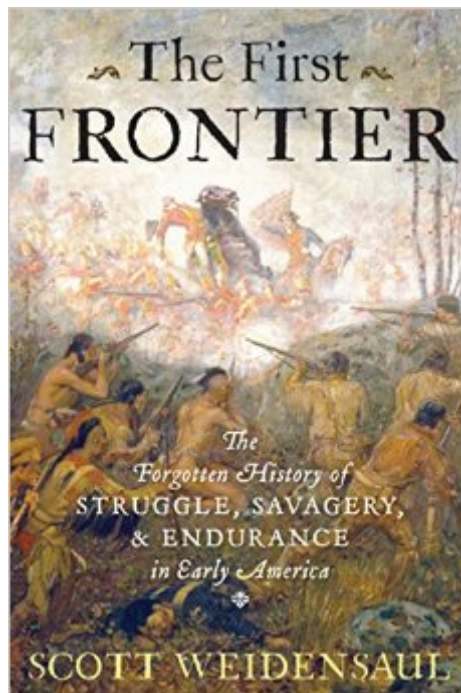


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# The First Frontier: The Forgotten History Of Struggle, Savagery, And Endurance In Early America



## Synopsis

Frontier: the word carries the inevitable scent of the West. But before Custer or Lewis and Clark, before the first Conestoga wagons rumbled across the Plains, it was the East that marked the frontier—the boundary between complex Native cultures and the first colonizing Europeans. Here is the older, wilder, darker history of a time when the land between the Atlantic and the Appalachians was contested ground—when radically different societies adopted and adapted the ways of the other, while struggling for control of what all considered to be their land. *The First Frontier* traces two and a half centuries of history through poignant, mostly unheralded personal stories—like that of a Harvard-educated Indian caught up in seventeenth-century civil warfare, a mixed-blood interpreter trying to straddle his white and Native heritage, and a Puritan woman wielding a scalping knife whose bloody deeds still resonate uneasily today. It is the first book in years to paint a sweeping picture of the Eastern frontier, combining vivid storytelling with the latest research to bring to life modern America's tumultuous, uncertain beginnings.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is a very well-written, highly readable, and very informative book. The author is a very skillful writer who makes many different, complex, subjects come alive. The book is mostly narrative in form and is far from dry history. The book is part anthropology, part sociology, part geology, and part (the largest part) history. It book discusses the earliest interactions between the American Indians and the colonizers from Europe, and also discusses the conflicts between various Indian tribes, between the English, French and Spanish colonies, and between different groups within each

colony. The first part of the book deals with the question of how the original settlers, the Indians, came to the new world. It describes the newest evidence that challenges the view that they all came across on a land bridge from Asia. It also challenges the idea that Columbus was the first European to reach the New World and that the colonies in the Southern part of the US and in the Caribbean were the first places where the significant interactions between Europeans and Indians took place. The book supports the idea that the Portuguese were fishing for Cod and drying them on the shores of North America long before the first Spanish and English colonies were established. The first part of the book contains a lot of geology and anthropology, as well as history and it was my favorite part of the book. The next two sections deal with the interactions between the colonies and the Indians, as well as inter-colony and inter-tribal conflicts. A reader should be forewarned that much of this material is disturbing, involving murder, rape and torture. The first of these two parts deals with the Southern Frontier and the second with the Northern Frontier. I found the history very interesting, if a bit repetitive. I learned that prior to European contact North America was very populated, but that this population dropped by perhaps 90% due to European diseases (small pox, measles, influenza, etc.) and had this depopulation not occurred it is questionable whether the European colonies could have survived. The second major thing that I learned was the conflicts between Indian tribes and tribal groups were extremely important, with many groups joining with the colonists against their historical enemies. The book also goes into great detail concerning the sociology of the Indian tribes and their treatment of captive Europeans, which ranged from torturing them to death, enslaving them and at the other extreme to adopting them. The question of Indian slavery and how it contrasted to the European enslavement of Indians and Africans is discussed at length. The book discusses how land was taken from the Indians, and how in some cases Indians "sold" land that was actually the "property" of another group. I put sold and property in quotation marks because these concepts were a bit foreign, with respect to land, to many Indians. In many cases they believed that they were only letting the Europeans live on the land, in effect leasing it for farming, while they still possessed their rights to pitch their tents on it, travel through it and to hunt and fish on it. The book also details that when they did understand the meaning of the agreements that they were making, they were often cheated by the method of determining the boundaries of the land in question, or by the Europeans just abrogating the treaties when they became powerful enough to do so. These land conflicts led to several wars, which are described at length in the book. I liked this book and recommend it to those interested in history and the sociology and anthropology of the Indians of North America.

Scott Weidensaul takes us back to the true frontier, *The First Frontier*, where lands east of the Hudson and Delaware were hotly contested for two centuries before the American Revolution. People who laid claim to the eastern seaboard came with ambiguous motives from unimaginably different cultures and lands. Although cohabiting the land, they communicated poorly and remained estranged. This peerlessly researched book opens our eyes to a violent time in the history of America of which most of us are uninformed. One would think that as time went by, civil co-habitation would occur, but the author tells us, "Far from being a cordial melting pot, the frontier was becoming an increasingly fractious mishmash." Part One entrenches us in the various cultures of these early inhabitants of eastern America. Part Two describes the 17th century expansion of the American colonies around Chesapeake Bay and New England, resulting in hatred, fear and bloodshed. Part Three is the story of the farther frontier, the Pennsylvania backcountry, where today a marker proclaiming the site of the first Amish settlement reminds us of the ghosts of that time. Interesting details from the book include:- 90% of America's native people lost their lives from foreign disease not long after European colonists arrived.- A white woman released from Native American captivity returned home to write the first American bestseller. Mary Rowlandson was the first female writer to publish in North America.- Brickmaker, Thomas Duston, had to choose between saving his bedridden wife or his children from the Indians.- Commercial slave trading boomed on both sides in the 1700s.- The scrupulous honesty of William Penn earned subsequent respect from the Lenape tribe.- Fur traders regularly married into Indian society to gain access to their wives' connections.- A daughter held captive for a decade recognized her real mother only after hearing her sing an old German hymn. Although at times plodding, this is first-rate storytelling. The fascinating tales of individuals involved in the clash are interwoven with disturbing accounts of violence and war. The time the reader invests in this time period long left fallow by historians' pens pays first-rate educational dividends. The detail in *The First Frontier* can be daunting to the casual reader. Not for the faint of heart, the book accurately describes the many atrocities of the times. The book is intended to instruct and inform, not to entertain. The payoff for one truly interested in America's beginnings is intellectually rewarding to one willing to spend time in its pages. Copious notes attest to the exhaustive research poured into the book. Highly recommended. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt through Netgalley graciously provided the review copy. Reviewed by Holly Weiss, author of *Crestmont*

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