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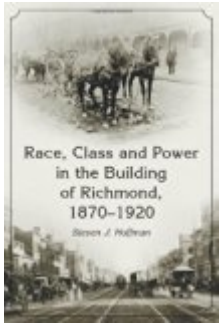
Steven J. Hoffman. *Race, Class and Power in the Building of Richmond, 1870-1920.* NC: McFarland and Company Inc, 2004. viii + 232 pp. $39.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7864-1616-5.



Reviewed by Shep McKinley

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Steven J. Hoffman's *Race, Class and Power in the Building of Richmond, 1870-1920* is a clearly written look at the "city-building process" in an important southern city in the half-century following the Civil War (p. 2). Hoffman, who teaches at Southeast Missouri State University in the Department of History and Historic Preservation Program, chose Richmond because it possessed characteristics of northern and southern cities. A state capital in the upper South with a strong manufacturing base, the city was diverse, economically vibrant, and large enough for comparisons to other urban areas in the North and South. Heavily damaged in the war, the Confederate capital successfully made the transition from Old South to New, maintaining its rank as one of the South's leading cities, and transforming itself from a mixed "walking city" to one sorted by race, class, residence, and business. Hoffman compares the attempts of the "commercial-civic elite," African Americans, and white workers to shape the built environment and social character of the city's various sections (p. 11). "Attempts" is the operative word because, Hoffman argues, none of the groups dominated the process, and all made considerable contributions.

The first three chapters investigate the commercial-civic elite's efforts and constraints in creating a Richmond to their liking. Business leaders guided antebellum economic development by controlling city government and forming various businessmen's organizations to influence voters and politicians. Although the city changed significantly after the war, the methods by which elites influenced Richmond's growth did not. In 1867, those leaders formed the Richmond Chamber of Commerce. Seeking to provide unified leadership and following a national trend, the white businessmen who made up the Chamber often served on the City Council, and saw themselves as the guardians of the city's reputation, economy, morality, development, and public health. Focusing on connections and freight rates with railroads increasingly owned by northern interests, and later, with state and interstate commissions, the Chamber was successful in leveling the playing field with other cities. Suburban annexations proved to be a contentious issue within the Demo-

cratic elite until the 1902 state constitution eliminated 48 percent of Richmond's voters with suffrage restrictions. Freed from the threat of black voters, progressive elites overpowered conservatives, ignored suburban opposition, and led substantial annexations in 1906, 1910, and 1914. The Chamber's guiding vision was a "Greater Richmond" that had room for more manufacturing sites, more sanitary worker housing, and an efficient expansion of city services (p. 43).

While chapter one highlighted the power of Richmond's commercial-civic elite, chapter two argues that they were far from dominant. The Chamber failed to navigate federal "politics, personality, and bureaucracy" in their quest to deepen the James River to modern standards (p. 57). Hoffman ably evaluates the colonial economy thesis as he details the consequent decline of the port of Richmond. The city's commercial-civic elite were equally ineffective in attracting enough outside investment capital to allow the city to become a national competitor. Northerners only occasionally invested locally, and even Chamber members invested elsewhere. The lack of a first-class hotel between 1870 and 1895 was a conspicuous example of the city's capital deficiencies. Finally, elites failed to fix the city's labor market. Divisions of gender, religion, and especially race alienated foreign immigrants, created severe imbalances, and contributed to black out-migration. The Chamber and other organizations did little more than set up ineffective labor bureaus.

In chapter 3, Hoffman builds on the theme of prejudice as a self-inflicted wound, and introduces public health as a city building issue. Despite their efforts to attract outside investment, Richmond's commercial-civic elite undermined their agenda by suppressing information about disease outbreaks and denying sewer and water improvements to blacks and working-class whites. The resulting public health crisis hurt Richmond's reputation as a suitable business location. Urged by the Chamber in the 1890s to improve the city's appalling mortality rates, the Richmond Board of Health responded, not by addressing the problem, but by blaming blacks and changing its methods of collecting statistics. Reorganized in 1906, the Board focused, and made progress, on improving white mortality rates while ignoring the noticeably higher disease rates for African Americans.

In chapters 4 and 5, Hoffman seeks to shift the spotlight of Richmond's city-building process from commercial-civic elites to African Americans and working-class whites, but his analysis remains elite-centered. Blacks and white workers appear more often, but they represent constraints to the elite's choices rather than independent actors. In chapter 4's focus on city politics, Hoffman's tendency is understandable given the character of the Democratic Party. Black political participation merely served to reinforce "the perpetual threat" to the elite, and resulted in indirect influence in the city-building process (p. 113). Fending off the black threat in 1871, Richmond's elites contained African-American voting strength in Jackson Ward. Hoffman's brief analysis of Jackson Ward politics and politicians is interesting. Aside from a brief challenge in 1886 by the Workingmen's Reform Ticket over the construction of the new city hall, working-class whites remained under the thumb of the city's elites. After disfranchisement, black moderates John Mitchell, Jr., and Giles Jackson maintained behind the scenes influence with the city's white elite.

Hoffman delves deeper into Richmond's African-American community in chapter 5, but he frames an analysis of black financial institutions and the emergence of a separate black economy within the range of choices of the ever-present commercial-civic elite. Hoffman's short case studies of the True Reformers Bank, the Mechanics Savings Bank, and the St. Luke's Penny Savings Bank, help illustrate the growth of the black community and economy, and the consequent constraining of options for whites in ordering the city.

As Jackson Ward expanded, the Chamber and other elites attempted to limit or direct the expansion of the black community, but were unsuccessful. In seeming desperation, elites chose to establish a "racial moat" south of Broad Street that, while limiting the growth of the downtown business district, also stopped the geographical spread of black businesses and residences (p. 175).

Race, Class and Power in the Building of Richmond, 1870-1920 will appeal to the general public, educators, and those interested in architecture, planning, and other disciplines. The author's questioning of the notion that elites dominated the creation of New South Richmond is a valuable contribution to the study of southern cities at this time. Hoffman is in his element when discussing the strengths and weaknesses of Richmond's Chamber and its commercial-civic elite, and less comfortable, or interested, in analyzing the African-American and white working-class communities. Indeed, his attempts to bring blacks and white workers into the discussion expose some of the book's most fundamental flaws. Neither a true comparative history of New South cities, like Don Doyle's *New Men, New Cities, New South*, nor a focused investigation of elite power in a city, like Thomas Hanchett's *Sorting Out the New South City*, Hoffman seeks to do both--while adding African Americans and the white working class into the mix--and accomplishes neither.[1] Hoffman's analysis of a range of potentially interesting topics is thin, and the reader never seems to understand why Richmond evolved the way it did. Another major problem is that two key terms, the "city building process" and the "commercial-civic elite," remain undefined throughout the book. The reader remains unclear about who the elite are, and what their intentions are for the city, besides the nebulous concept of prosperity. Hoffman names various businessmen as members of the Chamber, but he does not identify the dominating personalities of the era and their specific businesses or industries. And where are the lawyers and other power brokers within the city's elite? Hoffman also mentions few of the city's leading companies. For example, he describes, but never names, the Virginia-Carolina Chemical Corporation, the South's dominating fertilizer company headquartered in Richmond. Less fundamental flaws include Hoffman's tendency toward redundancy and the book's numerous typos, including every "afflicted" and "affluent."

In the end, *Race, Class and Power in the Building of Richmond, 1870-1920* is a good contribution to the study of this vital time period of southern cities, but not the definitive work on the topic. A quick look through my local library yielded several books on Richmond focused on race, class, gender, annexation, and planning. Hoffman's work will add to this literature, complementing the others with his focus on the Chamber.

Note

[1]. Don H. Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, Mobile, 1860-1910* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Thomas W. Hanchett, *Sorting Out the New South City: Race, Class, and Urban Development in Charlotte, 1875-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

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