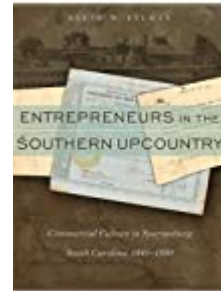


Bruce W. Eelman. *Entrepreneurs in the Southern Upcountry: Commercial Culture in Spartanburg, South Carolina, 1845-1880.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008. xii + 313 pp. Maps, tables. \$42.95 (library), ISBN 978-0-8203-3019-8.



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Businessmen Building the New South before the Civil War

Like nearly all important books, Bruce W. Eelman's study of entrepreneurial culture in Spartanburg County, South Carolina, defies easy classification. From one vantage point, it is a community study of the sort that might have sprung from New England's stony soil thirty-five years ago. From another angle, it looks more like a collective study of innovative business practices and values in a particularly significant region, not unlike Vera Shlakman's *Economic History of a Factory Town* (1935). It is, clearly, an attempt to account for the development of the textile industry, to sit alongside works by Broadus Mitchell, Ernest McPherson Lander, Jr., and David L. Carlton. And, as it almost must do for a volume dealing with the South in the period after Reconstruction, it wades into the eternal Woodwardian brawl of continuity versus change. *Entrepreneurs in the Southern Upcountry* has something for nearly everyone, and various subsets of the historical profession will appreciate different bits of it.

It may be best to start by situating the book in the context of two broad debates. If, for Woodward, the hall-

mark of the New South was change—change in personnel, change in values—then Eelman's periodization alone should be a giveaway that he intends to argue that the New South was not so new after all. The town-oriented booster culture, absorbing and promoting the values of Northern commercial society, did not need the Civil War to brush away unimaginative and overcautious planters to release the entrepreneurial energy weighed down by slavery. Instead, Eelman argues that a collection of town-based entrepreneurs was busy by the mid-1840s modernizing as much as they could manage, but in a way that not only did not challenge slavery but indeed relied upon it. The other, related debate is about when the Market Revolution came south. Eelman, echoing arguments made twenty years ago by Lacy K. Ford and others, suggests that many in the upcountry welcomed the market before the war. In this, Eelman would seem to be joining the ranks of Daniel Walker Howe and others in the past few years in suggesting that the Market Revolution delineated by Charles Sellers came much earlier, even in the South.

Spartanburg County may not have quite the brand recognition of some of its South Carolina cousins such as Edgefield and Beaufort. It sits along the state's northern border, encompassing mountains in the north, quite a lot of land suitable for livestock, corn, or cotton, and an astonishing concentration of swift-running waterways that eventually join the Broad River. The period covered is itself part of the argument. "By the 1850s," suggests Eelman, "a professional class had emerged in Spartanburg as an influential and active force working to mobilize support for economic diversification and infrastructural improvement" (p. 10). And while many histories of industrialization, and by implication entrepreneurship, in the Piedmont begin with the 1880s and the "cotton mill crusade," Eelman takes 1880 as his end point. By then, the path of the county's economic development was set, as "the railroads crisscrossing Spartanburg were controlled by northern-led corporations, and textile factories were becoming corporate industrial villages" (p. 5). It is only fair to note that Eelman does not attempt to write a total history of Spartanburg County in these thirty-five years, or even a full economic history; he is interested in the "modernizing leadership of Spartanburg" and particularly the "activities of southern professionals and commercial folks ... to create an environment more conducive to diversified market activity" (p. 3). These qualifications aside, *Entrepreneurs in the Southern Upcountry* remains a book of ambitious scope, as a synopsis of its contents will show.

Eelman's book falls into two halves that to a great degree mirror one another. After an opening chapter introducing the commercial class in antebellum Spartanburg, the war arrives, and after a chapter on it and another on the economic reorientations and recovery in the war's aftermath, we get another three chapters on transportation and manufacturing, education, and law and morality. Chapter 1 lays out the contours of the antebellum economic life of Spartanburg County. One long section uses sketches of key businessmen to develop a collective biography. Some, like B. B. Foster, began as planters seeking to diversify their incomes. Others, best exemplified by William Wofford, came from elsewhere to develop Spartanburg's natural resources, especially iron. Perhaps the single most important figure in Eelman's account is Gabriel Cannon, who turned his back on farming for a job as a clerk, later owning a store, a grist mill, and eventually investing in many manufacturing and railroad ventures. Another significant group of the business elite was town merchants. Early on, conflict arose between the rural planters, whose interests ran parallel to those who

held political power at the state level, and the group of "merchants, entrepreneurs, and town professionals—that was less dependent on staple-crop agriculture and more interested in combining a commitment to the slave economy with diversification in agricultural, industrial, and mercantile markets" (p. 10). Some issues united town and country interests. Merchants and planters alike opposed usury laws and sought reform of the state's banking system to make more capital available for all kinds of development in the upcountry. These groups found themselves at odds with one another on most issues, though, such as county taxation during the 1850s, when the expansion of cotton production brought significant growth to Spartanburg County.

Consideration of textile production and transportation go hand-in-hand in Eelman's second chapter. He discusses Spartanburg County's iron industry, which originated before the American Revolution and provided something of a predisposition for later industrial development. When the War of 1812 spurred domestic production of textiles, investors from Rhode Island came down and made use of the Tyger River to establish the South Carolina Cotton Manufactory in 1816. Over the next few decades, several more small mills sprang up around the county. The 1850s saw the rise of a new group of textile entrepreneurs, such as John Bomar and Dexter Edgar Converse, though by 1860 the value of textiles produced was still insignificant alongside Spartanburg County's agricultural output. While the chapter charts the expansion of the industry itself, Eelman's real accomplishment here is a careful dissection of the ideology that supported it. Promoters of manufacturing worked to convince the public of the dignity of manual labor and against the notion that working for wages in a mill undermined the independence so dear to southern white men. At one level, this was hardly necessary, since as Eelman observes, the industry relied heavily on those who had little independence to protect in the antebellum South: widows, young women, and children. Other promoters argued that by centralizing white workers around a factory, they could civilize them with schools and churches and keep them out of taverns. Another aspect of this early manufacturing culture Eelman studies is how these factories interacted with the rest of the local economy. For Spartanburg planters, "instead of performing merely ancillary roles to staple-crop production, mills and merchants forged an increasing interdependence between middle-class business people and plantation owners" (pp. 51-52). Transportation began with the use of rivers, and intricate and revealing conflicts arose between those who wanted the

rivers navigable in order to get crops out to markets and those who wanted to dam the rivers up and use the power for things like grist mills, sawmills, and eventually textile mills. The real story, though, is the Spartanburg and Union Railroad, which was chartered in 1847 and finally connected Spartanburg to Columbia in 1859. There was the debate one would expect, with the road's supporters arguing that it would prevent overreliance on fickle cotton, promote manufacturing and its blessings, improve the economy of the entire state, and cure the common cold. Detractors were less convinced, seeing the railroad as an engine to enrich town dwellers at the expense of rural residents. This contrast is the basis for Eelman's most interesting contribution in this section, a discussion of the debate over whether the county should levy a tax to support extending the railroad over the mountains to Asheville. This sort of intra-county squabbling can be very tricky to tease out and requires the sort of intimate understanding of places and people that is Eelman's forte throughout the book.

In the broad picture Eelman is painting of how commercial culture developed in Spartanburg, the chapter on antebellum education is important, if not immediately the sort of thing one expects. Essentially, the modernizing entrepreneurs wanted an educated, skilled workforce in order to support the kinds of economic development and diversification they wanted. They looked to New England and its proven results for a model. The only problem, politically, was that New England was also the hotbed of abolitionism, and many in South Carolina opposed bringing in New England education lest it carry the contagion of abolition with it. This is yet another example of how South Carolina's political system was dominated by planters who had no substantial interest in modernization and who opposed, almost instinctively, nearly every innovation these Spartanburg busy-bodies wanted. There was much back-and-forth over how education could benefit the state and the county without threatening slavery and, as with the railroad, more arguments over the taxes needed to support it. In the end, Joseph Wofford Tucker's school reform bill went down to defeat in the state legislature in 1855. What is most significant here, probably, is that much of the rhetoric about the benefits of education for white workers that David L. Carlton found present in the 1880s is already being used in the 1850s, further erasing the dividing line of the Civil War.

Not only would modernization make Spartanburg richer, it would make it better, and maybe even sober, or so argued its advocates. Part of the chapter focuses on

the control of African Americans, slave and free, through a combination of courts, town ordinances, and the police, but the more significant section looks at the attitudes of Spartanburg's entrepreneurial elite toward the judicial system. The growing number of debt cases in the 1850s provided work for more lawyers, and they pushed for a variety of legal reforms, mostly held at bay by the planter interests that dominated state government. The efforts of this same group to control the sale and consumption of alcohol further exacerbated the divide between town dwellers, with their middle-class sobriety, and hard-working, hard-drinking farmers in the countryside.

The Civil War and its aftermath are the subjects of chapters 5 and 6. The stay law enacted during the war squeezed middling yeomen, but those with capital profited handsomely from the wartime boom in textiles and iron. Not surprisingly, Reconstruction expanded the power and influence of Spartanburg's business class, which was made up not of planters seeing the light and trading in the plantation for the factory, but the same antebellum town-based elite Eelman has been discussing throughout. Eelman is especially adept in examining the complex web of economic and legal changes at work, especially during the first years of Reconstruction. The elimination of the stay law and the repeal of the antebellum usury law, both in 1866, substantially increased the number of debt cases in the courts, though the homestead provision of the 1868 constitution helped ease the problems of yeomen. An important shift in the story is when the stock law of the late 1870s finds town elites and large rural landowners on the same side for a change, casting aside the concerns of smallholders. The antebellum idea that economic development would help all whites was hardly given even lip service by this point.

Eelman's seventh chapter covers the slightly more familiar ground of railroads and textile mills after the war, but his close focus on Spartanburg brings useful new insights. Particularly important is his nuanced explanation of how the taxes implemented to fund construction of first of the Air-Line Railroad from Charlotte to Atlanta and later the Spartanburg and Asheville Railroad divided opinion in the county. Larger landowners, the town elite, and those who happened to live right where the railroads were coming through thought the tax a worthwhile investment, while the rest felt the burden but not the benefit. The railroad made possible the expansion of cotton production, and this led to considerable growth for the town of Spartanburg itself, and more substantial powers for its city council. Spartanburg's boom itself cre-

ated business opportunities as the local carriage maker expanded operations, sawmills sprang up, and brickyards supplied building materials. Textiles benefited from the strong antebellum foundation, with eight mills in operation by 1867. Despite the war, the 1860s saw a substantial increase in textile production in Spartanburg County, but this was only the beginning. "Between 1870 and 1882 capital investment and the value of products from Spartanburg's textile mills both increased almost six times" (p. 181). The most important of these was Bivingsville, run after 1868 by Dexter E. Converse, who introduced two new practices, the mill village and the marketing of the products through a New York broker. Using this experience, he set up Clifton Manufacturing Company in 1879, which would go on to become a hugely influential mill in the next several decades.

A postwar chapter continues the story of the development of education in Spartanburg. However, while before the war education was clearly only for whites and meant to raise everyone up in order to bring greater prosperity to the county as a whole, the divisions created by the war and Reconstruction meant that much energy was spent trying to figure out how to educate whites without educating blacks and just how much education anyone needed to hoe cotton or tend a loom. The connection between this chapter and the overall drive of the book is not as clear as in the antebellum material, but as history of education, it is quite interesting in its own right. A final chapter on the judicial system argues a bit unsurprisingly but convincingly that the modernizing elite of

Spartanburg were happy enough to turn a blind eye to Ku Klux Klan violence as long as it served to weaken the Republican administration they opposed, but they developed a new passion for law and order once the Democrats were back in charge, worried that vigilantism and lynching might frighten off investors.

Looking at Eelman's bibliography, it is a bit surprising that Spartanburg County has not had more detailed attention from historians over the years. Everyone knows David Golightly Harris's journal, which, like Eelman's book, goes from the late antebellum period through Reconstruction, but Eelman makes use of a number of other collections of personal papers of planters and businessmen, largely from Duke University, the Southern Historical Collection, and the South Caroliniana Library. The rich testimony of the 1871 Ku Klux Klan hearings provides important information on a number of postwar topics. Spartanburg was covered by an important regional newspaper, the *Carolina Spartan*, during this period, and Eelman mines population, agricultural, and manufacturing censuses for useful data. He also draws on lesser known primary sources. Two good maps at the beginning orient the reader, and the production team at University of Georgia Press maintains their high standards as usual. This is a complex and dense—in the best possible sense—book that engages in a number of important historical debates, and it should attract attention from many segments of the profession and maybe even get them talking to one another.

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