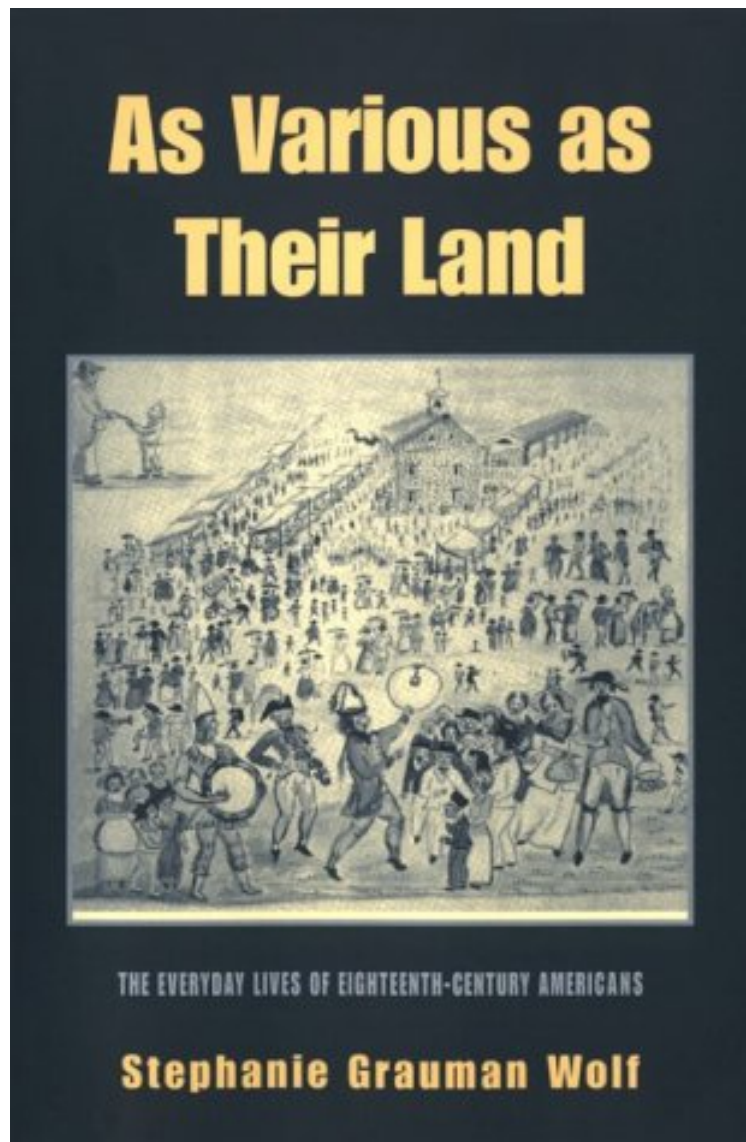


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As Various as Their Land: The Everyday Lives of Eighteenth-Century Americans

Stephanie Grauman Wolf

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Stephanie Grauman Wolf : As Various as Their Land: The Everyday Lives of Eighteenth-Century Americans before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised As Various as Their Land: The Everyday Lives of Eighteenth-Century Americans:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five StarsBy RuslanVery good for history lovers!0 of 0 people

found the following review helpful. What it was really like for our ancestors....By J. Michael This is an outstanding popular history of the the ordinary lives of Americans, both rich and poor, in the eighteenth century. Full of learned analysis, it is seasoned with quotations from contemporary writings that exhibit the era's prejudices and customs. What most impressed me was how hard and insecure most lives were for the comparatively advantaged inhabitants of this continent in that century. It really sent chills down my spine to think about how utterly brutal their existence was, to be so completely dependent on one's own physical labor for the sustenance of a lifetime and how extremely easy it was to lose everything. 9 of 9 people found the following review helpful. The Everyday Lives of Eighteenth-Century Americans By A Customer This work is part of The Everyday Life in America Series through which the reader learns about the mundane yet more important contributions of the "regular" colonists who populated this land. Most history books focus on great men - and only rarely, great women - major wars, and grand schemes and innovations. Wolf's book and the others in the series offer a picture of the early "humanscape" with a better understanding of the colonist's everyday lives. As the author states, "For every Cotton Mather, Samuel Adams, Benjamin Franklin, or George Washington there were hundreds of assemblymen, clergymen, and judges; thousands of people who made up mobs, polls, and armies; and tens of thousands of farmers, artisans, laborers, women, children, servants and slaves." (11) I am now convinced that no history is complete without consideration of the lives of these "everyday" individuals. The sheer numbers, as well as the scholar's aspiration to understand the past more completely, demand it. When a person reads about the past, they tend to romanticize it. Therefore, the hearts of most twenty-first century Americans are warmed by the commonly held image of early settlers working together as a new people in a new land, achieving seemingly impossible goals, massaging unrealistic dreams into reality. However, as Wolf's title suggests, the overriding theme of her book is diversity rather than the believed commonality. Wolf addresses this theme of diversity with regard to national origin, race, religion, social status, gender, settlement region, and more. The degree of complexity is increased by those variables. Though we have been made aware through more traditional histories that America was - and is - something of a "melting pot," Wolf delves beyond and beneath the usual focus on country of origin to uncover the depth of diversity in the eighteenth century. Given the complex human mosaic that was America, George Washington stated that it was "little short of a miracle" (10) that any sort of union was achieved. For the author, major events essentially provide a context that might enhance the reader's understanding of the "voices" of eighteenth-century Americans. For that reason, Wolf suggests that slavery and the Revolutionary War are important "backdrops" to consider as one listens to these "voices." The everyday lives of inhabitants might certainly have been affected by these historical events, though not to the degree one might believe. Using the Revolutionary War as an example, the author points out that: "...while history is written backward, it is lived forward, and for the people who experienced it, the War of Independence was really just one more interruption of their daily routines similar to many that had gone before." (9) Such statements challenge the reader to consider the everyday lives of people as the focus, rather than the events that make great chapter headings in textbooks. Another central message in Wolf's book, is that time is just one component of the history of the eighteenth century - and perhaps a relatively unimpressive one at that. Consideration of the diversity of American experiences at this "single point in time" allows greater understanding of our early nation. Therefore, on February 17, 1775, settlers in Pennsylvania lived one day of life while people in the Carolinas experienced something radically different. The organizational strategy of *As Various as Their Land* involves three separate sections labeled "The Home Front," "The Workaday World," and "The Public Domain" (Wolf 15, 139, 213 respectively). As the section titles suggest, they each deal with everyday home, work, and community experiences in the eighteenth century. I could not help but think of the Venn diagrams used in an algebra class, as Wolf describes these three overlapping circles of everyday life. The concept of overlap is essential to any accurate depiction of life - past or present. Such "intersections of sets," as they might be described in algebra terminology, create the understanding of life as it was lived in early America. The purpose and focus of Stephanie Grauman Wolf's book were very thought provoking. The purpose requires the reader to adjust their concept of history and the people who lived it day by day. The author used an impressive array of sources in presenting the "voices" of individuals through letters, diaries, and various other documents. However, the conclusions drawn from such a small "sample" of subjects seemed rather broad- and sometimes overly emphatic. Though Wolf makes a great effort to include information from the situations, I was completely aware that each "voice" provided just a glimpse at a moment of history. Just as the more "traditional" histories focus on certain prominent people, then, *As Various as Their Land* has comparable limitations by focusing on the "voices" of available and select individuals. And to be fair, any depiction of human events - whether created then or now-is almost always incomplete. This difficulty, however, should not be overemphasized. Wolf's book successfully fills in considerable gaps and connects the dots of traditional renderings with real human beings who lived history forward in eighteenth-century America.

Throughout the 18th century of enormous changes in America and challenges, no single description captured the majority of the new country's inhabitants, no one lifestyle embraced the typical American. Rich or poor, native or immigrant, slave or free, white or coloured, each individual determined the shape and opportunities of everyday life.

"Well researched . . . this study deals with an extraordinary variety of people in equally manifold circumstances: urban and rural dwellers, laborers and owners, slaves, impoverished immigrants, and Amerindians." Publishers Weekly