Book Review: Railroads in the Old South: Pursuing Progress in a Slave Society, by Aaron W. Marrs

Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society

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Book Reviews


Recent historians have begun to reexamine the industrialization of the antebellum South and have concluded that many southerners valued technological innovation and the benefits of modernization. As part of this growing historiographical trend, Aaron Marrs provides a broad overview of railroad development in the Old South. He explores how southerners used railroads, a symbol of modernity, to strengthen their premodern commitments to slavery and agriculture. In seven chronological chapters that trace southern railroads from conception to locomotion between the late 1820s and the early 1860s, Marrs makes four major conclusions: northern and southern railroads had much in common, railroads allowed southerners to modernize on their terms, no single regional response to railroad development existed, and railroads helped standardize time and work in the South. The use of slave labor stood as the most obvious difference between northern and southern railroads. Despite this important dissimilarity, however, northerners and southerners viewed railroads as an important technological advancement, source of profit, creator of cities, aid to farmers and industrialists, way to reach western land, and a convenient, if not enjoyable, means of transportation. Marrs correctly concludes that southern capitalists understood how to manipulate the South's conservative social order to work within a modern market economy. He notes the irony of using slave labor, a premodern institution, to build and operate the most modern form of transportation in the pre-Civil War South. Based on these clearly developed themes, Marrs effectively argues that antebellum southerners were neither fully premodern nor completely modern but a mixture of both that allowed them to embrace innovative technology while defending slavery and the world planters had created.
Southern railroads changed how people and communities worked and interacted with each other. Train schedules, based on clock time, amplified the importance of efficiency and profit. People planned their travel and business around train time. Reliable transportation allowed planters to maximize their cotton crops and thus further entrench slavery into southern society. Planters sold and leased slaves to railroad companies, providing railroad officials with a pliable workforce. Railroad platforms became impromptu sites for slave auctions that forced potential buyers to bid not only against each other but also against the next train that would arrive at a set time and remove the human stock to the next station and to a new group of buyers. Slaves, according to Marrs, even noticed an increased workload as cotton became more profitable because of railroads.

Despite drawing from a strong source base of railroad company records, individual memoirs, and regional newspapers, Marrs neglected to use *De Bow’s Review*, perhaps the most important antebellum journal dedicated to southern economic development and railroads. This lapse is problematic because between 1846 and 1861 J.D.B. De Bow published 154 articles dedicated to southern railroad development and dozens of shorter dispatches about individual railroad corporations in the South. The narrative might have also benefitted from a closer study of one railroad so readers would have a foundation to draw upon when learning about broader trends and innovations. At times it is difficult to remember which railroad he discusses and which acronym belongs to which railroad. Although these minor issues do not detract from Marrs’s conclusions, his failure to engage *De Bow’s Review* creates a significant dilemma.

*Railroads in the Old South* provides a factual and stimulating reminder that many southerners embraced modern technology in the antebellum period. Railroads helped shape this period in the South and allowed southerners to create a world in which slavery and innovation could coexist. By providing a broad overview of railroad development in the Old South, Marrs reminds readers that the New South was perhaps not so new after all.