

## Urban History Review Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW  
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

Mahoney, Timothy R. *Provincial Lives: Middle-Class Experience in the Antebellum Middle West*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Pp. x, 334. Illustrations, maps, tables, bibliography, index. US\$54.95 (hardcover)

Andrew C. Holman

Volume 32, Number 2, Spring 2004

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1015725ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1015725ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

### ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this review

Holman, A. C. (2004). Review of [Mahoney, Timothy R. *Provincial Lives: Middle-Class Experience in the Antebellum Middle West*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Pp. x, 334. Illustrations, maps, tables, bibliography, index. US\$54.95 (hardcover)]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 32(2), 67–68. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1015725ar>

ter a refreshingly different perspective on the city's history and geography.

There are, in my view, no serious flaws or shortcomings in this book. There were minor oversights, for example, the references to Alexander MacNab (it should be Allan MacNab), and I did find the chapter entitled "Oriah Mountain Dreamer" to be somewhat out of place, but experiences of the sort Terpstra is describing are, of course, personal and subjective. Overall, the book is a delight to read. The experience of the book itself is enhanced by four superb maps by Glenn Macdonald and eight exquisite sketches by Wesley Bates. *Falling into Place* should be read by all those interested in our experience of place. It is an eloquently written reminder that physical and cultural landscapes and the way we understand them are continuous works in progress.

Walter G. Peace  
School of Geography and Geology  
McMaster University

---

**Mahoney, Timothy R. *Provincial Lives: Middle-Class Experience in the Antebellum Middle West*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Pp. x, 334. Illustrations, maps, tables, bibliography, index. US\$54.95 (hardcover).**

In the conclusion of his pathbreaking 1989 study of 19th-century urban American respectables, *The Emergence of the Middle Class*, Stuart Blumin pointed to an interesting irony. For all he had demonstrated about middle-class structures in urban America, his study focused on only a distinct minority—big-city dwellers—in an era when most of the people lived on farms and in small villages and towns. What, he asked, were the differences between urban and rural milieux when considering middle-class structure and identity? What, in other words, was the geography of middle-class formation in 19th-century America?

Ten years later, Timothy Mahoney has begun to answer that question, and rather ably. *Provincial Lives* examines the development of a middle-class consciousness within an urban system: the river towns in the upper Mississippi valley from the 1790s to the Civil War. This book dovetails nicely with Mahoney's previous work, *River Towns in the Great West* (1990), which traces the development of a regional urban system in small-town Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, and Wisconsin in the middle decades of the 19th century. These books divide the labour of urban history clearly and well; *River Towns* describes the anatomy of the antebellum Midwestern urban system, *Provincial Lives* describes much of its physiology.

Mahoney's central argument is both plain and sophisticated: the Midwest was, in the early 19th century, a testing ground for middle-class values constructed in eastern cities and transported westward to growing towns and their hinterlands. Class identities here were not national or local in scope, but regional. "In the towns of the Great West the middle class transferred a cultural and social system which middle-class people had only just formulated in the older towns across New York and Ohio and tested its ability to shape social order in the West . . . and

the whole of the United States." (5) Three successive migrant groups played key roles in constructing and defining the regional middle class: early pioneers and transplanted gentry, whose ideals were paramount in local society, 1790s–1810s; young, male fortune-seekers, whose fraternal behaviour posed the threat of local social disorder in the 1820s and 1830s; and more respectable sorts—merchants and professionals—whose material display, mannered behaviour, moral admonition, and boosterism became the dominant means of expressing middle-class culture by the 1850s.

This regional middle-class consciousness was both powerful and fleeting. Regional elites held the economic and professional reins in local society; like those of southern planters, their ideals and values were hegemonic locally and overshadowed other subcultures. Economic and professional interests and common values married regional elites to one another. By the 1840s, a regional booster network was paralleled by a regional cultural network; river-town elites were bound by common interest, shared values, and mutual regard for cultivated behaviour.

This regional class culture eroded, however, as shared economic interest crumbled with the coming of the railroad in the 1850s. Initially, communities pooled talent and resources to draw railroads to their region, but ultimately the fruits of attracting railroads were not evenly distributed. Railroads could not, of course, run through every locality. Middle-class culture in the antebellum Midwest was predicated on regional commonweal; railroads divided community interest and ultimately conquered local middle-class culture in two ways. Where railroads connected small towns to big cities, local middle-class culture was swamped: middle-class culture generated in big city termini (of the sort that Blumin describes) prevailed; in those towns bypassed by the railroad, middle-class culture withered once a reason for regional consciousness was removed. In the upper Mississippi valley, the middle-class *moment* was bright but short-lived.

Mahoney's method in treating this subject is well balanced. Having painted the form of the regional urban structure, he seeks in this book to understand the social relationships that held it together. The author's archival research is impressive. He presents evidence from personal and family correspondence, diaries, and an interesting array of ephemera like social-event invitations and handbills. He uses family reconstitution (one of the most laborious methods that social historians employ) to explain the social networks that westward migration entailed and case studies to elucidate the professional culture of lawyers. Mahoney's book is, then, "structuralist," but not faceless. His portrait of regional society is rich, detailed, sophisticated, and above all, credible.

Some weaknesses remain, of course. The book is generally well written. Mahoney is at his best when telling stories about families, but this occasionally lapses in sections of dense, awkward prose (in the introduction and epilogue) that obfuscate the book's argument. Some usage inconsistencies mar the text (*Vanmeter* or *Van Meter*? *Saukenuk* or *Saukenauk*? *Kenney* or *Kinney Said*? *Hudson Bay Company*, *comradery*, and railroad

*script* for *scrip*). This book is largely about publicly expressed class culture and, like other works on the Victorian middle class, women's roles in middle-class formation are treated only marginally. Moreover, this book says nothing about the ways that movements like moral reform, religious revival, and sport—quintessentially middle-class activities elsewhere—may have helped shape middle-class awareness in the Midwest. Finally, Mahoney does not puzzle over theory. As such, this book is not laden with dull sociological discussions about social structure, but as a result it lacks a clear definition of the “middle class,” or even an acknowledgment that it is a problematic category.

Like all good scholarly books, however, this one's weaknesses are minor when compared to its strengths. Mahoney's *Provincial Lives* sheds a great deal of light on how the middle class grew and declined *outside of* big-city America—in villages and small towns within an urban regional system. The book is a model

for those who write about the history of urban regions in that it demonstrates the importance of social values and cultural ideals to the existence and maintenance of regional economies. And its scope—the region—provides an important corrective to social historians whose subjects have too often been either national or local. Mahoney's work leaves the reader wanting to know more about what the decline of regional middle class left in its wake. What happened to the “insecure, disoriented, untethered” respectables left behind in the small-town Midwest by the railroad and by the middle-class moment? Here is another intriguing story and one that I hope Mahoney will tell in his future scholarship.

Andrew C. Holman  
Department of History  
Bridgewater State College