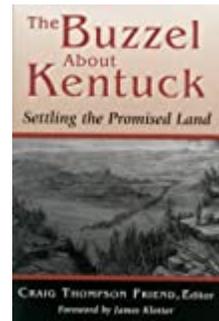




Craig Thompson Friend, ed. *The Buzzell About Kentuck: Settling the Promised Land*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999. ix + 268 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2085-0.



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Trans Appalachian Settlement: The Myth and the Reality

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The Buzzell About Kentuck: Settling the Promised Land, a collection of ten essays edited by Craig Friend, makes a valuable contribution to what James Klotter lamented in 1982 as a “relative dearth of good historical works” about the early Kentucky frontier (p. 1). Friend states in the introduction that he sought as contributors “scholars engaged in new methodologies and materials” and says that the essays “exemplify the new social history” concerning the settling of Kentucky (p. 9). The end result is this collection of offerings by an impressive assembly of scholars and educators from universities throughout the United States. The stated purpose of these works is to show that Kentucky settlers’ lives and communities were more complex than portrayed in previous accounts. The unifying theme is a reevaluation of the settlers’ relationships to the natives, the rest of the nation and to the land itself.

The division of the essays into three parts follows a roughly chronological pattern. Part one: “Dependence and Autonomy concerns early attempts to estab-

lish towns and settlements in the area. In “The Lower Shawnee Town On Ohio: Sustaining Native Autonomy in an Indian ‘Republic,’” A. Gwynn Henderson looks at the native American settlement of Shawnee Town. She describes this settlement as “an amalgamation of tribal peoples,” a complex community of different native ethnic groups (p. 33). Henderson details native American’s attempts to establish community as European settlement pushed them farther and farther west. This essay contains interesting demographics and descriptions of towns and their diverse inhabitants, social structures, government, economy, even their living quarters. Primary sources include the Minutes of the Provincial Council of Pennsylvania, George Mercer Papers, Relating to the Ohio Company of Virginia, and William Trent’s journal.

“Frontier Defenses and Pioneer Strategies in the Historic Settlement Era” by Nancy O’Malley describes the often violent interaction between pioneers and natives. She groups settlement into four chronological periods that became progressively easier as earlier settlers cleared the land, built forts and houses, and fought to overcome na-

tive American resistance to the presence of the Europeans in their territory. Despite the hardships and dangers of Indian attack, the settlers continued to pour into the area, lured by the promise of land, often grouping together in miserable, claustrophobic conditions. Students of social and cultural history and those interested in material culture will find this essay helpful. Detailed physical descriptions of forts, houses and “stations” in each of the four periods indicate an impressive amount of on-site research.[1]

In his essay, “‘This Idea in Heaven’ Image and Reality on the Kentucky Frontier” Daniel Blake Smith describes the political climate that developed as more affluent settlers staked their claim to the land. Thomas Jefferson and other powerful Virginians sought to implement an “agricultural paradise” in Kentucky. Smith’s research into historical documents, newspapers and manuscripts reveals a disparity of the myth and the reality for early settlers. Despite claims of availability of land, the reality was that few yeoman farmers could amass the capital required to buy land and most ended up as tenant farmers if they chose to stay. Cash crops such as tobacco and corn were necessary for economic survival and such crops required substantial capital and a reliable labor force. Smith stresses the fact that Kentucky was the first new slave state admitted to the union and settlers who could afford slaves were more likely to prosper. He concludes that Western Kentucky proved to be a land of promise only for already prosperous farmers and land speculators.

Part two, “Enacting Expectations” details “the designs and activities of . . . gentry politicians, yeoman farmers, and urban laborers” (p. 14). In the first essay, “Kentucky in the New Republic: A Study of Distance and Connection,” Marion Nelson Winship takes issue with the depiction of Kentucky as an anomaly because it was not truly incorporated into the early republic. She also challenges the assumption that its remote geographic location prevented true political and cultural connection with the rest of the nation east of the Appalachians. A quotation from John Brown’s father, a Virginia clergyman, who inquired in 1775, “What a buzzel is this amongst people about Kentuck?” provided the title for this collection. Brown, a prominent Kentucky politician, was one of the nephews who benefited from the mentoring and political connections of William Preston, “Virginia surveyor and land magnate, arguably the central figure in the development of early Kentucky” (p. 103). It was men such as these, Winship argues, who benefited most from settlement. In fact, Winship insists, these men “were meant to connect the interests of western men and thus to help

bring about the reformation of the relationship between Congress and the Western country” (p.107).

In addition to being well connected with powerful leaders in Virginia and Philadelphia, affluent families such as that of John Breckinridge and George Nicholas were able to move via the Ohio River into the area with relative ease by sending advance groups of foreman and slaves to clear the land, construct buildings and plant crops. Once comfortably settled, they could begin to develop the political strategies that identified their own style of partisan politics. Winship explores Kentucky politicians’ responses to such political issues as the Alien and Sedition Act which prompted The Kentucky Resolutions.

One of the values of the essays in this grouping is that they describe the same capitalist mentality that led to the exploitation of Appalachian resources.[2] In his own contribution, “Work and Be Rich: Economy and Culture on the Bluegrass Farm,” Friend continues to explore the profit motive for settlement. Friend argues that while a farmer might be lured to Kentucky “[t]o live a full life on an independent farm, to cultivate the land and harvest the produce, and to bequeath property to his children,” a fourth and more compelling motive was to profit from a market economy (pp. 125, 126). Even farmers with capital faced problems unlike those in other parts of the country, such as the difficulty in crossing Appalachian Mountains and unreliable river trade. These conditions help to explain the roots of the class system. Even propertied farmers, initially riding the crest of capitalism, faced an uncertain future with deforested lands and an unstable agrarian culture.

Christopher Waldrep continues in the same vein with, “Opportunity on the Frontier South of the Green.” His study focuses on the “eager multitudes” that swarmed to the area located south of the Green River in Western Kentucky. A new law allowed the sale of “two hundred acre tracts to widows, free male persons and anyone else with a family who actually cleared, fenced and tended two acres of corn for a year” (p. 154). Some of the points Waldrep addresses is the prevalence of vigilantism, the use of land as currency, and the transportation of Virginia law to Kentucky. The theme of capitalist motivation for settlement becomes somewhat redundant.

Stephen A. Aron elaborates on the theme proposed by Smith in Part I but focuses his study on the yeoman farmer and working man in “‘The Poor Men to Starve’: The Lives and Times of Workingmen in Early Lexing-

ton.” Aaron’s research of newspapers, journals, historical records and an interesting document, *The Emigrant’s Guide to the Western and Southwestern States* reveal a booming economy that drew workingmen to Lexington. These men supplied the labor for the most dangerous jobs and often found themselves in competition with slaves, especially in Lexington’s cotton bagging and hemp factories. Many slaveowners hired out their slaves for seasonal or annual labor, putting the slaves in direct competition with white laborers. Aron argues that this competition created a hostile environment for blacks and rendered free blacks anything but free. He argues convincingly that this tension was both a cause and effect of the deteriorating social climate in Lexington.

The final section “A Revised Promised Land” deals with the changing social and economic conditions in western Kentucky in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, especially as they affected women and blacks. Unfortunately, these works on subjects of such importance are somewhat disappointing. Ellen Eslinger’s essay, “The Beginnings of Afro-American Christianity Among Kentucky Baptists,” is an analysis of the religious experience of black Baptists in the Bluegrass region surrounding Lexington. The “religious renaissance” in Virginia spread to Kentucky in the aftermath of the Great Awakening and grew rapidly after the Great Revival that swept the western settlements in 1800. Because of slavery, this area had a large black population. Many of the slaveowners were themselves Baptists. Eslinger attributes the decision of slaves to join churches, especially those slaves from large adult groupings, at least in part, to an emerging (or re-emerging) African-American subculture based on a desire for an autonomous community life. Eslinger has done a good job of covering this aspect of black Christianity but as she states in her conclusion, much more research needs to be done to determine if there were, in fact, multiple beginnings.

In “‘I Cannot Believe the Gospel That Is So Much Preached’: Gender, Belief and Discipline in Baptist Religious Culture,” Blair A. Pogue examines the minutes of Great Crossings Baptist Church in Scott County to determine the role of women in churches. She disagrees with Jean Friedman’s thesis [1] that “churches strengthened patriarchal families, inhibited women’s autonomy, and deterred the formation of independent women’s organizations by regulating women’s sexuality through enforcement of a double standard of church discipline” (p. 218). Pogue argues that while some women joined churches for primarily social reasons, many others held deep religious convictions, joined churches that sup-

ported those convictions, and left when the church’s doctrines ran contrary to their beliefs. Though she strongly disagrees with the conclusions of Friedman and Susan Juster, it is clear that much more research is needed to determine the extent of the influence of churches and religion on the patriarchal ideology that determined women’s roles in the home, church and community.

“‘There We Were in Darkness,— Here We Are in Light’: Kentucky Slaves and the Promised Land” an essay by Karolyn E. Smardz, relates the amazing story of Thornton and Lucie Blackburn’s flight from slavery in Maysville, Kentucky, to Canada. This account lends credence to the existence of an underground railroad, a topic of debate in recent years. Smardz theorizes that the practice of “hiring-out” may have not only allowed slaves to purchase freedom for themselves and their families, but brought them “into contact with undesirable influences such as abolitionists, freedman and discontented slaves” (p. 247). The loosening of patriarchal control gave the slaves a taste of freedom and slaves sent to urban locations encountered churches, schools, and other associations where they could mingle with freedman. Smardz feels that the Blackburn story, discovered in 1985 in a Toronto archaeological excavation “is only one of thousands yet to be unearthed” (255). These stories, she feels, will provide examples “of just how dear the concept of freedom was to the enslaved, and the lengths to which they will willing to go to attain it” (255). The Blackburn story proves their efforts were not in vain.

This collection adds considerably to new scholarly literature concerning the settlement of western Kentucky, with the welcome addition of some of the voices silenced in the past. In addition to the content of the essays themselves, the authors’ intensive research and scholarship make the notes a valuable resource for students of Trans Appalachian History.

Notes:

[1]. In her notes on page 73, O’Malley thanks the families who allowed her to visit sites on their property.

[2]. For history of the settlement of Appalachia, see *Appalachian Frontiers: Settlement, Society & Development in the Preindustrial Era* a collection of fifteen essays edited by Robert D. Mitchell, Lexington, UP of Kentucky, 1991. For history of industrialization see Ron Eller *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930*. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1982.

[3]. Jean Friedman, *The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South, 1830-1900*. Chapel Hill: UP of North Carolina, 1986, Susan Juster, *Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics and Evangelicism in Revolutionary New England* Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994.

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