H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Edward E. Baptist. *Creating an Old South: Middle Florida's Plantation Frontier before the Civil War.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. xiv + 408 pp. $25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5353-5; $70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2688-1.

Reviewed by Arthur Remillard (Department of Religion, Florida State University)
Published on H-USA (March, 2004)

An Old South in the Making

An Old South in the Making

An era's name can both reveal and conceal the tenor of a time and place. In the case of the Old South, one might be tempted to envision a placid agrarian setting benevolently ruled by a class of wealthy planters. Edward Baptist's *Creating an Old South*, however, calls into question such images by examining two decidedly unstable pre-Civil War counties in "Middle Florida," a region located in Florida's central panhandle. The frontier environment of Middle Florida's Old South contained dueling, fistfights, murder, drunkenness, and most notably, class conflict. The memory of a mythically stable Old South overshadowed this raucous past and, according to Baptist, came only after planters forged a necessary alliance with yeomen. Baptist's final product offers a cogent thesis supported by a variety of sources such as regional folklore, newspapers, diaries, family papers, statistics, maps, illustrations, and public records.

Soon after Florida became a territory in 1821, a number of planters migrated from Southern states such as Virginia seeking financial and cultural prosperity. "These migrants remained confident," Baptist writes, "that they would be able to reconstruct Southeastern models of deference by nonplanter whites and submission by slaves in a new country" (p. 28). Middle Florida's nonplanter whites, who Baptist categorizes as "countrymen," refused to submit to the wishes of planters. Instead, countrymen wanted both recognition and acceptance from planters who, for example, expressed disapproval of nonplanter versions of honorable violence such as brawling. While planters considered dueling a suitable method for Southern gentlemen to settle disputes, they saw the "rough-and-tumble" fist fights of countrymen to be pure "mayhem" (p. 127). As a result, brawls drew heavy legal sanctions when compared to dueling and other similar forms of planter violence. While countrymen protested these and other honorific insults, the wealth and political influence of planters afforded them the luxury of ignoring such challenges.

During the 1840s, however, the Second Seminole War, a rising threat of slave rebellion, declining cotton prices, and the financial downturn of the Union Bank exposed the vulnerability of Middle Florida's planters. As countrymen grew in numbers and planters became less influential, a tacit agreement between the two classes developed. In exchange for recognizing the honor codes of countrymen, planters received political and ideological backing. While planters did not want to concede any power, their defeats during the "crisis decade" left them no alternatives–their own honor code yearned for the perceived stability that such an agreement would bring (p. 238). This tenuous accord would later unite Florida in the secession movement and ensuing Civil War. It would also enable planters to rewrite Middle Florida's history. Instead of frontier chaos, planters recalled a vision of Old South harmony. Jousting and other romantically inspired activities became "quasi-medieval community rituals" for planters to fortify their faulty memory of an honorable past (p. 256). This myopic version of the Old South, Baptist maintains, codified into a "civic religion" in the years following the war (p. 281). Indeed, in his infamous New South manifesto *The Mind of the South*, North Carolina journalist W. J. Cash argued that planters retained their privileged status in the years following the war.[1] While many wealthy white Southerners may have wanted Cash's declaration to be true, Baptist shows that in Middle Florida, at least, Cash spoke of a past that never truly existed.

As a whole, the book challenges readers to consider how and why a false memory can become a mythically factual portrait of the past. For planters, the appearances of power and stability prescribed by their ideals of masculine honor ultimately resulted in a mythical version of Middle Florida's history. Additionally, by focusing on

Florida, Baptist brings a fresh voice into the discussion of Southern history. Due in part to its small population and geographical location, Florida rarely receives mention in much of the Old South's historiography. Countering this trend, Baptist shows that Florida clearly was involved in the creation of Southern identity both before and after the war. The amount of research represented in *Creating an Old South* is, in itself, worthy of high praise. Chapters begin with a particular person, event, or cultural phenomenon, and flow seamlessly into broader themes. Various illustrations such as portraits, etchings, and maps bring many welcome visual components to the text. Furthermore, Baptist adeptly explains the surreptitious tactics of countrymen who struggled to destabilize planter authority. Here, he makes good use of works such as James Scott's *Domination and the Arts of Resistance.*[2] For countrymen, the "Jack Tales," a compilation of folktales about a "trickster" yeoman living in Middle Florida, "served as instruction, advice, and a means for navigating the difficult journey to manhood" (p. 121). Jack's trickery, then, informed the larger "hidden transcript" of countrymen who sought recognition and acceptance from planters.

While Baptist does briefly mention the effects of revivalism, he would have done well to include more on the topic (pp. 236-239). From Christine Heyrman's *Southern Cross*, historians began to understand that evangelicalism did not simply overtake the South following the Great Revival of the early-nineteenth century.[3] Advocating equality and acceptance among poor whites, women, youthful itinerant preachers, and blacks, Southern evangelicals initially alienated planters. Only by adapting to planter norms and eliminating the emphasis on egalitarianism did evangelicalism become the South's faith of choice by the 1840s. Baptist's focus on Middle Florida's conflicts and agreements during this same time could have brought further depth to, or even modified, Heyrman's thesis. Nevertheless, such a criticism should not overshadow the book's exceptional quality. Baptist's effort raises many good questions and invites further examination. Scholars interested in Southern history, issues pertaining to class, gender, and race, and memory studies will find this volume helpful.

Notes

[1]. W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1941).

[2]. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

[3]. Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Arthur Remillard. Review of Baptist, Edward E., *Creating an Old South: Middle Florida's Plantation Frontier before the Civil War.* H-USA, H-Net Reviews. March, 2004.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9052

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.