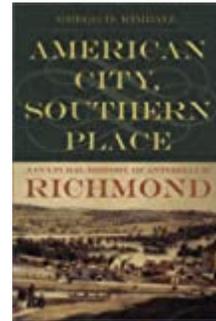




**Gregg D. Kimball.** *American City, Southern Place: A Cultural History of Antebellum Richmond.* Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2000. xxv + 262 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-2234-6.



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## When the Title Is the Thesis

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A book or essay title that informs the reader precisely what to expect is becoming a rare commodity in historical writing. More common is a title that intrigues but leads the reader well into the piece before revealing the purpose of the work. Not so with Gregg D. Kimball's fine study of Richmond's diverse populations and the cultures they created in the twenty or so years preceding the Civil War and the reshaping of those cultures during the war itself. The reader knows exactly what Kimball hopes to prove from the title. Richmond fully embodied those characteristics associated with antebellum cities: burgeoning industrialism, elite paternalism in benevolence and reform activities, European immigration, elite women and workingmen claiming public space and voice, a lively culture among free people of color amidst white repression and suspicion, merchant concerns about free trade and adequate transportation networks, and vigorous partisan politics. Antebellum Richmond was, he argues, a fully "American City."

At the same time, Richmond's culture continually absorbed and responded to southern mores. Active slave

markets flourished in the heart of the city, including auction halls at a major hotel and the Odd Fellows Lodge. City elites cooperated with wealthy planters to hold sway over Richmond politics, and free labor constantly competed against bond labor in everything from iron manufacturing to domestic service. African-Americans fiercely maintained kinship ties throughout the South as slaves were sold and moved. The momentum for secession developed slowly in the city; when Virginia held elections for a special convention to debate the subject, Richmond sent a predominately Unionist delegation. As secession sentiment triumphed and war came to Richmond, she acknowledged her "Southern Place" at great cost to Richmonders.

The book's subtitle best conveys the particular richness of this urban history. Here is "a cultural history" with full attention to the entire colorful and diverse population of antebellum Richmond. Kimball's study is resplendent with quotations from artisans, both black and white, women, planters, African-American laborers, southern boosters, newspaper editors, and recent immigrants. This reader had the sense that she was mean-

dering through a thoughtfully designed museum exhibit, where no detail of urban life was omitted and no complexity of relationships was ignored. Moving far beyond the usual topics of an urban history, Kimball tries to uncover the intangibles that defined the city's social and political life, and he does so from the perspective of the many actors who both created antebellum Richmond and were shaped by it. Whether he is examining urban cemeteries, prostitution, railroad development, masculinity, slave auctions, political debates, or labor disputes, Kimball slights no aspect of cultural formation.

The book is divided into three sections, each useful in its own way, and all connected through the repetition of themes and characters. Part One is best likened to a traditional urban history with an emphasis on the various commercial and manufacturing ventures. However, it is Kimball's attention to both the people who ran them and the people who worked in them, slave and free, that makes this section come alive. Excellent maps assist in illustrating both Richmond's daily involvement with northern commercial interests and the constant reifying of her role as a center of slavery and southern mores. Local manufacturing included the well-known Tredegar Iron Works, flourmills on the James River and Kanawha Canal, and some fifty tobacco factories. The Richmond, Fredericksburg, and Potomac Railroad made the city "the southernmost outpost of a northern railroad" (p. 19) and helped spur an urban growth rate of 63.3 per cent between 1840 and 1860 (p. 39).

Richmond's participation in antebellum reform efforts lay on the conservative side. Kimball notes that city elites organized against so-called moral problems like alcohol, gambling and prostitution, but he does not note that Richmonders failed to critically examine poverty and its causes as did northern reformers such as Matthew Carey or Joseph Tuckerman. Frequent exchanges between planters in the new western tobacco regions and the urban elite reveal shared "ideas of honor and trust common to Southern society" (p. 24). Although many historians associate Richmond with industrial slavery, perhaps because of Charles Dew's classic study, Kimball illustrates that of the eight thousand domestic workers in the city, most were slaves. Though important, industrial slavery was not typical of the Richmond slave experience.[1]

Richmonders remained strongly attached to their Revolutionary heritage and the Union it represented, as enacted in two major cultural events of 1858—the dedication of a new monument of George Washington and the

reburial of the remains of James Monroe. It is the tension between these two identities—American and Southern—that Kimball so thoughtfully and gracefully explores in the sections that follow. In Part Two, Kimball fleshes out what is already a complex urban history with chapters on specific cultural milieus of various groups with emphasis on their "connections" to the larger world. Deep research into the city's newspapers, business and personal journals, church records, and family letters makes this section particularly rich. In the case of merchants and their families, Kimball weaves their trade connections, travels, and commentary on Virginia life into a vibrant portrait of upwardly-mobile Richmonders who find much to like and love in the city, while sometimes questioning the influence and mentalite of the planter class.

A chapter on African-American life shows slave connections both to the Deep South, where sold family members often served, and to the north, as increasing numbers "took their freedom." Richmond contributed many people of color to the business of the Underground Railroad, ably assisted in many cases by free blacks that worked on the steamboats and railway cars. The First African Baptist Church was established in 1841 under the leadership of a (required) white pastor, Rev. Robert Ryland. An all-black Board of Deacons presided over the one thousand member congregation composed of both free people of color and slaves. Kimball uses its extensive records to document the movement out of Richmond of many people of color.

In a chapter on "Strangers, Slaves, and Southern Iron," Kimball reinterprets the conflict between northern white skilled ironworkers and the hired slave labor that James Anderson utilized at Tredegar Iron Works. Whereas Charles Dew and other historians have portrayed Anderson as defeating the striking white workers in 1847 and "winning" the contest over who should work in skilled industry, Kimball argues that Tredegar production levels never recovered from the strike, and that Anderson constantly had to negotiate improved contracts to gain the skilled employees he needed.

The fourth cultural group studied are the volunteer militia companies who, Kimball argues, constructed a "culture of manly behavior and ritual brotherhood" through which Richmond men, particularly the working- and artisan-class, came to understand and embody their masculinity (184). His thoughtful analysis of the toasts and speeches at militia banquets suggests their firm commitment to the Union even in the 1850s when the rhetoric of southern nationalism became pronounced. German,

Irish, and African-American militia organized as well, with the latter mainly providing music for militia events. He uses the Richmond Light Infantry Blues' trips to meet with Philadelphia volunteer regiments, and their reciprocal visits to Richmond, to emphasize the friendly intercourse and national scope of this fraternal tradition.

The final section, "Choosing Sides," shows how the "antebellum views of Richmonders shaped allegiances during and after the Civil war" (p. xxiii). Kimball complicates and deepens our understanding of just how difficult the choices of 1861 were and how secession destroyed the cultural worlds of many citizens. Even as many cheered the Confederacy, others who had moved to Richmond, established businesses, and raised families, shared Jacob Bechtel's view that "we are as strangers and aliens here" (p. 217). Kimball argues that "the shallow support Richmond gave the Confederacy has never been fully appreciated" (p. 218). He uncovers significant debate among commercial men over the economic repercussions of secession and among working men who met to propose delegates to the special convention. He shows the torn loyalties of some elite women as expressed in their personal correspondence and he notes the irony of black men and women conscripted to aid the war effort in direct opposition to their own interests. An Epilogue reiterates the themes of the book as the antebellum cultural lega-

cies played out in a radically different Richmond after the war.

*American City, Southern Place* is a deeply researched, carefully argued, and gracefully written study of the multiple voices and intertwined cultures that made up one small segment of antebellum America. This work is not a standard antebellum political history with some information about African-Americans, immigrants, and women added. Rather Kimball peoples the city and builds his argument around the real concerns, struggles, and decisions of many groups. He illustrates the national interests and connections of Richmonders from various ethnic, racial, and employment backgrounds. Concurrently he demonstrates values, manners, and beliefs these same citizens shared with residents of the Deep South. Students of southern, urban, antebellum, and African-American history will find much value in this work. Historians of any period or region can profit much from following Kimball's approach to multiple contexts and multiple voices.

#### Note

[1]. Charles B. Dew, *Ironmaker to the Confederacy: Joseph R. Anderson and the Tredegar Iron Works* (New Haven: Yale University, 1966).

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