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Reviews in American History, Volume 48, Number 1, March 2020, pp. 7-12
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/rah.2020.0001

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Paul Musselwhite, *Urban Dreams, Rural Commonwealth: The Rise of Plantation Society in the Chesapeake*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019. xii + 341 pp. Figures, maps, abbreviations, notes, and index. $50.00.

Cities are nodal, geographers inform us. Within their sprawl, individuals and neighborhoods are connected one to another, while the sum of these communities is itself bound by intricate threads to the suburbs and hinterlands. Neither city nor countryside stands alone. Paul Musselwhite offers an intriguing study of the abortive roots of one set of these urban-rural relationships in *Urban Dreams, Rural Commonwealth: The Rise of Plantation Society in the Chesapeake*. He seeks new answers to an old question: why did the Chesapeake develop as such a rural, planter-dominated landscape by the eighteenth century? He concludes that "the absence of urban places was no mere coincidental product of Chesapeake plantation agriculture. In fact, the relationship between plantations and towns was quite the opposite. A century of failed urban development was instrumental in forging the contours of Chesapeake society" (p. 2). The end result of Musselwhite's study is a book that intimately explores urban planning and civic ideology, but which sometimes ignores other contexts that were central to life in the Chesapeake before the American Revolution.

The book is organized in a clear and logical fashion; it unfolds in chronological order from the years preceding Jamestown's founding until the mid-eighteenth century, with each chapter focusing on English urban visions during a period of one or two decades. Musselwhite notes that city plans were central to the Virginia Colony's foundations, thanks in part to investors who hoped that the English borough model of civic communities would foster a stable and diversified colonial economy. Jamestown was a planned community, as were the unsuccessful Bermuda City and Argall City. The coordinated Powhatan attack led by Opechancanough in 1622 destroyed many of the nascent boroughs, contributed to the revocation of the Virginia Company's charter, and thus undermined these initial urban efforts. Fluctuating tobacco prices and Crown worries that a luxury crop was a poor foundation for a colonial economy prompted renewed efforts at town founding in the 1620s, led in Virginia by Governor John Harvey. Planters resisted Harvey's plans, however, and worked

to install their own vision of proper governance and an economic structure rooted in county jurisdictions. The Calvert family—granted proprietorship of Maryland by King Charles I in 1632—also undertook colonization with grand visions of the St. Mary's settlement as an urban hub, but the colony would ultimately adopt the county structure as well.

Parliament's victory in the English Civil War generated a new set of urban visions. Puritans questioned the emerging Chesapeake model of county governments and personal patronage that had developed under William Berkeley and the Calverts, renewing an imperial emphasis on town centers that might serve as social and religious models as well as economic engines. Musselwhite argues that the 1651 Navigation Act hoped in part to funnel trade through colonial towns, where it might be better regulated (and taxed), though this regulation was often framed in a language of civic virtue (pp. 101–2). This Parliamentary vision gained more traction in Maryland than in Virginia, where planters increasingly touted agrarian independence and clandestinely traded with Dutch ships in violation of the Navigation Act. As a consequence of this resistance to Parliament's plans, Jamestown actually shrank during the 1650s, and then, in the 1660s, "proposals for urban development once again had the counter-intuitive effect of reinforcing planters' faith in their own rural civic authority within the empire" (p. 129).

Musselwhite also sees urban development as a root cause of Bacon's Rebellion, the armed revolt beginning in 1676 that nearly toppled Governor Berkeley's rule and also unsettled Maryland's government. He portrays Chesapeake residents who were upset with the particular form town development had taken—especially Berkeley's grand vision for an expanded Jamestown and the Calverts' dream of a network of new port cities—as more crucial to colonial unrest than the Indian troubles on the frontier or resentment of corrupt county governments and opaque tax levies. Larger and more diversified towns, Musselwhite notes, might have presented poor whites with better economic opportunities and forestalled rebellion. In the 1680s aftermath of the rebellion, planters and English officials struggled for moral and economic authority on the ground, with competing visions of proper civic planning and economic development.

By the end of the seventeenth century, "a stable and powerful plantation elite finally solidified," but crown officials still dreamed of cities (p. 181). Francis Nicholson, who held posts in both Virginia and Maryland in turn, proposed three new colonial entrepôts: Annapolis, Williamsburg, and Williamstadt. These nascent cities were supposed to more firmly unite planter power to the empire but were only partially successful in this aim. By the new century, Musselwhite argues, rural planters were firmly entrenched as the stewards of Chesapeake political and economic power. Ironically, at this point towns like Norfolk and Baltimore began to grow. But they did not develop as centers of

civic virtue or imperial authority; instead, they almost exclusively functioned as commercial components of the plantation economy. The old, lofty urban visions had been replaced by cities that merely served as "atomistic gateways to a larger Atlantic marketplace" (p. 241). The end products, Musselwhite claims, were sweeping. The wrangling over urban planning created nothing less than "a republican planter political economy that combined rural capitalism with agrarian conservatism," a combination that subsequently marched across the cotton South and lasted until it was finally shattered by the Civil War (p. 265).

In the epilogue, already tenuous conclusions become less tenable. Musselwhite frames the Deep South as the inheritor of the Chesapeake's aversion to city development and urban power, carried west by "the descendants of Chesapeake planters who had become cotton kingpins" (p. 268). This supposes at once the smooth transference of ideology to the production of a different commodity and new landscapes, as well as the dominance of the sons of Virginia and Maryland in shaping the Old Southwest. The antebellum vitality of Natchez, Mobile, Nashville, Montgomery, Columbus, and numerous smaller places calls into question the effectiveness of any suppression of urban growth or the absolute control of a planter class over merchant interests. And the influx of leading planters from the Carolinas and Georgia—leavened with northerners intent on securing a portion of the wealth promised by dispossessing Native American lands, and added to the lingering influence of Spanish and French colonialism—certainly prohibited any clear, universal dominance by Chesapeake planters' progeny. Among the many fine recent works on the social and economic fluidity of the cotton South, Joshua Rothman's *Flush Times and Fever Dreams: A Story of Capitalism and Slavery in the Age of Jackson* (2012) reveals this to be far too neat a narrative arc.

Musselwhite's claims for the importance of town planning in imperial visions of the Chesapeake are based on impressive research. He has read a great deal in the American and English primary sources, especially in the pamphlets of the time. He also seems well aware of the expansive secondary literature concerning the colonial Chesapeake, though the book is largely uninterested in the questions of labor, the relative freedom (or restrictiveness) of Maryland and Virginia, and the challenges of subsistence in a new world that frame many of those studies. In its near single-minded focus on ideas about towns and cities, *Urban Dreams, Rural Commonwealth* offers a clear and useful argument, though it raises questions about how complete a history of ideas can be when largely removed from the material world.

In asserting the centrality of urban planning in formulating the Chesapeake's distinctive geography and agrarian ideologies, the book sometimes performs historical gyrations to avoid traditional explanations of how these patterns came to be. Native Americans certainly played no small part in Chesapeake development, through both their real actions and in English imaginations, but

a reader would hardly know that from this book. Aside from quick mentions of the 1622 Powhatan attack on Virginia settlements and frontier violence during Bacon's Rebellion, the region's Indian populations are all but absent. (And Opechancanough is the sole Native American individual to grace the book's index.) With so many excellent recent books that have incorporated Native Americans as active participants in shaping the colonial South—to note the work of one scholar, for example, James Rice's *Nature and History in the Potomac Country: From Hunter-Gatherers to the Age of Jefferson* (2009) and *Tales from a Revolution: Bacon's Rebellion and the Transformation of Early America* (2013)—this is a conspicuous absence indeed. That Native peoples constructed their own towns, quite often in relation to English communities after 1607, seems an important part of any discussion of Chesapeake urban centers.

To note one example where the absence of Native peoples seems misleading, Musselwhite attempts to frame Bacon's Rebellion within the context of urban planning, noting the complaints concerning the poor state of town development from Virginia counties when the Crown solicited grievances in the aftermath of the unrest. Reading these complaints, however, reveals that these few comments about urban plans are buried within much more numerous grievances about local officials' corruption, high and opaque taxes, a lack of military preparedness, and, above all, the continued presence of Native Americans. For example, Musselwhite cites one complaint from Rappahannock County as a direct plea for more effective town development, failing to note that the county's complainants were also among the most militant of all Virginians in blaming the rebellion on Indian violence on the frontier. Isle of Wight County petitioners were typical in their bald declaration that "wee desire that ther may be a continuall warr with the Indians that we may have once have done with them."[1]

If Indian people are largely missing, so too is any real discussion of the Chesapeake landscape. Cities sit on earth and rock, after all; they are built on both a "site" (their spot on earth) and within a "situation" (their relationship to other physical sites and economic networks).[2] The Tidewater environment mattered to the warp and weft of everyday life; it is hardly environmental determinism to note this. Colonists pursued tobacco's potential profit, they drove Native Americans west for land to grow that tobacco, they indentured and enslaved other human beings to produce more of the crop, they relied on extensive agronomy, and they were killed in large numbers by the region's biota. These material realities shaped settlement patterns in ways often elided in the book's discussion of urban plans. In discussion of the plant-cutting riots of the 1680s, for example, Musselwhite focuses to such a great extent on contested town development as an impetus for unrest that he omits even mentioning that the namesake plants being cut down were tobacco, in a pattern of militant agrarian efforts to govern "supply and demand" that would

repeatedly flare up all the way through Kentucky's Black Patch War. This understanding of the productive qualities of a place as they related to the consuming habits of distant people ultimately proved a much more durable physio-ideological construct than did colonial Chesapeake's urban planning. The planter elite's rhetoric of rural virtue may have been self-serving, but it also emerged out of a way of making a living that generated tremendous pressure for autonomy and decentralization. Tobacco growers may not have been "soil miners," geographer Carville Earle cautioned, but they most certainly felt the pressure to be land accumulators.[2]

The shaping force of this extensive, shifting agriculture in relation to Tidewater soils received careful attention from historians as early as 1926, in Avery Odelle Craven's *Soil Exhaustion as a Factor in the Agricultural History of Virginia and Maryland, 1606–1860*, and remains an important theme in the impressive body of colonial Chesapeake literature of Allan Kulikoff, Edmund Morgan, Lorena Walsh, and others. Indeed, it is close attention to these agrarian pressures, as well as the freedoms and opportunities that potentially accompanied them, that provide such rich texture to classic colonial Chesapeake studies as *Robert Cole's World: Agriculture and Society in Early Maryland* (Lois Green Carr, Russell R. Menard, and Lorena S. Walsh, 1991) and *"Myne Owne Ground:" Race and Freedom on Virginia's Eastern Shore, 1640–1676* (T. H. Breen and Stephen Innes, 1980).

Urban Dreams, Rural Commonwealth's most sweeping claims face the intrinsic challenge of trying to prove things based on an absence rather than a presence of evidence, always a problematic task. Musselwhite conclusively demonstrates that English officials repeatedly tried—and largely failed—to build important urban centers in the colonial Chesapeake. He likewise details some of the opposition to these plans. It is much harder, perhaps impossible, to prove that the civic structures and paternalistic worldview of a planter ethic took the particular form they did *because* of this wrangling. After all, the presence or absence of cities seemingly did little to blunt this expansive, planter-driven vision of southern colonial society. Other southern colonies demonstrated that a rural planter elite with inordinate political power could emerge in conjunction with important towns—the political ideology did not have to emerge in opposition to town planning. Charleston and Savannah dominated their respective colonies from the first years, yet the Carolinas and Georgia supported plantation structures and ways of thinking much akin to those of the Chesapeake. In their belief in the political, social, and economic authority of rural planters, colonial white South Carolinians and Georgians arrived at similar worldviews, despite living in colonies with important port cities.

In its dogged adherence to making urban schemes part of the Chesapeake's colonial story, Musselwhite's book has a certain utility. It does fill a gap in the literature concerning imperial conceptions of the colonies, and thus will

likely become an oft-cited source on the issue. It also nicely complements other recent work emphasizing the power of ideas in colonial America, such as Richard Bushman's *The American Farmer in the Eighteenth Century: A Social and Cultural History* (2018) and S. Max Edelson's *The New Map of Empire: How Britain Imagined America before Independence* (2017). Ideas do matter, and Musselwhite is interested in unearthing and examining the literature of English urban planning within a colonial context. He has successfully accomplished those aims in *Urban Dreams, Rural Commonwealth*. Separated from the broader context of the material colonial world, however, the book may leave some readers feeling as if they have been asked to assemble a jigsaw puzzle without being provided all of the pieces.

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1. "Causes of Discontent in Virginia, 1676 (continued)," *Virginia Historical Magazine* [*Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*] 2, 4 (April 1895), 388.
2. On this distinction, see Craig E. Colten, *An Unnatural Metropolis: Wresting New Orleans from Nature* (2005), 2.
3. Carville Earle, "The Myth of the Southern Soil Miner: Macrohistory, Agricultural Innovation, and Environmental Change," in *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History*, Donald Worster, ed. (1988), 176.