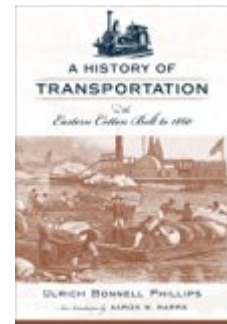


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Ulrich Bonnell Phillips. *A History of Transportation in the Eastern Cotton Belt to 1860*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2011. 432 pp. \$16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57003-965-2.

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Southern Antebellum Railroads: A Retrospective

In 1908, Ulrich Bonnell Phillips followed up his dissertation on Georgia politics with *A History of Transportation in the Eastern Cotton Belt to 1860*. The work was well received and helped launch Phillips toward a prominent career as a leading scholar in the field of slavery and southern history. For decades, historians retreated into the image of the pastoral South that Phillips—especially in his later works—helped create. Yet in the last few decades, scholars have begun to examine the antebellum period with an eye toward non-agrarian aspects of southern society, such as industry, the rise of an urban middle class, and educational structures in the South. The University of South Carolina Press’s reprinting of Phillips’s work in its Southern Classics Series is usefully timed to provide an opportunity for us to think about where we have been and where we now are on this important subject. A very insightful new introduction by Aaron W. Marrs helps guide the way. Author of *Railroads in the Old South: Pursuing Progress in a Slave Society* (2009), Marrs is ideally suited to the task as his own important work builds on and revises the scholarship of Phillips and others regarding railroads and their place in southern economic life.

In its original form, *History of Transportation* contains an analytical introduction and conclusion that frames eight chapters tracing early canals and turnpikes in the South Carolina and Georgia low country at the end of the eighteenth century through the building of various railroads emanating from Charleston and then to Geor-

gia’s various projects, which ultimately placed it at or near the top of southern railroad mileage and profits. A penultimate chapter deals with smaller projects and roads. Methodically using newspapers, railroad convention reports, and company records, Phillips traced the ways that boosters envisioned projects, how they sought to implement them, and toward what ends. Today, these detailed chapters remain a useful entry into the projects they describe. Phillips concluded that some, like Georgia’s Western-Atlantic line, were successful because of their ability to tap into western plantation regions by moving cotton to eastern commercial towns and ports. For the most part, however, Phillips argued that results “were a disappointment” and “failed to enlarge greatly the volume or the scope of industry.” That failure was due in part to a lack of manufacturing and diversification as well as the “greatest obstacle,” namely, “the dependence upon negro labor and the maintenance of slavery as a system for its control” (p. 388). Phillips’s assessments reveal much about the particular time period in which he wrote, but also his own unique background as a Georgian who styled himself as a translator of southern history to a national audience.

Although Phillips is often placed alongside other Progressive Era historians, this particular study reveals the voice of a New South booster as much as a capitalist critic. Frank Norris’s scathing critique of the Southern Pacific Railroad’s monopoly, *The Octopus*, had been published in 1901, yet Phillips rejected such a harsh assess-

ment of antebellum precursors. His railroad executives were “sane”; there “was no stock jobbing in the field”; and their focus remained on making money within a primarily agrarian society and serving civic-minded goals, including an overriding desire to “foster the success of the South in its race with the North” (p. 387). This conclusion may result partially from the work’s limited source base. Through the lens of leaders and promoters, railroads offered an unalloyed benefit for society, and to a great extent Phillips shared their attitudes toward progress for the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century South in which he was raised and would return in 1908, leaving the shadow of Frederick Jackson Turner at the University of Wisconsin to accept a teaching position at Tulane. He also had an underlying sympathy for what he perceived to be the plight of antebellum elites.

As Marrs’s introduction reveals, Phillips had difficulty getting this book published. Columbia University Press agreed to print it only at the author’s expense, and that required Phillips to have the book underwritten by his friend Alfred Stone—a noted Mississippi cotton planter, tax collector, historian, and racial theorist. Stone’s influence and Phillips’s prejudice help explain why, over the protest of the press’s editors, he dedicated the book to the “Dominant Class of the South: who in the piping ante-bellum time schooled multitudes white and black to the acceptance of higher standards who in the war time proved staunch and who in the troublous upheaval and readjustment which followed wrought more sanely and more wisely than the world yet knows” (p. xxxvi). That remarkably revealing—and insensitive—symbolism comes as little surprise to historians who now associate Phillips with his advisor, William Dunning, and his “school” of southern history that often ignored and in other instances flattened and even denigrated people of African descent. Though slavery is scarcely discussed in the body of this work, which is concerned primarily with the economics of the railroad business from the perspective of profits and mileage, Phillips gave it causal power in explaining what he saw as the region’s relative lack of success in the railroad business.

Indeed, *History of Transportation* anticipated some of the views about slavery and race that Phillips worked out in subsequent books, most famously, in *American Negro Slavery* and *Life and Labor in the Old South* (1918). For starters, slavery “locked up” capital—limiting industrial and railroad development—and ensured that railroads served almost exclusively agricultural interests. Secondly, Phillips believed that “Negro labor was as a rule inefficient for any tasks but those of crude labor”

(p. 388). Thus, to Phillips, the South did not have a class of labor capable of building railroads as successfully as their northern counterparts. Finally, Phillips’s presumption of African American passivity led him to conclude that railroads had little effect on slaves or slavery. Railroads, he noted, made slaves “more easily mobilizable by their masters, but otherwise affected them very little in slavery times” (p. 395).

Recent work, including Marrs’s own book, have significantly revised and in some instances overturned Phillips’s conclusions, while opening new areas for future scholarship. For example, much new research reveals that what Anthony E. Kaye has called “the second slavery” extended well beyond agricultural pursuits. Newer studies of southern railroads show that slaves were known by contemporaries to provide valuable skilled labor for railroad companies.[1] Whether purchased by railroad companies or hired from local slaveowners or private contractors, slaves were used by over three-quarters of the 118 southern railroads in operation before the Civil War.[2] Marrs and others provocatively suggest that slavery, “far from standing in the way of southern progress, facilitated progress.”[3] Casting slaves as actors, and often as resisters, also allows us to appreciate how dramatically railroads affected their lives: as a means to accelerate their forced migration westward; as a means to provide an under-examined information network; or, as in the case of Frederick Douglass, as a means for escape.

For Phillips, southeastern railroads served planters’ interests and thus had little transformative effect on the South’s economy. Yet more recent studies of non-planters and the growth of southern towns have shown that more than just planters invested in railroads and that they were designed for more than just agricultural reasons. Yet as Tom Downey’s study of upcountry South Carolina has shown, by 1860 “corporations ... as well as the rambunctious merchant class ... had spent thirty years successfully sculpting the agrarian landscape in the interests of capital.”[4] Railroads were a significant part of that change. Lacy K. Ford Jr. found that planters held only 40 percent of railroad directorships in that region, while merchants and lawyers each controlled 20 percent and industrialists and bankers combined for 8 percent.[5] Similarly, Michael Gagnon’s dissertation on Athens, Georgia, and work by William Thomas reveal that railroads were supported by and benefited Georgia’s budding industrial class and suggest that their services reached a broad swath of that state’s population.[6] Appreciating the various groups who competed to build rail-

roads or sought to benefit from them undermines another of Phillips's conclusions: that railroads generally united white southern society and politics. It appears that, as in the North, the pragmatic and political processes of designing and building railroad systems generated both class conflicts and severe competition between localities that knew the outcome could make or break their economic and political future. Far from leaving the South static, southern railroads introduced new ideas; new technologies; new ways of doing business; and for many, the reorientation of daily life around train timetables.[7]

Recent scholarship also begs the question of how unsuccessful southern railroads really were. When compared to the North they seem inferior, though the gap may have been closing somewhat in the 1850s. Global comparisons, however, suggest an even more complicated view. Richard Graham, for example, shows that the Deep South's victory over Brazil in capturing global cotton markets had a great deal to do with its superior transportation networks.[8] Contemporaneous British manufacturers who were frustrated with India's slow development as a raw cotton source made the same point. However, many southern railroad boosters pointed to Cuba's fast developing transportation network with some degree of envy. Phillips's narrow regional and national approach—typical of the time in which he wrote—hindered such perspective.

If most of Phillips's conclusions seem out of place in the face of recent trends that highlight how white and black southerners sought their own paths toward modernity, his methodology also provides some routes that historians might consider exploring. In particular, his focus on the business and finance networks railroads created remains largely unsurpassed, revealing how comparatively little we understand about the business of commerce within the southern United States. Economic historians—especially of the North—often study the relationships that trade formed within regions (between town and country or various interest groups) or the economic linkages that tied together local, regional, national, and international trade networks. Although some recent scholarship has touched on that subject, Harold Woodman's lamentation in 1990 that "the commercial history of the section has continued to receive little scholarly attention" remains true.[9] Following the business of the railroads is one way to remedy that. Our deeper sensitivity to southern economic diversity and global trends should allow for a greater understanding of the goods and services that railroads provided and what, in turn,

that says about the nature of doing business in and with a slave South.

Notes

[1]. Anthony E. Kaye, "The Second Slavery: Modernity in the Nineteenth-Century South and the Atlantic World," *Journal of Southern History* 75 (August 2009): 627-651.

[2]. Theodore Kornweibel Jr., "Railroads and Slavery," *Railroad History* 189 (Fall-Winter 2003): 35; and Aaron W. Marrs, *Railroads in the Old South: Pursuing Progress in a Slave Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), chap. 3.

[3]. Marrs, *Railroads in the Old South*, 83. Also, see Kenneth Noe, *Southwest Virginia's Railroad: Modernization and the Sectional Crisis* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

[4]. Tom Downey, *Planting a Capitalist South: Masters, Merchants, and Manufacturers in the Southern Interior, 1790–1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 226.

[5]. Lacy K. Ford Jr., *Origins of Southern Radicalism: The South Carolina Upcountry, 1800-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 233.

[6]. Michael Gagnon, "Transition to an Industrial South: Athens, Georgia, 1830–1870" (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1999); and William G. Thomas, "Swerve Me?" The South, Railroads, and the Rush to Modernity," in *The Old South's Modern Worlds: Slavery, Region, and Nation in the Age of Progress*, ed. L. Diane Barnes, Brian Schoen, and Frank Towers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 166-188.

[7]. This is eloquently dealt with in Marrs, *Railroads in the Old South*, esp. chaps. 2, 4-7.

[8]. Richard Graham, "Slavery and Economic Development: Brazil and the United States South in the Nineteenth Century," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23 (October 1981): 620-655.

[9]. Harold Woodman in the introduction to the 1990 Southern Classics reprint of *King Cotton and Its Retainers: Financing and Marketing the Cotton Crop of the South, 1800-1925* (1968; repr., Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1990), xv. A few exceptions include Elinor Miller and Eugene D. Genovese, eds., *Plantation, Town, and County: Essays on the Local History of American Slave Society* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press,

1974); John D. Majewski, *A House Dividing: Economic Development in Pennsylvania and Virginia before the Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Scott Marler, “‘An Abiding Faith in Cotton’: The Merchant Capitalist Community of New Orleans, 1860–1862,” *Civil War History* 54 (August 2008): 247-276.

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