

# Steamboats and the Rise of the Cotton Kingdom

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## Review

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**Gudmestad, Robert** *Steamboats and the Rise of the Cotton Kingdom*. Louisiana State University Press, \$42.50 ISBN 978-0-8071-3839-7

### King Cotton and the Transportation Revolution

This book is the first in-depth analysis of the relationship between the rise of southwestern steamboats and the cotton kingdom. Based on a wide array of primary research in government documents, court records, travelers accounts, antebellum newspapers, and manuscript collections, as well as existing work on the history of the region, Gudmestad's book is a sweeping account of the South's antebellum expansion. He argues that, while migrants would have come to the region without steamboats, their invention and subsequent embrace by riverboat entrepreneurs, merchants, and planters intensified and accelerated the economic development of the southern interior, reordering the landscape in the process. The book discusses the ultimate liability of this economy during the Civil War, when railroads would have been of more use to the Confederacy, but most of the analysis is spent exploring an under-examined element of southern antebellum capitalism.

*Steamboats and the Rise of the Cotton Kingdom* weaves together traditional river history topics with the broader history of the region. There are chapters on southern steamboat entrepreneurs and technology, steamboat labor, steamboat travel, Indian Removal, steamboat speed and safety (which includes an account of steamboat racing and explosions), transformations in riverboat landscapes, the growth of the Cotton Kingdom, and a final chapter on railroads and the decline of steamboat. Along the way, Gudmestad makes a compelling and often original case for the centrality of steamboats to economic development. For instance, Gudmestad relates the river economy to the deforestation of the South through analysis of the amount of wood burned on southern steamboats, and the ways in which the clearing of land for plantations was facilitated by this need for steam engine fuel. As forests became plantations, the speculative capitalism of

the steamboat economy also helped reorder minority peoples. The connection between the internal slave trade and steamboats has been previously well-documented, but Gudmestad analyses Indian Removal as also linked to steamboat travel. Thus he links African-American and Native American history in a larger narrative of dispossession and forced migration. In doing this he nicely stresses the exploitation and pain that accompanied the aspirations of southern businessmen.

One of the most refreshing elements of this book is the combination of qualitative and quantitative research. While Gudmestad conveys the now traditional cultural approach to understanding various impressions of historical change, he also demonstrates the impact of steamboats quantitatively. The book reveals important new statistics on such matters as the numbers of various Indian groups removed by steamboat, wood consumption by southern steamboats, and the costs of southern steamboats. Such statistics help sustain his argument regarding the importance of the steamboat economy in transforming the South with greater depth than would have been possible by impressionistic data alone. In this way his book can be seen as a southern update to Louis C. Hunter's data rich 1949 classic *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*.

By putting steamboats at the center of the story of southern expansion Gudmestad has made a significant contribution to southern and economic history. With graceful prose and helpful illustrations, the book deserves a wide readership.

*Tom Buchanan is Senior Lecturer at the University of Adelaide and is author of Black Life on the Mississippi: Slaves, Free Blacks and the Western Steamboat World.*