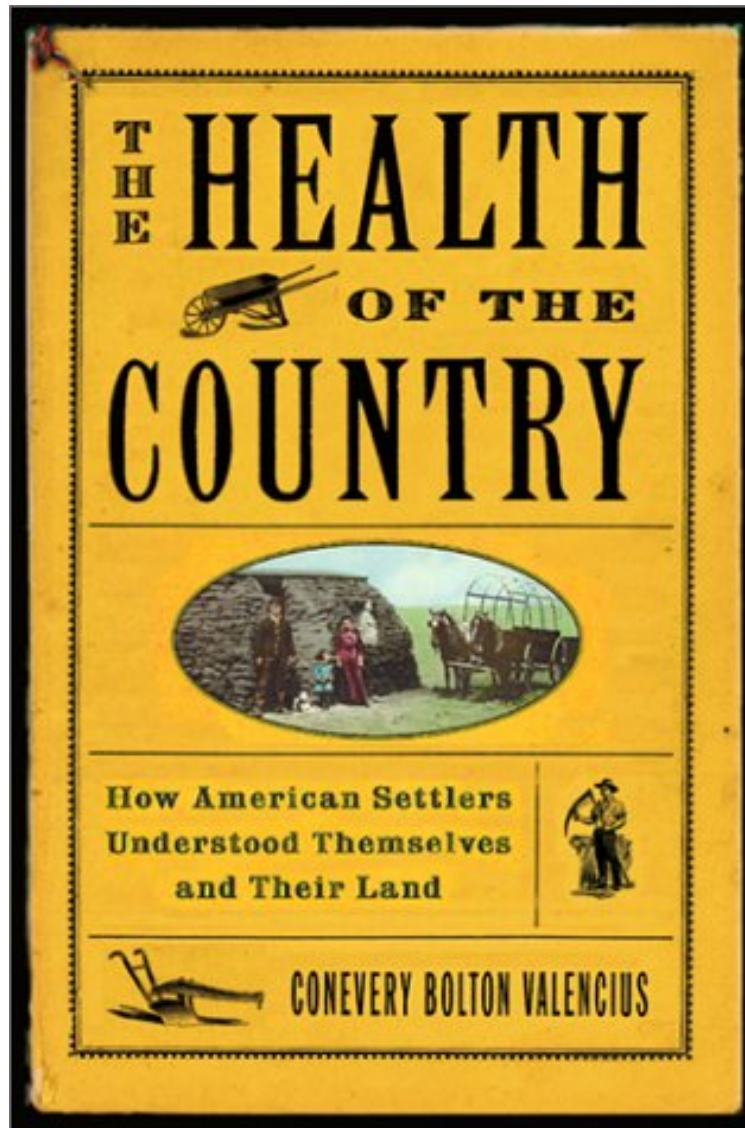


# The Health Of The Country How American Settlers Understood Themselves And Their Land

*Conevery Bolton Valencius*

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**Conevery Bolton Valencius : The Health Of The Country How American Settlers Understood Themselves And Their Land** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Health Of The Country How American Settlers Understood Themselves And Their Land:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Land and Body in Antebellum Arkansas By Taylor rose For American settlers in the middle Mississippi River basin during the early nineteenth century, the boundaries between

self and surroundings were porous. Nebulous notions of health and productivity seeped into the language, everyday actions, and thoughts of Arkansas homesteaders. In *The Health of the Country*, Coneverly Bolton Valencius digs into the diaries, letters, and literature of settlers to unearth how these newcomers assessed the character and potential of the land to which they had so recently arrived. Valencius takes a thematic approach to the topic of antebellum medical geography, switching gracefully between narratives regarding overland migration, subtropical epidemiology, yeoman agriculture, water ecology, racial anxiety, and the professionalization (and resulting amateurization) of medical practice. Despite our modern tendency to compartmentalize the various studies of body and land, Valencius argues that these frontiersmen and women thought in more holistic terms. A fever, for example, could be the result of anything from stagnant water to ethereal miasmas to a recent change in location. Likewise, agricultural success might be due to healthy soil, but it could just as easily be correlated with human fecundity. Simply stated: As they described the world around them, so too did early Americans describe themselves (99). Of course, the book has its flaws. To what degree does this synthesis of individual and environmental concerns translate geographically and temporally? Valencius repeatedly remarks on the quintessentially American nature of frontier settlement, but do we see the same occurring farther west of the Mississippi? And later in the nineteenth century? The author does not say. She does, however, appropriately emphasize dissociation from the land as a major force behind the aforementioned inclination to separate issues of health and environment in the twenty-first century. In my opinion, this is the book's most revelatory conclusion. In this way, *Health* is an important contribution to several sub-disciplines of history and a key insight into antebellum epistemology. 3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Shedding light on an era that is usually forgotten.

By Dog Owner  
The time period discussed in this book is usually "glossed over" by teachers and professors. The author sheds light on the early development of science, the relationship between people and their environment, and other pieces of information that haven't been discussed for with most students. I enjoyed the author's humorous, yet academic style, and feel more layers of meaning can be gained from each reading. 2 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Interesting read.

By cm reader  
had to buy this book for an American environmental history class. learned a lot of how Americans used to perceive health. great class, good book. a little dry sometimes, but how else do you write about something that happened over a hundred years ago?

Many have written about the settling of early 19th century America, but until now no one has explored these settlers' self-consciousness about what they were doing, what "settling" and cultivating the land itself meant. In *The Health of the Country*, Coneverly Valencius shows that assessments of the "sickliness" or "health" of land pervade settlers' letters, journals, newspapers, and literature--evidence of the common sense of another time, when land was believed to have intrinsic health characteristics and the human body was understood to be linked in intimate and intricate ways with similar balances in the surrounding world. Valencius focuses her research on the Arkansas and Missouri territories from the time of the Louisiana Purchase to the Civil War, capturing the excitement, romanticism, confusion, and anxiety of the frontier experience and revealing how these emotions were bound up with settlers' unique relationships with their land. This is a complex and rewarding book, a beautifully written, fresh account of the gritty details of American expansion, animated by the voices of the settlers themselves.

From Library Journal  
This book is based on the author's Harvard dissertation, which won the 1999 Allan Nevins Prize. (Valencius is currently on the history faculty of Washington University in Saint Louis.) While Jacqueline Corn's *Environment and Health in Nineteenth Century America* focuses on Pennsylvania, this work looks at antebellum westward migration, with particular emphasis on Arkansas and Missouri. Settlers of both European and African extraction assessed the environment in a variety of ways, including its effect on their health. Letters, newspapers, journals, and literature all reveal sentiments ranging from "this is a healthy country," as one satisfied newcomer put it, to "I think it is a sickly place," as a more tremulous settler wrote in a letter home. Valencius suggests that the ideas and practices linking human well-being and locale were fundamentally identical processes with those thought to operate in the natural world. For example, in the release of foul miasmas from soil disturbed by cultivation, settlers perceived the same cycle of imbalance and reequilibrium that they experienced in the release of "bad humors" from their own ill bodies. A particularly fascinating chapter in this intriguing work examines issues of race in this environment. An excellent choice for academic and large public libraries.

Daniel Liestman, Florida Gulf Coast Univ. Lib., Ft. Meyers  
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From The New England Journal of Medicine  
The *Health of the Country* is an illuminating medical perspective on the settlement of the American frontier from the Louisiana Purchase to the start of the Civil War. Through the use of letters, scientific reports, and travel literature, Valencius is able to map what she calls a "geography of health." Settlers and travelers identified land with health or illness and improvement in the land with improvement in individual and national health. Her treatment of human interaction with the environment is not necessarily new; what is novel in her approach is her analysis of the settlers' parallel perceptions of the health of their bodies and the health of the land. Under Valencius's guidance, "medical and environmental history come together in settlers' bodies." Valencius also introduces the history of science and medicine to the growing body of literature on the history of America's westward expansion. Bringing these fields of history together, she finds new ways to advance

our understanding of all of them. She also uses the best aspects of social-history analysis in her study of common people's understanding of medicine and the environment. By looking more closely at the lives of ordinary people, social historians have already expanded our understanding of the American past. In chapter 6 especially, Valencius takes us one step further by looking at settlers' "local knowledge" of medicine. In this chapter, her analysis in earlier chapters of settlers' perceptions of medicine and the environment are brought together, and the implications of local knowledge are fully explored. Her examination of the ways everyday experiences contributed to American medical knowledge is perhaps her most important contribution. Valencius effectively argues that medicine in the 19th-century American West was closely connected to family and community. Few medical professionals lived on the frontier, and family members or neighbors with local knowledge were called on as healers. Family- and community-centered medicine was particularly important at the time of settlers' arrival in the West and during periods of "seasoning"-- the term used by early Americans to describe acclimation to a new settlement. Seasoning was a spiritual as well as physical challenge, such that religion, as Valencius notes, was a crucial component of medical knowledge on the 19th-century frontier. Local people developed a medical geography of new lands in parallel with the age of American exploration and the expansion of topographic knowledge that began with Lewis and Clark. In time for the celebration of the 200th anniversary of the Lewis and Clark expedition, Valencius presents the broader scientific and intellectual context of their exploration. Building local medical knowledge, Valencius reveals, connected new country to the rest of the nation and medical practitioners to national scientific endeavors. Individual and family stories of health were integral to the national story of expansion. Those stories of a "healthy country" meant not only healthy bodies; they also meant a healthy nation with economic prosperity and the potential for growth. At the same time, the creation of local medical knowledge also contributed to the development of regional identity. In the antebellum era, Missouri and Arkansas -- the focus of the book -- became identified less with the West and more with the South. In the process, local medical practitioners began to assert a distinctively southern medicine that was based on their empirical knowledge of the southern environment and its effects on the human body. In asserting their brand of environmental medicine, southerners called on Hippocrates and his treatise *Airs, Waters, and Places* in particular. (Readers should note that Valencius pays homage to this work in her chapter titles.) She astutely observes that southern healers drew on Hippocrates, while their political and philosophical counterparts around the nation drew on other classical writers to identify the new nation with ancient civilizations. But just as southerners participated in a national project of building self-esteem, they concurrently created a southern identity that was medical as well as political in the decades before the Civil War. Racial identity was as important to white American settlers as their growing identification with regions. In the penultimate chapter of the book, Valencius details the racial climate that challenged and threatened many settlers in their migration to and settlement of a new place. Race and place had long been associated in the human mind, and 19th-century Americans were no exception. Many settlers expressed the fear that they were becoming more like other races, particularly Indians, in their acclimation to western regions. Their bodies were often marked by illnesses and by the seasoning associated with adjusting to their new western homes. The challenge in the minds of white settlers, Valencius argues, was not only to survive the physical threat of a new and unfamiliar environment but also to maintain their racial identity. Valencius has produced an excellent, well-written book that rethinks our stories of western expansion and regional identity and that ties American medical and environmental history to larger stories of nation-building. It is a work that should not be ignored by those interested in the history of medicine and the American frontier. Joseph Key, Ph.D. Copyright 2003 Massachusetts Medical Society. All rights reserved. The New England Journal of Medicine is a registered trademark of the MMS. "Fascinating....Valencius's refreshingly original account contains a real admiration for the sensitivity that our ancestors displayed for the landscape." -- The Weekly Standard, Sept. 16, 2002