

Industrial Development and Manufacturing in the Antebellum Gulf South: A Reevaluation

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Review

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Frawley, Michael S. *Industrial Development and Manufacturing in the Antebellum Gulf South: A Reevaluation*. Louisiana State University Press, 2019 \$45.00 ISBN 9780807170687

Michael S. Frawley is asking us to do some fresh thinking about the late antebellum economy of the Gulf South. His focus is on three states, Alabama, Mississippi, and Texas, that formed the heart of the Old South's Cotton Kingdom. His claim is that both contemporary observers (think principally Frederick Law Olmstead) and modern historians (think principally Fred Bateman and Thomas J. Weiss) have seriously underestimated the importance of manufacturing in this trio of slave states.

To prove his point, he has plowed through an astonishing array of sources, beginning with the manuscript 1860 United States Census of Manufacturing. He convincingly argues, however, that census data is an inadequate measure of the extent of manufacturing establishments in these Gulf states. Too many concerns were simply overlooked. So he has turned to the extensive R. G. Dun credit reports, to city directories, to newspapers, to contemporary journals, and to local histories to compile a more complete roster of manufacturing concerns. The results are striking. "The census marshals...missed almost 20 percent of the firms in Alabama, Mississippi, and Texas," he discovered (p. 128).

Frawley's second step was to plug his data into Geographical Information System software to build an extensive series of very valuable maps. These show the location of manufacturing sites and reveal their relationship to each other and to natural resources, markets, and transportation systems (there are *a lot* of maps in this slender volume, and the LSU Press deserves credit for giving the author permission to include such a large number).

Admittedly, most of these manufacturing concerns were small, were owned by individuals (as opposed to partnerships or companies), and served primarily local markets:

blacksmith and machinist shops, shoe and harness makers, lumber and grist mills, carriage and wagon makers, and the like. But their numbers added up. The South did indeed have industry before the Civil War, he insists, and planters were willing to divert some of their capital to manufacturing enterprises and employ both free and slave labor to keep these facilities in operation.

Frawley is careful to avoid claiming too much for his thesis that the extent of antebellum manufacturing in this region has been underestimated. “Southern industry lagged far behind northern in 1860,” he readily admits. “The concerns missed by the census marshals, when added to the census totals, did not put the South on a par with the North,” and yet these two “regions were more alike...than one would expect” (p. 128). The fundamental difference, of course, was the South’s embrace of the institution of slavery.

Slavery made all the difference, in ways both large and small. Enslaved workers made the antebellum South an agricultural leviathan and gave the region its comparative economic advantage vis a vis the free labor North and, indeed, much of the rest of the world. Why divert very much capital to manufacturing when there was so much money to be made growing cotton? Southern Upland was the standard of the world, and the lords of the loom in both Europe and the northern United States could not get enough of the stuff, as the record 1860 crop of 4 million bales suggested.

Slavery also carried some handicaps onto the shop floor, an area that is largely beyond the scope of this valuable study. Industrial slavery invariably operated on a task basis, with payments in cash or goods for the slave artisans’ “overwork,” and this method of motivating unfree workers had some serious side effects. Once a manufacturing system using slave labor was up and running successfully, the white operators put a premium on stability, on established routines, of doing things the same way, over and over again. Technological innovation took a back seat to keeping the old order functioning. The southern iron industry, for example, lagged far behind the North in matters of basic technology, and this had nothing to do with the impressive level of skill possessed by slave ironworkers; it had everything to do with white managers’ reluctance to alter manufacturing processes once slave artisans were turning out a satisfactory product. Again, this is not the author’s story, but this conservative industrial bias would cost the South deeply once secession triggered mortal combat with the North.

The comments immediately above are in no way intended to suggest that this book is not a tremendously solid and welcome study. Michael Frawley has earned the subtitle of his book: “A Reevaluation.” There was indeed more industrial activity in the antebellum Gulf South than we have previously known, and it took the efforts of a highly skilled researcher and a gifted historian to tease this story out of his myriad sources. He has added some critical balance to our understanding of what the economy of the Cotton Kingdom looked like. But it was still, as he notes, the *Cotton Kingdom*, with all that designation implies. “The Gulf South was an agrarian golconda,” he writes in conclusion, but he rightly insists that “built upon that same landscape were industrial firms” (p. 129). And what was there was far in excess of what observers from Olmstead to Bateman and Weiss have acknowledged.

Charles B. Dew is Ephraim Williams Professor of American History at Williams College. His books include Ironmaker to the Confederacy: Joseph R. Anderson and the Tredegar Iron Works (1966; revised ed., 1999), Bond of Iron: Master and Slave at Buffalo Forge (1994), and The Making of a Racist: A Southerner Reflects on Family, History, and the Slave Trade (2016).