on the history of vegetarianism in general and of ethical vegetarianism in particular.

—Ronald LeBlanc, University of New Hampshire

Michael Olmert
304 pp. Illustrations. $27.95 (cloth)

This is a wonderful book. Artfully designed in a compact square format, it makes for pleasant, informative reading about eighteenth-century outbuildings in Virginia and Maryland. Aimed at nonspecialists, Kitchens, Smokehouses, and Privies is written in an easy style by Michael Olmert, a professor of English at the University of Maryland, College Park and a veteran writer for Smithsonian magazine. The book surveys current scholarship on a subject usually covered only in periodicals or book chapters. Olmert’s writing is not jargon-ridden, technical, or dry, making this book perfect for an afternoon read.

When the historic preservation movement began in the United States in the 1920s, the emphasis was first on researching, restoring, and reconstructing the houses themselves. The outbuildings—each of which was purpose-built and essential to the functioning of the estate—were ignored. It is only in more recent years that scholars have really explored these dependent structures, few of which survive, to give a more complete picture of life on an estate in eighteenth-century Maryland or Virginia.

The book is divided into chapters by type of building: kitchens, laundries, smokehouses, dairies, privies, offices, dovecotes, and icehouses. Olmert explores how the placement of outbuildings on a site, their design, and even their upkeep was determined by the building’s function. For example, the dairy would not have looked like the dovecote or kitchen. There were reasons for the differences: historians now know why the windows were high in a dairy and why the direction that the door faced was crucial in a smokehouse. Olmert makes the interesting point that people who work as costumed interpreters at historic sites are often excellent resources. It is through the buildings’ use by actual people that historians have come to know the whys and wherefores of each design.

Although questions may remain about the nature of a design detail—for example, the use of ladders in dovecotes, or why some privies had as many as five seats together—Olmert presents each new subject as an interesting open matter. He presents nothing as absolute; here, what we don’t know makes the subject more intriguing. Reinforcing the idea that scholarship is ongoing, each chapter ends with a wonderful multipage “Notes and Further Reading” section that acknowledges the author’s sources—both books and the people with whom he has spoken—and suggests where to go to learn more. Not burying the source information in the back of the book and presenting it in the same font size as the chapter material itself is a model approach. The book also includes appendices on two different building shapes: octagons and hexagons. Although they make an interesting postlude, these appendices seem somewhat lost, like two chapters in search of a home in the book. Still, they don’t detract from Olmert’s work as a whole.

A question that remains for me about these outbuildings concerns the use of color in their decoration. Recent scholarship has revealed the degree to which color—sometimes considered gaudy and quite tasteless to our modern eyes—was an important part of eighteenth-century surroundings. How did the outbuildings fit into the eighteenth-century color scheme? Were the dairies white? Was the stucco that covered some smokehouses painted in dark, smoky colors? Olmert has given his readers many ways to find more information and carry out their own investigations into any particular detail—architectural, social, cultural, or culinary—that strikes their fancy.

—Gwendolyn Owens, McGill University

Creating Abundance: Biological Innovation and American Agricultural Development
Alan L. Olmstead and Paul W. Rhode
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008
480 pp. Illustrations. $23.99 (paper)

The abundance of American agriculture is among the country’s great economic successes. The transformation of California from field grain production to a fruit and vegetable cornucopia, the conversion of the “Great American Desert” into corn and wheat belts exporting to the world, and the dramatic rise in the productivity of every sort of plant and animal through human manipulation has made overproduction rather than scarcity the watchword of the age. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century agricultural innovation was the site of considerable high-stakes espionage and international political intrigue, served as the focus of