

**Bigham, Darrel E., Towns and Villages of the Lower Ohio.**  
Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1998, 370  
pp. \$39.95.

This Ohio River Valley Series volume is in large part the result of U.K. Press's late 1980s "Always a River Project" on the Ohio River's place in American history. For this volume Professor Bigham, who grew up near the Susquehanna River, drew both from his academic experience at the University of Southern Indiana and his studies of Evansville, Indiana, as river city with its black community. The writer focuses on the 350 miles it is from Ohio Falls to Cairo, Illinois, a stretch of the Ohio that historians have largely ignored since the mid-1800s. To him this section of the river is "a microcosm of the history of the United States and its ideas of westward expansion, linear progress, human perfectibility, continental mastery, and material reward."

Covering events from the time of the earliest European settlement until 1920, Bigham touches on many communities of varying sizes. The largest cities on the lower Ohio--Evansville, Henderson, Owensboro, and Paducah--have received their share of attention in a locale where the Ohio was both an avenue and a barrier between North and South, one in which "the absence of bridges until the late 1880s reinforced cultural and social differences." One of Bigham's main questions concerns why a major city such as Cincinnati or Chicago did not develop on the lower Ohio.

Bigham divides his material into four segments: 1792-1818, 1815-1850, 1850-1880, and 1880-1920--the latter, the least studied of the four. He sees internal dynamics, along with the

role that commercial promotion has played, as quite important in shaping settlements. While natural resources and agricultural potential have furnished opportunities for development, much more significant has been the commitment of capital and management to the development of the lower Ohio area. Bigham does not, however, rule out the importance of timing and luck.

In all four time periods, he points out the ways the Ohio River may have divided the northern banks culturally from the southern shores. At the same time he shows this mighty river as a unifying force for development. In fact, "Upper Southern culture prevailed" there. To the author, "the Ohio peaked as a force in regional and national development in the 1850s, when the steamboat was in its golden age and new railroads complemented river trade." While the river influenced the growth of railroads, the distant future would see these rail lines reducing the waterways as trade routes. Villages without rails still depended greatly on the rivers, especially on the Green, Cumberland, Tennessee, and Ohio. Businesses on and along the lower Ohio grew noticeably between 1880 and 1920. Examining economic factors in all four time frames, Bigham explains the numerous social forces at work in those communities.

The professor's brief closing explains his reasons for concluding his study just after World War I. Most lower Ohio towns declined increasingly in the 1920s, during the Great Depression and World War II. Cars, trucks, and busses had their combined effects upon commerce as did bridges, locks, and dams, as well as state and national government decisions affecting funding of river infrastructure. Some cities, notably Paducah and Evansville, joined in levee building while ignoring the

potential for flooding although 1962 and 1997 brought vivid reminders of 1927 and 1937.

Bigham notes educational and population changes through Upper South culture are quite evident. He concludes that communities "remain creatures of their distinctive past--each a special place with different stories to tell. The river was--and is--largely responsible for that."

Bigham's visuals, clustered near the middle of the book, are random photos of places and events located along the Lower Ohio, many of which the author has taken with his camera. Readers who look for maps within the different time eras will find some of them a bit of a challenge to read. Perhaps some readers will find some historical materials not immediately clear. Bigham superimposes his system of numbers over specific, major settlements along the lower river. For quick reference in the readers' noting comparisons, he has constructed population and "settlement tables" as appendices.

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