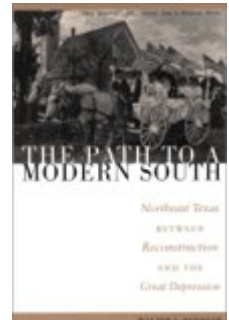


**Walter L. Buenger.** *The Path to a Modern South: Northeast Texas Between Reconstruction and the Great Depression.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001. xxvi + 342 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-292-70887-7.



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## Rethinking Texas' Modern Roots

Historians have long recognized the importance of the New Deal and World War II in bringing change to the South and to other regions of the United States. The infusion of federal dollars, regulations, and policies stimulated economic, social, political, and cultural transformations in many areas and helped set the nation on a path to a new era. In the South, historians have recognized that this federal presence helped lead to the political realignment of African Americans and the acceleration of the use of the courts and mass protest to end segregation and other forms of discrimination. It also stimulated economic development and facilitated the South's modernization.

In *The Path to a Modern South: Northeast Texas Between Reconstruction and the Great Depression*, Walter L. Buenger has written an important work that challenges historians to reconsider both the roots of change and modernization in Texas and the larger meaning of these changes. Buenger does not deny that the New Deal and World War II were transforming events, but he argues that the seeds of change had been sown pri-

or to the arrival of the New Deal. Instead of inaugurating change, the New Deal and World War II sped changes that were already underway, and the foundation laid prior to 1930 allowed Texans to take full advantage of new opportunities made available by the federal government's expanded presence. Buenger also asks why Texas began moving along a path toward modernization at a time when other southern states did not. Texas, after the turn of the century, was modernizing, and becoming more Texan and less southern. While Buenger focuses on Texas, he also challenges historians to ask questions about the roots of change and modernization in other parts of the South.

Buenger studies eleven counties in Northeast Texas between 1887 and 1930. In 1887, that area closely resembled other cotton-growing regions in the South, and thus, Buenger explains, serves as an excellent place to study transformation and compare its course with the larger cotton South. Buenger's study, which is arranged chronologically and thematically, follows many complex and often subtle changes that occurred in the larger po-

litical, economic, and cultural arenas. Multifaceted politics, an evolving economy, and a shift from an historical memory devoted to the Confederacy to one that celebrated Texas' own colorful history, all combined (with other factors) to set Northeast Texas apart. Ideas about race, religion, the role of women in society, and government's place in citizens' lives also shifted, so that by 1930, Texans were in a position to take advantage of what a federal presence could offer the larger state.

One area that Buenger explores extensively is politics. Throughout the book, he shows his readers how the political culture of Northeast Texas evolved over time. The ever-changing and factionalized nature of Texas Democratic politics forced factions to compete for voters. By 1912 in Northeast Texas, even though black voters' political clout had waned, more white males (and later women voters) with different interests and backgrounds participated in the political process. In order to succeed at the polls, political factions and their candidates in the region worked hard to attract constituents and avoid alienating potential voters. In Northeast Texas, compromise became necessary, thus eliminating the extremists who gained footholds elsewhere in the South.

Politics of this kind made it easier to accept activist government because competing factions used the power of the government to provide rural and urban voters with services, such as improved and expanded education and county agent systems. Indeed, Northeast Texans and their political representatives at all levels of government turned to the state when it was economically or politically advantageous. Thus by 1930, Texans were primed to accept a federal presence (and what it could offer) when other southerners found that presence distasteful.

The economic change that occurred in Northeast Texas likewise put the state on a path to modernization not found in other parts of the South. Railroad construction and operation in the region

provided new business opportunities. In addition to jobs created to build and maintain the railroads, the establishment of national chain stores, and the arrival of mail-order catalogs (which could reach Texas thanks to the railroads) strengthened the ties to areas outside of the South. The railroads and the transportation they provided for goods and people stimulated the growth of new industries (such as lumber) and encouraged farmers to plant alternative crops to cotton, such as peaches and sweet potatoes. All this helped move the region away from the typical southern cotton-dependent economy and the culture it spawned. The arrival of state banks along with chain stores and catalogs in Northeast Texas helped undermine the old economic order. The power of the old furnishing merchants vanished while providing consumers new ways of obtaining credit along with greater choices and lower prices. The confluence of these external forces, largely forces that were altogether absent from similar regions, helped distance Northeast Texas from the rest of the South.

Culturally, the region also underwent change. While Northeast Texas never severed its ties to the South, it became less southern, more Texan, and more American. Texas' membership in the Confederacy and the sacrifices of war had fostered an historical memory that celebrated the Confederate past. This memory had in part, encouraged and perpetuated the South's hostility to an activist government. But as Texas came of age, its citizens developed a growing interest in their state's history, its own revolution, and its unique past as an independent republic. Texans also witnessed first hand the tragedies and triumphs of the sons they sent to fight World War I. Over time, the Confederate past and its heroes took a back seat to the celebrations of Texas' own proud past and the heroes of the Great War.

Although Northeast Texas bordered nearby Arkansas and Louisiana, being part of the Lone Star State, with its own rich history, mattered

enormously. The memory of the Confederacy, Buenger tells us, was not forgotten, but it was the memory of Texas' own dynamic history that helped provide distance from the rest of the cotton South. Texas' multifactional politics, an evolving economy, and its unique cultural heritage opened the doors to change at a time when the doors may have remained closed elsewhere in the South.

Buenger's research is impressive. He has not only mined primary sources, including newspapers, manuscript collections, and oral interviews, but has also pored through the relevant historical literature on Texas in particular and the South in general. Buenger's work is a solid, well-written, well-researched effort and his arguments are convincing. His work will no doubt prompt historians to investigate other southern locales and other areas of Texas and ask if the seeds of change were planted before the arrival of the New Deal and World War II. *The Path to a Modern South* is an important work not only for historians of Texas, but for historians of the American South.

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