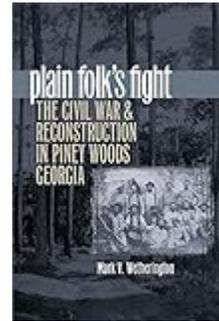




**Mark V. Wetherington.** *Plain Folk's Fight: The Civil War and Reconstruction in Piney Woods Georgia.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. i + 383 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2963-9.



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## The Life and Death of *Plain Folk* in Georgia's Piney Woods

Georgia farmer James Fraser joined the Confederate Army during the first exciting weeks of the Civil War. He served zealously in the 8th Georgia until the summer of 1862 when a particularly severe battle cost his regiment seventy-six casualties and Fraser his right leg. Forced to return to his home in south central Georgia, Fraser no longer had to contend with Yankees on the battlefield, but with life as an invalid in a yeoman society. A burden to family and friends, he spent the rest of his years teaching some school and expressing his bitterness. A tyrant to his family, by 1875 authorities charged him with the murder of a man who had the temerity to take care of Fraser's stepchildren. Clearly, resentment over his injury, combined with a feeling that his neighbors did not honor his wartime service, had made Fraser an "intensely angry and violent man" (p. 236). Though many soldiers experienced a less traumatic homecoming in the piney woods of Georgia, Mark V. Wetherington's fine study *Plain Folk's Fight* is at its best when it examines the culture and ideology of men and women like James Fraser.

*Plain Folk's Fight* explores in a sophisticated manner such broad issues as nationalism, race and gender rela-

tions, and economic change through what now is a rather traditional approach—regional social history. The "wire-grass country" or piney woods section of Georgia, defined by Wetherington as the lower Ocmulgee River region below Macon, offers a useful case study for such an analysis because it has been overlooked by historians and, as an area dominated by yeoman farmers, offers clues about the lives of more typical white Georgians who supported the Confederacy and helped bring Reconstruction to an end. After reading virtually every primary source available on the region, Wetherington emphasizes that the society these white plain folk created was complex. Though few owned slaves and many even resented the influence of the planter class, their "race consciousness" led them to support the planter class in war and peace (p. 2). This support for slavery fit neatly within an ideology that prized overlapping commitments to economic independence, honor, and, above all, manhood. Influenced by the work of Steven Hahn, Stephanie McCurry, and Stephen Ash, Wetherington's conclusions downplay the significance of class divisions in the Georgia piney woods. Rather, the men, and sometimes the women, of the plain folk are described as historical agents

beholden to no single group, be they planters, politicians, or Yankees, but consumed with protecting their privileges as white citizens in a yeoman society. This collective struggle led them to support the Confederacy and fight to overthrow Reconstruction, but, as Wetherington concludes, their effort left an ambiguous legacy in a post-war South where economic change, rather than any political revolution, mattered most.

Wetherington's study follows a rough chronological organization. The early chapters detail the settlement of the piney woods by white settlers in the early nineteenth century. This analysis of the religious, economic, and cultural lives of these farm families highlights their consuming drive for independence that is often reflected in their apparent alienation from the planter class that dominated the black belt counties surrounding the piney woods. Indeed as Wetherington's thorough research makes clear, planters dominated most of the counties *within* this presumed yeoman land. Often marginalized culturally and embattled economically, the sense of honor and masculinity (i.e., patriarchy) that bound the men in these plain folk families together often led them to defer to their planter neighbors. Thus it is no surprise when Wetherington concludes that what united yeoman secessionists during the tumult of 1861 "was not a fear of planter power in the South ... but their overriding fears of Yankee domination, Southern submission, and what this meant to their concept of honor and masculinity" (p. 70).

Several chapters on the war years reveal the impressive support most men and women in plain folk families gave the Confederacy. Increasing casualties on the battlefields of Virginia and material want at home did not significantly undercut this commitment until 1864. It was in that year that Sherman's invasion and several particularly bloody engagements involving piney woods men, along with other factors, sapped the collective will of these patriotic confederates in south central Georgia. At the same time, the divisions in piney woods Georgia that occasionally surfaced before the war, some economic and others political, erupted violently. Rather than lose all fighting a futile war, plain folk attempted to save their economic and political independence by recommitting themselves to an ethic of economic and political localism that reflected the marginalization they had felt before the war.

Wetherington's analysis of piney woods Georgia during Reconstruction is quite effective. In several powerful passages he illustrates the devastating toll the war had on white families. As always, women and children in partic-

ular seem to have suffered most by the death or injuries war inflicted upon these families. In general those living within the white belt region of the wiregrass maintained their economic independence better than most plain folk in the area's black belt. Wetherington attributes this relative success to the yeoman farmers' dedication to "self-sufficiency and republican simplicity" that kept them out of a tempestuous market economy (p. 246). While negotiating between a traditional "moral economy" and an expanding market economy, most of these same plain folk sought the overthrow of Reconstruction. Adopting violent tactics against the freedmen and their allies in their defense of white patriarchy, piney woods plain folk successfully challenged the legitimacy of Georgia's Reconstruction government. According to Wetherington, however, their victory proved short-lived. For even as ex-Confederate soldiers rallied to defeat the cause of the freedmen, they themselves were losing control of their land to northern lumber companies. Assisted by New South businessmen, the Georgia Land and Lumber Company, incorporated in New York, purchased "dubious" titles to over 300,000 acres of pineland in the wiregrass region. Though protested by an ever dwindling number of yeoman farmers, "rangeland disappeared, cotton production expanded, and white tenancy increased" (p. 305).

*Plain Folk's Fight* is a gracefully written, scholarly work that will appeal to specialists as well as casual readers of southern or Civil War history. Wetherington's exemplary research in the primary material and interesting use of secondary sources should commend his study to graduate students in particular. Of course, not every argument in *Plain Folk's War* is entirely convincing. For example, Wetherington's analysis of white patriarchy seems to discount the impact of class conflict too often. This becomes something of a problem for him in his description of the piney woods during 1864-65 when divisions within the white community seem to have been ubiquitous. Additionally, the nature of the moral economy that Wetherington's contends plain folk fought to protect is somewhat vague. What was the extent of market penetration before the Civil War? Did traditional agrarian principles or their own economic marginalization lead white belt farmers to reject the expanding commercial market? Evidence regarding the presence of merchants, tradesmen, and planters suggests that many in the piney woods embraced commerce. These and other questions do not diminish the important contribution *Plain Folk's Fight* makes to our understanding of southern history. This is an insightful work that deserves close attention.

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