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Review of Rip Van Winkle's Neighbors: The Transformation of Rural Society in the Hudson River Valley, 1720-1850, by T.J. Wermuth

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Rip Van Winkle's Neighbors: The Transformation of Rural Society in the Hudson River Valley, 1720–1850. *By Thomas S. Wermuth*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001. 192 pp. Tables. Cloth, \$54.50; paper, \$17.95. ISBN: cloth 0-791-45083-X; paper 0-791-45084-8.

Reviewed by Thomas J. Humphrey

Early on in his thoroughly researched account of the rural economy in the mid-Hudson Valley from 1720 through 1850, Thomas S. Wermuth asks the fundamental question that has long inspired historians to delve into the debate over the transition to capitalism in the North American countryside. “To what extent,” he inquires, “did the community structures within which these farmers lived, worked, and traded shape their economic activities” (p. 4). With this question, Wermuth compels historians concerned with rural social and economic life, and with markets, to focus more specifically on farmers. Wermuth concisely answers his complex question by breaking new ground in at least two directions. Much of the existing literature on farm production and market transition deals with either Massachusetts or Pennsylvania. These studies highlight either markets or the role of community in early American economic life. Yet, farmers’ motivations for participating in either markets or in neighborhood trade and labor systems, inside or outside of Massachusetts and Pennsylvania, remain largely unexplored. Wermuth fills both of these gaps with an important, tightly organized, and clearly written contribution to the literature. He situates his study in the mid-Hudson Valley and concentrates on farmers’ specific behavior to explain how “individual households attempted to improve their living standards while carefully negotiating community needs and demands” (p. 5).

Wermuth divides his chronological study into two parts. In the first, which covers the period from 1720 to 1785, farmers aspired to achieve a “comfortable subsistence” (a phrase used throughout the book

to describe farmers' goals). These farmers lived in strongly interconnected heterogeneous communities that kept a strong Dutch orientation, but that revealed intercultural mixing as well. The inhabitants were also divided by wealth, rank, and status, and these divisions were regularly reinforced on a variety of political, social, and religious festival days. In this community, the household was the basic unit of production, but not all households participated in markets for the same reasons. Some sought self-sufficiency; others sought profit or commercial involvement. Most households, roughly 70 percent, produced grain for local trade, but the other 30 percent produced a high proportion of the goods traded in regional markets. Access to local and regional markets did not necessarily change the goals of most of these farmers. Instead, "the most persuasive explanation for the economic behavior of Hudson Valley residents is that decisions about production and trade were just as often shaped by practical social and family concerns as by market opportunities" (pp. 66–7).

The American Revolution represented a turning point in the economic development of farmers in the mid-Hudson Valley. During the war, local revolutionary leaders regulated the economy to facilitate subsistence and to provide for the army that occupied the region. Crowds retaliated violently when anyone acted against the best interests of the community, and the crowds infused these riots with political meaning. They made economic protests patriotic. The war also temporarily severed trade ties to Britain, forcing inhabitants of the mid-valley to expand domestic manufacturing. Farmers responded by increasing the amount of spinning and dairying done in the household. The war also "compelled farmers to view their production and trade in market terms" (p. 89). At the end of the war, more farmers participated in the market, but for vastly different reasons.

Between 1785 and 1820, farmers in the mid-Hudson Valley increasingly participated in the market revolution. Again, they did so for different reasons and in various ways. Poorer farmers, for example, had far less contact with paper money in the eighteenth century, but they altered household production so they could use the market to achieve subsistence. They tended to trade more locally and relied on goods for trade. By 1820, however, they had put more land under the plow, decreased household manufacturing, and produced more specifically for commercial markets. These poorer and middling farmers increasingly used paper money and, by the end of the 1830s, conducted nearly all of their transactions in cash. Larger producers, on the other hand, continued to dominate long-distance trading and relied on cash far earlier than their poorer neighbors. By 1820, most farmers in the region relied on "traditional methods of production and trade" but were also "altering their production in response to the needs and demands of the market revolution" (p. 113).

If the American Revolution prompted farmers to change their relation to the market, the transportation revolution changed the market itself. Wermuth rightly notes that, by 1830, eastern farmers were forced to compete with farmers in the West, who sent their goods east and south via the web of canals and roads that crisscrossed New York. Competition forced mid-valley farmers to reevaluate their production after 1820. Grain production had changed, and community economic consensus had disappeared. Political leaders no longer made decisions in the best interests of the community. Instead, economic leaders made decisions that affected the community, arguing that the public good was enhanced through private interests and private gain. The point was driven home forcefully when a Pennsylvania coal company selected Kingston as the end of the line of the Delaware and Hudson Canal. After that, “the Kingston economy increasingly serviced the canal” (p. 123). The small agrarian community had become a burgeoning urban entrepôt.

Wermuth’s analysis draws on a wealth of complex sources. For instance, he studies markets over time through account records of local merchants. He summarizes a great deal of this material in nearly thirty tables spaced throughout the book. The tables are informative and easily read, but the material is also incorporated into the narrative to provide comparative analysis. Such material, and his keen analysis, would easily offer plenty of valuable information to anyone interested in the business practices of merchants in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. More than that, Wermuth’s book offers important insight into the motivations of farmers in a community undergoing dramatic social, political, and economic changes.

Thomas J. Humphrey is assistant professor of history at Cleveland State University. He has written several articles on land rioting in the Hudson Valley in the eighteenth century and is currently finishing a manuscript on landlord–tenant relations and land riots in eighteenth-century New York.