

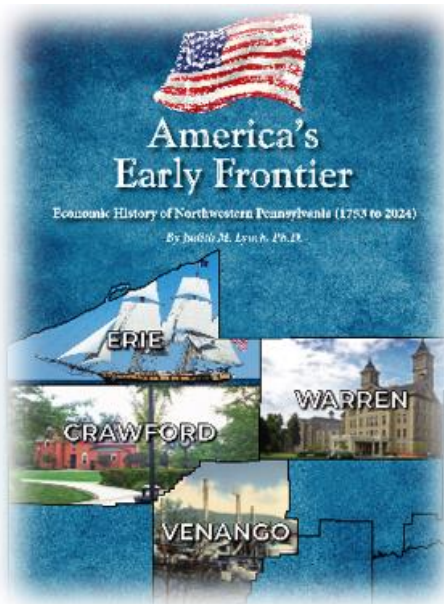
JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Book Notes #199

February 2025

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
Dr. Andrew Roth

'America's Early Frontier'
Judy Lynch's Book Is about History and Much More



What was America's early frontier?

As hard as it might be for some to imagine, for the vast area north of the Ohio River, western Pennsylvania had its moment as America's first "frontier." To preserve the land west of the Appalachian Mountains for the Native American tribes and to keep the region's timber and mineral wealth for themselves, the British Proclamation Act of 1763 sought to thwart colonial Americans' westward expansion. Indirectly, that sparked the American Revolution as resentful colonials simply ignored the decree, crossed the mountains, and settled in what was America's early frontier. Ohio was still the land of the Shawnee, Wyandotte, and other Native American tribes that had not yet been displaced to the "Indiana" territory. "Indiana," which means "land of the Indians," was to be preserved in perpetuity for the indigenous people.

Perpetuity, it turned out, lasted about 20 years.

All of that is another tale for another time. Joining other high quality Jefferson Educational Society (JES) publications such as David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak's "Accidental Paradise: 13,000-Year History of Presque Isle," JES Decadian Scholar Judy Lynch's "America's Early Frontier: Economic History of Northwestern Pennsylvania (1753-2024)" brilliantly and in encyclopedic fashion tells the economic history of America's early frontier's northern most territory – the land that became the four counties of northwestern Pennsylvania.



Lynch is well qualified for the undertaking. Lynch – the founding chairwoman of the JES Board of Trustees, former CIA analyst, high school teacher, and college professor with a University of Pittsburgh Ph.D. in political science – served for 20 years as county executive of Erie County, Pennsylvania. One doesn't usually think of Erie as having its finger on the pulse of the future, but in the 1990s, Lynch and another JES board

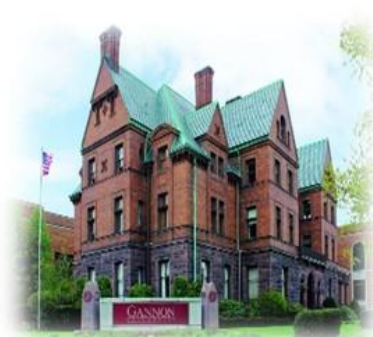
member, three-term city of Erie Mayor Joyce Savocchio, made Erie County the first political entity in the nation in which the two highest elected offices were both held by women.

As Lynch says in her preface to "America's Early Frontier," "The history of northwestern Pennsylvania is the story of the adventurous and entrepreneurial people who ventured into the region to make their homes and fortunes and who faced tumultuous economic fluctuations with courage and grit." [1] Using the taxonomy Michael Lind developed in "Land of Promise: An Economic History of the United States," Lynch tells that story by first following its path from the region's geologic origins, in particular, the last Ice Age's creation of the Great

Lakes and the numerous rivers, streams, lakes, and woodlands that constitute the area's topography to its preindustrial development by early settlers. She continues with the Age of Steam on both water and rail and its eclipse by the Motor Age. She then proceeds to the Motor Age's eclipse by the Information Age's undermining of the region's industrial base. She concludes her detailed history of the region with the emergence of its billion-dollar tourist industry and the attempts of 21st century for-profit and nonprofit champions in "eds, meds, and insurance" to scrape off the Rust Belt rust to create a new Erie and a revitalized region.



Griswold Plaza Post Office



Strong Mansion/Gannon University

"America's Early Frontier's" conceptual framework has two defining traits. For residents of northwestern Pennsylvania's four counties, I suspect the greatest interest might be Lynch's detailed revisiting of its past. She brings back to life the stories of the people whose names are on the region's roads, villages, buildings, and institutions. Readers uninterested in the namesake of Griswold Plaza or William L. Scott, who built what is now Gannon University's Old Main as a wedding gift for his daughter, will instead find her sketch of economic and political philosophy interesting. Lynch analyzes how the American system actually works, challenging 21st century political thinking.



Aside. Griswold Plaza is named after the Griswold family patriarch Matthew Griswold, Sr., whose Griswold Manufacturing Company operated in Erie from 1865 to 1957. It is most famous for its cast iron cooking utensils, including the Griswold frying pan, which is now a collector's item. Griswold's son, Matthew Griswold, Jr., is largely responsible for the General Electric Company's 1908 decision to locate in Lawrence Park, then part of Millcreek

Township just to the east of the city of Erie (Lawrence Park). Griswold Jr. was a Yale University friend and classmate of GE executive Francis Cole Pratt. Pratt led GE's decision to build the facility, showing the power of networking. Matthew Griswold Jr. became the first president of GE's Erie Iron Works. [2] As even the most casual observer of Erie history knows, GE dominated the regional economy for the entire 20th century.

Scott, who founded, among other things, the company that became Penelec, is arguably the wealthiest individual in the history of northwestern Pennsylvania. Coming to Erie in the 1840s with Charles M. Reed, grandson of one of Erie's founders, Scott's W.L. Scott & Co. eventually held interests in shipping, railroading, coal mining, iron manufacturing, and banking. He served as Erie's mayor and as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives. He was an avid horseman and thoroughbred racehorse breeder. Part of his Algeria Farms is now Millcreek Township's Scott's Park. "America's Early Frontier's" conceptual framework has two defining traits. For residents of northwestern Pennsylvania's four counties, I suspect the greatest interest might be Lynch's detailed revisiting of its past. She brings back to life the stories of the people whose names are on the region's roads, villages, buildings, and institutions. Readers uninterested in the namesake of Griswold Plaza or William L. Scott, who built what is now Gannon University's Old Main as a wedding gift for his daughter, will instead find her sketch of economic and political philosophy interesting. Lynch analyzes how the American system actually works, challenging 21st century political thinking.



William L. Scott

Lynch bases her economic philosophy on two observations. First, she recounts, "the tumultuous economic fluctuation" that characterized northwestern Pennsylvania, quoting Joseph Schumpeter at some length. In "Capitalism,

Socialism, and Democracy,” he describes “the destructive-creative impact of ever-new technology, new products, new methods of transportation, new markets, and new forms of industrial organization the capitalist enterprise creates.”[3] Even the most casual perusal of Lynch’s book illustrates the truth of that analysis as the handicraft and agricultural world of the region’s preindustrial era was overwhelmed by the coming of canals, Lake Erie steamboats, and railroads both opening up the region’s goods to new markets but also confronting their makers with new competitors. The scenario was played out repeatedly over the region’s 200-year history as the extractive industries gave way to manufacturers. After dominating almost the entire 20th century, manufacturers gave way to globalization’s new markets and the Information Age’s new business paradigms.

In the pure laissez-faire environment of libertarian fantasies, that occurs without governmental intervention. But, of course, the government intervenes as both the maker of the context in which economic activity occurs and the regulator of that activity. It was true from the beginning as the Holland Land Company and the Pennsylvania Population Company chartered by the government decided who and where people would settle in northwestern Pennsylvania’s four counties.

Context is infrastructure. Americans have always had an ambivalent attitude about the government building infrastructure. In the early 19th century, Kentuckian Henry Clay, based on Alexander Hamilton’s economic plan, proposed what he called “the American System.” Its three main principles were “improvements to infrastructure, revenue generation through high tariffs, and a strong national bank.” [4]

Then, as today with current infrastructure legislation and the role of the Federal Reserve regulating the monetary system, the plan encountered opposition from those who feared a strong central government. In short, they feared if the government could build infrastructure and control the flow of funds in the economy through a central bank, what else might it seek to control? In the 19th century, the strongest opposition came from southerners who feared the government would abolish slavery. It is a theme that resonates today. In the 21st century, it is Silicon Valley tech bros’ fear of government regulation that inspired Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos, and Tim Cook to become political partisans.

Americans want to believe their great national wealth was created by lone individual entrepreneurial geniuses. In part, it was, but those geniuses benefited from the context the government created. Clay’s plan built the Erie Canal and was the model for funding the construction of the transcontinental railroad; in the 20th century, the government built arguably the most powerful driver of the national economy – the Interstate Highway System – and funded research through the Department of Defense that created the internet. Or, more

parochially, looking at northwestern Pennsylvania, it built Kinzua Dam, Pymatuning Reservoir, and the magnet drawing hundreds of thousands of tourists to Erie every summer fueling its billion-dollar tourist industry – Presque Isle State Park. Without that park neither, on a micro level, Sara’s Restaurant, nor, on a macro level, would the region’s numerous hotels have much of a market.

Yes, we need more entrepreneurial geniuses like H.O. Hirt, who founded Erie’s Fortune 400 company Erie Insurance, and Paul Nelson, who built Waldameer Park and Water World into a state-of-the-art amusement park drawing tens of thousands to Erie each summer. But we also need a smarter government free of right- and left-wing zeal. The American economy has always been, in the parlance of today, a public-private partnership. Beginning with Alexander Hamilton’s plan for banking and manufacturing down to the current taxing, tax abatement incentives, and state and federal funding agencies, Lynch describes [5] a proposal designed to revitalize the city of Erie and other locales throughout northwestern Pennsylvania. To paraphrase Henry Clay, the American model has always been a public-private partnership. Political partisans on the right want the money but not the control; those on the left appear to want both.

How do you find the balance?

Lynch’s choice of Michael Lind’s taxonomy to frame her work is instructive, for Lind is a Hamiltonian. Hamilton is hard to place in our current political spectrum. On some issues, he is very right wing, and on others, very progressive. As James Pinkerton says in “The American Conservative”:

As a champion of energetic government, eager to pursue developmental economic goals, Hamilton might seem to be on today’s left. But as an enthusiast for business and profit, he might seem to be more on the right. So, he is politically adrift, we might say – neither party nowadays is interested in the sort of pro-business economic strategy that Hamilton championed. [6]

Lynch, like Lind, and like me, is a Hamiltonian. American history, but American economic history in particular, has always had a bipolar aspect to it. Americans like to think they are Jeffersonians. It is, at its root, the spirit animating today’s right-wing, libertarian, neo-populists. They like to think of America as a nation of small, independent businesspeople, farmers, and artisans living in small towns who accept personal responsibility for their fate and want as little governmental intrusion as possible.

Some Americans fit that profile.

However, as we have been since the early 19th century, the overwhelming majority of Americans are Hamiltonians. They live in large urban and suburban areas and own or work in large organizations, whether for-profit or nonprofit, funded by debt and either direct or in-direct government subsidy (tax deductions, tax abatements, government grants, and contracts of one sort or the other). This is Hamilton's world. It was the genius of his vision that made America great; if America is to be great again, it needs to recapture that vision.

That's enough political economy. The real pleasure of Lynch's book for northwestern Pennsylvanians is the stories she tells about people who built the region and the things they built.

Stories like the brief sketch of Archibald Tanner who settled in Warren County in 1816, opened a store, and became one of Warren's most prominent businessmen. He helped build Warren's "roads, boats, and bridges... he helped bring the first steamboat up the Allegheny River." [59 – *rather than a long string of Ibids listed below, since all quotes are from Lynch's book, going forward I will simply identify the page number.*] Or, another short bio, her recounting of the much more famous Oil City native and Allegheny College graduate Ida Tarbell's muckraking exposure of the excesses of Clevelander John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company. [91-92] Or the origins of northwest Pennsylvania's grape and wine industry in 1818 when Deacon Elijah Fay planted the first grapes that ultimately led to Welch's Grape Juice Company in neighboring Westfield, New York, opening a facility in the borough of North East, Pennsylvania, and the founding in 1865 of the South Shore Wine Company, the region's first winery. [95]



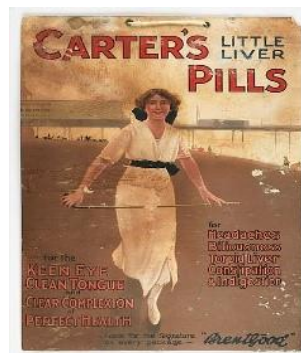
ARCHIBALD TANNER.

Archibald Tanner

Rush Battles founded Corry, Pennsylvania’s Climax Manufacturing Company, which produced the first Climax locomotive in the 1870s. [131] Or, one of my favorites, even though I grew up in Canton, Ohio, I can remember the 1950s television ads for Carters Little Liver Pills. First produced in the city of Erie in 1868 by John Samuel Carter’s Carter’s Medicine Company, they are still sold today as Carter’s Laxative and “remain a hallmark of American patented medicine.” [136]



Climax Locomotive



Carter's Little Liver Pills

Another of my favorites because of its indirect association with the 19th-century women’s movement, which encouraged women to ride bicycles because of the freedom it afforded them, is the story of the Black Manufacturing Company. It was located at Erie’s 19th and Liberty streets and produced the Tribune Bicycle. Featured on the cover of the Jan. 4, 1896 Scientific American, it was “a nationally recognized leader of high-grade bicycles.” [158] Although a bittersweet story, Lynch’s account of “Talon Zippers Fall to the Japanese” relates the success of Meadville’s Talon Zipper Company from its origins in the 19th century as the Hookless Fastener Company to its acquisition by Tag-It Pacific in 1996 and its demise in the 21st century. As Lynch recounts, its success is “the story of the creativity and persistence of three men: Colonel Lewis Walker, Whitcomb Judson, and Gideon Sundback. [271-274]



We are all prisoners of our experience. As someone who spent a half-century in higher education, I particularly enjoyed Lynch’s detailed history of the region’s higher education institutions, beginning with the founding of Allegheny College in 1815 and culminating with the founding of the Lake Erie College of Osteopathic Medicine in the 1990s and Erie County Community College in 2021. It is the story,

once again, of public-private partnerships that created Edinboro Normal School (now part of PennWest University), Mercyhurst College (now Mercyhurst University), Gannon University, and Penn State Erie, The Behrend College. Penn State Erie's Knowledge Park promises to become a key economic driver for the region's future.



Otto Behrend



Mother Borgia Egan

It is the story of visionary individuals whose energy overcame multiple challenges; people such as the Mother Borgia Egan, RSM, founder of Mercyhurst College; Bishop John Mark Gannon, founder of Gannon University; and the family of Otto Behrend whose generosity made Penn State Erie, the Behrend College possible. [215-243] Additionally, Behrend gave his summer home on Asbury Road to the Millcreek School District; it is now one of the area's jewels – Asbury Woods Nature Center.

I'll not spoil your fun, because the great pleasure of Lynch's book is discovering nuggets of the region's history. Since she is not a theoretician, she does not provide a declarative statement of her economic or political philosophy. You can, however, deduce it from her inductive development of the history of the region and how it mirrors the economic history of the nation and its fluctuating appreciation for the role of public-private partnerships in its success.

That is important and an enjoyable approach to her work.



Orange Noble



Spirella Corsets



Gertrude Barber

But far more enjoyable is to treat “America’s Early Frontier” as an encyclopedia of the region’s economic history. I have only given you a tiny sample of the people and organizations she chronicles. People and organizations from the obscure, like Orange Noble, who made a fortune in the 19th-century oil fields of Venango County and then spent it building the city of Erie’s infrastructure, or her account of Meadville’s Spirella Corset Company. Or, her sketches of the famous, like Le Grand Skinner, whose Skinner Engine Company built steam engines in the 19th century and survived until its demise in 2013. Like Behrend, who built a papermaking powerhouse, the Hammermill Paper Company. Even figures like Gertrude Barber, who founded the internationally recognized the Barber National Institute for developmentally disadvantaged children and adults, are mentioned alongside sometimes larger-than-life characters behind the region’s newspapers and electronic media from Horace Greeley to Joseph Sterrett to John Mead to Myron Jones to Bob Chitester, who founded WQLN Public Broadcasting in northwest Pennsylvania to Adam Welsh and Brian Graham’s independent, alternative publication, the Erie Reader.

Over 20 years in the making, Judy Lynch’s “America’s Early Frontier” is a monumental achievement. It is the best, single-volume history of northwest Pennsylvania written. It should be in every school and college library in the region, and it should be read by anyone with an interest in not only northwestern Pennsylvania economic history but American economic history.

You can get your copy at:

Werner Books
3608 Liberty Street Liberty Plaza
Erie, Pennsylvania 16508
814-864-1565
www.WernerBooks.com

The Jefferson Educational Society
3207 State Street
Erie, Pennsylvania 16508
814-459-8000
www.JESErie.org



-- Andrew Roth, Ph.D.
Scholar-in-Residence
The Jefferson Educational Society
roth@jeserie.org

This content is copyrighted by the Jefferson 2022.

Photo Credits

“America’s Early Frontier: Economic History of Northwestern Pennsylvania (1753 to 2024)” at **Jefferson Educational Society** available at [Books - Jefferson Educational Society](#) accessed Feb. 1, 2025.

“Judy Lynch, Decadian Scholar-in-Residence” at **Jefferson Educational Society** available at [Administrative Team - Jefferson Educational Society](#) accessed Feb. 12, 2025.

“Mayor Joyce Savocchio” at **Erie Times-News** (Feb. 2, 2019) available at [Savocchio Business Park gets new owner](#) accessed Feb. 12, 2025.

“The former Griswold Plaza Post Office” at **Erie Times-News** (June 7, 2022) available at <https://www.goerie.com/story/news/local/2022/06/08/erie-buildings-tells-erie-pa-history-through-stately-structures-crowley-watson-curtze-hamot/65358182007/> accessed Feb. 12, 2025.

“Gannon University Old Main” at **Gannon Knight** available at <https://gannonknight.com/11809/news/professors-discuss-burning-issues-in-the-classroom/> accessed Feb. 12, 2025.

“Griswold-Slant-Logo.jpg” at **Wikimedia Commons** available at [File:Griswold-Slant-Logo.jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#) accessed Feb. 12, 2025.

“William Lawrence Scott (Pennsylvania Congressman)” at **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia**, available at [William Lawrence Scott \(Pennsylvania Congressman\) - William Lawrence Scott - Wikipedia](#) accessed Feb. 12, 2025.

“Archibald Tanner” at **Find a Grave** available at [Archibald Tanner \(1786-1861\) - Find a Grave Memorial](#) accessed Feb. 13, 2025.

“Deacon Elijah Fay” at **Find a Grave** available at [Deacon Elijah Fay \(1782-1860\) - Find a Grave Memorial](#) accessed Feb. 13, 2025.

“Climax Locomotive” at **Climax Locomotives (Corry, PA)** available at [climax locomotive corry pennsylvania - Search](#) accessed Feb. 13, 2025.

“Carter’s Little Liver Pills Welcome L0043366.jpg” at **Wikimedia Commons** available at [File:Carter’s Little Liver Pills Wellcome L0043366.jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#) accessed Feb. 13, 2025.

“Black Manufacturing Company (PA) Community content is available under [CC-BY-SA](#) unless otherwise noted” at **Vintage Advertising & Company Histories** available at [Black Manufacturing Company \(PA\) | MyCompanies Wiki | Fandom](#) accessed Feb. 13, 2025.

“Mother Borgia Egan.jpg” at **Wikimedia Commons** available at [File:Mother Borgia Egan.jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#) accessed Feb. 13, 2025.

“Otto Behrend” at **Asbury Woods** available at [Planned Giving and Bequests - Asbury Woods](#) accessed Feb. 13, 2025.

“HENRY (1873) p406 ORANGE NOBLE, ERIE (PA).jpg” at **Wikimedia Commons** available at [File:HENRY\(1873\) p406 ORANGE NOBLE, ERIE \(PA\).jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#) accessed Feb. 13, 2025.

“Spirella Corsets 1917.jpg” at **Wikimedia Commons** available at [File:Spirella Corsets 1917.jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#) accessed Feb. 13, 2025.

“Dr. Gertrude Barber” at **Barber National Institute** available at [About Dr. Gertrude Barber](#) accessed Feb. 13, 2025.

End Notes

1. Lynch, Judy. **America’s Early Frontier: Economic History of Northwestern Pennsylvania (1753-2024)** (Erie, PA: Jefferson Educational Society, 2024), p. 4.
2. Ibid., p. 364.
3. Ibid., p.7.
4. “The American System – Henry Clay’s Plan for the National Economy” at **American History Central** available at [American System, Summary, Facts, Significance](#) accessed Feb. 13, 2025.
5. Lynch, *cited above*, pp. 313-319.
6. Pinkerton, James P., “Hamilton Shrugged” in **The American Conservative** available at [Hamilton Shrugged - The American Conservative](#) accessed Feb. 12, 2025.
7. Lynch, *cited above*, p. 59.

[Subscribe to JES Publications Mailing List!](#)

[Support JES | Donate](#)

In Case You Missed It

[JCLA Report | ‘It’s Broken, so Let’s Fix It’](#) written by 2024 Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy Cohort

[Truth in Love | Margaret's Story and the Price of Redemption](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Parris Baker, Antonio Howard, and Diane Chido**

[The Wider World | Foreign Aid – Where Has it Gone?](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Diane Chido**

[Classic Be Well | Power Down After Day at Work](#) written by health and wellness expert **Debbie DeAngelo**

[On the Waterfront | Hunting Grounds: Bay Rat Big Game](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. David Frew**

[Russia-Ukraine War Series | What Does Trump Presidency Mean for Ukraine?](#) written by **Lena Surzhko-Harned**

[Book Notes #198 | “This, That, & the Other X”: The Art of Power ... or Maybe Not](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Andrew Roth**

JES Mission: The Jefferson was founded to stimulate community progress through education, research, and publications. Its mission also includes a commitment to operate in a nonpartisan, nondenominational manner without a political or philosophical bias. As such, the Jefferson intends to follow the examined truth wherever it leads and is neither liberal nor conservative, Democratic nor Republican in philosophy or action. Our writers' work reflects their own views.

