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Family Values in the Old South

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Thompson Friend, Craig (ed.) and Jabour, Anya (ed.). *Family Values in the Old South*. University Press of Florida, \$69.95 ISBN 978-0-8130-3418-8

Proving the Importance of Family

Popular culture often portrays family values as fixed prescriptions of gender roles, familial relations, and domestic serenity. Yet, as historians demonstrate, the reality of family life rarely matched the rhetorical imagery. Craig Thompson Friend and Anya Jabour offer a lively examination of the ideas of family values versus the real life experiences of families in the context of the Old South. The diverse collection of essays collected from historians engaged in family studies brings into high relief how values, in reality, were “in a constant state of flux” (2). Family structures in the region at times defied traditional values that lauded the nuclear circle and rigidly defined roles for men and women within it. Slavery, in particular, set family values in the region apart from other areas of the nation as patriarchal power and the paternalistic ethos that structured master/slave relations were closely tied to the maintenance of the household and its dependents. Drawing from new areas of research on topics such as orphanages, same-sex households, and public houses, just to name a few, Friend and Jabour bring to light the divergent values produced by varying political, economic, and social forces in the Old South.

Organized in three thematic sections, the essayists address the nature of family life and reinforce the assertion that values in the region were more fluid than fixed. The first part debunks the notion that southern families lived solely in a traditional situation by exploring how modernity also entered into the domestic circle. Nancy Zey’s essay on orphan asylums demonstrates how family values existed in such institutions absent of kinship ties. Children and the “civic mothers” who cared for them created relationships that mirrored typical nuclear households (24). These asylums, however, went beyond merely sheltering indigent children to provide civic and religious instruction. From diet and dress

to daily activities, female caretakers sought to shape children into model citizens. Children themselves accepted the sentimentalized view of family and welcomed the maternal roles played by the female staff.

The role of cross-plantation unions explored in Emily West's study of South Carolina challenges readers to rethink the sources of power for enslaved men and women. The risk of great physical injury to escape to see their wives allowed husbands to assert a sense of masculinity while visits to the home afforded them opportunities to provide material and emotional support for their families. Separation in cross-plantation unions, moreover, helped prepare enslaved individuals for the pain that accompanied the sale of a loved one. Friend's essay on the mourning rituals of slaveholding families illustrates the devastating effects that the death of a child had on mothers and fathers. Going against popular ideas that a child's death was a sentimentalized event in the plantation households, the author explores how parents navigated through great "guilt, confusion, and frustration at their helplessness" as their child faced uncertain death (63).

A particularly innovative approach to family life is found in the section's final essay. Anya Jabour posits that same-sex households comprised of women was widely accepted in the Old South as it posed little challenge to patriarchal power and heterosexual social standards while providing southern females with an alternative to marriage and the dangers of childbirth. Taken together these essays encourage readers to think beyond the romanticized ideal of the nuclear family to include situations in which southerners created and maintained familial bonds that provided comfort in a constantly changing and challenging world.

The second part of the anthology situates the home within the context of the southern economy, exploring its various economic functions. Lynn Kennedy looks at the practice of sewing and its economic and social meaning in regard to slaveholding households. She posits that, while it provided much needed clothing for dependents, both black and white, sewing also shaped female relations, whether between female slaves and their mistresses or mothers and daughters. As a traditionally female-centered activity, sewing likewise became an important symbol of social status and female respectability.

In "A Family Firm," Nikki Berg Brown examines the business relations between husbands and wives in the plantation economy and the adverse consequences it had on the marriage of Ann and Richard Archer. Richard relied

on Ann to manage his vast plantation and its labor force as he spent months away from the home attending to business and political obligations. Such a business arrangement involved mutual trust and dependency that produced, as Brown argues, a more egalitarian relationship for Ann and Richard. Yet his constant absences left the marriage strained as both dealt with the accompanying frustrations, loneliness, and, at times, depression produced by such situations.

The household, as Kristen E. Wood demonstrates, could also serve as a place of public business that threw the private doors of the home open to public scrutiny and permitted women, through their domestic labor, a greater level of economic power. Using traveler accounts from patrons of southern boardinghouses, taverns, and inns, Wood argues that public houses “complicated domestic authority” by requiring a restructuring of labor within the home to serve travelers to their satisfaction (169). By the end of this section, one must reconsider how the home and the men, women, and children within it contributed to and was shaped by the economic needs of southern society.

Family values also shaped the very public world of southern politics and courts, as the final section brings to light. Andrew K. Frank’s study involves the story of George Stinson, a store proprietor who married into a Creek Indian family. Stinson found himself in court when it was discovered that he was running an illegal store. As trial records indicated, his family ties to a powerful clan in Creek Country shielded him, at least for awhile, from punishment. The economic and diplomatic forces brought on by the growing movement to remove the Native Americans of the Southeast, however, eventually undermined his efforts to protect his business.

Values concerning the proper southern family pervaded the region’s legal system in other ways, as Kevin Noble Maillard reveals in his essay on inheritance practices in Charleston, South Carolina. Racially-mixed relations between free women of color and white males complicated the legal process of settling wills. In a culture that privileged white over black, those women seeking to receive assistance after their loved ones death faced an uphill battle in trying to extract some economic support as white family members challenged their claims in the courts.

The electric culture of party politics in the Old South also reached into the tranquil world of families. Christopher J. Olsen, in his study of white Mississippi families of the upper socioeconomic class, contends that kinship ties helped to

shape political culture by providing powerful associations among politicians and their constituents. Political leadership, moreover, contributed to the economic and social identities of powerful southern families.

The engaging essays in *Family Values in the Old South* inspire readers to think critically about traditional notions of family, domesticity, and gender that, in many ways, still exist today. While southerners sought to emulate the social prescriptions that sentimentalized the domestic circle and reinforced rigidly defined roles for men, women, and children, they, at times, reconceptualized the meaning of family and roles within it to meet the shifting cultural context of the Old South. At the heart of this anthology is the connectivity between the public world of politics, economy, and law and the private realm of home and family relations.

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