesting a much simplified mealtime regimen than that preferred by the island's elite.

After 1889, life again changed for workers. Pollen evidence reflects the impact of the blight that swept away the American chestnut from much of Appalachia as well as an increase of weedy vegetation and a lack of landscaping, that Palus and Shackel attribute to the decay of

the built environment. Domesticated mammals continued to make up a large portion of island residents' diet, but excavations at the West Row House site produced bone fragments of wild species as well as signs of a garden that Palus and Shackel argue reflected deteriorating living conditions on the island under absentee ownership. Over five hundred glass vessels were also found at the West Row House site. A significant number were medicinal, reflecting an increasing dependence on store-bought medicines, but over half were whiskey or liquor bottles. Finally, excavations at all three sites revealed only a few pieces of formal decaled and gilded tableware. Whiteware predominated, and at the Schofield site and the West Row site archaeologists found a significant presence of ten-inch plates as opposed to smaller plates found in earlier deposits. Workers, it seems, were reserving their few pieces of intricate tableware for special occasions and opting for even larger tableware for everyday use. Yet, in the absence of strong paternal controls, according to Palus and Shackel, workers, by their determination to possess decorated tableware, medicines, and alcohol, were rejecting the implications of their status as unskilled wage earners by asserting their status as consumers.

After combining the archaeological evidence with written and oral histories of Virginius Island, Palus and Shackel conclude that after the 1850s the paternalistic inclinations of the island's owners declined in conjunction with declining living standards for workers, the deskilling of employment on the island, the decay of the natural and built environment, and the increased dependence of workers on consumer goods. In making their argument, the authors challenge existing histories of the island and reprove the NPS for an inordinate concern with antebellum events, the Civil War era, and the island's entrepreneurial elite at the expense of the type of working-class social change reported in *They Worked Regular*. "It is easy to come away with the impression," write the authors, "that the town reached its economic zenith and historical significance in the 1850s and 1860s" (p. 2). While Palus and Shackel acknowledge the efforts of the NPS to incorporate aspects of the new social history into their planning, programs, and interpretation, the NPS receives considerable criticism for failures to interpret the working-class experience more fully for visitors to Virginius Island. "The one domestic site interpreted to the public," write Palus and Shackel of current interpretation efforts on the island, "belonged to the family of one of the industrial entrepreneurs, and the information on the wayside is about the floods that submerged the island" (p. 9).

While describing the state of present-day Virginius Island, Palus and Shackel complain that the remnants of the built environment on the island were "neither 'restored' nor 'reconstructed' but rebuilt to signify something other than ruins, something that will last longer in the face of episodic flooding. While the National Park Service has taken great strides to preserve the ruin, and it was in desperate need of help, the walls no longer look like ruins. They do not give the impression that they have been affected by decades of neglect or by environmental forces" (p. 10).

In their effort to tackle a multiplicity of questions of history as well as archaeological and historical interpretation, Palus and Shackel have produced a work that often proves to be more tantalizing than satiating. Their argument suffers from their overly ambitious agenda. Like the ruins on Virginius Island, the story of the island's working class is "in desperate need of help" and deserves "to be preserved," but in *They Worked Regular*, Palus and Shackel neither fully "restore" nor "reconstruct" the story that they seek to preserve, because they fail to weave together archaeological and historical material in a holistic manner that would have amplified both more fully. Often evidence seems lacking. While perhaps a minor point, the excavation of only three sites may be problematic in terms of sampling, but more troubling is the sparseness of the material uncovered at the sites and the propensity of the authors to bemoan the lack or quality of evidence and then proceed to interpretation. As for the historical methodology of the book, much of the most engaging material in the book is drawn from existing secondary sources about Harpers Ferry and Virginius Island. A lack of written primary documents, like journals or correspondence, plagues efforts to write community studies from the perspective of people who left few written records. Palus and Shackel must, of course, accept the limitations of the new social history and the lack of documents left by their working-class subjects, but the history of industrial entrepreneurs that makes up a large portion of *They Worked Regular* is at best a barebones treatment of an engaging story that, employed well, might have shed further light on the lot of the working class. In one instance, the authors attribute motives to Herr that the evidence presented fails to support. At another point, the authors assert that legal disputes over water rights undertaken by island industrialists reflected "changing attitudes toward nature and the ownership of resources" (p. 18). However, the authors fail to provide sufficient detail regarding the legal disputes to make a

conclusive argument.

Other goals of the authors include placing the history of Virginius Island into broader contexts, but too often they rely on argument by analogy and fail to provide sufficiently strong analogous evidence. They are most successful at integrating the story of the island's working class into the broader scope of U.S. labor history. They demonstrate nicely the commonalities with places like Lawrence, Massachusetts, but they also assert the distinctiveness of Virginius Island and seek to wrap the working-class story of the island into a paradigm of competing classical and liberal republicanism. Except for the emphasis on consumerism toward the end of the book, however, the republican paradigm falls aside uselessly like an anesthetized appendage. Historians like Sean Wilentz (*Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* [1984]) have sought to utilize republicanism to understand the nineteenth-century working class, but their treatments have included sufficient detail and attention to their topic to validate their arguments. In *They Worked Regular*, the argument becomes lost among other lines of argument. Palus and Shackel may be correct in their assertions about republicanism, but their attempt to draw conclusions about a specific place by generalizing from republican sentiment in other working-class communities simply fails to prove that workers on Virginius Island viewed their situation through the same lens.[3]

Except in their use of the wheat-growing regions of Virginia and their mention of the chestnut blight, the authors' effort to place Virginius Island within a regional or Appalachian context also fails. "Archeological materials from Virginius," they write, "best represent changes occurring in the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the apex of industrial development and resource extraction from the West Virginia countryside based on industrial principles of organization and management" (p. xvii). Palus and Shackel might have taken some care making the connection between the island and regional trends; instead, they merely assert in the introduction that "as in much of West Virginia, pulp and paper mark the final period of development as well as the ultimate disinvestment in the Virginius Island community by absentee landowners, connecting our story to the broader narrative of decline and neglect that has affected the region" (p. xix). Contextually, Palus and Shackel omit from their references a number of important works on the southern textile industry, Appalachia, and, more important, West Virginia. For instance, Douglas Flamming uses the techniques of the new social history convincingly to detail the rise and decline of mill owner paternalism and its impact.[4] Likewise, John C. Hennen's work might have been particularly influential in shaping the authors' understanding of Virginius Island's final decline in the early twentieth century. Palus and Shackel make much of the evidence for patterns of consumerism reflected in the archaeological excavations of the West Row House site, but they make little effort to integrate the specific evidence into the broader patterns of consumer behavior that Hennen treats as a byproduct of modernization in West Virginia and the nation prior to the 1920s.[5] Waterpower played such a crucial role in the history of Virginius Island that one cannot help but question what impact the industrial transition to steam and electricity may have had on the island. Palus and Shackel attribute the final demise of industry and the decay of the built environment on Virginius Island to absentee ownership, but changing technology, production techniques, and market conditions may well have played a role in the fate of the community.

The story of Virginius Island and of those who labored on it is worth telling and worth incorporating into the national public memory, and Palus and Shackel are to be commended for seeking a conceptual framework that would allow for the story of the island's working-class residents to be preserved as part of Americans' understanding of their own past. Nonetheless, their execution of the concept leaves much to be desired. The title itself seems to reflect the underlying problem with the text. The phrase "they worked regular" was used by a former Virginius Island resident in an interview conducted in the 1990s by individuals other than the authors. It appears only once in the entire book: "Edna Farmer stated during interviews that everyone on the island 'worked regular,' which appears to mean that they worked very long hours and returned home to eat and sleep only" (p. 94). Palus and Shackel proceed to argue that the long hours accounted for the presence of larger plates being used on the island that "would allow a meal to pass more quickly, where smaller plates would require several servings from different dishes to complete the meal" (p. 94). It seems equally if not more probable that Farmer meant that the residents, even toward the end of the island community's existence, worked regularly or could count on employment without extended periods of unemployment or excessive days of lost wages. In the southern textile industry, in the coal mines of Appalachia, and in other industries operating in the early twentieth century, workers faced periods of unemployment and stretch-outs that could and often did lead to layoffs and irregular work

schedules for those who retained employment. Whatever Farmer's intent, Palus and Shackel speculate on the meaning of a phrase that becomes the title of their monograph, a book crippled by a lack of clear purpose, equivocation, and poorly supported assertion. Moreover, the authors never seem quite sure whether they are writing an archaeological report, a history of the island, a proposal for reforming interpretive practices at public history sites in the United States, or an entreaty for a greater consciousness of working-class history. Readers with an interest in Virginius Island, the NPS's efforts or lack of efforts to preserve the island's history, or the interpretive questions confronting public history sites may find *They Worked Regular* worth examining, but a number of Shackel's other works on Harpers Ferry, archaeology, and the interpretation of historic sites would better serve the purpose. Likewise, readers could obtain a better appreciation of labor history, Appalachian history, or economic history from other sources.[6]

Notes

[1]. Paul Shackel has written a number of important works on history and memory and archaeology and history. Most recently, he has cowritten a treatment of the making of Harpers Ferry's historical identity that in many ways surpasses the book being reviewed. See Teresa Moyer and Paul Shackel, *The Making of Harper's Ferry National Historical Park: A Devil, Two Rivers, and a Dream* (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2007). His other works include Paul Shackel, *Personal Discipline and Material Culture: An Archaeology of Annapolis, Maryland, 1695-1870* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993); Paul Shackel, *Culture Change and the New Technology: An Archaeology of the Early American Industrial Era* (New York: Plenum Publishing, 1996); and Paul Shackel, *Archaeology and Created Memory: Public History in a National Park* (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishing, 2000).

[2]. For a brief but more traditional history of Virginius Island that places the demise of the island community in the mid-nineteenth century, see Mary Johnson, "A Nineteenth-Century Mill Village: Virginius Island, 1800-1860," *West Virginia History* 54 (1995): 1-27.

[3]. The most recent book on the Lawrence strike, and a very readable source, is Bruce Watson *Bread and Roses: Mills, Migrants, and the Struggle for the American Dream* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005).

[4]. Douglas Flamming, *Creating the Modern South: Millhands and Managers in Dalton, Georgia, 1884-1984* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 9-78.

[5]. John C. Hennen, *The Americanization of West Virginia: Creating a Modern Industrial State, 1916-1925* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 79. For more on the southern textile industry and the role of paternalism in mill villages, see Alan Tullos, *Habits of Industry: White Culture and the Transformation of the Carolina Piedmont* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989); Jaquelyn Dowd Hall, et al, *Like A Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 317-318; and David Carlton, *Mill and Town in South Carolina, 1880-1920* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 271. Perhaps the most important works on community in Appalachia are Durwood Dunn, *Cades Cove: The Life and Death of a Southern Appalachian Community, 1818-1937* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988); Dwight B. Billings and Kathleen Blee, *The Road to Poverty: The Making of Wealth and Hardship in Appalachia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and Robert S. Weise, *Grasping at Independence: Debt, Male Authority, and Mineral Rights in Appalachian Kentucky, 1850-1915* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001). For more on labor and community in Appalachia, see John Alexander Williams, *Appalachia: A History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); and John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982). For a treatment of modernization in West Virginia in the early twentieth century, see Paul Salstrom, *Appalachia's Path to Dependency: Rethinking a Region's Economic History, 1730-1940* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994).

[6]. Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy since the Civil War* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 149-153. On the construction of historical interpretation, see Stephanie Yuhl, *A Golden Haze of Memory: The Making of Historic Charleston* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

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