

The History of the Hudson River Valley: From Wilderness to the Civil War

Vernon Benjamin

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Depth of detail and superb understanding of historical figures prove Benjamin's research and admiration of the New York landscape.

It's difficult to imagine a more thorough history of the Hudson River Valley than this one by Vernon Benjamin. The book's subtitle, "From Wilderness to the Civil War," indicates the broad span of history covered in exhaustive detail. With an author entranced by the region, this evocative and encyclopedic travel through history has much to feast upon.

This 13,400-square-mile area of upstate New York has been the setting of great events in American history, as well as home to giants of literature like James Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving, and Edgar Allan Poe. In addition to accounts of these events and literary figures, Benjamin describes early incursions into the region by Dutch and English explorers and the many bloody battles fought there during the French and Indian War, the American Revolution, and the Civil War. *The History of the Hudson River Valley* also manages to cover such diverse topics as slavery, the women's movement, and the founding of West Point Military Academy.

Benjamin, a journalist and lecturer of history at Marist College, moves the story along at a leisurely pace. The depth of detail the reader will encounter is proof of the author's comprehensive research but also raises the question of whether this labor of love might have been trimmed down somewhat—highlighting key moments in the Hudson Valley's history rather than attempting to be all-encompassing.

Still, Benjamin displays an acute understanding of the historical figures described in his book. As just one example among many, he vividly reenacts the saga of Benedict Arnold's flight from the region in 1780 when his treason was uncovered. Before then, he meets with his coconspirator, Major John André of the British forces, and the two men size one another up: "When it came to the hard negotiations, [Arnold's] dominating nature was embittered by years of non-recognition, his boldness as wild and fearless as on the battlefield. André, in his turn, was the amenable younger companion, perhaps feigning admiration over Arnold's war prowess and sympathy toward the grave injustices he received, all the while testing the limits of his demands and cautiously drawing in his prey."

Fans of Americana will enjoy Benjamin's book, while those with a special interest in the Hudson River Valley will delight in the vast panoramic history depicted here.

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