US economic historian at the forefront of the ‘new wave’ that swept through economic history in the 1960s and which attempted to apply the standard tools of neo-classical economics and econometrics to outstanding problems of economic history. He shared the Nobel Prize for Economics in 1993 with US economist Robert Fogel.

In his earlier work on ocean shipping and the US balance of payments, North stayed within the fold of the New Economic History, combining simple neo-classical production theory with the new methods of extracting data from historical records. Subsequently, he explored the implications of the theory of property rights for the process of institutional change in US history and laid the foundations for a more general theory of the industrialization of the Western world in the last two centuries, grounded once again in the theory of property rights.

North was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts. His BA and PhD were obtained from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1942 and 1952 respectively, and he began teaching at Berkeley in 1946. In 1950 he joined the University of Washington in Seattle, first as an assistant professor, then an associate professor, becoming a full professor in 1960, serving also as director of the Institute of Economic Research at Washington after 1961. Spending a year at Rice University in 1979 and two years at the University of Cambridge, England, 1981–82, he returned to the University of Washington in St Louis in 1983.


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