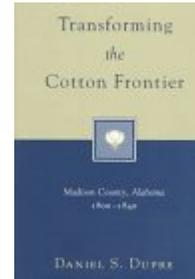


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Daniel S. Dupre. *Transforming the Cotton Frontier: Madison County, Alabama, 1800-1840.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997. xii + 269 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-2193-1.



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Transforming the Cotton Frontier is a familiar story in a unique setting. In the decades after the ratification of the Constitution, people around the country debated the relationship between liberty on one hand and order on the other. Would the liberty of free white men undermine male order within households? Slave holder authority in southern communities? The system of deference that had structured politics for decades? Would it alter the relationship between debtors and creditors, freeing the former from the burdens of bad business decisions and downturns in the market, and weakening the ability of the latter to collect on debts? There was probably no place in all of society in the early republic, no relationship between two people, that was not understood in terms of liberty and order, and that was not therefore connected to the Revolution and the promise of the new nation. Madison County, Alabama, was no exception.

Making excellent use of local newspapers—Madison County had two newspapers throughout the 1820s, something incredible for such a newly settled place—Daniel S. Dupre traces the development of two competing political ideologies, one emphasizing liberty, another stressing the need for order, both of which set the stage for the party system of the next decade. The squatters and planters, merchants and professionals who settled the county in the first two decades of the century benefited initially from high cotton prices and an abun-

dance of inexpensive land. But in 1819 cotton prices fell, suddenly, confronting Madison's residents with something they had never expected: scarcity—of land, markets, credit, cash, opportunity. Economic depression raised the stakes in the debate between liberty and order.

During the early years, people debated the need for orderly settlement upon the land and for proper title to it versus the liberty of squatters to possess undeveloped land where they found it, regardless of who actually owned it. But so long as everyone prospered, there was no need to push for one side or the other. Free access to abundant resources encouraged an orderly process of settlement and development. Everything changed with the onset of economic depression. As everyone scrambled to hold onto what was theirs, the county split. Merchants, bankers, professionals, and planters unencumbered by mortgages stressed the need for orderly payment of debts, collection of taxes, removal of squatters, and government-assisted economic development. Squatters, indebted farmers, and landless laborers sought debt relief, restrictions on land speculation, and a government responsive to their concerns. It was the story of early national and Jacksonian America compressed into a few years: An apparent abundance of resources and opportunity postponed the making of tough decisions about development and the role of government in the economy. Sudden collapse forced decisions that in the context of

hard times were passionately contested and especially bitter to swallow. And when it was over, politics were completely reorganized.

I know of no other study quite like this one. It begins at the end of the so-called first party period and ends at the beginning of the so-called second party period. Dupre views the 1820s as an important political moment in its own right, not merely as epilogue to the Revolution or prologue for the Age of Jackson. This distinguishes the book from those of other scholars—Lacy Ford, Harry Watson, and Mills Thornton, for example—who have covered similar territory but with an eye more to the politics of later years.

The first two chapters cover the initial period of settlement, of economic boom and sudden bust. Despite the legal chaos of the Yazoo land fraud and the Supreme Court decision in *Fletcher v. Peck* (1810), which frustrated title holders for years, settlement was orderly and peaceful, albeit rapid. Families arrived, many from Georgia, often via Tennessee, plopped themselves down and immediately went to work clearing and planting. They secured basic necessities first, and then looked to planting cotton. Already by 1809 there were 353 households in Madison County. Most were squatters, few owning more than five slaves. Squatters did not immediately worry about proper title to the land they worked. But the government land sales following the Supreme Court decision brought new sorts of people to Madison County, planters and speculators who invested thousands of dollars in thousands of acres, and who needed the security of proper title and of government. So long as opportunity and land remained abundant, emerging class divisions sparked no immediate conflict. The most heated political issue in the county during the early years concerned the name of the new town. The squatters eventually won, and the town became known as Huntsville, in honor of its founder. The losers, a group of speculators, had preferred the pretentious name of Twickenham, in honor of English writer Alexander Pope.

The panic of 1819 changed the tone of political debate by increasing the stakes. Teetering on the edge of financial ruin, Madisonites, squatters, planters, and speculators alike debated the role of government in maintaining order during economic crisis. Two positions emerged: Creditors, mostly bankers and merchants, advocated minimal government intervention in the economic crisis, that they might use existing laws and courts to uphold contracts and win satisfaction from debtors in an orderly fashion. Debtors, mostly farmers, sought gov-

ernment intervention in the form of debt relief, currency reform and land reform, so that good family men might keep their homes, provide for their wives and children, and maintain a stable social order. Both positions represented essentially conservative reactions to the panic of 1819. In “a natural world that had gone inexplicably awry” (p. 60), men of good character were failing, while men of questionable character were succeeding. Creditors, of course, did not question their moral standing and saw no need to alter the political and legal order. Debtors, however, could only account for their failings in terms of a faulty system in need of amendment to maintain “Standards of behavior that traditionally could be relied on in climbing the ladder of success,” as Dupre argues (p. 60). Tempers flared in the debate. Riots erupted in nearby Franklin County.

In Madison County, debate over economic development and social order tended to pit the merchants and bankers in Huntsville against farmers in the surrounding countryside. Planters as a group are harder to pin down; they could side with farmers or with merchants. Before the panic, bank interest rates were restricted. Private rates, however, were not. Bank directors often took advantage of these circumstances to borrow at low interest from their banks and lend at high interest to farmers, who accepted the terms in the heady days of the cotton boom. After the panic set in, debtors questioned not their judgment, but the character of their creditors. Unscrupulous, aristocratic speculators were ruining them, and in the process undermining the values and the virtuous citizenry upon which the republic rested. However, landowners, as bankers were quick to point out, had accepted high interest loans on property purchased at inflated prices because they were in a tremendous hurry to enter the game of cotton planting. Their own greed had gotten the better of them. Foreclosures on indebted landowners were to be regretted, but were hardly cause for restricting the liberties of bankers who knew how to win a profit.

In a terrific chapter on land settlement and economic development, Dupre untangles the many interests that competed for government assistance. Farmers who had purchased land from the federal government before the panic of 1819 afterward asked if they might relinquish unimproved acres to the federal government as a way of reducing their debt. But farmers also wanted the government to hold relinquished acres in reserve until they could afford to repurchase them. At the very least they wanted preemption rights, rights of first refusal should the land ever be put up for auction. In 1821 the gov-

ernment agreed to accept relinquished land as a form of debt relief, in part because there was widespread consensus that the plan was needed. However, the matter of preemption rights remained unresolved. Merchants, bankers, and unencumbered landowners approved of relinquishment, although they wanted the land sold, with no preemption rights granted to former owners. Prospering farmers and planters saw this as an opportunity to add acreage to their estates. A group of businessmen interested in constructing a canal around a forty-mile stretch of shoals in the Tennessee River, which would open Madison County and its town of Huntsville to steamboat traffic, saw this as an opportunity to raise much needed capital. They asked that relinquished land be auctioned and the proceeds invested in the canal. Where one stood on the question of land relinquishment and preemption rights depended not only on whether one was a debtor or creditor, farmer or merchant, but on whether one lived upstream of downstream of the shoals, on whether one favored a canal or a rail road or a turnpike, on one's position on state chartered development companies and on the relationship between government and business in general.

And yet at bottom there was consensus: All sought access to the market. For some, that meant first securing title to their land. Once in possession of clear title, then one could worry about getting cotton around the shoals and off to market. For others, however, overcoming transportation problems was a higher priority. The debate was not really over whether there ought to be economic development. No one expressed fears of an encroaching market on a subsistence way of life. After all, nearly everyone, debtors and creditors, had cast their lot in for the market during the boom years. They were not about to turn back. Instead, people debated how limited capital ought to be pooled and in whose interests it ought to be invested. From one perspective indebted landowners could seem disorderly, while from another perspective canal investors could appear bent on snatching liberty away from independent farmers. And so consensus appeared elusive. No wonder politicians were deeply confused, frequently switching positions on the various issues. In the end, relinquished land was sold, but not until 1829, and with preemption rights given to original owners.

In a chapter on moral reform, Dupre details another debate cast in terms of order and liberty. The temperate sought to bring order to their community by restricting drinking and drunkenness. Drinkers, naturally, resented the infringement on their liberty. James G. Birney, the

future abolitionist, played a prominent role in these debates. His leadership in the local Bible and tract societies, Sunday school, and temperance society helped win him election as mayor, an office he used to close down dram shops and enforce Sabbatarian restrictions. But Birney always pressed too hard to win much political success, although that did not deter him. His commitment to self control and moral order led him down the path to abolitionism, a journey that would require his leaving Madison County and the South. Birney was exceptional, but instructive nevertheless because he viewed slavery in terms of moral order.

Debates over moral order spilled over into public discussions of electioneering, barbecues, and drink treating. As some saw it, politicians who pandered to voters gave up their autonomy to mobocracy. Likewise, voters who sold themselves to politicians who plied them with liquor and stuffed them with slow-cooked beef and pork sacrificed their own liberty. Once again, liberty and order seemed at odds. Dupre makes an interesting point: Whereas in George Washington's Virginia, drink treating had symbolically turned the social order upside down, thus actually reinforcing the authority of the gentry, in 1820s Madison County, Alabama, barbecues and treating increasingly represented the actual social order, not its inversion. And this is precisely why some found these events so threatening. They indicated the waning of deference, and perhaps even an excess of democracy.

More than anything else, slavery defined the limits of liberty and demonstrated the need for order. Fittingly, Dupre ends his study with a discussion of the peculiar institution. Of particular concern to Madison County leaders were the actions of whites. Slaves were seen as largely passive. Careless masters threatened social disorder by letting their slaves wander into town on Sundays to carouse with free blacks and lower class whites and to buy liquor from unscrupulous shopkeepers. However, to restrict the actions of "passive" slaves was to curtail the liberties of whites who owned and fraternized with them. Only the threat of abolitionism finally forged the consensus that had so long eluded the white residents of Madison County. There was, after all, a danger in too much liberty. There was, after all, a need for order. In the summer of 1835, word spread across the South of a massive slave insurrection planned in Mississippi, led by criminal and abolitionist whites. It was news Madison County whites had feared, but in a sense also expected. That there was surely no substance to the rumors of insurrection did not matter, in Madison County, Alabama, anymore than in Madison County, Mississippi, where

the rumors first surfaced. Whites responded by closing ranks and blaming any disorder on slaves and abolitionists in general. Unlike their Mississippi counterparts, Alabamians refrained from accusing and lynching local suspects. But the event altered history in Madison County nonetheless. No longer did liberty and order seem incompatible. Indeed, the freedom of white southern men depended on the order of slavery. The threat to order and liberty, it now seemed clear, came not from anyone in Madison County, but from fanatics abroad.

As Madisonites turned their eyes and their fears outward and northward, the local issues that divided them seemed far less serious. Questions concerning economic development, credit, debt, banks, internal improvements, morality, and electioneering would continue to be subjects of debate. And residents would continue to oppose one another in the coming decade as they lined up for or against Jackson's Democracy. But the stakes never seemed quite so high. Such issues never divided the community again as they had before, because the whites dared not let themselves divide. Debates between Whigs and Democrats, therefore, were muted, by a national party structure that minimized local conflict by further drawing Madisonites outward, and by an emerging sectionalism touched off by abolitionism and the insurrection scare.

At his best, Dupre demonstrates both the apparent contradiction of liberty and order and the subtle ways they were really interdependent. There are moments, however, when he seems to believe the newspapers he has read. For example, he describes the dram shop controversy as a cultural conflict. That is certainly how Birney and his followers understood matters. One was free to invest one's money in hotels and paved streets, or spend it on whiskey. And the choice one made determined whether one perceived a threat to liberty from drunken brawlers or from temperance reformers. But I suspect all of this had less to do with culture and more to do with how much money one had. Similarly, the controversy over electioneering seems not to have cut very deeply. Over a thousand people signed a petition

against barbecues, but people still flocked to them. I am reminded of current debates over negative campaign ads, to which everyone objects but everyone responds. Such debates can easily be taken too much at face value.

I do not get any sense of emerging conflicting political ideologies in Madison County. Instead, personal ambitions, friendships, enemies, wealth holding, place of residence, and who knows how many other variables in the mix seem to have shaped voter positions on a given issue. And underneath was consensus, one very apparent during the insurrection scare. Consensus, I suspect, did not emerge after years of bitter debate; it was probably there all along. It only took the right event fully to reveal it.

Of course, how can one know whether political conflict during the 1820s was deeply divisive? How can one know whether the later debates between Whigs and Democrats were more superficial, more "routine," to use Dupre's word? I doubt if answers will be found in the columns of newspaper editors, who were in the business of overdramatizing and polarizing politics. Dupre makes no use of election data, if any was even available to him. At the very least, a conclusion that politics was different in the later two-party period would seem to require some investigation of that later period. Yet, the book ends abruptly, just before the parties are formed in Madison County.

Dupre's deconstruction of political debate between opposing newspapers is superb. He has a sharp eye for subtle shadings and shifts in discourse. Moreover, the book makes a fine case for taking the 1820s seriously in its own right and not simply as prologue for the second party period. The connections between voting behavior and political discourse, and their change over time, are very difficult to discern. Conclusions based on them must be tentative.

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