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Book Review: Three Capitals, by William H. Brantley

Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society

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This Review is brought to you for free and open access by LOUIS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Huntsville Historical Review by an authorized editor of LOUIS.
Summersell has prepared a superb introduction about Hamilton, not only providing us with an excellent biography of the man, but giving us at the same time an overview of the history of Mobile and placing Hamilton in historical perspective.

Summersell has also included a select bibliography that could well serve as a basis for developing a library collection of material on Alabama history. Libraries around this state would do well to check their holdings against this bibliography, and add any missing titles. Individuals interested in Alabama history should do the same.

The price of the book is high, but you certainly get your money's worth. A "must" acquisition for all libraries and individuals interested in Alabama history.


The University of Alabama Press had recently reprinted William Brantley's definitive work on the early period of Alabama's statehood. This work, first issued in 1947, has long been out of print. Brantley traces and discusses the period from 1818 to 1826, when the capital was moved to Tuscaloosa from Cahawba. Previously St. Stephens had served as the territorial capital and Huntsville as the first, albeit temporary, one.

Brantley covers well the political turmoil of the time; the struggle of William Wyatt Bibb, the first governor of Alabama, to have Cahawba selected as the site for the first "permanent" capital and, after his death, the successful effort of the Tuscaloosa forces to move the capital there. A short appendix traces the history of Huntsville before 1819, and much of the history of this area is recounted in his section on Huntsville as the capital. For this reason alone the book
should be acquired by residents of Huntsville and Madison County. But Brantley never was afraid to make judgments or to "speak his piece." Perhaps this is what makes "Three Capitals" interesting to read as well as being informative.


Many Southerners still bristle when reminded of certain episodes of the Civil War. Perhaps foremost among these is the burning of Columbia during Sherman's march through the South. Marion Lucas, a native of South Carolina and a graduate of the University of South Carolina at Columbia, wrote his doctoral dissertation on this subject and now it has been further "polished" for publication. This is largely a dispassionate look at the events leading to the burning and an attempt to distribute the guilt as Lucas sees it.

His conclusion is that only about one-fourth of the city actually burned, the residential areas largely escaping the conflagration, and that about every group involved in the burning shares a part of the blame.

Labeling the burning a tragedy that has long helped to keep North and South from complete reconciliation, he blames Confederate military and civilian leadership for leaving cotton bales piled high upon the streets in the business section of the city, to be burned by drunken federal soldiers, local rabble and who knows else.

Liquor stored in the capital was not destroyed by Confederate officials and seems to have been the catalyst for rioting, looting and the arson.

Union generals are blamed for not sending troops into the city to put down the rioting that went on unabated.