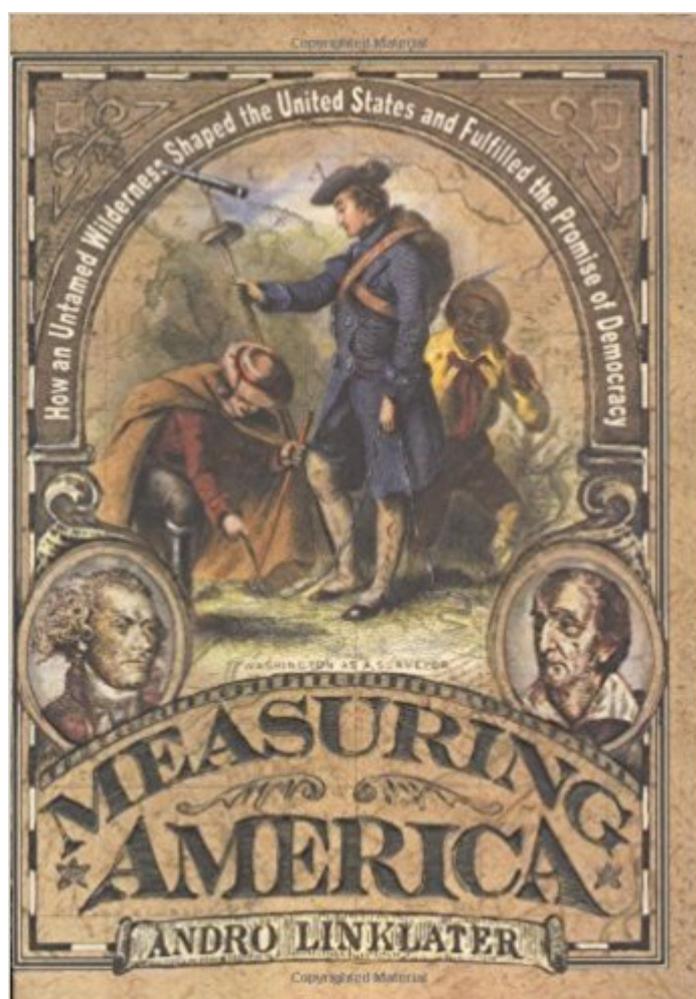


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Measuring America: How An Untamed Wilderness Shaped The United States And Fulfilled The Promise Of Democracy



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

Andro Linklater is a Scottish journalist who fell in love with America when he was flying over it, looking out the window at "the spectacular grid of city blocks, the squared-off American Gothic farms, and the long, straight section roads that caught the imagination of Kerouac." Now he has written a fascinating book to tell us just how we got so square. *Measuring America: How an Untamed Wilderness Shaped the United States and Fulfilled the Promise of Democracy* (Walker) shows that geometry and land acquisition and speculation drove the development of the nation. The importance of simply measuring the land has reinforced for Americans the value of land ownership. Native Americans did not enclose or measure land, and thus they could not convincingly demonstrate (to those who wanted to take it from them) that they owned it. This pattern was true not just in America, but in, for example, South Africa and Australia. Patterns of demarcation even influenced regional character. In the South, the legislatures were dominated by landowners who relied upon local surveyors who did not use chains and theodolites, but instead relied on marked trees and memory. Such a system caused violent struggles, but it also meant that doubts over actual ownership inhibited speculation and transfer of land. In the North, farmers would settle, improve the land, sell, and move to another measured plat; in the south, owners kept the property for generations, and Linklater refers to the effect on southern literature of such patterns of survey and ownership as being good material for future scholarly research. The squares laid out in the 19th century did not help efficient farming, but they helped the financier, who could easily track the value of the squares; settlement was based on speculation.

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