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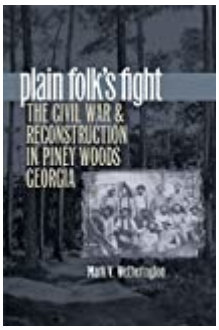

Mark V. Wetherington. *Plain Folk's Fight: The Civil War and Reconstruction in Piney Woods Georgia.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. i + 383 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2963-9.

Reviewed by Timothy Jenness (Department of History, University of Tennessee)

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Fighting Georgian Farmers

Over the last forty years Civil War scholarship has demonstrated conclusively that neither the North nor the South was unified. Analysis that considers class, gender, and race is now a staple of the scholarly debate and has enriched our understanding of American history. Despite these needed historiographic adjustments, historians have sometimes remained transfixed on the role of elites; those white men who voted, determined political and economic policy, dominated their households, and fought. To an extent, such a bias is understandable given that elites left an extensive trail of written documents from which scholars have gleaned considerable information. Yet, this approach overlooks the masses of common people–the plain folk–who made profound contributions to Northern and Southern society. Scholars such as Bell Wiley, Frank Owsley, Steven Hahn, and I. A. Newby, for instance, have contributed significantly to our understanding of the southern yeomanry in the nineteenth century. In his *Plain Folk's Fight: The Civil War and Reconstruction in Piney Woods Georgia*, Mark Wetherington builds on their contributions by presenting an authoritative analysis of one remote section of rural Georgia.

Culling a variety of regional sources such as diaries, personal papers, and court records, Wetherington analyzes both the poorer yeomen, who comprised the majority of citizens living in the piney woods region of southern Georgia, and their wealthier planter neighbors who lived along the Ocmulgee River. Plain folk–defined as white farmers who worked less than 150 acres and owned fewer than 10 slaves according to Wetherington–inhabited a rural wooded area northwest of the Okefenokee Swamp and outside the more fertile lands of Georgia's black belt. How and why, Wetherington asks, did these plain folk come to support planter-led secession when they appeared to have little in common with their wealthier neighbors? How did they respond to the hardships of war once Georgia committed itself to the Confederate cause? And, how did the Confederacy's plain folk veterans deal with the changes that had occurred after they returned home in 1865?

In answering these important questions, Wetherington contends that the plain folk's localism and independent traditions influenced their behavior. "Rather than blindly follow the dictates of class consciousness

or the planter elite," he writes, "a majority of the plain folk chose to secede from the Union, support the Confederacy, and fight again in the postwar era for what they determined to be their own self-interest" (p. vii). According to Wetherington, piney woods plain folk responded to secession, war, and reconstruction in a manner that reflected their understanding of their place in Georgian society. For these poorer white farmers, race consciousness was more important than class consciousness (p. 66). Black belt slave majorities surrounded the piney woods, yet these yeomen saw their lives as distinct from the lives of masters and slaves around them. Concerned about their homes and families, plain folk "feared the consequences of a Republican president and possible black emancipation, which would free former slaves to move into subsistence areas like the piney woods" (p. 2). Plain folk supported secession to defend their families, homes, and notions of white liberty. Once the war began, the piney woods failed to become "a home front of white women and slaves where household authority was fundamentally altered." Instead, contrary to what earlier scholarship has suggested, the established patriarchy continued to control the home front and kept it functioning even though "growing numbers of plain folk joined the new wartime poor" (p. 3).

In a nuanced discussion of how plain folk viewed themselves, Wetherington suggests that their localism and racism dovetailed nicely with a republican ideology founded on Jeffersonian notions of an "economically independent yeomanry sharing common interests" (p. 12). They raised a variety of subsistence crops, dabbled in the raising of cotton, and relied on a free and open livestock range to supplement their way of life. Plain folk and planters often negotiated the use of land that both valued for the raising of crops, the cutting of timber, and the grazing of livestock. Throughout these interactions, yeomen and planters found themselves bound by race. Wetherington contends that despite this symbiotic relationship, the plain folk wanted to participate in the market and live on their own terms. While they increased their presence in the cotton and slave markets, plain folk remained "unwilling to jeopardize their self-sufficiency and the stability of their neighborhoods for the economic interests of planters" (p. 41).

Wetherington contends that plain folk soldiers had their own reasons for fighting. First and foremost, they sought to protect hearth and home from Yankee threats. For Georgia Governor Joseph Brown, "white supremacy and masculinity depended on black enslavement" which black Republicanism threatened (p. 84). Plain folk concepts of masculinity also helped to explain why so many able-bodied men joined the army–they had to in order to be "worthy of the privileges of men, including the affections of female patriots" (p. 145). In the raising of regiments, plain folk generally deferred to planter leadership much like they did politically during the antebellum era. For Wetherington, this show of apparent unity implies that traditional economic tensions that had existed before the war were mitigated by wartime necessity. Interestingly, by March 1862, the piney woods region had a 60 percent enlistment rate of eligible white males. This rate of mobilization, he points out, was comparable to that found in wealthier black belt communities. Wetherington concludes that planter fears that the plain folk in the region would not support the Confederate war effort were misplaced.

As the war dragged on, hardship became a way of life for piney woods residents. According to Wetherington, enough white men remained home to "preserve the paternalistic social order," yet there were too few to prevent mounting deprivation, particularly among the plain folk (p. 149). Increasingly, planters and plain folk shared concerns about keeping the black population in line while white males were off fighting. The author contends that wartime shortages increased the economic divide between planters and yeoman farmers, particularly in the white belt backwoods areas. Nevertheless, some planters took seriously their paternalistic obligations by selling their corn at the established Confederate rate "out of a spirit of patriotism," rather than taking advantage of the plain folk's economic plight (p. 171). While speculation did exist, Wetherington's argument weakens other scholars' claims that class conflict led to Confederate defeat.

As 1864 progressed, writes Wetherington, piney woods denizens found themselves surrounded by the enemy "as the battlefront and home front merged" (p. 201). Localism predominated as plain folk rallied to a defense of their immediate homes and families. Divisions that had existed in 1861, between the secessionist black belt neighborhoods along the Ocmulgee River and the cooperationist white belt neighborhoods away from the river, reappeared late in the war. Yet, despite the fact that in portions of the latter neighborhoods Unionism reasserted itself, Wetherington insists that the willingness of piney woods folks to form local militias demonstrated that Confederate nationalism remained alive. Plain folk continued to fear subservience to the Yankees if the Confederacy lost the war. In other portions of the region, Wetherington admits, privation and hardship had increased so

dramatically that by early 1865 even strongly secessionist Wilcox County was overwhelmed by the burdens created by four years of war. The county's prewar localism reemerged to replace Confederate nationalism. By the end of the war, the piney woods emerged as a divided region. Unrepentant rebels faced off against anti-Confederates whose disaffection had increased with wartime privation.

With the end of the war, writes Wetherington, plain folk veterans returned home wounded both physically and psychologically, often unable to take care of their family's immediate needs. He argues that "the ability to do farmwork and produce what was required to make a family economically independent" remained central to the plain folk veterans' sense of who they were as honorable men (p. 235). Plain folk soldiers believed that their failure to protect their families during the war could be overcome by providing for them after the war. This, says Wetherington, was part of their drive toward gaining self-sufficiency in the wake of extensive wartime hardship.

Despite their desperate plight, plain folk rejected black labor after the war. Much like they had feared in 1860, emancipation threatened plain folk status because, according to Wetherington, it "blurred the boundaries between the privileges and rights of black and white men, threatening to make them all submissive hewers of wood" (p. 249). As plain folk struggled to regain their footing, a key tenet of their ideology remained focused on keeping blacks in their proper place in the social hierarchy. Plain folk viewed freedmen as the greatest affront and symbol of Yankee victory.

In *Plain Folk's Fight*, Mark Wetherington demonstrates the importance of giving agency to rural Americans whose voice has, until recently, been often overlooked. While slaveholding planters may have been the leaders of secession in 1861, many white yeomen offered them the support they sought. As Wetherington suggests, the Civil War was not simply "a rich man's war and a poor man's fight," but rather a war that featured the complicated and conflicting tugs of localism and nationalism. For the plain folk, defense of "family, home, and property," and not class, was the central issue of the war (p. 305). For those scholars and general readers more interested in the intricacies of the Confederate home front than in the dryness of battlefield tactics, *Plain Folk's Fight* is a must-read.