

4-1-1998

*Political Culture in the Nineteenth Century South:
Mississippi, 1830-1900*, by Bradley G. Bond

Lacy K. Ford, Jr.

University of South Carolina - Columbia, ford@mailbox.sc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/hist_facpub



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Publication Info

Published in *American Historical Review*, Volume 103, Issue 2, 1998, pages 593-594.

<http://www.indiana.edu/~ahrweb/>

© 1998 by University of Chicago Press

This Book Review is brought to you by the History, Department of at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu.

African and West Indian disease environment where malaria strains proved far more virulent, and where the hard-won irrigation ditches incubated yellow fever, dysentery, and, after the 1830s, cholera. So many whites died from "fever" in the region that slaves often worked relatively free of day-to-day white inspection, in time relishing their understanding of hydraulic technology, intermittently sabotaging the control efforts of plantation overseers, and always conducting their own business enterprises along the salt creeks. Stewart emphasizes that post-emancipation wages drew many coastal freedmen into the adjacent pine woods, but many others never left the peculiar salt-marsh landscape that their ancestors had made and their parents managed. He demonstrates that freedmen in his chosen region bought real estate at a rate higher than those elsewhere in the former Confederacy and explains why they were able to do so.

Control of slaves and by slaves paralleled control of natural systems and control by natural systems. No book better describes the growing of rice, cotton (particularly the silky "sea-island" cotton that brought premium prices in England even as it exhausted the soil), and sugarcane over generations, but what makes this monograph so special is that Stewart makes clear how the planters, overseers, and slaves all understood their efforts in larger ecological contexts involving estuary salinity, rogue rice varieties, sandy soil exhaustion, floods, and natural and artificial manuring. Moreover, Stewart traces the slow demise of coastal-zone plantation agriculture against the innovation of large-scale truck gardening and the rise in lumbering and turpentine-making just inland and the subsequent development of long-abandoned coastal plantations as resorts for Savannah families (and, on Jekyll Island, a private club for millionaire capitalists). Finally, the book analyzes the devastating impact on contiguous lands, and especially on small-enterprise African Americans, of the Corps of Engineers' successful channeling of the estuary seaward of Savannah, something envisioned by the first settlers of the region. Some readers may expect a more detailed treatment of Savannah, but Stewart focuses on a larger landscape, and his efforts will shape scholarship for decades.

JOHN R. STILGOE
Harvard University

BRADLEY G. BOND. *Political Culture in the Nineteenth-Century South: Mississippi, 1830-1900*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995. Pp. 343. \$35.00.

In this copiously researched monograph, Bradley G. Bond proffers bold and intriguing arguments about the political culture of nineteenth-century Mississippi, only to return in the final analysis to the familiar but convincing conclusion that in both antebellum and postbellum Mississippi, the tenacious grip of white supremacy and the politics of race emphatically defined the parameters of political culture. According to

Bond, as settlers of a frontier state deep in the cotton South, white Mississippians of the 1830s embraced *herrenvolk* democracy, the idea of an enslaved black working class, and market opportunity. They defined liberty and virtue in terms of whiteness and economic independence (which they understood as the control of productive property and/or successful market engagement) and sought to create a homogenous white society resting firmly on the foundation of African-American slavery. A shared commitment to white supremacy obscured potential class differences among whites during the antebellum era.

It is on the point of yeoman participation in the market economy that Bond breaks most forcefully from the prevailing tone of previous historiography. Disputing claims ably advanced by Steven Hahn (in *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Country, 1850-1890* [1983]) and others that antebellum yeomen feared dependency on the market and practiced safety-first agriculture, Bond asserts that both the number of Mississippi farmers who failed to achieve self-sufficiency and the narrow margins of error allowed by many who produced a family subsistence testify to the fact that Mississippi yeomen instead pursued an "accumulation-first" strategy that gave the accumulation of wealth and property priority over subsistence concerns. Mississippi yeomen saw the economic rewards promised by market participation as a better guarantor of independence than self-sufficiency. Although Bond presents impressive evidence that the plain folk of antebellum Mississippi participated, sometimes vigorously, in the market economy, his argument that the yeomanry readily adopted a market-oriented *mentalité* remains problematic.

Mississippi prospered when the cotton economy boomed and suffered when it slumped. The state's first political instincts included loyalty to Andrew Jackson, and those instincts were reenforced when Jackson's antipathy toward banks proved prophetic. Mississippi chartered banks with abandon during the 1830s as the cotton economy expanded, but when the panic of 1837 and the subsequent economic depression revealed the banks' reckless speculation and their unreliability as sources of specie, voters vented their hostility by supporting Democratic candidates opposed to redeeming the bonds of Mississippi's state-sponsored bank. Outside of Natchez and its hinterland, the commercially oriented Whig Party enjoyed comparatively little support in Mississippi, but by the late 1840s, the state's overwhelming Democratic majority divided sharply into a faction of cautious Unionist Democrats, led by United States Senator Henry S. Foote, and a faction of ardent states' rights Democrats, led by future Confederate President Jefferson Davis. Bond portrays Mississippi's hostility to any outside threat to its ideal of a homogenous white society as so instinctive and deeply rooted that loud appeals to manly resistance easily overwhelmed cautionary voices. Mississippi narrowly averted secession

in 1850, arguably coming even closer to leaving the Union than traditional Hotspur South Carolina, and when antislavery Republicans captured the presidency in 1860, Mississippi seceded with little hesitation.

Yet the sacrifices compelled by a full-scale war took their toll on Confederate Mississippi, unleashing class resentments even before the siege of Vicksburg cut the Confederacy in half. Mississippi's white plain folk resented conscription, draft exemptions favoring planters, the tax-in-kind, and the Confederate army's impressment policies. As a result, increasingly half-hearted support at home plagued the war effort. But Union victory, the emancipation of slaves, and Republican Reconstruction temporarily unified white Mississippians as never before. Horrified at the prospect of social equality and black political power, Mississippi whites mounted a concerted campaign of fraud, intimidation, and terror to restore white rule. This restoration movement was led, if not always controlled, by an emerging elite of "New Departure" Democrats, merchants, and professionals committed to economic progress through increased business and industry. But New Departure Democrats proved equally committed to white domination of a nominally free black underclass.

Eventually an agrarian revolt emerged, driven by frustration with low cotton prices and growing rates of tenancy as well as resentment of crop-liens and corporations, again revealing class divisions among whites. But Bond argues that the agrarian insurgents of the 1890s failed to mount an effective campaign on behalf of beleaguered farmers and other small producers because they could not escape the stultifying grip of the two central tenets of Mississippi's political culture: that blacks must be subordinated at all costs and that market participation promoted good citizenship. Moreover, after experiencing substantial electoral success, the Farmers' Alliance split over the questions of the subtrees and the Populist Party, leaving agrarian insurgency divided at its moment of opportunity. Ultimately, the farmers' effort to redistribute economic power from town to countryside failed, but the bitter racism vented by rural plain folk during the protest triumphed. The paternalism of the New South elite, however racist in its own right, yielded to a coarser form of white supremacy that led to whitecapping and disfranchisement before formal segregation, an idea backed by middle-class conservatives eager to diminish racial violence, satisfied the demands of Mississippi rednecks and their champions, such as James K. Vardaman.

On the whole, Bond's careful portrait of nineteenth-century Mississippi is grim, and justifiably so. After brief moments of prosperity during antebellum cotton booms sustained by the sweat of slaves, the Mississippi story is one of grinding poverty, persistent racism, provincial isolation, and local rule by a small elite of merchants, landlords, and bankers whose conservatism and intolerance were surpassed only by that of the white plain folk whom they outsmarted from time to

time in order to preserve their control of local affairs.

LACY K. FORD, JR.

University of South Carolina

GEORGE HARWOOD PHILLIPS. *Indians and Indian Agents: The Origins of the Reservation System in California, 1849-1852*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press. 1997. Pp. xviii, 238. \$27.95.

This book restores the narrative balance of California Indian history during the critical early years of the gold rush. It tells the vital story of those who implemented federal policy as well as those who made it. More importantly, it allows us to see the Indians of California as full participants in key events that shaped their destiny.

George Harwood Phillips posits several distinct periods for the "zone of interaction" in California's San Joaquin Valley. The first phase, 1769-1830, was marked by periodic raids of Spanish soldiers in search of fugitives from the coastal missions. The second phase, 1830-1849, was a time when valley tribes "increasingly implemented strategies of offensive resistance" by raiding coastal settlements to obtain horses and mules for traders from New Mexico (p. 36). Phillips has described these first two phases in his earlier work, *Indians and Intruders in Central California, 1769-1849* (1993). The current volume analyzes the third phase of interaction, 1849-1852, during which the native people of the interior were overwhelmed by hordes of newcomers flooding across their land during the gold rush.

The focus of the book is primarily on the work of three federal commissioners who were appointed in 1850 to serve in California. Congress empowered George Barbour, O. M. Wozencraft, and Redick McKee to make treaties with the Indians of California, but beyond that their operating instructions were vague. Phillips does well to emphasize the creative license the commissioners exercised; the implementation of policy in the field often involved a good deal of on-the-spot improvisation.

As the commissioners began their work, the Indians of California were actively resisting white encroachment. Native leaders such as José Juárez, the highly respected chief of the Chauchila, called on his people to expel the interlopers. "The white tribes will not go to war with the Indians in the mountains," he assured his followers. "They cannot bring their big ships and big guns to us; we have no cause to fear them" (p. 43). Members of the "white tribes," meanwhile, were outraged that native people were blocking access to valuable lands desired for mining and farming.

Phillips correctly argues that the active resistance by the California Indians influenced the work of the commissioners. At first, the commissioners had contemplated removing the Indians from the state, in conformity with prior federal practice. This notion was soon abandoned in the face of large numbers of militarily aggressive Indians. The alternative seized