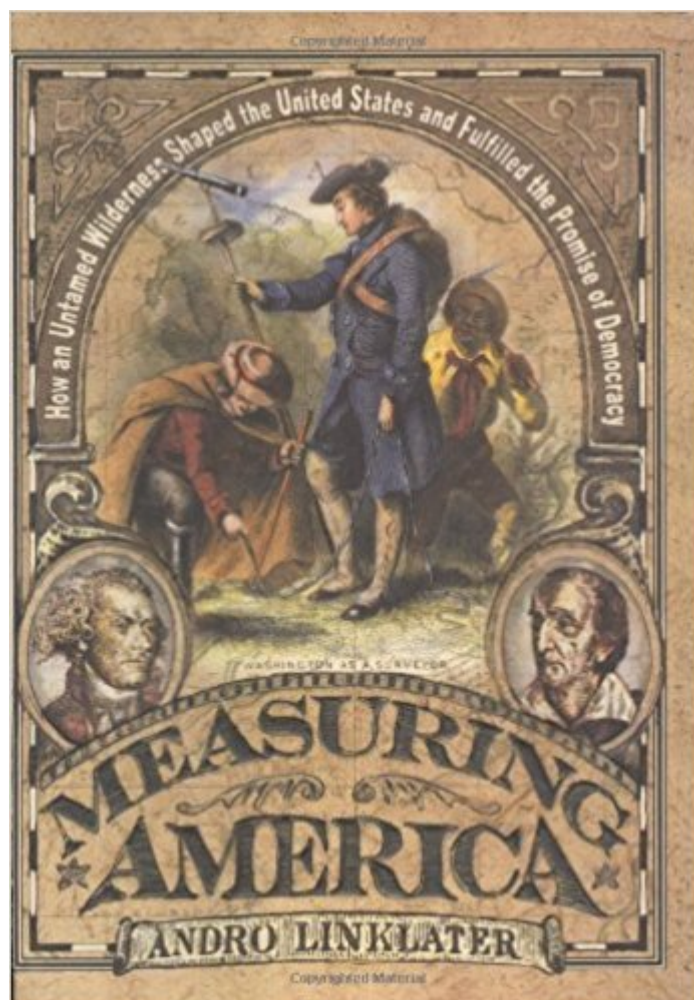


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Measuring America: How An Untamed Wilderness Shaped The United States And Fulfilled The Promise Of Democracy



Synopsis

Measuring America is the fascinating, provocative, and eye-opening story of why America has ended up with its unique system of weights and measures—the American Customary System, unlike any other in the world—and how this has profoundly shaped our country and culture. In the process, Measuring America reveals the colossal power contained inside the acres and miles, ounces and pounds, that we use every day without ever realizing their significance. The most urgent problem facing the newly independent United States was how to pay for the war that won the country its freedom; America's debt was enormous. Its greatest asset was the land west of the Ohio River, but for this huge territory to be sold, it had first to be surveyed—that is, measured out and mapped. And before that could be done, a uniform set of measurements had to be chosen for the new republic. English, Scottish, German, Dutch, Scandinavian, and other settlers had all brought their own systems with them (more than 100,000 different units are reckoned to have been in daily use), and in his first address to Congress, George Washington put the establishment of a single system of weights and measures immediately after a national defense and a currency as the United States' most urgent priority. The debate on this vital measure took place at a critical moment in the history of ideas, when the traditional, subjective view of the world was being increasingly challenged by objective, scientific reasoning. Thomas Jefferson—supported by Washington, Adams, Madison, Monroe, even Hamilton—championed the new idea of a scientific 10-based system derived from some universal constant such as time or the size of the earth. Such an alliance should have ensured a decimal America, but ranged against them was the invisible genius of Edmund Gunter, the seventeenth-century English mathematician whose twenty-two-yard surveying chain, introduced in 1607, had revolutionized land ownership in Britain and was still used by every surveyor in America—including Thomas Hutchins and his successors in charge of the land survey on the Ohio frontier. How we ultimately gained the American Customary System—the last traditional system in the world—and how Gunter's chain indelibly imprinted its dimensions on the land, on cities, and on our culture from coast to coast is both an exciting human and intellectual drama and one of the great untold stories in American history. At a time when the metric system may finally be unstoppable, Andro Linklater has captured the essential nature of measurement just as the Founding Fathers understood it. Sagely argued and beautifully written, Measuring America offers readers nothing less than the opportunity to see America's history—and our democracy—in a brilliant new light.

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Customer Reviews

American democracy was less a product of revolutionary war and constitutional ferment than it was of a particular way of measuring land, argues British historian Linklater in his delightful new study. Private ownership of land was a new concept in England in the 17th century, one that was grounded (so to speak) in the developing science of surveying, in particular, Edmund Gunter's simple new surveying system of squares and grids. But the idea that land could "be owned as a house or a bed or a pig was owned" was central to the new United States. Thomas Jefferson and others contended that property belonged to those who could purchase it and labor upon it. Thus, when the land west of the Ohio River was purchased by the United States, a new wave of settlers headed there with the intention of owning their own patch of land. Before the land could be sold, however, it had to be measured in roughly equal plots, and the surveyors used Gunter's method of drawing the boundaries of land in square miles. Linklater's detailed chronicle of the physical development of early America demonstrates the ways that the desire to own private property grew out of the individualism of the frontier and shaped the peculiarly American notion that the individual's right to property is both a foundation and a guarantee of democracy. 35 b&w illus. Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Why do we use gallons, feet, and dollars and cents? How were these measurements created? Why do we not use the metric system, and why do so many cities and states have grids visible from the ground and the air? To answer those questions and more, British historian Linklater brings to life the

creator of the system we use today, a rector named Edmund Gunter, along with a host of major personalities (Washington and Jefferson) and unknown or forgotten players (geographer Thomas Hutchins and geodesist Ferdinand Hassler). These figures play out against Linklater's elegantly drawn backdrops-national and international history, politics, economics, and business-to reveal how we came to measure as we do. Linklater also shows how as the United States expanded from the original Colonies to the West Coast over its first 100 years, our choice of measurement became part of the American psyche and legal system and also affected society. This expertly written and eminently enjoyable chronicle is highly recommended for history and history of science collections. Michael D. Cramer, Schwarz BioSciences, RTP, NC Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Great story about the US Customary system of units and how the nation was surveyed for sale. An important piece of our history that seldom gets told. Linklater is a great storyteller.

Loved this book when I read it some years ago. I must have given it away, and was glad to find it now! It defines how we went from measuring land from tree to river, etc. lots of history done very interestingly.

This is a phenomenal read for any thinking person with a general knowledge of American History and an interest in technology, politics, and science. It is the story of the measurement of the continental US - starting with the application of the instruments and techniques of Europe to the mountains, forests, swamps and plains of the American Republic - and of the development of American technology and standards to meet the needs - and the story of this land measurement overlaying and contending with the existing land measurement systems of the other colonizers. It is a story of personal heroism of the explorers and surveyors in marking out a continent and transforming the wilderness into cities and farms, the story of greed and claim jumping, the story of how the law learned to cope with all of the issues. Seldom is a book interesting both as to science and technology and history and people at the same time, but this work is fascinating on every page. I've never seen anything like it other than Boorstein's The Discoverers.

Great educational book.

A most excellent, interesting, and informative book. Will definitely read again regularly.

This is a most informative story of the men who charted this country and laid out the boundaries.

Andro Linklater provides a superb overview and analysis of the math, the politics, the history and the economics of how the United States became a nation, paying off its Revolutionary War debt and absorbing millions of square miles of wild and untamed, uncharted land into a governable entity. Wonderful work!

the book confirmed my belief that the country was created by those who would now be classed as the "1 percent." very happy with the pricing and delivery service

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