

### The Southern Exodus to Mexico: Migration Across the Borderlands After the American Civil War

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## Review

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**Wahlstrom, Todd W.** *The Southern Exodus to Mexico: Migration across the Borderlands after the American Civil War*. University of Nebraska Press, \$55.00  
ISBN 9780803246348

### Remaking Economic Fates in the Mexican Borderlands

In *The Southern Exodus to Mexico*, Todd W. Wahlstrom provides a nuanced, cogently argued, and well-researched story about the nearly five thousand former Confederates who migrated to Mexico following the Civil War. Most scholars acknowledge this flight, if only cursorily, as one taken by frustrated Confederates who refused to be reconstructed under Yankee rule. Most have focused on the better known leaders—former Confederate officers and politicians like Sterling Price, Joseph Shelby, Simon Bolivar Buckner, and Matthew Fontaine Maury. They helped lead the migration into Mexico in a self-proclaimed effort to avoid living under United States control but, as Wahlstrom shows, there was a lot more to it. The vast majority of fleeing Confederates had been small to middling-scale slave owners who hoped to regain a semblance of their former economic livelihoods in Mexico and elsewhere. Wahlstrom also admirably considers the post-war black migrations, and illuminates their movement into the Mexico borderlands. Wahlstrom's focus especially on southern migration into the northern Mexico borderlands, yet he draws broad and persuasive conclusions on the migration's hemispheric impact. Wahlstrom ultimately contends that although Confederate migration to Mexico and elsewhere proved to be relatively small-scaled and short-lived, it profoundly shaped the postwar South and its place in the world. Indeed, Wahlstrom convincingly argues, "Southern migration and colonization in Mexico . . . played a pivotal role in remolding and reshaping the South, the United States, and the Western Hemisphere in the post-Civil War era" (p. xxvii).

Aside from the better-known ex-Confederates who moved to Mexico primarily to avoid Yankee rule, most emigrants sought to take advantage of the

economic opportunities offered by the Mexican borderlands. Former Confederate slave owners tried to make a new start in the troubled country. It was in such a way, claims Wahlstrom, that the southern emigrants “attempted to break the boundaries of an increasingly hemmed-in southern economy and society” in the postwar period (p. 131). Further, Wahlstrom shows, coming to terms with the migration impulse and its underlying economic causes serves to reshape our understanding of Reconstruction, especially in terms of the heretofore standard narrative regarding southern regional dependence. Although the postwar period is certainly marked by an economically dependent New South, Wahlstrom’s work expands the narrative to show a portion of postwar southerners who fled such dependence.

Former white Confederates were not the only southerners to evacuate the postwar South. Indeed, Wahlstrom makes clear that black movement into the Mexican borderlands reflected yet another, and too often overlooked, contour of African American agency following emancipation. Former slaves moved into Mexico in a concerted effort to reshape their own social, economic, and geographic livelihood, mirroring future domestic and international movements that continued throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries. Much like their white counterparts, Wahlstrom shows, black migration into Mexico recast postwar emigration “along the lines of economic pursuit and upward mobility” (p. 46).

Although postwar southern emigration to Mexico was critically important to how the South and America dealt with the economic, social, and ideological aftermath of the Civil War, any significant southern permanence in Mexico (or Latin America generally) ultimately faltered. This happened for a variety of reasons, not the least of which had been the very “borderland” where many former Confederates hoped to settle. Neither local Mexicans nor Comanche Indians in the Texas-Coahuila borderlands—where a large portion of southern emigrants hoped to restart—favored an influx of southern white and black migrants. Locals and their Comanche counterparts hardly enforced national Mexican laws, and they together served to block any significant government influence that might have favored the newcomers. It is with this discussion that Wahlstrom clearly articulates the complex multi-cultural and multi-national milieu that ultimately “cracked,” as he says, the best hope for permanent southern emigration (p. 82).

This is an important book, and it deserves a place on reading lists for graduate seminars and Civil War enthusiasts alike. Indeed, not only does Wahlstrom add a great deal to the historiographical discussion in Civil War history, but his work also serves as a significant contribution to Southern, emancipation, and borderlands history.

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