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Edward E. Baptist. *Creating an Old South: Middle Florida's Plantation Frontier before the Civil War.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. xiv + 408 pp. $25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5353-5; $70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2688-1.

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A New Look at the Old South in Florida

Antebellum Florida was a period of dynamic, momentous transformation. Florida had only been a state for a little over fifteen years when it broke the bonds of Union and seceded to join the Confederate States of America. The peninsula had been a possession of the United States for less than fifty years, but in that time period Florida underwent a colossal transfiguration from a vast Spanish wilderness, which served as a safe haven for runaway slaves and Native Americans, into a fire-eating ally of South Carolina and its sister Deep South states. Even though Florida remained largely uninhabited, close to 50 percent of the infant state's population were slaves. Edward Baptist's 2002 work, *Creating an Old South: Middle Florida's Plantation Frontier before the Civil War* explores and analyzes the most prominent and influential counties in the state's black belt, Leon and Jackson. While Florida's politics did closely follow that of South Carolina and many of the leading Democrats in the state were members of a group called the South Carolina School, it is Baptist's contention that Florida's founding fathers generated their own culture and society, and did not merely borrow and emulate those already in place in neighboring states.

The thesis of Baptist's work, however, would seem to contradict the title that the author chose. His title is paradoxical since the book challenges the notion that Florida was founded as nothing more than extension of the Deep South. One of the most significant conclusions of the book appears to be the fact that the author questions preconceived notions as well as previous scholars who claimed that Florida was, in fact, an extension of an Old South environment and culture. On more than one occasion Florida was derisively referred to as the smallest tadpole in the dirty pool of secession and this nickname stuck with the state throughout the Civil War and was commonly used by fellow Southerners to describe their neighbors to the south. Because of this fact, literature on antebellum Florida is scarce and Baptist's work is one of the first in-depth analyzes of antebellum cultural and societal life in the state written since the mid-twentieth century. *Creating an Old South* is important because it studies an overlooked and largely forgotten region and portion of Southern history.

Baptist focuses much of his attention on class conflict in Florida between the planters and the yeomen which he labels "countrymen." He claims the countrymen handed the "Cottonocracy" a string of crushing defeats which left them without supreme power within the state, thus rendering them different from their aristocratic brethren throughout the rest of the Deep South. In turn, Florida failed to be merely an extension of older Southern societies. Baptist maintains that planters had established what he describes as an uneasy command of Middle Florida in the Territorial Period (1821-45) though they were constantly challenged by the so called countrymen.

While the planters did not have the same power they wielded in other states, they did control the apparatus of government throughout the antebellum period. Baptist might be simplifying issues by viewing the decline and ultimate defeat and collapse of the Whig party in Florida as the end of planter domination in the state. The Whigs were backed by conservative planters who largely hailed from Virginia and the Upper South and reached the pinnacle of their power in the election of 1848. As the rest of the South turned away from reason and rationale, and towards emotion and extremism, the Whigs slowly began to lose their influence and were replaced by Democrats who had moved to Florida from South Carolina and Georgia.

Florida's last decade in the Union (1850-60) saw a shift in political power from the conservatives to the radicals, but this did not mean, as Baptist concludes, that the planters' power declined as well. A new planter class

wielded the political power and this was a class made up of members of the South Carolina School of Politics, producing governors such as James E. Broome, Madison Starke Perry, and John Milton who held the state's highest office from 1853-65.

Baptist seemingly contradicts his earlier assertions of a planter defeat by stating that the planters did, in fact, retain political power, but they were defeated on the issue which they held most dear: manhood and honor. Baptist does an admirable job of explaining how the planter class compromised many of their core values by acknowledging the emergence and subsequent power of the yeomen farmers or "countrymen," but this does not explain the fact that the planters were responsible for taking the state out of the Union in January 1861, by a vote of 62-7, or that they remained in control of Florida politically through the end of the Civil War.

Edward Baptist's book is an important endeavor in the historiography of antebellum Florida. He challenges preconceived notions and previous author's claims about the cultural makeup of the state, all of which work to motivate further discussion concerning the role of Florida during this period in antebellum history.

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