

Planting a Capitalist South: Masters, Merchants, and Manufacturers in the Southern Interior, 1790–1860. *By Tom Downey*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 2006. xii + 262 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, maps, tables. Cloth, \$49.95. ISBN: 0-807-13107-5.

Reviewed by Stephen A. West

In this book, Tom Downey seeks to offer a new answer to an old question. Through a local study of the South Carolina interior, he addresses familiar debates about whether or not the slave society of the Old South can rightly be regarded as capitalist. Rejecting static, either/or answers, Downey argues that the Palmetto state by 1860 was in the midst of a “transition . . . toward becoming a capitalist society”—a transition that was incomplete but “well under way” (p. 8). Readers already sympathetic to the case for a capitalist South will find much in Downey’s well-researched account to bolster their views. If skeptics are unlikely to experience a conversion, they can still appreciate his fine-grained portrait of one Southern locale.

Downey focuses on the antebellum districts of Edgefield and Barnwell, which lay adjacent to one another on the Savannah River. The area was part of the South Carolina backcountry at the time of the American Revolution, but the cotton boom of the early nineteenth century transformed it into a slave-majority region dominated by plantation agriculture. Drawing on census returns, newspapers, and courts cases, as well as published and unpublished records of the state legislature, Downey explores how that transformation was followed by a second one that began with the rise of commerce and industry during the 1820s and 1830s. The town of Hamburg, founded in 1821, became an important cotton market and served as the terminus of a railroad link to Charleston that was, for a brief time during the 1830s, the longest line under single management in the United States. Emptying into the Savannah River near Hamburg, the waters of Horse Creek provided power for the cotton factories of Vaucluse and Graniteville, which employed several hundred operatives by the 1850s. Graniteville in particular achieved notice throughout the state and region as a showpiece under the management of William Gregg, who cast himself as a kind of industrial apostle for the slave South.

As Downey acknowledges, factories, railroads, and merchant houses arrived in the South Carolina interior as adjuncts to an agricultural economy founded on slavery and never displaced it. Nonetheless, he argues, by 1860 they constituted a growing presence in the region, winning important concessions from the state government and successfully challenging tenets of a “country-republican” ideology that emphasized the virtues of agricultural life. The state legislature, for example, provided financial assistance in founding both the town of Hamburg and the railroad that served it. For his part, industrialist William Gregg secured approval to dam Horse Creek, despite protests from residents who asserted a traditional right to use the waterway to transport timber. And the public acceptance that Gregg won for his arguments in favor of white wage labor, according to Downey, brought the area’s “political economy to the very brink of capitalist society” (p. 143).

Among recent works, Downey’s book shares a number of features with Jonathan Daniel Wells’s *The Origins of the Southern Middle Class, 1800–1861* (2004). Both view Southern merchants and industrialists as committed to the institution of slavery, but argue that those groups had a greater vitality and autonomy than acknowledged by Eugene Genovese and other historians who see the Old South as fundamentally pre- or noncapitalist. Both also stress ties and similarities between the antebellum North and South. Wells devotes much of his attention to social and cultural history, situating his study in the context of works on the urban middle class of the North. Downey focuses more on political economy, drawing inspiration from scholarship about the transition to capitalism in the Northern countryside to make his argument for a similar transition in the South.

Planting a Capitalist South makes several important contributions. The idea that commerce and industry challenged tenets of republican ideology may be a familiar one, but Downey pursues it in directions seldom explored by previous historians of the Old South, examining conflicts over issues like railroad routes, water rights, and the power of town governments. Moreover, he links those subjects to historians’ debates about the capitalist character of the region, and he stakes out an innovative position with his argument that the late antebellum South was in the midst of a transition to capitalism. At a number of points, however, Downey might have explored more fully the comparison he

draws to events in the North. Michael Merrill, Christopher Clark, and other historians of the Northern countryside sought to demonstrate how the intrusion of new market relations transformed existing patterns of production, labor, and exchange among a wide range of rural dwellers. Downey, by comparison, does little to show that the appearance of towns, railroads, and factories affected the everyday lives of most inhabitants of the South Carolina interior, or that occasional conflicts over water rights and the like led to sustained or organized political divisions among them. As a result, some readers are likely to question the depth and breadth of the transition that Downey wishes to portray. But even those who come away with such doubts will nonetheless recognize the value of this richly detailed and creative study.

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