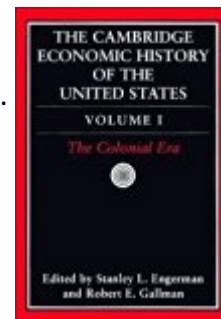


Stanley L. Engerman, Robert E. Gallman, eds.. *The Cambridge Economic History of the United States, Vol 1: The Colonial Era*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 481 pp. \$74.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-39442-0.



Reviewed by Henry A. Gemery

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The preface to the initial volume of *The Cambridge Economic History of the United States* notes the editors' plan to follow out two "moderately unusual ideas" in the series: 1) to give attention to the wider span of British North America--that is, the specific inclusion of Canada and the British West Indies, and 2) to recognize the prior economic history of the societies that came together (willingly or unwillingly) in the region--Native American, African, and European. The set of essays is indeed distinct from prior colonial histories on just those grounds. A third of the nine essays are given over to the Native American, African, and European backgrounds, and two further essays deal with the "Northeastern corner of the New World" and with the British West Indies. The remaining four essays cover the more conventional topics of colonial history--settlement and growth in the mainland colonies, the economic and social development of the South, British mercantilist policies and the colonies, and the Revolution, the Constitution, and the new nation. That structure and coverage can be most directly compared with two earlier colonial histories, Greene and Pole's *Colonial British America* (1984)

and McCusker and Menard's *The Economy of British America, 1607-1789* (1985).[1] Though these volumes lack essays on Native American, African, and Canadian backgrounds, they are comprehensive in other ways and will likely remain as prime surveys of colonial economic history, supplementing the essays in this Cambridge volume.

The three "broadened coverage" essays are capable surveys that serve to begin the volume. Neal Salisbury is given the very challenging task of drawing together a coherent history of the disparate tribes of Native Americans who peopled the continent before and during the colonial era. The task is made more difficult by the extensive time span chosen, from the Paleo-Indians of 10,000 to 8,000 B.C. to the American Civil War. The narrative of trade and displacement (by disease, war, and treaty) that Salisbury provides finds an apt summary in a later chapter where Daniel Vickers, writing on frontier land acquisition, notes: "...if there was good money to be made in dealing with Indians, there were fortunes to be won in supplanting them" (p. 216).

Indians were supplanted not only by whites; they were also supplanted by enslaved Africans. John Thornton's chapter on the African background to American colonization is comprehensive in its discussion of African geography, politics, and economic organization but less complete in its coverage of the slave trade, the prime conduit for forcibly bringing by far the largest "immigrant" group to British America. Although Thornton carefully details sources of supply in Africa, no aggregate totals of the trade are given, so the enormity of the movement is not evident to readers until it appears in David Galenson's tables in chapter 4.

E. L. Jones's essay on the European background is both provocative and wide in its scope--temporal and structural. Witness, for example: "It is not too fanciful to accept that what we are seeing with respect to North America was, in long perspective, a resumption of the westward Germanic movement that had dissolved the Roman Empire and brought the Saxons to England" (p. 97). Or Jones's question on comparative colonialization: "...why was colonializing by other northern Europeans in North America so much feeble than that by the British?" (p. 128).

The three initial essays in the volume, unlike the six following, carry no text footnoting. That, for this reviewer, represents a deficiency in a prime reference work since readers searching for further development of, support for, or an alternative interpretation of an argument or contention are left to search through the bibliographical essays for clues as to the literature that might be relevant to the point in question. The remaining essays are footnoted but contain no internal author references, in contrast to, for example, Floud and McCloskey's *Economic History of Britain Since 1700* (1994), a set of Cambridge volumes that might well be regarded as a companion series.

Coverage of the more "conventional" topics of the volume begins with David Galenson's master-

ful overview of "The Settlement and Growth of the Colonies: Population, Labor, and Economic Development." It is the linchpin chapter in the volume--in its treatment of major sectors and elements of economic growth, in its balance of institutional detail (for example, "The Institutions of Settlement") and economic theory, and in its incorporation of virtually all of the most recent scholarship on mainland colonial economic history. Its tables provide the most informative data in the book--data on demographic patterns, wealth, and exports. It is also the longest essay in the book and could nearly stand by itself as a short history of colonial development.

The three following chapters concentrate on colonial regions, with Daniel Vickers writing on the Northern colonies, Russell R. Menard on the "Souths," and B. W. Higman on the British West Indies. Vickers develops a concept of "household competency" as a unifying theme: "...householding societies with a resident merchant class..." (p. 245). Menard examines the "economy of the several Souths" by surveying tobacco production in the Chesapeake Bay area, rice and indigo production in the Carolina-Georgia lowcountry, mixed farming in the backcountry, and a frontier zone. Menard's chapter, like Galenson's, is considerably informed by his own work on the topics bearing on the colonial South's economic and demographic history.

Higman's essay on the British West Indian colonies focuses on its monoculture, "dependence on external trade, the dominance of large-scale plantations and involuntary labor systems, the drain of wealth associated with a high ratio of absentee proprietorship, and the role of the servile population in the internal market" (p. 297). He then asks why all of these characteristics appeared in "exaggerated form" in the Caribbean rather than elsewhere in the Atlantic economy. His development of answers is as full as space constraints allow and is notable in that both text discussion and footnote references make debates

in the literature (as over wealth and income estimates) amply clear.

The last two chapters of the volume shift attention from regional economic patterns to topical ones--mercantilism and then the Revolution and Early National economic policies. John J. McCusker's treatment of mercantilism is strongest in its development of the doctrine as an economic growth theory and in the history of its implementation in English law. Empirical dimensions are given less note, and neither text, footnotes, nor bibliography acknowledge that there was ever a cliometric wrangle over the burdens of the Navigation Acts. Cathy Matson closes the volume with a thorough review of the ending of colonialism in the mainland colonies and Early National economic development. Fiscal and monetary issues make their first significant appearance in this essay, together with the political debates surrounding both the adoption of the constitution and the formulation of subsequent economic policies.

In summary, it is unlikely that any single volume survey of U.S. colonial economic history, particularly one with the expanded scope adopted for this volume, could do justice to the variety of economic experience and the range of scholarship that has developed on colonial topics over the past several decades. The virtue of the volume does in fact lie with its wider treatment of colonial history and its relatively compact (481 pages) presentation. But there are inevitably costs. Recent scholarship, say of the last two decades, is unevenly incorporated in the various essays. Readers with specialty interests may well find disappointments in the work. Money, credit, and commodity trade patterns are lightly treated. There is no "Jacob Price-like" essay in this volume nor is there a chapter on "The Centrality of Trade" as in the McCusker and Menard volume. The slave trade, the primary source of human labor in the colonial era, is given relatively cursory attention. The Middle Colonies receive less attention, Galenson's treatment aside, than their position as a

prime population destination and growth area would warrant. Yet, despite its unevenness, the volume is a valuable contribution to the colonial literature and will be a prime reference work.

[1]. Jack P. Greene and J. R. Pole, eds., *Colonial British America* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984); John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard, *The Economy of British America, 1607-1789* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

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