

### Becoming Bourgeois: Merchant Culture in the South, 1820-1865

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## Review

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**Byrne, Frank J.** *Becoming Bourgeois: Merchant Culture in the South, 1820-1865*. The University Press of Kentucky, \$50.00 hardcover ISBN 9780813124049

### Examining Southern Merchants

Perhaps no cliché in book reviewing is more tired than the one which announces that a book has filled a gap in the historiography. Yet Frank Byrne has genuinely performed this service, to our lasting benefit, with *Becoming Bourgeois*. Byrne, who teaches at the State University of New York at Oswego, breathes new life into the slim and aging historiography of merchants in the antebellum South. The book will not only be of interest to scholars of the Old South, but should also catch the eye of historians in the burgeoning field of the history of consumerism. Byrne pushes that field into an underexplored region and time period, and provides a great deal of information about the merchants with whom consumers had constant contact. For scholars of the Old South, Byrne raises serious questions about the nature of the antebellum southern economy, although his own conclusions do not push his evidence as far as it could go.

Byrne opens with an overview of the merchant population. He finds that merchants across the region were overwhelmingly natives of the South. Byrne details the struggles that merchants faced in not only securing funding for their stores but also in judging the creditworthiness of potential customers. The book then turns to merchants' place in southern society. Unsurprisingly, many merchants were Whigs, an interesting contrast given the fact that the stores themselves could be centers of gambling, fist-fights, and a host of other activities that presumably would have made Whigs squeamish. Byrne illustrates the complex interactions that took place in stores, as well as the repercussions that these events had on merchants as members of a community. In so doing, Byrne effectively creates a three-dimensional image of these merchants; they are not

simply economic actors. Sometimes Byrne's evidence calls out for additional analysis. Byrne notes that antebellum newspapers castigated merchants for avoiding hard labor, but the larger irony of that criticism—that slaves were performing the majority of the South's hard labor—goes unnoticed.

Byrne's fascinating chapter on the antebellum merchant family benefits from his mining a large number of personal papers to uncover material on diverse topics such as courtship, gender relations within marriage, and child-rearing. He also documents the relationships that merchants had with slaves—occasionally as owners but also as providers of goods on the sly. The final three chapters of the book chart the experience of merchants in the Civil War. Like their non-merchant neighbors, merchant families supported the Confederacy and sent their sons to war. Merchants did have to deal with mounting criticism as the war dragged on and their desire for profits clashed with the increasing privations on the home front. Merchants in any society at war doubtless have to battle accusations of war profiteering, but the antebellum jibes about merchants' presumed Yankee-ness quickly transitioned to questioning their level of patriotism. Byrne concludes with a look at the postbellum era, arguing that the talents merchants gained in the antebellum years positioned them to be masters in the New South (205).

As this brief synopsis makes clear, *Becoming Bourgeois* cuts a wide swath and covers an impressive range of topics. The book includes a useful appendix of tables that bolster Byrne's demographic claims. Byrne writes in clear, jargon-free prose and has chosen convincing evidence. His analysis is generally sound, although some readers, including this one, may question the utility of Byrne's declaration at the beginning of the book that merchants embraced the South but were not of the South (2). Indeed, it seems to me that Byrne is instead presenting us with a more complex portrait of the South than the historiography allows. Byrne ably demonstrates that southern merchants overwhelmingly hailed from southern states. They accepted slavery's role in southern society. They followed their region into war. Those that served in the army suffered with their fellow soldiers. The evidence Byrne has compiled from a broad array of manuscript collections suggests that these merchants and their families were not northern interlopers but were very much of the South. I wish Byrne had pushed this evidence a bit further. If so, he might not have so readily accepted the idea of planter hegemony, but rather argued that the merchants complicate our current understanding of the southern economy. To me, his evidence suggests that historians should take antebellum complaints about Yankee characteristics of

shopkeepers and merchants with a grain of salt. Focusing on such rhetoric obscures rather than illuminates the complexity of the antebellum southern economy. Byrne has shown that southern merchants played an important role in the Old South's economy; we now need to revise our conception of the economy to include them. Historians who take up this task will build, gratefully, on the solid foundation that Byrne has laid for them.

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