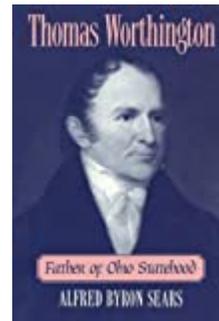




**Alfred Byron Sears.** *Thomas Worthington: Father of Ohio Statehood.* Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998. viii + 260 pp. \$17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8142-0745-1.



**Reviewed by** Mary Alice Mairose (Ohio Historical Society)

**Published on** H-Ohio (June, 1999)

## A Facet of a Complex Man

This study which began as Sears's 1932 doctoral dissertation was first published in 1958. It has been reprinted in conjunction with Ohio's upcoming bicentennial celebration in 2003. Even after more than four decades, it is still the most complete account of Worthington's public life.

Worthington's political career spanned almost three decades and can be divided into three phases: state maker, senator, and Ohio politician. During the first and probably most significant phase of his career, Worthington served as a territorial legislator and led Ohio's battle for statehood. He was also an important member of Ohio's first constitutional convention and worked for broad suffrage for white males and for a strong legislature.

He spent much of the next decade in the U.S. Senate where he served two incomplete terms. Opposing the war of 1812 on the belief that the U.S. was not ready for the conflict, he nonetheless played an active role once war was declared by serving as a member of the Senate Committee on Military Affairs. Worthington also negotiated with the Indians, hoping to prevent them from sid-

ing with the British.

Returning to Ohio, Worthington spent the rest of his public career in state politics. He served two terms as governor. This position must have been frustrating because Worthington had helped to create an office with little power and this prevented him from achieving his goals while in office. Although he supported public schools, reform of penal and poor laws, and regulation of saloons, the legislature passed few laws in these areas. His major achievement as governor was the establishment of the state library. Worthington ended his political career in the Ohio House of Representatives from 1821-1825 where he supported the building of canals.

Perhaps the greatest weakness of the book is that Sears admires Worthington so much that the study reads more like hagiography than historical biography. In the preface, Sears declares his admiration for Worthington's "sturdy manhood, his unflinching moral courage his faith in democracy...He was a true patriot, completely dedicated to what he believed were the best interests of his country..." (p. viii). This dates the book. In our own era of cynicism toward our leaders, this statement seems

naive and simplistic.

This admiration of Worthington becomes a flaw, and any enemy of Worthington's automatically becomes an enemy of Sears. For instance, the statehood debate is presented in terms that Worthington was obviously correct and St. Clair was far from a worthy opponent. Sears seems to have agreed wholeheartedly with Worthington's assessment that St. Clair was a "pathetic old man" and depicts the territorial governor as a political dinosaur "who did not grasp the fact that aristocracy was on the wane and frontier democracy was on the rise" (p. 53). The reader comes away with no sense that the battle between Worthington and St. Clair represented larger conflicts about American government, nor that St. Clair was a patriot during the Revolution who used his own funds to train his men.

While the book is a useful reference tool for students of early Ohio politics, it can hardly be considered the last word on Thomas Worthington. Recent studies of early Ohio have cast Worthington in a very different light than the Sears biography. Andrew Cayton for instance has portrayed Worthington as an aristocrat who was capable of dealing with the developing nature of frontier politics.[1] Donald Ratcliffe's recent work on party politics in early Ohio challenges the importance of the Scioto Valley in the early statehood period.[2] This leaves the reader wondering if Thomas Worthington really was "the Father of Ohio Statehood." A new introduction placing Worthington in the context of recent scholarship would have been a useful addition.

Extensive research in Worthington's papers has convinced me that Worthington was much more complex than he appears in the pages of this study, and that Worthington and his family still have a great deal to teach us

about many aspects of life in early Ohio. Worthington's ambition extended far beyond the political sphere. He was an entrepreneur who owned huge parcels of land, oversaw farming operations, processed his agricultural products, and often personally shipped them to western markets. Chapter Two, "Businessman and Citizen," provides a brief overview of these enterprises, but seems to be an afterthought, as it provides no context for any of these activities.

Likewise, Worthington's family is largely glossed over. Sears declares that "Worthington's domestic life was particularly happy" and his children became "upright and worthy citizens of the community" (pp. 44-45). Yet Worthington's relations with his children were often stormy, and alcoholism, debt, and disgrace played a major role in the lives of his offspring. A fascinating study is waiting to be written on Thomas Worthington and his family.

I only hope that Alfred Sears's biography will not be regarded as the final word in Worthington studies, but will serve as a starting point for future scholarship.

#### Notes

[1]. Andrew R. L. Cayton, *The Frontier Republic: Ideology and politics in the Ohio Country, 1780-1825* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1986).

[2] Donald J. Ratcliffe, *Party Spirit in a Frontier Republic: Democratic Politics in Ohio, 1793-1821* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998).

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-ohio>

**Citation:** Mary Alice Mairose. Review of Sears, Alfred Byron, *Thomas Worthington: Father of Ohio Statehood*. H-Ohio, H-Net Reviews. June, 1999.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3130>

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).