



**Old Dominion, Industrial Commonwealth: Coal,  
Politics, and Economy in Antebellum America  
(Studies in Early American Economy and Society  
from the Library Company of Philadelphia)**

*Sean Patrick Adams*

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In 1796, famed engineer and architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe toured the coal fields outside Richmond, Virginia, declaring enthusiastically, "Such a mine of Wealth exists, I believe, nowhere else!" With its abundant and accessible deposits, growing industries, and network of rivers and ports, Virginia stood poised to serve as the center of the young nation's coal trade. By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, Virginia's leadership in the American coal industry had completely unraveled while Pennsylvania, at first slow to exploit its vast reserves of anthracite and bituminous coal, had become the country's leading producer.

Sean Patrick Adams compares the political economies of coal in Virginia and Pennsylvania from the late eighteenth century through the Civil War, examining the divergent paths these two states took in developing their ample coal reserves during a critical period of American industrialization. In both cases, Adams finds, state economic policies played a major role. Virginia's failure to exploit the rich coal fields in the western part of the state can be traced to the legislature's overriding concern to protect and promote the interests of the agrarian, slaveholding elite of eastern Virginia. Pennsylvania's more factious legislature enthusiastically embraced a policy of economic growth that resulted in the construction of an extensive transportation network, a statewide geological survey, and support for private investment in its coal fields.

Using coal as a barometer of economic change, *Old Dominion, Industrial Commonwealth* addresses longstanding questions about North-South economic divergence and the role of state government in American industrial development, providing new insights for both political and economic historians of nineteenth-century America.

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