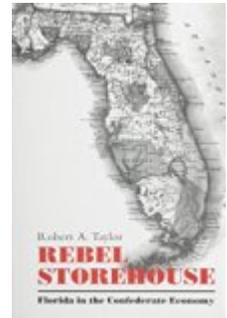




Robert A. Taylor. *Rebel Storehouse: Florida in the Confederate Economy.* Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1995. xii + 220 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8173-0776-9.



Reviewed by David E. Woodard

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This splendid monograph by Robert A. Taylor of Florida Atlantic University works well on several levels. First, it serves as an economic history of Confederate Florida and examines its contributions to the Southern war effort. Taylor suggests that scholars have neglected Florida's prominent role in the conflict. Florida's abundant and diverse agricultural economy became a critical source of food and provisions for the Confederate army, especially after the fall of Vicksburg in 1863. Second, Taylor does an excellent job of addressing the strategic role of Florida for both Union and Confederate commanders. He explains that both sides were slow to recognize Florida's potential value. The South initially failed to defend the state and grasped Florida's importance only when it became necessary to seek alternative sources of food for the rebel army. Union leaders also failed to understand Florida's possible role in the conflict. Not until late in the war did they envision Florida as a "rebel storehouse." Only then did they attempt to disrupt trade between Florida and its Southern allies.

During the 1850s Florida showed signs of developing into an agricultural paradise. While its primary crop was sea-island cotton, the state produced many other commodities. Florida shipped citrus fruit, pork, medicine, corn, whiskey, sugar, fish, and molasses to the other Southern states. The state also specialized in the production of wood products, lumber, and fish, and it conducted a profitable business in the export of salt. This tropical paradise could be of great benefit to the Confederate war effort. Taylor argues that "when the road to victory and independence grew longer and more difficult than anticipated, the agricultural value of the lower South to the rest of the Confederacy rose with each Union land advance" (p. 66). Even though cotton remained an important cash crop, by 1863 "the diversion of cotton acreage to corn in Florida underscored the increasing importance of the state to Confederate logistical planners" (p. 71). Taylor points out that by the fall of 1863, Richmond had finally begun to see the importance of Florida as a source of agricultural goods.

Salt was one important commodity that Florida provided to its Southern allies. "Eventually," writes Taylor, "the manufacture of salt in Florida became a vital industry contributing significantly to the Confederate war economy" (p. 45). There was a salt scarcity in the South, and Floridians were able to fill the void. Numerous saltworks, both large-and small-scale operations, were started along the Florida coasts. Federal forces destroyed some of these operations but could not shut them down completely. The salt industry, states Taylor, "displayed a remarkable resiliency in spite of widespread destruction at the hands of the Yankees" (p. 54). Salt was such a valuable and scarce commodity that speculators and profiteers were active in the business. One profiteer held tons of salt until prices rose to his desired level; meanwhile, soldiers and Southern citizens went without. Although Richmond did little to protect the salt industry, it was, "in monetary terms, Florida's most important contribution to the Confederate economy" (p. 65).

Florida's other significant contribution to the Southern war effort was its shipments of beef. Beef cattle production in Florida more than doubled from 1840 to 1860, and Florida cattlemen were earning considerable profits. More important, remarks Taylor, "a general decline in beef production in the deep South created an increased demand for Florida beef, making the sale of herds driven all the way from south Florida to cities like Savannah and Charleston attractive to their owners" (p. 10). Floridians saw a great future for their cattle industry. The state might soon rival Texas as a beef supplier, and when beef shipments started going to Cuba and the West Indies, the future appeared even brighter.

Florida beef kept much of the rebel army from starving during the lean years of 1864 and 1865. After the fall of Vicksburg, Florida was no longer a secondary beef market but the primary source for meat. Yet there remained numerous difficulties that often kept Florida beef from

reaching the rebel army. Because Florida was not adequately supported by Southern defenses, cattle owners were constantly harassed by Union troops. Many Floridians were also shipping beef to Cuba which diverted meat from the front. A new bureaucracy was even implemented to deliver these herds where they were needed. But expectations after Vicksburg were tremendous, and it became impossible for Florida to deliver the amount or quality of meat desired by Confederate officials. The army requested 3,000 head of cattle per week. These cattle were driven long distances, and by the time they reached their destinations, the animals yielded little or no meat. One drove of cattle, it was reported, was so lean that "not a single ounce of grease or fat could be found on any of the bovines" (p. 116). Floridians also lacked advanced transportation facilities by which to ship their herds. Land transportation was "very primitive" (p. 17), and Taylor points out that the only forms of transportation were wagon paths. While Florida's inland waterways were suitable, the state needed other forms of transportation to develop its economy. By early 1865, Florida, while providing much meat, had probably reached its peak of useful cattle production.

As Confederate resources decreased, more and more pressure was placed upon Florida to deliver materials, but problems continued. Coordination difficulties led to complications in delivering commodities to the proper places; excess cotton production continued even though food was more essential; transportation problems remained; and Union forces continued to gain territory. In fact, by 1865 many Floridians, believing the war was lost, were reluctant to sell their cattle or salt for worthless Confederate scrip. Overall, Taylor estimates that "at the very least, fifty thousand head of Florida cattle" were shipped to Confederate troops. Even though the meat was often tough, it provided the only protein for troops fighting in the lower South. "Supply officers in the state," writes Taylor, "endured a constant bombardment of impractical requests for more and

more cattle to feed troops. . . . In the end Florida beef only prolonged the conflict and did not alter its outcome" (p. 132).

Neither Union nor Confederate strategists were able to take full advantage of Florida's resources. At the start of the conflict, in spite of Floridians' fears, Union forces did not invade the state. Taylor maintains that Union control of Florida would have disrupted that state's "economic links to Georgia and Alabama" as well as threaten "vital industries upriver at Columbus, Georgia" (p. 29). Whether due to lack of resources or lack of foresight, it took the Union several years before they set their sights on Florida as a key strategic area.

However, by 1863 Union strategists finally recognized Florida's agricultural importance and made efforts to disrupt the supplies of cattle, pork, and salt to rebel troops. Union forces used Florida's system of internal waterways to disrupt sawmills, lumber activities, and saltworks. Taylor writes that Florida's "many rivers provided not only avenues for them to attack plantations and farms in the interior, but also a means of speedy retreat should the rebels choose to fight" (p. 142). Union raids and advances into the Florida interior also hurt the morale of civilians and disrupted homes, farms, and community life.

While Florida firmly supported the Confederacy, Richmond initially did little to exploit Florida's potential contribution to the war effort. The Confederate high command decided not to defend Florida and its miles of prime coastline. Without suitable protection, blockade running and smuggling became more difficult. Confederate leaders concentrated their efforts in Virginia and let Florida fend for itself. This allowed Union forces to seize several key coastal areas and seriously disrupt the Florida economy. As Taylor writes, "Confederate authorities lacked the military force and the will to defend the state properly" (p. 43).

Taylor concludes that Florida "made an economic contribution that was out of proportion to

the number of its inhabitants," and he makes a convincing case for not dismissing Florida as a "backwater of the larger conflict" (p. 159). In looking at Florida's economic prominence, *Rebel Storehouse* fills an important gap in the historical literature. *Blockaders, Refugees, and Contrabands: Civil War On Florida's Gulf Coast, 1861-1865* by George Buker (1993), discusses details of a "quasi-war" along the Florida Gulf coast. Buker does examine the salt and cattle trade, but *Rebel Storehouse* offers a superior synthesis of Florida economic contribution to the Southern war effort. John E. Johns concentrates primarily upon political and military events in his 1963 book, *Florida During the Civil War*. Those same political and military details also dominate several other books about Confederate Florida: William Nulty's *Confederate Florida: The Road to Olustee*, (1990); and *The Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida* by William W. Davis (1913).

In essence, Taylor has put Florida back on the map as an important state in the history of the Confederacy. The book is well-written, well-documented, and efficiently organized. While a few more maps might have been useful, I would recommend this book to anyone interested in Florida, the Confederacy, or the economy of the South during the Civil War.

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