



Jennifer R. Green. *Military Education and the Emerging Middle Class in the Old South*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Illustrations. xiii + 300 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-89493-7.

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Finding the Middle in the Old South

In her 2008 book, *Military Education and the Emerging Middle Class in the Old South*, Jennifer R. Green seeks to fill a gap in the historiography of middle-class formation in the antebellum United States, as well as in the history of education. Compiling demographic data on over one thousand cadets who attended state or private institutions in the Old South during the 1840s and 1850s, Green contends that military education is one location to view the development of the middle class in regional and national terms. Families from the middle ranks of southern society—largely nonmanual, nonagricultural professionals—“mirrored their northern counterparts in leveraging education to develop professional occupations” (p. 2). Taking advantage of funding opportunities and a nonclassical curriculum, southern, middle-class families sent their sons to such academies as the Virginia Military Institute, the South Carolina Military Academy, and the Kentucky Military Institute, among others, to attain an education with the hope that it could promote both social stability and social mobility. Many cadets, she claims, adopted northern, middle-class values stressing industry, morality, and self-regulation, yet at the same time their vision of manhood retained some southern variations. The emerging middle class in the South never threatened the southern elite’s dominance of the region, she insists, which was based on slave ownership and landholdings. Instead, members of the middling rank hoped to separate themselves “from the yeomanry, plain folk, and any developing urban working class” (p. 181). The benefits of a military education, however, coupled with alumni networks and the increased professionalization of certain occupations, does suggest that the standards for mobility and social status were changing during these years.

Green argues that the middle class in the antebellum United States did not possess a class consciousness. Rather, they were a class “in itself,” whose members re-

alized they held similar economic, occupational, and behavioral characteristics with a larger group of people but lacked a shared sense of identity. She agrees with much of Jonathan Daniel Wells’s book, *The Origins of the Southern Middle Class, 1800-1861* (2004) but she furthers his analysis by “defining the group more specifically” to investigate what social mobility, status, education, and professionalism meant to the middling ranks of southern society (p. 20). Although one-third of military cadets’ fathers labored in agriculture, most worked in professional occupations—“they were attorneys, physicians, and ministers, in order of frequency”—and looked to military education to instill discipline and useful knowledge in their sons to solidify or enhance their social status (p. 25). They were successful, Green asserts, as matriculates from the academies were more prevalent in professional occupations than their fathers.

Green asks her readers to put aside contemporary perceptions of military schools. These antebellum institutions were not bastions of a militant and backward South. They “represented educational reform and the concerns of the emerging middle class,” who began redefining the criteria for upward mobility in the region (p. 9). In a master-class-dominated world, families of the nascent middle class wanted a “practical” education for their sons. Much like the educational reform taking place in the North, southern military schools promoted a curriculum “centered on science and vocational training in engineering and teaching” (p. 130). Less stringent admission standards, coupled with the availability of funding, made southern military academies ideal for families of the emerging middle class. Green refers to numerous letters written by cadets and their fathers stressing the importance of a practical education, which, she believes, demonstrates the desire for progress within the Old South. Indeed, the growth and success of southern military institutes indicates that the promotion of tech-

nological advancement was taking hold in the region.

After graduation, cadets found an extensive system of career placement at their ready. Ad-hoc alumni networks formed, guiding recent graduates into nonagricultural, nonmanual occupations. The same networks then pursued professionalization of these careers “through control of exclusive knowledge, creation of organizations, and eventually legislation regulating the profession” (p. 197). The professionalization of teaching, especially, raised the prestige of military education, brought more educators into the field, and helped perpetuate a southern middle class. Furthermore, through this professionalization, members of the middle class were slowly redefining social status in the South, shifting the standards for upward mobility away from ownership of land and slaves, and replacing “the basis of elite social position with goals they could attain” (p. 154).

This focus on professionalization, technological advancement, social mobility, and practical education echoed developments in the antebellum North. Yet the emerging middle class of the Old South never adopted northern values wholesale. For instance, Green claims that overall, the national middle class adopted a version of restrained manhood, emphasizing the importance of religion, industry, self-regulation, and self-improvement. Southern military academies stressed these individual traits, and cadets adopted them readily but they also adhered to elite, southern notions of manhood revolving around honor and hierarchy. Instructed to submit to military authority, these cadets developed a vision of man-

hood that also embraced independence. They proved their autonomy by choosing to submit to military school discipline. As southern, elite males depended on mastery over all those around them for social status, cadets worked at self-mastery, regulating their participation in immoderate behavior. Despite these southern variations, however, Green argues that the emerging southern middle class adopted ideals of manhood more closely resembling their northern counterparts than those of the southern elite.

Although one could question the non-threat status Green attributes to the emerging southern middle class—certainly the group’s subtle efforts to redefine the standards of social status could appear threatening to a master class already on the defensive—her work is engaging, well documented, and original. Not only does Green demonstrate the slow formation of a national middle class in the antebellum period but she also details regional variations in its development. Her analysis of occupational mobility between generations buttresses her contention that the social structure of the antebellum South was in a process of transformation prior to the Civil War. Furthermore, the use of military education, with its system of cadet funding, disciplinary regimen, and alumni networks, successfully shows how southern professionals sought to reformulate the criteria for social status while seeking occupational stability and upward mobility. Any student of class formation in the antebellum United States, the history of the Old South, or U.S. education is likely to benefit from Green’s work.

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