

# Railroads in the Old South: Pursuing Progress in a Slave Society

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## Review

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**Marrs, Aaron W.** *Railroads in the Old South: Pursuing Progress in a Slave Society*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, \$55.00 ISBN 9780801891304

### The Influence of Railroads on Southern Society

Given the vast scholarship on antebellum railroads, is there really a need for another book on this topic, particularly one largely focused on just the South? Aaron W. Marrs believes there is, especially one that “can help illustrate the tension between the modern goals of antebellum slaveholders and their determination to achieve those goals while retaining and even bolstering their conservative social order” (8). Marrs identifies four themes critical to understanding antebellum southern railroads—the degree to which the southern experience paralleled that of the North, the role played by slavery, the impact of community relations, and how southern railroads and southerners were shaped by the regional sense of time.

The one topic pervading the book is how the history of railroads in the antebellum South largely duplicated that in the North. Indeed, the book continuously describes one aspect after another of southern railroads and then Marrs inserts a brief discussion of similar circumstances in the North. For example, in Chapter 1 Marrs explains that if southern railroad companies faced difficulties obtaining rights of way when constructing their lines, so did northern companies. Chapter 2, which provides a fascinating discussion of the role of engineers and contractors in the construction of southern railroads, concludes by stressing that the problems of construction were not unique to the South as northern contractors “were also capable of mismanagement and falling into bankruptcy” (44). Even in Chapter 3, which focuses on the role of labor and does a superb job of delineating the role slavery played in southern railroad construction, Marrs concedes that slavery surely was unique to antebellum southern railroads, but also emphasizes that historians have tended to undercount the importance of white laborers to southern railroads and to ignore how there

were free labor disputes in the South just as in the North. The book's subsequent chapters continue to trace the parallel problems southern and northern lines encountered. Most notable is how, like in the North, southern railroads had to cope with sabbatarians' concerns that the railroads' need to function on Sunday conflicted with community standards while these companies concurrently negotiated with the federal government which expected their lines to run so predictably and continuously in order to insure on-time mail delivery.

By far one of the book's most intriguing topics, examined in Chapter 6 entitled "Passages," concerns how southern railroad passengers perceived time. Marrs notes that "southerners possessed a 'railroad mentality' in advance of the railroad's arrival" (146). He cites many examples of how southerners recorded time as a critical issue of their travel "sometimes to the exclusion of other details about the trip" (147).

Marrs' study is heavily grounded in primary sources. Most significant is his analysis of company minute books and reports to determine how much of southern railroad revenue came from upfreight service. Rather than accepting the traditional notion that southern lines only succeeded on the earnings gained by shipping such staples as cotton from the plantations to the market, he provides convincing evidence that the wide variety of consumer goods that were being transported into the southern interior accounted for substantial share of their freight income.

If this work has a major shortcoming it would be that it does not cover any of the war years. However, that would be too much to ask for and more importantly, Marrs has given Civil War scholars some critical issues to consider when they evaluate the conflict's impact on railroads and the railroad's impact on the conflict.

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