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Darrel E. Bigham. *Towns and Villages of the Lower Ohio.* Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 1998. 400 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2042-3.

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Darrel E. Bigham, director of the Historic Southern Indiana Project and professor of history at the University of Southern Indiana, has taken on a prodigious task in *Towns and Villages of the Lower Ohio* of providing a framework to understand community development along the Lower Ohio River. He defines this stretch of the river as extending from below the Falls of the Ohio at Louisville to Cairo, Illinois, where the Ohio joins the Mississippi River. Most readers will never have heard of the towns he examines, for, with the possible exceptions of Evansville, Indiana; Paducah, Kentucky; and Cairo, these were always small towns. Some are no longer even on maps.

Why, then, should H-Local subscribers, or other H-Net subscribers, care about this book? The most important reason is that Bigham has provided a very detailed model of a regional study. Richard Wade and Carl Bridenbaugh gave us comparative urban histories in Wade's *The Urban Frontier: Pioneer Life in Early Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Lexington, Louisville and St. Louis* (University of Chicago Press, 1957) and *Slavery in the Cities: the South, 1820-1860 (Oxford University Press, 1964)* and Carl Bridenbaugh's pioneering *Cities in the Wilderness: The First Century of Urban Life in America, 1625-1742* (Ronald Press Co., 1938) and *Cities in Revolt: Urban Life in America, 1743-1776* (Knopf, 1955). Environmental historians write about rivers as ecosystems (see Philip V. Scarpino's *Great River: An Environmental History of the Upper Mississippi, 1890-1950* (University of Missouri Press, 1985). Bigham combines both approaches, as his version of comparative urban history is the towns along about 350 miles of one river.

It is axiomatic in urban history that towns exert an influence on their hinterlands out of proportion to their actual size, for towns are economic, political, and social centers. Bigham shows that even tiny towns can serve as these centers, especially when they are the county seats and when they are the places where steamboats land to discharge and take on goods and people.

Bigham's work also serves to recover the history of a region scholars have neglected. Until now, Charles E. Conrod's Ph.D. dissertation on "Limited Growth of Cities in the Lower Ohio Valley" (Northwestern University, 1976), which focused on economics, was the only scholarly study of this region (p. 5). Indeed, this book is part of the legacy of a project entitled "Always a River: The Ohio River and the American Experience," which the National Endowment for the Humanities and the humanities councils of Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia, plus other public and private organizations, sponsored in the early 1990s. This reviewer was one of the many historians involved in that project. The University Press of Kentucky's Ohio River Valley Series, which includes this book, developed out of that multi-year effort, and Rita Kohn, co-editor of the series with William Lynwood Montell, directed the "Always a River" program. Kohn and Montell claim that "This series expands on this significant role of the river in the growth of the American nation by presenting the varied history and folklife of the region … Each [book] traces the impact the river and the land have had on individuals and cultures and, conversely, the changes these individuals and cultures have wrought on the valley with the passage of years" (p. xi).

Bigham claims that "This work is designed as an introduction to oft-ignored places in a little-studied part of the country. Each community's story is different, but often narratives overlap. Through the specific and the shared narratives, a story of a region emerges" (p. 7). To accomplish this goal, the author divides the book into four sections: "Lower Ohio River Settlements, 1792-1818"; "The Age of the Transportation Revolution, 1815-1850"; "Communities in the Civil War Era, 1850-1880"; and "The Industrial-Metropolitan Age, 1880-1920." In fact, that last section title is a misnomer, as there are frequent references to events after 1920, although there is no clear consistent concluding date.

In each section, Bigham discusses the growth and de-

cline of the towns along the Ohio River in twenty-four counties (eleven in Kentucky, seven in Indiana, and six in Illinois). He focuses on transportation issues, economic growth (or lack thereof), population growth (or lack thereof), the development of local governments, and the evolution of civic life through institutions like churches, schools, and clubs–topics that are relevant to the history of towns around the world. Chapters start with a theme, like the impact of railroads on town development; then, Bigham provides examples from a wide variety of towns to show how that theme works in each town.

To further complicate the context for this study, the states themselves were very different in their development. Kentucky was a slave state with a complicated history of land titles that thwarted development, while Indiana and Illinois were formed out of the Northwest Territory under the terms of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 and with land surveys clarified by the Ordinance of 1785 that established the public land survey. Southern Illinois and Kentucky vested more power in a southern version of county government, while Indiana gave more power to townships, following a New England model (p. 3). Each part of the region had different natural resources to exploit as the basis of its economy. Each depended on river-based transportation, from flatboats to steamboats to barges, for part of its economic growth, but also was affected by the development of roads and railroads over the decades. Some towns, like Evansville, had a large number of immigrants. Some towns had very few. Most town boosters had grand dreams for their future success. Because he is covering so much ground, literally and figuratively, the writing is very dense and the statistics and examples sometimes overwhelming. Most of the emphasis is on groups of people as actors, so there are few pauses to develop personalities for individuals.

In addition to this matrix of local and regional factors, Bigham has to account for major national events like the western campaigns of the Civil War that brought troops to this region; the growth of major metropolises like Chicago, Indianapolis, and Cincinnati; U.S. Supreme Court decisions on segregation; and the multiple floods that damaged or destroyed river towns over the centuries. He also tries to address the question of why a Chicago or Cincinnati did not grow up on this stretch of the river (pp. 3-4).

For Bigham, there is a clear winner and a clear loser in the urban rivalry of the Lower Ohio River. Evansville seems to do everything "right" and to emerge as the most prosperous and successful community. Cairo, though, emerges as a hapless loser, whose citizens never seem to be able to conquer nature or gain control of their own destiny from the hands of the town's "outside owners."

Bigham mines an enormous number of sources to reach his conclusions, and here, his study is a model for other local historians if comparable sources are available. For example, he uses a wide variety of federal census materials, including the population schedules, slave schedules, census compendia, and volumes on manufactures and agriculture; local history publications, including county and city histories, historical atlases, city directories, business directories, and newspapers; early travelers' guides, Federal Writers Project books, and standard works on urban and state history; a few local government records, like city council minutes, tax records, county commission records, city charters and ordinances, school board minutes, and utility company records. It is not clear how many of these records are available for each community, for even such an inventory would be a major project in itself. Other sources that Bigham apparently did not use are Sanborn Insurance Maps (or those from comparable companies) that document the physical development of towns and the records of the R.G. Dun & Co. at Harvard University's Baker Library; these document the economic health of individuals and businesses in the mid-nineteenth century and would be useful additions for individuals writing more detailed histories of these towns or counties. Bigham's endnotes do include very useful information on the value of his sources, but unfortunately, there are paragraphs with no endnotes; one has to assume that a note a paragraph or two later refers to sources in previous paragraphs.

The largest drawback to this work is one that the University Press of Kentucky should have been able to foresee and avoid. The maps, as reproduced, are virtually unreadable because they are far too small and dark for the amount of information on them. It would be helpful if there were many more maps to orient readers unfamiliar with this region. However, the press or author wanted to limit the number of maps for some reason, they should at least be legible. Since computer programs can generate easy-to-read maps with few difficulties, it is inexcusable to have such hard-to-read maps in a book that focuses on having readers understand the relationships between land and water and the impact of geography on human settlement. Similarly, some of the illustrations in the photo section are far too small, so that the information Bigham cites in the captions is not easily visible in the photo itself. It is a shame that a book that is reproducing so many photos does not devote enough space to each one that readers can actually appreciate the detail they include.

Towns and Villages of the Lower Ohio should be a catalyst that will send local historians, especially those in small towns, scurrying into their city halls, county courthouses, archives, libraries, museums, and attics to find sources that will allow them to document their own communities as Bigham as documented those along the Lower Ohio. Surely, the sources are there, and personal papers, letters, and diaries will enliven those local stories in a way that space does not permit in a book that covers as much as this one does. H-Net subscribers who wish to have more assistance in this search can find it David E. Kyvig and Myron Marty's *Nearby History: Exploring The Past Around You* and its "spin-off" volumes from the American Association for State and Local History/AltaMira Press and Krieger Publishing Company.

One problem with local history, as amateurs write it, is often a lack of context. Bigham challenges local historians to seek that context in a complex regional framework, here a river valley but, perhaps elsewhere, an ocean shore, lake front, mountain chain, interstate highway, canal route, or coal field. Study his methodology and wide-ranging context, use the references in his bibliography, but provide better illustrations.

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