

HIST 740 Topics in History for Educators:
Creating a New Nation, 1763-1815
Book Review #2
February 2, 2011

Jack P. Greene. *Pursuits of Happiness: The Social Development of Early Modern British Colonies and the Formation of American Culture*. The University of North Carolina Press. 1988. Pp. xi-284.

“In the beginning was the word, and the word was with the New England Way and the word became ‘America’”(p. 213). Sacvan Bercovitch’s permutation of John 1:1 illustrates the myth that the New England colonies, with its puritanical roots, had a greater influence on the formation of American culture than other British colonies at that time, a myth most students of history have embraced without question. Jack P. Greene, in his book, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Social Development of Early Modern British Colonies and the Formation of American Culture* argues just the opposite. He believes that the New England colonies were far from the norm and in fact they were the exception. He uses the declension model to characterize the societal changes in New England and he uses a developmental model to characterize the societal changes in the Chesapeake, the Middle Colonies, and the Lower South. Ultimately, Greene seeks to prove that, not the New England colonies, but the Chesapeake and other southern colonies were illustrative of an emerging American culture and that they more clearly exemplified a culture in which the individual’s “pursuits of happiness” were more likely the norm.

Pursuits of Happiness is a well-organized, well-researched volume that clearly lays out a practical and useful interpretation of the sociological characteristics apparent in each of the British colonies studied, and that ultimately led to the formation of American culture. Greene lays the foundation of the book by carefully

illustrating the social institutions in place before 1660 in the New England and Chesapeake colonies. With the backdrop set, he goes on to describe the social characteristics of both colonies after 1660 until the dawn of the American Revolution. Methodically, Greene continues with a detailed analysis of other areas of British settlement, Irish plantations, the Middle Colonies, the Lower South and the Atlantic and Caribbean Islands. His sociological examination of each of the areas takes into consideration, demographics, social mobility, economic issues, family and kinship relations, religious factors, political influences, urbanization and any subset of these characteristics that have relevance. Distinctive patterns emerge amongst and between the colonies that Greene uses as evidence to support his position.

Greene does justice to his thesis and enables his readers to better understand his argument by synthesizing his data and creating models for consideration. In describing the New England experience, Greene employs the declension model, which posits that New England descendants exhibited a steady moral and social decline away from the original goals of their founders (p. 55). The author uses the sociological terms of “*gemeinschaft* to *gesellschaft*” (p.55) to illustrate the idea of decline. The Puritans moved from *gemeinschaft*, or community and traditionalism toward *gesellschaft*, or individualism and modernism, away from their puritanistic origins and toward a more typically British social structure like that of the Chesapeake. Furthermore, Greene uses the idea of a continuum with centrifugal and centripetal force at each pole to aid in the reader’s understanding by placing the unsettled colonies toward the centrifugal end of the continuum and the more settled colonies toward the centripetal end of the continuum (p. 173). By using this

continuum, the reader can easily observe that the New England colonies were becoming less settled, less cohesive and less coherent, more like the Chesapeake and other British colonies and less like the original puritanical settlements in New England.

Greene uses a developmental model to prove that the Chesapeake and other British American colonies were becoming more settled, more cohesive and more coherent, like their British predecessors. After bringing to light the many commonalities between the Chesapeake and British rural society, Greene states, "In both its inner dynamics and its organization, the increasingly hierarchical society of the eighteenth century Chesapeake probably came closer than that of any other contemporary British-American cultural region to replicating what Harold J. Perkin has referred to as the 'old society' of rural England...(p. 99). Therefore, Greene uses the Chesapeake as the standard by which he judges the other British settlements in North America and the Atlantic as to whether they are more or less settled, more or less cohesive, or more or less coherent.

In his concluding chapter, Greene makes clear the idea that each of the American colonies became more and more alike, with an emerging common culture that can be described through growth, differentiation and values (Pp. 176-177), and can best be summarized by the idea that American inhabitants valued "the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety (p. 196). Greene, in his *Pursuits of Happiness*, busts the myth that our American culture was derived mainly from the influences of the puritanical settlers of the New England colonies and he has earned

his place among authors to be read by serious scholars who wish to know more about the origins and early sociological characteristics of American culture.

Pursuits of Happiness should be a must read for secondary and post graduate social science educators and curriculum writers and planners who want to enrich and engage their students. The book, with its expansive discourse on the sociological make up of the American colonies prior to the American Revolution, would provide an excellent case study for an advanced sociology course. Moreover, the inclusion of this book as supplementary reading for serious students of American history would be fitting and appropriate. Greene's detailed and carefully constructed contribution to the study of early American culture is certainly to be respected and admired.