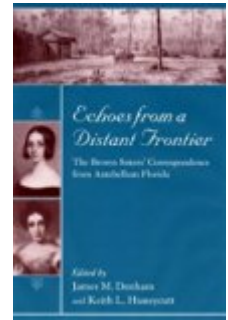


**James M. Denham, Keith L. Huneycutt, eds..** *Echoes from a Distant Frontier: The Brown Sisters' Correspondence from Antebellum Florida*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004. xii + 325 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-57003-536-4.



**Reviewed by** Lee Willis

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A common grievance among historians researching antebellum Florida is the relative dearth of primary sources. Compared to other southern states, extant manuscripts and newspapers are lacking. Scholars attempting to understand social life and customs in nineteenth-century Florida can be easily frustrated as they face greater limitations than scholars of some seventeenth-century colonies. Despite these difficulties, several historians have produced a number of quality books on the territory and state recently. Edward Baptist, Larry Rivers, and a co-editor of this volume, James M. Denham, have overcome the research problems and produced very good books on the territory and state in the last ten years.[1] And thanks to the efforts of Denham and Keith Huneycutt on *Echoes from a Distant Frontier*, historians will have richer and deeper source material to mine. Their edited work features the correspondence of Corinna and Ellen Brown, two New England-born sisters who lived in Florida from 1835 to 1850.

The Brown sisters of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, arrived in East Florida in 1835. Moderately

affluent and capably literate, they left New England after the death of their parents and joined other family members who had removed to the Mandarin area. Over the next fifteen years, Corinna and Ellen endured the perils of the Second Seminole War (1835-42) and lived in St. Augustine, Newnansville, Fort King, Pensacola, and Key West. All the while they wrote descriptive letters to family members in the North, primarily their brother and accomplished artist, Mannevillette Brown. The sisters commented upon electoral politics, military leadership, religion (both personal piety and observations of revivals and rituals), deaths, marriages, and family life, among other topics.

Though all of the letters are an important contribution, those written from East Florida during the Second Seminole War are particularly valuable. Several missives demonstrate the two women's political acumen and their awareness of the shifting winds of military affairs. Both Corinna and Ellen married army officers and socialized with leading military and political figures. How much influence these elite women had on territorial political culture is difficult to gauge, but there

is little doubt of their interest and knowledge of contemporary events and politicians.

Denham and Huneycutt beautifully edited the letters, which are housed at the U.S. Military Academy Library at West Point. The reader glides through the chronologically arranged epistles with ease thanks to contextual chapter introductions and helpful footnotes along the way. Furthermore, given the Brown sisters' entertaining prose and the drama of events that they described, the book can be read for enjoyment as well as a primary source--especially for one who enjoys epistolary novels. One regret (certainly not a criticism) is that the sisters did not remain in the same place during their fifteen-year residence in Florida. Since they moved frequently and to very different locales, it is more difficult to recognize if their observations about their environs reflect time, place, or both. Had Corinna and Ellen remained in Mandarin, for example, historians would find the letters more valuable as a gauge for change over time.

Nevertheless, Denham and Huneycutt have brought to light a fascinating glimpse of women's lives on the southern frontier. Their work joins several other edited volumes published recently that have illuminated nineteenth-century Floridian lives.[2] Thanks to these publications and the hard work of archivists around the state, who continually seek out new manuscripts for their collections, antebellum Florida has become a hot topic for new research on the Old South.

#### Notes

[1]. For example, see Edward E. Baptist, *Creating an Old South: Middle Florida's Plantation Frontier before the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Larry E. Rivers, *Slavery in Florida* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2001); William W. Rogers and Erica Clark, *The Croom Family and Goodwood Plantation: Land, Litigation, and Southern Lives* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999); and James M. Denham, *A Rogue's Paradise: Crime and*

*Punishment in Antebellum Florida* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997).

[2]. Examples include Kathryn Carlisle Schwartz, *Baptist Faith in Action: The Private Writings of Maria Baker Taylor, 1813-1895* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003); and Arch Frederic Bailey, Ann Smith Lainhart, and Winston Bryant Stephens Jr., eds., *Rose Cottage Chronicles: The Civil War Letters of the Bryant-Stephens Family of North Florida* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1998).

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