

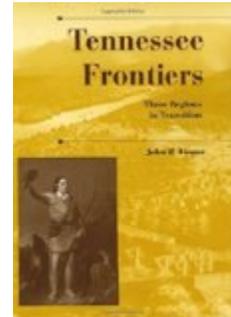
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**John R. Finger.** *Tennessee Frontiers: Three Regions in Transition.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001. xxiii + 382 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-33985-0.

Reviewed by Nathan K. Moran (Center for Earthquake Research and Information, University of Memphis)

Published on H-Tennessee (May, 2003)



John R. Finger, Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, has written a book that chronicles the formation of the state of Tennessee from the settlements of indigenous people up to the expulsion of the Cherokees and the closing of the Tennessee frontier. This is not the first undertaking on the subject. The works of historians J. G. M. Ramsay and Thomas P. Abernethy most notably come to mind.[1] Finger's work revises and expands the scope of available texts on early Tennessee history by including a discussion of the various contexts framing the state's growth and development. Finger also examines the interactions between the indigenous and European cultures as each struggled to develop and control the area for its own use.

The book begins by describing the geography, geology, and environment encompassing Tennessee. To native Tennesseans, well-schooled in their state's history, this treatment may seem tedious at first, but Finger's descriptive passages show how these factors influenced the settlement and development of the area. Finger starts with the arrival of the Paleo-Indians approximately 14,000 years ago and then documents the origins of each Indian tribe and the portion of the state they inhabited. Finger's descriptions of Native Americans shaping their environment to fit their needs are vivid and informative. He points out that, prior to the arrival of European settlement, Indians had already begun to change the landscape to suit their needs. The overview of tribal structure and society explores the unique ways each tribe acted and interacted as separate political entities.

European involvement with Native Americans is woven into the narrative from the first chapter. Hernando de Soto's expedition, Finger argues, depicted the con-

vergence and inextricable involvement of Europeans and Native Americans in a web of economics, society, and politics that resulted in a struggle for dominance over the whole area. Finger details the ways that Native Americans attempted to set the representatives of various European countries against each other, turning their enemies into their allies. He also shows how Europeans, in turn, used Native Americans to assert their domination. Finger's thorough work in depicting the force of economics for both Europeans and Native Americans—in particular noting how Native Americans were drawn into a world economy along with the escalating pace of European trade and settlement—is an able treatment of a complex subject.

Finger also deftly introduces individuals who were important actors in early Tennessee history, including John Sevier, Andrew Jackson, Little Turtle, and Dragging Canoe, to name only a few. His depiction of Native American and white settlers who impacted the state's history is even-handed. He notes especially the invaluable contributions that women made in both Native American and European societies. Good examples are the descriptions of how native tribes generally used marriage to cement political alliances with influential settlers and, specifically, how Cherokee women served their society as a political force. Finger also charts the cultural divide separating Native American and European societies. For example, in the matter of revenge killings among tribes, settlers assumed that Native American tribes were a political entity and that their leaders had complete control over them, a perception that led to much conflict between the two cultures.

Finger recounts the now familiar story of how pio-

neers, arriving from North Carolina, Virginia, and the east coastal settlements that would become the United States, tamed the “Tennessee” wilderness to suit their vision of civilization. Finger shows how settlement took place not in isolation but in conjunction with broader economic forces at play in the colonies, and later, the United States. He thoroughly describes how trade with other nations was vital for the area’s development and how geography shaped Tennesseans’ vision of obtaining that access. Tennessee pioneers worked hard to find convenient ways to get their goods to the rest of the world, and in turn, to receive the materials they needed. They actively courted their own government as well as those of France and Spain to ensure continued, open access to trade through the Mississippi River. Another economic theme that Finger ably explores is that of land ownership. Finger explains the concept of land value and ownership as it was understood by both Native Americans and white settlers and shows how their differing views led to conflict over who controlled the land. White settlers eventually won this conflict at a considerable cost to the Native Americans who originally inhabited Tennessee.

Finger does not ignore political development, however; both Native American and colonial systems are fully explored. The governmental systems of the tribes inhabiting the area are thoroughly detailed and contrasted with those of the colonists. The development of Tennessee government from the early settlement to statehood is clearly and concisely described. Finger details how settlers created government to meet their needs of justice, land ownership, and political representation,

and he also shows how the geography of Tennessee influenced this development as the distances involved in travel forced settlers to organize a government that could respond immediately to their needs. Finger additionally discusses how each section developed politically and the resulting impact of sectional interests within the state. A constant concern in the early development of Tennessee was the rivalry between political factions, which Finger argues reflected local concerns coupled with political currents of the United States and the world at large.

The bibliographical essay at the end of the book provides great value to scholars of Tennessee history. The sources for each chapter are laid out in such a fashion that anyone interested can easily find additional information. The essay, coupled with a serviceable index, makes this book a good reference for anyone who is teaching Tennessee history on the undergraduate level. The only complaint is the lack of footnotes. This shortcoming could be remedied by providing endnotes for each chapter so that information and its sources can be correlated more exactly. Finger’s book is a good synthesis of modern scholarship on the early history of the state and frontier. It is presented in a concise and readable manner, making it an able successor to Abernethy’s *From Frontier to Plantation in Tennessee*.

#### Note

[1]. J. G. M. Ramsay, *The Annals of Tennessee to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (1853); and Thomas P. Abernethy, *From Frontier to Plantation in Tennessee* (1932).

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

/~tenn/

**Citation:** Nathan K. Moran. Review of Finger, John R., *Tennessee Frontiers: Three Regions in Transition*. H-Tennessee, H-Net Reviews. May, 2003.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7527>

Copyright © 2003 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.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).