

Curtis Putnam Nettels

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Curtis Putnam Nettels, trained at the University of Kansas and the University of Wisconsin, had an active teaching career at the University of Wisconsin and Cornell from 1924 to 1966. From the outset he centered his research and writing in the colonial and early national period and quickly became one of the best and most effective teachers, writers, and critics on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century America. His move to Cornell pushed its Department of History into the front rank of colonial history.

Nettels was born in Topeka, Kansas, from old New England stock, as all three of his names suggest. His father was a court stenographer, local politician, and lover of music, as his son became. With the University of Kansas only twenty miles away, it was natural for him to go there for his undergraduate education and equally natural that he should do his graduate work at Wisconsin, which had a very strong American history section.

Under the influence of Frank Hodder at Kansas, who had begun his teaching at Cornell University in 1885, and Frederic L. Paxson, the ‘frontier’ historian who succeeded Frederick Jackson Turner when he left Wisconsin for Harvard in 1910, and in an atmosphere permeated by the progressivism of Richard Ely, John R. Commons, and Selig Perlman in economics; John M. Gaus in government; E. A. Ross in sociology; and, most of all, the LaFollette family, Nettels emerged as a progressive historian, concerned about the problems modern industrialism had created, the ravages that uncontrolled capitalism had done to soil, forests, and water of the West.

Nettels’s early teaching was heavily influenced by the detailed multi-volume works of Charles McLean Andrews and Herbert Levi Osgood, enlivened by Charles Beard’s stress on economic factors and by Frederick Jackson Turner’s emphasis on the frontier in American society and government. One of his earlier articles was on Frederick Jackson Turner and the New Deal. “Historians,” he said, “like Turner, place the present in its appropriate setting. They make clear to laymen how the elements of modern society took form.”

Nettels’s first research project was a history of colonial money, a topic on which little work had then been done. American archives and libraries could provide some information, but the detailed correspondence between British colonial officials and their superiors in London was essential for a thorough understanding of the subject. Fortunately, a Guggenheim Fellowship enabled Nettels and his wife, Elsie Patterson Nettels, to spend a year in England working in the Public Record Office collections of countless letters, reports, and miscellaneous documents

bearing on trade relations, appointments, directions, regulations, and protests against them. Out of this work came *The Money Supply of the American Colonies*, a study that no scholar could afford to neglect.

Nettels's synthesis of colonial history appeared in 1938 as *The Roots of American Civilization: A History of American Colonial Life*, which was widely used as a text in courses on the colonial period. It stressed the economic growth of the colonies, their institutional adaptations, their trade and political relations with England, the causes of their friction with the mother country, and the colonists' insistence on the preservation of their legal and natural rights as Englishmen that finally brought about the Revolution. Here Nettels showed himself a strong defender of the American position and a critic of those in the profession who accepted any approximation of the Tory interpretation. That he was a devoted nationalist is reflected in everything he wrote.

As one of five editors, Nettels had a share in the planning, editing, and writing of the ten-volume *Economic History of the United States*. His volume two, *The Emergence of a National Economy*, like his *Roots*, was admirably organized and thorough and reflected well his deep faith in this country and its democratic processes. At the same time, the economic side of history is here made clear and attractive. Nettels was proud of his major works and pleased to see them remain in print throughout his life. He also served as chairman of the program committee of the American Historical Association and served as a member of the editorial boards of the *American Historical Review* and the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*.

With the coming of World War II, Nettels began to take an active part in the burgeoning public debate over American aid to the Allies, which he vigorously supported. This led on one occasion to his being asked by the president of the University of Wisconsin during World War II to defend the American position against Oswald Villard in a public confrontation.

At Cornell he concentrated his energies more on writing and gave less time to professional societies or national politics. As a citizen-historian he felt he must devote his energy and abilities to correcting popular misapprehensions about the country's history. He was convinced, for example, that most writers on George Washington had failed to grasp the leadership he had shown in the years from 1765 to 1776. His *George Washington and American Independence* forced all later writers to give careful attention to the role of Washington in these early years, even if it prompted some to charge that he was trying to make Washington more important than he actually was. Another attitude that perturbed him was the tendency of conservatives to return to Calhoun for constitutional arguments against New Deal policies. Not only did they revive Calhoun, they attempted to glorify—Nettels felt, to exaggerate—the political argument for states' rights and to minimize the role of Lincoln and Grant. This brought

Nettels to his fundamental question: Which existed first, the Union or the states? If it were the states, then the case for their sovereignty and that of the conservative against the growth of federal power would be greatly strengthened.

These questions deeply moved Nettels. Both before and after retirement he spent much effort to publicize his views in letters to daily newspapers (more than a score were in the *New York Times*), to historical journals, and to weekly and monthly periodicals, arguing brilliantly from his deep understanding of American constitutional history. In all of his writing he had an extraordinary facility for drawing on his wide reading to support his views so that even those readers who did not agree with him found his conclusions ingenious, strikingly relevant, and not easily discounted. Nettels was a member of Phi Beta Kappa, the Massachusetts Historical Society, and the Colonial Society of Massachusetts. He replaced Samuel Eliot Morison for a year at Harvard and taught for short periods at Columbia University and Johns Hopkins University. He took much satisfaction in the work of his students.

Curtis Nettels is survived by his wife, Elsie Patterson Nettels, who aided him materially in his early research, and a daughter, Elsa Nettels, who teaches American literature at William and Mary College.

Knight Biggerstaff, Edward W. Fox, Paul W. Gates