



Daniel H. Usner, Jr. *American Indians in the Lower Mississippi Valley: Social and Economic Histories*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1998. xiv + 256 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8032-4556-3.



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Judging by the past few conferences I've attended and by the seemingly endless book catalogs that cross my desk, some of the most vital and interesting work on the history of American Indians before the civil war is being done in the south. From Patricia Galloway's *Choctaw Genesis* to Claudio Saunt's *A New Order of Things*, scholars are taking new looks, armed with tools and methods from ethnohistory and cultural studies, at how Indian nations in the southeast came to be and how they resisted and adapted to the changes brought about by European colonialism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[1] Dan Usner's *American Indians in the Lower Mississippi Valley*, the latest book in the University of Nebraska Press series on Indians of the Southeast, is a welcome contribution to this vibrant field.

After an introductory historiographic chapter that highlights the advances of the field as well as pointing out those arenas still in need of further attention, each chapter in *American Indians in the Lower Mississippi Valley* focuses on a particular aspect of their "Social and Economic Histories," emphasizing throughout "Indian strategies

of adaptation and resistance" (p. xi) to European colonization and its attendant changes (three of the eight chapters have been previously published). Usner begins with a detailed examination of interactions along the Natchez-French borderlands, interactions that began fruitfully enough for both Indians and colonists but that resulted, by the mid-1730s, in the end of the Natchez chiefdom (although, as Usner is right to emphasize, not in the extermination of the Natchez people themselves, who migrated mostly eastward, becoming members of the Creek and Catawba nations among others).

This outmigration of remaining Natchez illustrates a primary theme of the next chapter, "A Population History" of the Lower Mississippi Valley during the eighteenth century. Precisely because he takes a regional rather than group approach to population history, Usner shows how some southeastern Indians adapted to population declines through migration and merger with other groups. In line with his call for a southeastern project along the lines of Helen Tanner's *Atlas of Great Lakes Indian History*, maps showing rela-

tive sizes and locations of the different groups mentioned in this chapter would have been very useful, especially in illustrating their migrations into, around, and out of the Lower Mississippi Valley.

The following three chapters investigate the changing economies of the Lower Mississippi Valley, from the mid-eighteenth century's "Frontier Exchange Economy," which Usner has explored more fully in his *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy*,^[2] to the antebellum cotton economy that had less use for Indians as economic actors and more use for their lands. This transformation of the socioeconomic order had dramatic implications for region's Indians, as their subsistence patterns were undermined and Euro-Americans began dispossessing them of their lands. Yet, as Usner admirably details, Creeks, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and others drew upon a wide range of adaptive strategies from transforming themselves into slave- and plantation-owning agriculturists to finding spaces "on the margins of a plantation economy" (p. 96), providing goods and services to their Euro- and African-American neighbors. This latter strategy demonstrates that at least some aspects of the frontier exchange economy, especially "Small-scale, face-to-face" (p. 57) transactions, remained even after the meanings of these exchanges changed. While this section of the book was well evidenced and argued, two chapters focusing on adaptations to the cotton frontier in Mississippi and Louisiana, respectively, suffered somewhat from their tendency to repeat each other and perhaps would have been better as a single chapter.

Focusing on New Orleans in the nineteenth century, chapter seven contributes to another area of important recent scholarship examining Indians "behind the frontier" that, so far, has mostly concentrated on the northeast.^[3] Usner's findings that "city streets were as useful as back-country forests or remote swamplands in the day-to-day struggle for survival" (p. 127) demonstrate

that despite some very serious differences in their nineteenth-century histories, Native Americans in New England and in the Southeast utilized similar strategies in their goals to remain culturally distinct and in familiar territories. This chapter works especially well as a companion piece to Usner's earlier examination of "American Indians in Colonial New Orleans."^[4]

Usner concludes with an examination of nineteenth-century images of Lower Mississippi Valley Indians, illustrating the cultural side of the socioeconomic changes the other chapters have examined. Images of Native Americans in the eighteenth century demonstrated a complexity that reflected the multiple and varied Euro-American interactions with the region's native peoples. But as both the number of Indians in the area and the variety of Euro-American interactions with them declined (both consequences of the transition from a frontier exchange economy to one based on plantation agriculture), an increasingly racialized, one-dimensional image of Indians emerged.

One benefit of Usner's regional approach is that is, in James H. Merrell's words, "transcend[s] narrow (and still poorly understood) ethnic or 'tribal' boundaries"^[5], especially in examining the multiple ways in which different groups responded and adapted to European colonization. A disadvantage to this approach, however, and one that Usner acknowledges, is that it de-emphasizes the "cultural dimensions of change and continuity" among particular groups and lessens our ability to understand "what this all meant to the participants themselves" (p. 12). Usner's detailed analysis of the demographic and economic changes in the Lower Mississippi Valley has given us a great place from which to build.

Notes

[1]. Patricia Galloway, *Choctaw Genesis, 1500-1700* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995); and Claudio Saunt, *A New Order of Things: Property, Power, and the Transformation of the*

Creek Indians, 1733-1816 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[2]. *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

[3]. See, for instance, Colin G. Calloway, ed., *After King Philip's War: Presence and Persistence in Indian New England* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College, published by University Press of New England, 1997), especially the essays by Ruth Wallis Herndon and Ella Wilcox Sekatau, and Thomas L. Doughton; Daniel Mandell, *Behind the Frontier: Indians in Eighteenth-Century Eastern Massachusetts* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996); and Jean M. O'Brien, *Dispossession by Degrees: Indian Land and Identity in Natick, Massachusetts, 1650-1790* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[4]. Daniel H. Usner, Jr., "American Indians in Colonial New Orleans," in *Powhatan's Mantle: Indians in the Colonial Southeast*, eds. Peter H. Wood, Gregory A. Waselkov and M. Thomas Hatley (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 104-27.

[5]. James H. Merrell, "The Indians' New World: The Catawba Experience," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3d Ser., 41 (1984): 538.

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