

Robert B. Outland, III. *Tapping the Pines: The Naval Stores Industry in the American South.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004. xii + 352 pp. \$47.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-2981-4.



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Out of the Woods

When next you see Robert Outland, thank him for writing a first-rate history of an obscure area of the Southern economy. And pat him on the back for composing it with style and grace. For three centuries—from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-twentieth—naval stores was an important sector of the Southern economy, yet it is probably the least understood of all Southern staples. Indeed, many historians have only a vague idea of what naval stores are and how they were collected, processed, and consumed. Perhaps it is easier to understand cotton, rice, or tobacco because these are field crops, and their uses are still familiar. Naval stores straddled agriculture and industry—neither purely one nor the other—and their applications have largely disappeared (pp. 4-5).

Outland's treatment of naval stores is comprehensive in several ways. First, the chronology is complete, covering the topic from the colonial period through the 1950s. Second, the breadth of his treatment goes beyond routine economic analysis to address important social and environmental dimensions. The research is comprehensive as well, drawing on an impressive list of monographs, articles, newspapers, business records, government doc-

uments, and manuscript collections.

Pine trees, especially the longleaf and loblolly, secrete sap that can be rendered into tar, pitch, turpentine, and rosin. The first two have excellent waterproofing and preservative qualities, and were applied to the hulls and cordage of wooden sailing vessels (pp. 5-6). In the age of sail, naval stores were strategic commodities. As a maritime nation, Britain sought a dependable source of naval stores safe from the disruptions of war. Moreover, having a source within the empire appealed to the mercantilist sentiments of the period. Thus Britain encouraged naval stores production in North America to replace supplies formerly purchased from Scandinavia (pp. 8-11).

Although several colonies produced naval stores, North Carolina soon emerged as the leading source of tar, pitch, turpentine, and rosin. Outland explains that North Carolina was well suited to produce naval stores and ill-suited to produce anything else. It had the raw material in abundance and adequate water transportation to support the trade. What North Carolina lacked was an alternative crop. While South Carolina and Georgia grew rice and sea island cotton, "North Carolinians

lacked any other staple they could produce profitably" (p. 35). Thus North Carolina became the Tar Heel State by default. Even after the invention of the cotton gin, rising demand for turpentine in industrial applications secured naval stores as a viable alternative to upland cotton (p. 37).

Of particular interest are Outland's chapters on labor. Basically, three classes worked the pine forests: poor whites, who often squatted on the property of others; yeomen, who worked small forest holdings to supplement their agricultural incomes; and planters, who invested in large expanses of pines and sent dozens of slaves to toil in them. These large, slave-based operations accounted for the vast majority of production. Life in the piney woods was hard. Indeed, one manager described the work routine as "severe to a degree almost impossible to exaggerate" (p. 163). Each slave was assigned an area of trees to tend. Although slaves generally preferred the task system common to naval stores, they missed the social interaction with other slaves that could ameliorate the drudgery of their labor. Outland concludes that material conditions for naval stores slaves "were comparably worse than those of bondsmen in agriculture" (p. 85).

Emancipation brought little change in living and working conditions to the piney woods. Predictably, free laborers were hard to attract and retain (p. 163). Employers often used cash advances and store credits to bind workers into debt peonage. Several states encouraged the practice through legislation that turned the debtor into a virtual slave, and law enforcement often cooperated with producers to keep workers in peonage (pp. 168-171, 239). Perhaps the most shameful labor practice in this or any industry was convict leasing. The brutal work routine and savage punishments accorded many prisoners were tantamount to a death sentence (pp. 176-180). Naval stores were as destructive of forests as they were of people. Outland describes collection practices as "suicidal," as trees died from prolonged turpentine and of-

ten failed to reproduce themselves (pp. 98-99). Producers typically worked an area to exhaustion, then moved their laborers and equipment to new areas. Thus naval stores eventually laid waste to areas of South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, and Alabama as well (p. 111).

The naval stores industry, little changed since colonial times, began to face serious challenges in the early-twentieth century (pp. 122-123, 280). Dwindling supplies of pitch pine, rising labor costs, and improved methods of extracting the commodities undermined the traditional piney woods culture (p. 156). Greater employment opportunities for blacks and poor whites dried up the labor pool. By the 1950s, the naval stores industry had passed from the scene.

Clearly, this is the best history of naval stores yet written. Indeed, it will likely become the standard work on the subject. That said, I shall offer a few modest suggestions. More maps are needed, especially in the early chapters (the first appears on p. 113). As much of the discussion focuses on eastern North Carolina, a map identifying the counties, rivers, and ports would aid readers. Also, an anatomical drawing of the pine, perhaps in cross-section, would enlighten verbal descriptions of complex botanical processes. Tracking price movements over time requires that values be corrected for inflation and deflation. For example, figure 9.1, a graph of weekly wages for the period 1924-40, would not appear as dramatic if indexed to a constant dollar (p. 284). Moreover, the volume needs a fuller discussion of the impact on the industry wrought by changes in naval architecture. As more ships were built of iron and powered by steam or petroleum, demand for preservatives of wood and cordage declined. How did this effect prices? Product mix?

Despite these minor issues, *Tapping the Pines* is an excellent treatment of an important subject and deserves inclusion in any collection of Southern economic or labor history.

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