The Industrious Revolution is an economic history landmark, restructuring the pre-Industrial Revolution landscape in terms at once both vivid and prosaic. Identifying the household as a primary economic unit, Jan de Vries argues that the “long eighteenth century” running from 1650 to 1850 marked a fundamental change in the terms of interaction between nuclear families and the market economy in Western Europe. The essence of the change was “a simultaneous rise in the percentage of household production sold to others and a rise in the percentage of household consumption purchased from others” (71). “Simultaneous” in this usage should be understood in the economist’s sense that these phenomena were “jointly determined” as a goal-oriented behavioral pattern, not that all of the component changes occurred at a single historical instant. Consumer desires were triggered by new goods from abroad (such as tea, coffee, sugar and tobacco), and subsequently extended to such items as clothing and household furnishings valued for their style, workmanship and appearance (133–154). Households attracted by these consumption goods became more specialized in marketable products, devoted more hours to household manufacturing (sometimes called “proto-industry”), and increased time spent working for others in the labor market (92–113). De Vries’s essential historical point is that this behavioral transformation predated the technological breakthroughs of the Industrial Revolution, setting the stage for (though not “explaining”) that great supply-side event (110–113, 180).

The purpose of this essay is to consider what adaptations and amendments may be required in order to apply this analysis to the economic development of the United States. That North America is intended to be part of the Industrious Revolution sphere is evident from many examples provided in the book. De Vries writes: “From an early date colonists in British North America came to view their land-abundant environment not as a platform for self-sufficiency but as a resource with which to participate—through a flood of marketed tobacco, rice, indigo, wheat, fish, timber and tar—in the Atlantic economy’s
consumer offerings” (96). The author goes on to cite Gloria Main’s explanation for “the emergence of rural industrial activity where one would least expect it,” (land-abundant New England in the first half of the eighteenth century) as “a colonial adaptation to an expanding mercantile economy, a gendered variant of the intensification of labor” (98). These colonial snapshots, and many others, fit the de Vriesian template well. But at least three widely noted features of North American economic history may call for interpretive adjustments:

1. High Mobility. For many settlers, the very act of migrating to a new continent embodied an aspiration towards upward social and economic mobility, and thus could be taken as an additional indicator of de Vriesian industriousness. Upon arrival, the land-abundant setting gave rise to continuing new opportunities for advancement via migration, and high geographic mobility thus became an enduring feature of American economic life. Mobility or potential mobility was clearly consequential for families. Gloria Main writes: “…young people in New England had a choice that their counterparts in old England did not: They could move far away from home, work hard, and build a farm, or they could stay, seize the new opportunities afforded by expanding markets, and, by controlling costs through sexual restraint, still hope to enjoy the high, and increasing, standard of living enjoyed by their elders.”

2. Opportunities for Farm Ownership. Land abundance, high mobility, and active markets in real estate generated greater opportunities for farm ownership in North America than in most of Europe. For this reason, the same energies for household advancement tracked by de Vries were often channeled in the New World towards attaining or maintaining ownership status. Such aspirations were not (or at least not intended to be) inconsistent with high levels of material consumption, but they gave rise to norms and behavioral patterns that deserve special attention. As Thorstein Veblen wrote in 1923: “Habitually and with singular uniformity, the American farmers have aimed to acquire real estate at the same time that they have

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1 Gloria Main, “Rocking the Cradle: Downsizing the New England Family,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 37 (Summer, 2006), 58.