

Disunion, War, Defeat, and Recovery in Alabama: The Journal of Augustus Benners, 1850-1885

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Review

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A Life Spanning the Civil War Years

Augustus Benners was an extraordinary man of his time—not because he was a successful Alabama planter, lawyer, politician, and family man (for he was all of these). Benners was extraordinary because he kept a detailed diary of his activities and his ideas for more than thirty years. One of his descendants, John Westbrook, brought segments of this journal to his history professor, Glenn M. Linden, asking if the historian would be interested in editing the work. Linden and his wife Virginia agreed to take on the task of diving into the life of Augustus Benners. The result is this highly readable account of Benners's life and times.

In a brief introduction to the journal, Edward Countryman provides a glimpse into the importance of the work. He claims that Benners's value to history lay in the fact that he was neither a politician of national renown, nor was he merely a member of the southern plain folk. Instead, Benners was an important local and state politician, whose diary gives us access to ethos of this important period in American history. Moreover, according to Countryman, the journal "gives us the perspective of one man who enjoyed real privilege but not overwhelming wealth, who took part in major decisions but never wielded great power, and who witnessed destruction but was not himself destroyed" (3).

Born in North Carolina and a graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Benners left his native state in 1840 to accompany his brother to establish a law practice in Greensboro, Alabama. Over the next decade, Benners built the practice, married a local woman, Jane Hatch, and started a family. By 1850 Benners had established his life firmly, owning two plantations, enjoying

his family, and finding great success in his law practice. It is also with 1850 that Benners began his diary entries that would continue to his death in 1885 and make up the bulk of this book.

The diary divulges several themes in Benners's life. First and foremost, he was a diligent planter. His two plantations—Walker Place and Cheney Place—encompassed 715 acres. He owned more than eighty slaves and much of his attention in the diary focused on the business of agriculture and the management of his slaves. A typical entry from 1853 reads: "Visited the plantation on Tuesday morning and returned Wednesday. Found the hands at Walker Place gathering corn—the Pick room full of cotton. Lydia and Ellen sick. At Cheney Place found Smith sick . . . The rest of the hands were picking cotton" (32-33). Throughout the Civil War years, Benners continued a dogged focus on agrarian matters. In between commentaries on the state of the war, the economy, or his family, he still frequently made entries related to the status of his crops and slaves.

With Reconstruction, however, when it came to his agricultural endeavors, Benners had to face new challenges, as did all southern planters. The greatest difficulty, of course, was adapting to the post-emancipation labor situation. In May 1865, he wrote: "There is a great gloom hanging over the people by reason of the destruction of the labor system of the Country—no one know what to depend upon or what to do" (138). Within months, the Freedmen's Bureau had stepped in requiring contracts with former slaves. Benners expressed great frustration with the concept. In January 1866, he penned: "I have found that there is much perplexity and difficulty with planters about hiring hands. They are so faithless to their promises—contract to day and leave to morrow" (146). Nevertheless, Benners had one benefit not available to many other post-war planters—a separate source of income. His legal practice subsidized the lean years and allowed him to adapt to the new labor system and maintain his agricultural operations.

Beyond Benners's agrarian impulse, the diary also reveals quite a bit about state and local Alabama politics during this era. First elected to the state legislature in 1853, Benners relished his responsibility to represent his neighbors in government. In this capacity, he exhibited fiscal conservatism. For instance, he voted against a bill in 1854 designed to increase the building of railroads in the state by issuing state bonds to the public. His speech against the measure helped defeat the bill. He recorded: "The main reasons of my opposition to the

bill were that the State already involved with a large debt should not whilst it was so considerable incur additional liabilities" (35). This same protective ideology continued even into Benners's stint as a legislator during the Civil War. In October 1861, he helped defeat a bill designed to issue five million treasury notes to planters, which could then be accepted as payment of taxes. Benners railed that such an action would "deplete the treasury . . . Destroy the credit of Alabama and it would produce jealousies and heart burnings against the class who were singled out for State relief—and it would ruin the currency of the banks—and of the Confederate States" (72). Even after the Civil War, Benners reentered politics as a member of the Democratic and Conservative Party. He attended the Alabama Constitutional Convention in 1875, and most interestingly, he testified in Washington D.C. before a Senate committee in 1877 in the disputed Hayes-Tilden presidential election.

Benners also paid close attention to national events, penning his thoughts and opinions frequently. In 1856 he noted about the presidential election that "the South dreading the possible success of J. C. Frémont who is the candidate of the Black republicans" (41). During the Civil War, he kept up with battle reports from far-off places, taking keen interest in those involving local soldiers. For instance, in 1863 he wrote: "Gen Lee gained a victory at Chancellorsville last Sunday and on next day attacked them near Fredericksburg and drove them across the Rappahannock—John Corwin was killed and a number of our company wounded & taken prisoners" (101). After the war these commentaries continued, with both state and national issues being fodder for his writing.

Despite all of the successes Benners achieved, he was not immune to heartbreak. Of the twelve children born to the Benners family, only seven survived to adulthood. In 1853, his three-year-old son, Gus, died of "croup." When the doctor told Benners there was no hope for the sick child, Benners wrote, "oh how my heart chilled as I was told again and again there was *no change* in him—my poor little boy gasped on. . . ." The boy died early in the morning, and Benners lamented: "His smart little prattle will no more gladden my heart on earth never again and his fat little feet paddle out to meet his pa and give him a hug and a kiss" (34). Benners poured out similar emotions with the deaths of other children and family members. In 1881 his wife of more than thirty years died while on a trip to Texas. Benners grieved this loss for the rest of his life. He wrote about the shock of losing his life-long companion. "I cannot realise the awful truth—a monstrous void seems around me and if my mind gets off & dwells on another thought it soon returns and my desolation is awfully

present" (291).

Benners would follow his wife to the grave only four years later. His final entry, written on the day of his death—August 7, 1885—provides a microcosm of the interests of a lifetime. He mentions difficulties with his stomach, but then spends most of the entry relating time with family and friends. But even in this seemingly mundane entry, Benners closed with updates on news of the death of former president U.S. Grant and on news of the wider world: “Grants corpse reached New York and is lying in state at City Hall. Cholera is very bad in Spain & in France” (339).

Expertly edited, the journal will appeal to both popular audiences and scholars of the middle period of nineteenth-century American history—especially those interested in Alabama and Southern history. The editors have included a thorough narrative of the life of Augustus Benners and his family, and they have also provided a helpful description of Greensboro, Alabama, during the time Benners lived there. Most impressive, however, are the helpful editorial comments throughout the work, explaining and providing context for Benners’s entries. When grouped with thorough explanatory and source footnotes, as well as a solid index, this work serves as a model for how good primary source editing can be done.

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