

Building the Empire State of the South from Frontier to the Civil War: A Review Essay of *Cultivating Race*

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Cultivating Race: The Expansion of Slavery in Georgia, 1750-1860. By Watson W. Jennison. (Lexington, Ky.: University of Kentucky Press, 2012. Pp. 440. Bibliography. Notes. Index. \$50. ISBN: 978-0-8131-3426-0).

A genealogist once told me that he judges the quality of a book purely on if he finds his family in it. In a similar way, I rate a work on how much I learn from it. By that standard, I hold *Cultivating Race* in high regard because it adds so much to my knowledge of geography, slavery, and early Georgia.

That colorful and nationally significant history has gaps that could fill several volumes. This one book tries to meet many of those needs through exposing seldom if ever discussed secret histories that, when carefully weaved together, tell how the “Empire of State of the South” developed from a sparsely settled colonial forest. The author starts with the ruins of the experiment of the Georgia Trustees to create in America in 1733 the English philosopher Thomas Hobbs’ Leviathan, a tightly controlled society that weeded out the worst vices and encouraged virtue.¹ This unique social experiment attempted to rehabilitate middle class English debtors in a colony that excluded debt, plantations, personal land ownership, lawyers, rum, and slavery. Without African bondage, this thirteenth colony had no one to help South Carolina slaves in escaping to Spanish Florida, avoided the danger of slave revolts, and limited most manual labor to Englishmen in need of rehabilitation. The trustees even considered including freed persons in their program to substitute for slave labor. By 1752, no longer subsidized by Parliament, they completed a process of transforming their non-profit project into a standard British colony that included slavery. In the many parts of the new Georgia, slavery took on a resemblance to bondage in Jamaica, including in the climate and a disproportionately high number of slaves to whites. The province’s slave code of 1765 replicated that of Jamaica to the extent of even including granting freed persons all but political rights. The subsequent code of 1770 excluded those particular provisions, the beginnings of a long history in Georgia of denying minorities the right to compete with white labor. In the 1760s, the colony’s free population of African descent likely counted less than 100 people. Slavery in the province, however, exploded in the last two decades of the colonial period through investment by planters in South Carolina, the British subsidies for indigo,

¹ Robert S. Davis, “Wheels Within Wheels: Slavery and the Framework of the Social History of Eighteenth Century, Georgia,” *Journal of Backcountry Studies* 5 (Summer 2010).

and the need for rice to feed slaves in Jamaica and the other British sugar islands. Georgia had only some 500 people left in 1741 but 18,000 whites and 15,000 blacks by 1773.

The American Revolution remade Georgia and slavery. Its military enlisted few men of African descent and likely not as armed men although slave labor built the fortifications crewed ships for both of the opposing militaries. At the 1779 siege of Savannah by a combined American and French force, black labor saved the King's army as black Loyalist Americans would do to the end of the war. A large percentage of the new state's population, not all of them supporters of the King's cause, left wartime Georgia's social and political anarchy for the colonies of Britain and Spain. The exiles included many of the self-freed who would go on to Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone but many thousands more people of African descent continued on as slaves in Jamaica and elsewhere. Within the southern swamps, colonies of Jamaican like Maroon people sprang up of African Americans who escaped slavery but who had also abandoned or had been abandoned by the British. Overall, Georgia lost some 10,000 of the 15,000 slaves it had in 1773. Without the market for indigo and rice, Georgians produced food during the war and turned to cotton as a serious crop for the first time. Shortly after the American Revolution, Eli Whitney invented the most practical of the cotton gins developed in the ear on a Georgia plantation while his contemporaries, some in Georgia, developed steam engines that would, in time, power a new economy.

The new Georgia subsequently experienced the greatest period of growth in its history as Americans immigrated to the new state for land, even at the cost of conflict with Indian tribes committed to holding on to their lands and with Spain. Revolutionary War leader Elijah Clark challenged the United States government with a threatened French supported invasion of Spanish Florida and by briefly seizing Indian lands on the Oconee River. Historian Ira Berlin would write that slaves from the North and the Chesapeake were purchased in a "Second Middle Passage" to fill the needs of the "Georgia trade."² This business would come to expand far beyond its boundaries as some 1,000,000 slaves would be moved across the country. Georgia, however, would pass laws in the late 1790s against importing slaves from Africa and later from anywhere, a decade before the United States government, because of a slave revolt in its own Screven County in 1798 and the contemporary racial civil war in Saint Dominique. The new state also had to contend with the growing power of Alexander McGillivray, the great Creek leader in a nebulous political entity of escaped slaves, Creeks, Seminoles, and whites that the author of *Cultivating Race* refers to as the state of Muscogee, not unlike the later "Commanchia" defined by S. G. Gwynne in his recent book *Empire of the Summer Moon*.³

Matters became more complicated in the first decades of the Nineteenth Century. Five different major military conflicts happened on the Florida border between 1812 and 1819: the Patriot War, an invasion by American soldiers of fortune; the campaign to destroy the

² Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slavery Slaves* (Cambridge, MA, 2003), 168.

³ Samuel C. Gwynne, *Empire of the Summer Moon: Quanah Parker and the Rise and Fall of the Commanche, the Most Powerful Indian Tribe in American History* (New York, 2010).

Negro Fort; the War of 1812; a civil war among the Creek Indians; and the First Seminole War. These conflicts all involved race at least as much territory. Florida became such a refuge for escaped slaves as to threaten to bring down Georgia's entire plantation economy while the Seminoles feared their own enslavement by the Georgians. Similarly, the Creek civil war pitted the tribe's ruling slave owning and generally mixed racial planter leadership, in sympathy with their white planter cousins, against the Redsticks, Creeks who opposed the white world and slavery. Florida finally passed to the United States in 1819 and the state of Georgia obtained the Indian lands within its modern borders through a series of land sessions that cumulated in the Cherokee removal in 1838.⁴

Class, race, and politics developed with the history of the state's land acquisitions and other development. Coastal Georgia fought to retain political power against the growing population and political strength of the upcountry. In answer to land frauds of the 1780s and 1790s, Georgia dispensed later land sessions from the Indians through all white land lotteries. This populist idea, however, never failed to serve as an issue of contention between the wealthy classes and frontier populists such as Governor John Clark who also fought for schools, roads, and political reforms. The low country planters had the capital to invest in the expensive and complicated crop of rice. Thomas Spalding managed his plantations through Muslim slaves instead of white overseers and used a common coastal labor system built on tasks that allowed slaves to acquire wealth enough on their own time to merit locking their cabins. During the War of 1812, Spalding's slaves did not flee to the invading British army (half of which consisted of escaped slaves from a previous Chesapeake invasion) and he actually armed them to defend his property. Skilled slaves built and maintained such plantations as well as sold their services in cities like Savannah. Some slave owners became more agents than task managers. Conversely, upland plantations produced the relatively simple but profitable cotton on even small tracts and with little capital. Money could be made there with the most untrained workers and even without slaves although producing cotton proved to be painfully repetitive. Planters in the interior would use the gang system where white overseers often managed overworked and underfed male and female slaves through the use of the lash. In cities like Atlanta and Macon, white artisans banded together and with the Democratic Party in opposition to an industrial and planter elite that tended to support the opposition Native American "Know Nothing" Party. The relatively few skilled African Americans in the upcountry, caught in the middle of these contentious politics, faced increasingly restrictive laws that keep them from competing with white labor in upcountry cities, as other laws in 1818, 1833, and 1835 made being any free person of African descent all but illegal. The State Supreme Court, finally created in 1846 in part in answer to court cases that favored Cherokees, became Chief Justice Joseph H. Lumpkin's instrument for uniform enforcement of laws against freed persons that would have hardly left them with more rights than slaves. Competition with cotton from Asia, Africa, and Latin America

⁴ Also see John T. Ellis, *The Second Creek War: Interethnic Conflict and Collusion on a Collapsing Frontier* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010).

encouraged the building of the state's extensive railroads but created new labor clashes between free Irish and slave workers. Mining eventually created a challenge between slave and mechanical labor while owners of textile factories experimented with different combinations of black and white, male and female, workers. By then, slavery had become the central institution in Georgia and even had power in isolated areas with few slaves or freed persons.

Through this epic, the reader learns why such people as William Augustus Bowles, John Floyd, George Mathews, David B. Mitchell, John W. Hooper, and John Twiggs once mattered to the Georgia public. The reputations of some leaders such as Augustan S. Clayton receive a different and more positive take than in the traditional and inadequate history. That the author discusses such African Americans as John Brown, Mathew Chivers, Austin Dabney, Barbara Galphin, Moses Going, and James Nunez but omits Olaudah Equiano, George Liele, Fenda Lawrence, and Tom Sims speaks more to what still needs to be done in Georgia history than any shortcoming of this scholarship. Google Scholar, a free internet service, makes up for the shortcomings of the incomplete index to *Cultivating Race*.

Researchers will question some statements and interpretations in pioneer works of such scope. When I checked some of the statements made about Austin Dabney, Moses Going etc., sources did not always substantiate the author's claims. In those instances, the stated facts did not affect the conclusions, however. The biggest problem in *Cultivating Race*, however, is the structure of its content. It is two or more books in one that have only early Georgia history as a common link, not even class, race, slavery etc. That its 400 pages have only eight chapters, usually with more than 100 footnotes each, illustrates this awkward construction. From this core material, for example, a book on the evolution of class and race to 1850; a dual biography of Elijah Clark and Alexander McGillivray; a history of the very different wars on the Georgia-Florida frontier, 1812-1819; and a study in the secret historiography of the Cherokee removal through the conflicted writings of George White, George Gilmer, and Wilson Lumpkin could all be written. Separate volumes on the ground covered in this one book would likely also discuss such other leaders of the time as Farish Carter, Mark Anthony Cooper, Richard R. Cuyler, William Scarborough, Nelson Tift, and John G. Winter. The research compiled in this work makes one look forward to what will eventually come from this beginning.