

# Plain Folk's Fight: The Civil War & Reconstruction in Piney Woods Georgia

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## Review

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**Wetherington, Mark V.** *Plain Folk's Fight: The Civil War & Reconstruction in Piney Woods Georgia*. University of North Carolina Press, \$39.95 ISBN 807829633

Race Trumps Class

Flagging Support Undermines South

When Robert E. Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia in April of 1865, the Civil War for all intents and purposes ended. The Confederacy soon collapsed, and the United States began its long road toward regional reconciliation. Historians, however, have long debated why the South toppled so quickly. The Confederacy was about the same size as Western Europe, its primitive infrastructure frustrated invading armies, and its white population was overwhelmingly dedicated to the idea of independence. It, therefore, seems unlikely that this nation would have disintegrated so rapidly.

During the last half of the twentieth century, an outpouring of scholarship touched on the issue of the Confederate collapse and the reasons the South lost the Civil War. Currently, two competing schools of thought fuel this debate. The traditional view, popular at least through the 1960s, held that the Confederacy collapsed primarily because of external forces: massed Federal armies that penetrated its borders, factories and farms of the United States that rapidly out produced the South, and the Union navy that blockaded the Confederate coast and disrupted the sale of cotton needed to purchase supplies. This view has been challenged in recent decades by the notion that the Confederacy collapsed because of internal weaknesses such as its steadfast devotion to states' rights, class antagonisms, or the loss of morale among women.

Works such as Mark V. Wetherington's **Plain Folk's Fight: The Civil War and Reconstruction in Piney Woods Georgia** provide an opportunity to test assumptions about this debate. Yet, such a community study offers readers even

more than that; it offers a look at the rationale for going to war, who supported and who opposed the war and why, how the war changed race relations, gender roles, class relationships, and the community as a whole, and the ultimate effect of the war on a region and its people. In sum, if done correctly, such studies offer historians an invaluable opportunity to explore the major issues of the war in microcosm.

Thankfully, **Plain Folk's Fight** is done correctly. Indeed, this is regional history at its finest. Wetherington has produced a well-researched and well-written account of the people of the Piney Woods region of South Central Georgia during the cataclysm of secession, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. He rightly contends that the Piney Woods (or Wiregrass) region has been neglected in the study of the Civil War era and that without the story of this region, our perceptions of Georgia's war are incomplete. He focuses on Coffee, Irwin, Pulaski, Telfair, and Wilcox counties during the antebellum period. All five were economically and socially caught between the black belt plantations to the north and the rugged and marginal lands to the south. This was a region dominated by yeoman farmers. Historians have long debated why these families who owned few or no slaves fought for the Confederacy and at what point their loyalty to the new nation faded.

Although this was a region long opposed to the secession rhetoric of the large planters from elsewhere in Georgia and the South, this staunch unionism eroded as the inhabitants set aside class interests and listened to the call for unity expressed by Governor Joseph Brown. Brown's views on states' rights were entirely consistent with the plain folks' localist political ideology, which advocated a republican heritage of economic independence and personal liberty and the right of white men to determine local matters.

As Wetherington points out, by the election of 1860, race consciousness clearly outweighed class consciousness in the political culture of the plain folk. To them, slavery made all whites superior to blacks, and the republican principles of honor, liberty, and independence depended on racial domination. In the end, race trumped class.

The yeomen of the Piney Woods believed that slave holders could take their property into the new western territories, and they feared the consequences if expansion ceased to occur. The institution would be forced to expand into the southern interior, into their region where planters would buy all the good land.

Wetherington also demonstrates that the white yeomen were dedicated to Southern independence and slavery as a means to safeguard white supremacy. They feared a world without slavery where free blacks would move into their region to compete for limited economic resources. Preserving the institution preserved their world. By chronicling their debates and decision to secede, Wetherington's study shows that the future of slavery touched the lives of virtually all southern whites and that secession and the war was indeed a counterrevolution designed to protect, not alter, the status quo. The farmers and shop keepers of the Piney Woods went to war in true republican spirit to preserve the nation their forefathers had created. For these men, Lincoln, the Republicans, and the invading Yankee armies threatened the Revolutionary heritage bequeathed by the founders.

As to why and when that dedication to independence faded, Wetherington points to battle deaths, crippling wounds, shortages of basic goods, the eroding support of women who needed husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons at home to tend to the agricultural needs of the region, and, finally, the arrival of Federal forces. According to the author, while the insurmountable challenges of the last year of the war forced the local population to choose between fighting for Southern independence or attending to family needs, the local battle at Griswoldville brought the war home and demonstrated that the Confederacy was doomed.

According to Wetherington, the locals then turned their attention inwardly in an attempt to rebuild and preserve as much of their battered world as possible. As evidence of the return to localism following the battle of Griswoldville, the Pulaski County Inferior Court voted to keep Confederate tax-in-kind corn at home and distribute it to needy soldiers' families instead of forwarding it to the front. This action, along with increasing unionist sentiment and mounting desertion signaled that the war was over in the Piney Woods three months prior to Lee's surrender. Thanks to studies such as this, the impetus for the premature Confederate collapse becomes clear.

Thankfully, the author carries the story of the plain folk into the postwar period. He discovers that Reconstruction for the white population was, in reality, the same ongoing battle to preserve their traditional society and white supremacy. The inhabitants struggled throughout the late nineteenth century to preserve their old way of life, denouncing commercial agriculture and advocating the restoration of communal economy withdrawn from the market.

They railed against indebtedness to northerners, which they saw as a form of economic bondage. They feared the crop-lien system and used the Panic of 1873 as proof of the wisdom in continuing to grow food crops with white labor on family-owned land. However, the expansion of commercial cotton production and northern timber interests were destined to alter forever the world these people had fought so long and hard to preserve. Only in segregation did the plain folk have success as they struggled to keep blacks in an inferior caste.

Wetherington has produced a fine study of a region and its people struggling with a national calamity. His insights into just how this great tragedy affected the lives of individuals in the far corners of the South remind us of the complexity of the Civil War and the need to bring together the experiences of as many participants as possible if we are ever to understand completely the war and its implications.

This important monograph not only covers a slice of life for these men and their families and how the war affected them and their region, it also makes clear that Southern whites fought for myriad reasons. At the heart of their struggle, however, were the issues of racial superiority, the supremacy of local government, and a desire to maintain the status quo. The plain folk of the Piney Woods lost their fight, but their struggle reveals much about them and their world. Wetherington has done an excellent job of allowing us to view this world through the lives and words of those who were there.

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