

### Only Connect: Railroad Development And Race In The Confederate Corridor

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## Review

### ONLY CONNECT

#### Railroad development and race in the Confederate corridor

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**Nelson, Scott Reynolds** *Iron Confederacies: Southern Railways, Klan Violence, and Reconstruction*. University of North Carolina Press, ISBN 807824763

The scholarship on the middle period of the 19th century in the South has proliferated to such an extent over the past few decades, that it seems almost impossible to offer a new and fresh interpretation of events, whether they are political, social, economic, or racial. Scott Reynolds Nelson has done just that, however, in his study of railroad development in the southern Atlantic states -- what he calls the Confederate corridor -- stretching southward from northern Virginia to Georgia.

His view is novel because it integrates railroad building with, as he says, "the increasingly disparate fields of labor, political, economic, cultural, and business history." He shows who built the railroads, as well as how they were built, before, during, and after the Civil War, and how the ingenious A.B. Andrews and Moncure Robinson, from their base in North Carolina, created the Seaboard Inland Air Line during the early postwar period.

The Air Line was in fact not a railroad at all, but rather a transport company that relied on "a logo, a stencil, a form, and a handshake." It used waybills -- or a "through bill of lading" -- to transport cotton and other staple crops north to Norfolk. The major obstacle to Southern railroads in the prewar period was creating a north-south axis, with slave-owning planters usually supporting the traditional east-west movement of goods to familiar ports and merchants. The Air Line circumvented the political opposition by drawing on the efforts of the Confederacy during the War to transport goods north. "Its status as a railroad company without railroad tracks -- as a public fiction -- made it elusive and effective," the author writes. By the early 1870s, however, Andrews was pushed out with the arrival of capital from the North.

While much of this is new, what is perhaps most exciting is how Nelson blends business and economic history with the impact of railroads on race relations. While many factors were involved, some of the most bitter and violent Ku Klux Klan activity in the Carolinas occurred in Alamance County, North Carolina, and Spartanburg, South Carolina, where railroad shops and connections upset racial norms and, in the minds of many whites, created too many opportunities for blacks to flaunt their newly acquired freedom. It was this as much as politics, the author suggests, that caused the eruptions of Klan violence.

One has to stretch the imagination to criticize *Iron Confederacies*, but it might have been revealing to view more closely the antebellum slave workers, the conscripted blacks during the War, and the postwar black convicts who largely built the lines. This is a minor matter, however, in an otherwise fine study, which offers new and fresh interpretations and does so by integrating a range of disciplines.

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