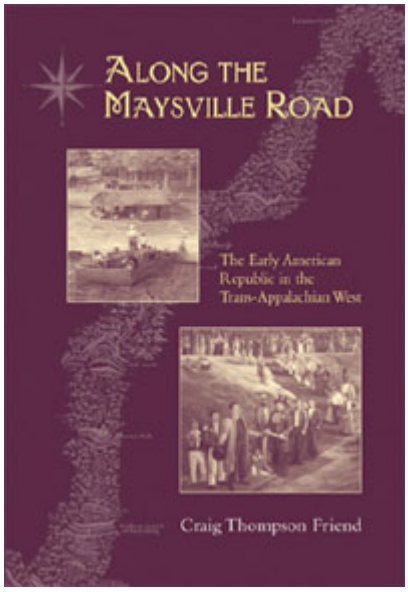
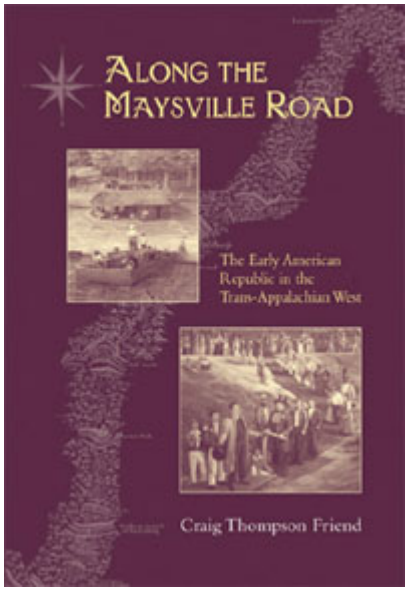
Along the Beaten Path in Early Kentucky





Craig Thompson Friend, Along the Maysville Road: The Early American Republic in the Trans-Appalachian West. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005.

Craig Thompson Friend has written a biography of the thoroughfare that provided passage from Maysville, Kentucky, on the Ohio River, south to Lexington in the heart of Bluegrass Country. It began as a buffalo trace before conflict between Native Americans and early settlers transformed it into a beaten path. As a commercial economy grew up along its length, later generations molded it into a true road. This corridor provides the perfect setting, Friend writes, for "a microhistory of social and cultural change in the Early American Republic" (4).

The first chapter details the early settlement of the five counties that became home to a wide variety of people in the late eighteenth century: Virginians, Pennsylvanians, New Englanders, African Americans, Scots, Scots-Irish, Germans,

and other European immigrants. Friend labels the region “the Village West”—though not precisely urban, the region was not wholly rural. Small towns served as market centers with stores, taverns, mills, and churches. The second chapter focuses on the arrival of a gentry class who sought to impose order on the region, and the third describes the growth of a market economy. Friend adds a section that explains the impact of settlement and trade on the natural environment. The fourth chapter is entitled, “New Americans? Revising Identities and Communities.” Topics include the Second Great Awakening, militias and the War of 1812, and the development of Lexington as the Athens of the West. The final chapter, “Changing Landscapes: The Triumph of the Middle Class,” discusses the growth of class distinctions, the rage for refinement, the expansion of slavery, and the push for internal improvements. Other topics of interest include masculinity, femininity, ecology, material culture, architecture, and gentry ideals. The author poses excellent questions in his introduction, but one must read carefully to discern the path of the argument that he intends to make. Likewise the individual chapters need stronger signposts along the way to guide readers through. The book ends abruptly in 1835 when the Maysville Turnpike replaced the old road, and there is no conclusion to pull the book’s themes together into a strong statement about what we can learn about the early American republic by expanding our view to include Kentucky.

Friend clearly sets out to engage in the debate over the transition to capitalism in early America. Historian Allan Kulikoff divided the scholars of the 1970s and 1980s who argued over this development into two camps: social historians and market historians. Both focused on the question of household production for use versus household production for exchange or market, with one side arguing that market forces intruded on long-settled, precapitalist communities in a destructive way, while the other side argued that capitalism and markets developed very early and most Americans were eager to participate in them. But while Friend uses the term “moral economy” freely throughout the book and cites almost every relevant study, he inexplicably overlooks Daniel Vickers’s seminal 1990 *William & Mary Quarterly* article that reframed the debate. I do not, of course, expect Friend to throw in his lot with Vickers and agree with his interpretation, but I do expect Friend to engage Vickers’s theoretical model—at least in his footnotes, if nowhere else.

Friend and Vickers actually agree that farmers produced goods for both personal use and a wider market, doing whatever was needed to insure the independence of their families. But Vickers goes further. According to him, the moral economy of Great Britain that involved common people uniting in community rituals (and occasional riots) to force the propertied class to acknowledge their moral duty to provide for those dependent on them could never really take root in America because too many men had access to land of their own. Tenants always believed that land ownership lay just around the corner—often despite all evidence to the contrary. According to Vickers, familiar community rituals like harvests, quilting bees, and town meetings were meant to keep peace between competitive neighbors rather than cement class solidarity. Vickers theorized that in place

of a European-style class system, Americans organized their economy around four "agencies of power": credit, political privilege, paternal authority, and slavery. Friend misses a real opportunity to test Vickers's model—Vickers could only consider the first three in relation to the New England family of his study; Friend could have added much to the debate by considering the evolution of all four in Kentucky. Friend makes it clear in his introduction that all are in fact central to his study, but he fails to deal with these themes in a systematic fashion that a reader can track from the beginning of the book to the end.

Vickers's argument is made stronger by his interpretation of what the new backcountry history of the 1980s—studies of eighteenth-century violence on the frontier in the Carolinas, western Pennsylvania, Vermont, and Maine—had to offer the debate. According to Vickers, though these conflicts pitted have-nots against haves, they subsided once the lower and middling sorts gained access to the economic opportunities that those on the seaboard enjoyed. Of the trans-Appalachian West, Friend writes, "The historiography of early Kentucky seems to dwell on one question that has never been clearly enunciated by historians: Why did the settlement process *not* result in the violent social conflict typical of other contemporary backcountries?" (93). In fact, a historian who appears in the citations of every chapter of Friend's book focuses on exactly this issue, and his point is similar to that of Vickers. In *How the West Was Lost: The Transformation of Kentucky from Daniel Boone to Henry Clay*, Stephen Aron writes, "[N]o rebellion erupted during the 1780s, because too many occupant-improvers had too much to lose from a general redistribution. For Kentucky pioneers in affairs of land, the tradition about what homesteaders needed to get by too often yielded to their ambition to get more" (194).

Considering how often rivers ran low or froze over, however, Craig Friend is really onto something by focusing on the Maysville Road, and his analysis is strongest when he concentrates his attention on the beaten path itself. The evolution of society can be clearly seen when laws requiring all men to participate in maintaining and improving it give way to laws allowing the gentry to send slaves instead. The author's account of how a cholera epidemic forced residents to flee and hastened the end of the road in the early 1830s is truly harrowing. *Along the Maysville Road* is a readable account of the evolution of Kentucky in the decades that followed the American Revolution. Friend evokes the look and feel of the place quite clearly, and the author's liberal use of quotations from letters, diaries, travelogues, and newspapers allows the voices of farmers, merchants, and planters to be heard. For those who have not remained current on the changing historiography of early Kentucky, this book is a very good place to start. Friend touches on important new topics, and readers can follow his footnotes to more specialized treatments of anything that piques their interest.

Further Reading:

For the best study of Kentucky as a backcountry, see Stephen Aron, *How the West Was Lost: The Transformation of Kentucky from Daniel Boone to Henry Clay* (Baltimore and London, 1996). Relevant critiques of the debate over the transition to capitalism in early America include Allan Kulikoff, "The Transition to Capitalism in Rural America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 46 (January 1989): 120-44; Michael Merrill, "Putting 'Capitalism' in Its Place: A Review of Recent Literature," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 52 (April 1995): 315-26; and Daniel Vickers, "Competency and Competition: Economic Culture in Early America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 47 (January 1990): 3-29.

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