



Julius Wilm

Settlers as Conquerors

Free Land Policy in Antebellum America

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THE AUTHOR

Julius Wilm has a doctorate in Anglo-American history from the University of Cologne. Currently, he teaches American history at the University of Copenhagen.

In early America, the notion that settlers ought to receive undeveloped land for free was enormously popular among the rural poor and social reformers. Well into the Jacksonian era, however, Congress considered the demand fiscally and economically irresponsible. Increasingly, this led proponents to cast the idea as a military matter: Land grantees would supplant troops in the efforts to take the continent over from Indian nations and rival colonial powers. Julius Wilm's book examines the free land debates of the 1790s to 1850s and reconstructs the settlement experiences under the donation laws for Florida (1842) and the Oregon Territory (1850). Both laws promised to bring the interests of poorer whites and their government into a more harmonious relation – to the exclusion of African Americans and for the explicit purpose of displacing Native peoples. Drawing on new records, Wilm details the trajectory of settlements and shows how the settler-imperialist experiments fell apart and undermined the rationale of the donation laws. After home seekers fled Florida due to malaria and militias in Oregon triggered uncontrollable violence, settlers came to be seen as unreliable agents of government aims.

“This is the single most detailed exploration of free land in antebellum America. Wilm does a marvelous job exploring the limits of settler colonialism as a framework for settlement in Florida, where it failed. For the case of Oregon, he shows that settler occupation was appealing to federal legislators because it would ‘substitute the ax, the plow, and the hoe, for the gun, the sword, and the bayonet.’ That the government knowingly held out a promise of free land in order to encourage squatter sovereignty is a most compelling argument.”

Amy S. Greenberg, Pennsylvania State University

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