

George E. Brooks

George Brooks, who retires after 44 years in the Department of History, is a distinguished historian of Africa and a leading authority on pre-twentieth-century commerce in the coastal regions of West Africa.

George received a B.A. degree at Dartmouth and M.A. and Ph.D. degrees at Boston University, where he began his lifelong research on West African trading networks and their linkages to the world economy. George undertook graduate studies just as African history came into its own as an academic field during European decolonization and the initial years of African independence. Like many historians of the time, he focused on the precolonial era. His first book, *Yankee Traders, Old Coasters, and African Middlemen: A History of American Legitimate Trade with West Africa in the Nineteenth Century* (1970), examined the commercial changes as long-distance trade shifted from slaves to other commodities in the nineteenth century. This work complemented his earlier co-edited volume, *New England Merchants in Africa: A History Through Documents, 1802–1865* (1965). This pattern—sharing historical sources with others—is a hallmark of George’s scholarly life: his students and colleagues at Indiana University as well as others in the United States and abroad have benefited from his references to materials that they might not have explored without his encouragement.

George’s interest in West African commerce led him down new paths. In the 1980s, as most historians of African history moved from precolonial topics to the impact of European colonial rule in Africa, George turned his attentions to the more distant past and investigated the interaction between the environment and trade over the centuries. In his book, *Landlords and Strangers: Ecology, Society, and Trade in Western Africa, 1000–1630* (1993), he proposed a schema linking the shifting fortunes of West African empires and commercial networks to variable climatic periods. He would be the first to admit that his reconstruction drew on data from archaeologists, but George asked probing questions, read exhaustively, and made the key connections that others had missed. *Landlords and Strangers* was a finalist for the Melville J. Herskovits Award, the major book prize offered by the African Studies Association for the most influential work of the year. *Landlords and Strangers* also was the topic of a roundtable at an African Studies Association conference, during which archaeologists and historians spoke to its groundbreaking importance to various fields of inquiry.

George has many other publications, including another book, *Eurafricans in Western Africa: Commerce, Social Status, Gender, and Religious Observance from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Centuries* (2003). His articles include a pioneering examination of women merchants in precolonial Senegal, “The Signares of Saint Louis and Gorée: Women Entrepreneurs in Eighteenth-Century Senegal,” which has been reprinted in several anthologies.

George arrived at Indiana University in 1962, just as its African Studies Program was beginning its rise to international prominence. He was an anchor in history, supervising numerous Ph.D. dissertations and assisting graduate students in many disciplines as they wrote grant proposals for research funding. George also taught at all levels and received a teaching award in 1970. He helped undergraduates appreciate Africa’s rich and complex past and provided graduate students with the background they needed for taking Ph.D. qualifying exams (and ultimately teaching their own courses). George also developed courses in world history and began a life-long commitment to this pedagogical mission. He produced two textbooks: *The Aspen World History Handbook*, which he co-edited; and *Getting Along Together: World History Perspectives for the Twenty-First Century*, which he has made available online. George was also a member of the executive council of the World History Association.

George's involvement in world history complemented his interest in global travel. This interest began during his time in Korea (serving with the U.S. Army), continued with a motorcycle tour of Western Europe as a young man, and increased over the past five decades with trips as a researcher and professional historian to Africa, Asia, and Europe. In retirement, George continues to travel and keep in contact with a network of scholars. He also is completing another book on commerce and social change in nineteenth-century Western Africa.

John H. Hanson