

The Southern Middle Class in the Long Nineteenth Century

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Recommended Citation

McMillen, Sally G. (2012) "The Southern Middle Class in the Long Nineteenth Century," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 14 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.14.2.15

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol14/iss2/14>

Review

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Spring 2012

Wells, Jonathan Daniel (ed.) and Green, Jennifer R. (ed.). *The Southern Middle Class in the Long Nineteenth Century*. Louisiana State University Press, \$45.00 ISBN 978-0-8071-3851-9

New Social History Shines New Light

Jonathan Daniel Wells and Jennifer R. Green, two scholars who have done much to expand our understanding of the South's middle class, have edited this collection of essays on that very topic. The coverage is broad, ranging temporally from the last two decades of the eighteenth century through the first decades of the twentieth century. Topics examined here are diverse, ranging from papers exploring merchants in Charleston's Chamber of Commerce, to three African American female writers who promoted racial uplift by embracing middle-class values, to sectional politics and their influence on an emerging middle class. These papers offer an expansive view of the South's middle class and its impact on family, community, and region.

For too long, scholars have tended to pay little heed to this portion of the South's population, in part because it seemed to operate outside the region's slave-based, agrarian economy and because it comprised only about ten percent of the population. These essays encourage readers to consider the significance of the South's middle class and to broaden its definition. The term, first used in the 1830s, became common by the 1850s and included merchants, businessmen, small planters, and professionals. As Martin Ruef explains here, and as these essays demonstrate, the term middle class is a complicated one because it is so expansive. Historians need to remember, he insists, that there was "not *one* middle class, but many middle classes" (204).

Space permits coverage of only a few essays in this collection. Using Norfolk, Virginia, as his focus, John G. Deal examines how that city's middle class organized volunteer groups to engage in various benevolent projects. Men

performed good works through their associations, seeking to lift up the “worthy poor” and prevent their dependence. The goal was to encourage the poor to embrace the values that middle-class men knew were basic to a good life--sobriety, thrift, and industriousness. Deal also describes how middle-class women engaged in good works, pursuing outreach projects through church and charitable organizations that served the city’s orphans and destitute.

While manufacturing too often gets slighted when examining the nineteenth-century South, three essays here address the middle class and its efforts to promote industrialization. Susanna Delfino argues that in the three decades leading up to the Civil War, some middle-class entrepreneurs created an industrial base in Kentucky and Tennessee, providing the impetus for an expansive, more diversified economy. New iron and textile industries there created managerial, bookkeeping, and clerical positions, as well as opportunities for skilled and unskilled laborers. Jonathan Wells presents a more dismal view of manufacturing in the post-Civil War South. Though the region desperately needed to expand its economy, middle-class men struggled to succeed, facing an unstable and unprofitable economy. These men also met resentment for their efforts and found it difficult to restore the legitimacy their professions had brought them before the War. Churchmen were among the loudest critics, decrying materialism and greed that ministers associated with industrialization. Even professionals, including lawyers and doctors, became targets of criticism. Their calls for regional reforms, such as public education and a stronger southern economy, often met resistance.

Two interesting essays examine young men and their professional careers. Angela Lakwete looks at the three Aiken brothers of South Carolina who migrated to the Southwest to pursue their professions. One manufactured cotton gins, another invested in commercial firms, and the third practiced law. All were aggressive, though two of the brothers died young, never achieving the financial success they desired. As Lakwete shows, however, their occupations, personal associations, and life choices made them middle-class. Jennifer Green’s essay studies the Jenkins brothers whose father was a wealthy planter on Edisto Island. She argues that birth order often influenced young men’s career choices and social standing. The oldest Jenkins brother inherited family property and became a planter. The second was university-trained as a physician; the third attended a military academy and then founded and ran a military school. Right before the Civil War, however, the youngest purchased land and slaves in order to become a planter, obviously yearning to move beyond his middle-class status.

As these essays show, this is an emerging field that deserves further research. One hopes that future work on the South's middle class will do more to consider free blacks who were part of a small but self-conscious cohort of professional men, such as William Johnson, a barber in Natchez. Many women fit into the middle-class—those who founded and ran female academies, authors and poets, women who owned millinery and clothing shops or ran small businesses, teachers, and governesses. Scholars have much work to do to better understand this social class whose occupations and values had a profound impact on the nineteenth-century South.

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