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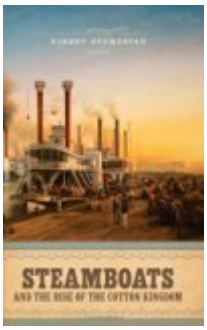
Robert H. Gudmestad. *Steamboats and the Rise of the Cotton Kingdom.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011. 312 pp. $42.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8071-3842-7.



Reviewed by Lo Faber

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Commissioned by Tom Downey (Papers of Thomas Jefferson, Princeton University)

On December 16, 1811, in the midst of the maiden voyage of the aptly christened *New Orleans*--the first steamboat to navigate the Mississippi River--the ground began to tremble. The largest earthquake ever recorded east of the Rockies destroyed the town of New Madrid, brought down chimneys in Louisville, and woke people from sleep as far away as Quebec; its force even caused the great "father of waters" to briefly reverse its flow. The omen was appropriate. By forever reversing the directional logic of western river transportation, the *New Orleans* and her thousands of bigger, faster successors contributed to the economic and social transformation of an area as vast as that shaken by the legendary quake.[1]

In *Steamboats and the Rise of the Cotton Kingdom*, a well-written book rich with ideas, Robert Gudmestad explores the myriad ways in which steamboats aided and abetted this transformation. Far from telling a simple tale of technological determinism, Gudmestad emphasizes the social and experiential dimensions of his story--for example, the central role of steamboat transport in Indian Removal, and the novel sensations associated with passenger travel on paddle-wheeled palaces. While some of his arguments are, inevitably, less convincing than others, taken together they constitute a valuable contribution to scholars' still-evolving understanding of the rise of the American South in the first half of the nineteenth century.

At only 177 pages (plus appendices, notes, and an index), *Steamboats and the Rise of the Cotton Kingdom* does not aspire to the encyclopedic comprehensiveness of Louis C. Hunter's 1949 classic *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*. Nor, despite opening with the *New Orleans* and closing with Mark Twain, does Gudmestad provide a chronological account of steamboats' rise and fall. Instead he organizes his chapters thematically, with the first five exploring, in sequence, entrepreneurs, laborers, passengers, Indian Removal, and safety regulations. In the sixth, with nods to (among others) William Cronon, Leo Marx, and John F. Kasson, Gudmestad turns to the

ethos of technological mastery over "nature," and the demands for federal government support for man-made "improvements." Only then, in his seventh chapter, does he take on the broader analysis promised by the book's title: the "Rise of the Cotton Kingdom."

To begin with the obvious: enormous steamers, their size denoted by the number of cotton bales they could haul ("a 1,200 bale boat"), could transport far more "white gold" to Atlantic markets far faster than their flatboat predecessors (pp. 142-143). But a mere discussion of increased shipping capacity would not make for a very interesting book; moreover, one could argue that cotton was actually the single Southern product that, being produced almost entirely for export, needed steamboats the *least*. Gudmestad deepens his analysis by exploring a number of other indirect but crucial ways in which steam literally powered the spread of cotton culture. More transport capacity led to more production and more demand for labor--which led in turn to the acceleration of the domestic slave trade. At the same time, by rendering unnecessary the labor of building flatboats, steamers, in Gudmestad's view, "made slaves more efficient and more valuable" (p. 29). The removal of tens of thousands of Creeks, Cherokees, Choctaws, and Seminoles in the 1830s was also enabled by steamboat transportation, thus opening up vast new areas perfectly suited for cotton cultivation. In all these ways and others, the great paddle-wheelers facilitated the breakneck development of the cotton South from 1811 to 1850.

All this is important, solidly researched, and well explained. But it is hardly surprising. Other factors--the advent of the cotton gin, soil exhaustion and excess slave populations in the Upper South, and the Louisiana Purchase, to name just a few--surely played roles in this story, and the coronation of King Cotton begins to look rather overdetermined. Gudmestad enriches what might have been a workmanlike but pedestrian study by interweaving a second parallel line of interpretation, related to but separate from the first: the development not simply of cotton cultivation but of a new, modernizing slave South, aggressively capitalist, technologically oriented, and bent on development in cooperation with the federal government, in the Gulf-facing regions west of the Appalachians, contrasting sharply in many ways with the old colonial seaboard South.

This second narrative arc brings ***Steamboats and the Rise of the Cotton Kingdom*** into much richer and more provocative interpretive territory. Beyond simply spurring the cotton plantation complex, steamboats led to the rapid rise of an integrated, diversified regional economy around it. Hemp from Kentucky, iron from Tennessee, and wheat from the Northwest were crucial components of this developing economy, as was timber from throughout the Mississippi watershed. Just as crucially, the fact that goods could now be shipped upriver, as well as down, brought the region into the transatlantic market for consumer products. While the old, Atlantic-facing South--coastal Georgia, the lowcountry Carolinas, tidewater Virginia--continued to rely on a purely export-based commodity production model dating back to the colonial era, the new trans-Appalachian South was leveraging steam power and cotton profits to build a more multidirectional and diversified internal market.

Far from premodern, this rapidly developing interior South was "on the vanguard of radical change" (p. 18). And with structural change came new social dislocations and attitudes, such as the stark class stratification of cabin and deck passengers, and the "general acceptance of risk" that came with a disturbingly high rate of fatal accidents (p. 112). Steam power also turned once-remote upriver towns into Atlantic world ports, which brought the mingling of white, slave, and free black laborers, the proliferation of taverns, and other perceived "conditions dangerous to public order" typical of port cities (p. 158). Closer

integration with the Atlantic economy also brought cosmopolitan urbanity to previously remote places--or in one writer's words, "a little Paris, a section of Broadway, or a slice of Philadelphia" on the streets of once-isolated backwater burgs (p. 156).

Nor was the modernizing interior South, in contrast to the Calhounite lowcountry Atlantic South, apt to look askance at the involvement of the federal government. On the contrary, Southwesterners who asked Washington to fund projects to remove snags and break up logjams felt they "needed the federal government to promote interstate commerce" (p. 139). Erstwhile entrepreneur Henry Shreve, appointed in 1824 as superintendent of western river improvements, personified Washington's supportive response; Congress sank over $3 million into river improvements, with the clearing of the enormous "Great Raft" near present-day Shreveport being only the best known of many such projects (pp. 127-130).

By encouraging forms of wage and salaried labor alongside the slave system; by increasing dependence on capital investment; by fostering internal commerce in addition to export-based trade; by accelerating the mobility of both people and goods; and by multiplying and lubricating regional links to the global economy, steamboats helped transform the modernizing capitalist South. They also changed the landscape, as millions of trees were removed from the Mississippi's banks both for fuel and to prevent obstructions. Not just a picturesque accompaniment, steamers were an integral component of a rapidly changing region. But whether these "floating engines of capitalism"--to use Gudmestad's arresting phrase--were causes or effects of the transformation remains difficult to say (p. 155).

A bit of both, perhaps; surely there were many other factors at work. Other historians have recently depicted the rise of the cotton South as the product not of technology but of geopolitics and American expansion.[2] It is striking, in fact, how little Gudmestad looks beyond the borders of the United States. After all, the first steamboats, during the War of 1812, were crucial not only for their impact on commerce and mobility but for providing a way for Americans to travel from New Orleans to the Eastern seaboard without risking capture by the blockading British navy. Nor are all Gudmestad's assertions convincing; some, like his suggestion that the advent of steam power "allowed white Americans to entertain a plan as audacious as Indian Removal," seem a bit strained (p. 95). His assertion that the rise of rail after 1850 erased the distinctiveness of the new trans-Appalachian South and made pan-Southern unity possible in 1860 also appears, for once, too technologically deterministic.

But these objections are peripheral and subjective. While every single arrow may not hit the mark, Robert Gudmestad's book convincingly shows that southwestern river steamboat transportation was an integral part of a stunning and rapid regional transformation that was both wider and deeper than the simple spread of cotton culture. It will make compelling reading not only for historians of "Southern Industry" but for all scholars interested in the numerous profound overlapping social, cultural, and economic transformations of the early American republic. The fact that Gudmestad accomplishes this in clear, user-friendly prose, punctuated by numerous captivating anecdotes and a handful of well-chosen illustrations, is icing on the cake.

Notes

[1]. For an account of the quakes see Jay Feldman, ***When the Mississippi Ran Backwards: Empire, Intrigue, Murder, and the New Madrid Earthquakes*** (New York: Free Press, 2005). Gudmestad narrates the ***New Orleans***'s voyage on pp. 1-4.

[2]. For example, Adam Rothman, ***Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South*** (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

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