
The past few years have seen a burgeoning literature reexamining the economy of the Old South. This book makes a valuable contribution to that literature and also demonstrates the value of looking beyond the traditional chronological cutoff point of the Civil War.

Focusing on the New River valley region of southwestern Virginia, Randal L. Hall traces the area’s economic development across more than two centuries, concentrating on the various mining industries there. Importantly, Hall demonstrates that these industries were never purely local concerns but instead were interlocked with world events, whether providing bullets for the American Revolution or nitrocellulose propellant to the twenty-first-century army.

Many of Hall’s themes will be familiar to those who have been following the new literature on the southern economy (admirably summarized in the introduction): the interplay of white and slave labor, the capitalist instincts of the men who ran the mines, and the comparative performance of similar industries in other parts of the country. Hall’s contribution is in expanding the literature to include mining is noteworthy, and he makes other thematic contributions as well. I will discuss two in this review.

The first is his concern with the environmental impact of industrial development. As an extractive industry, mining could not help but have a considerable effect on the land. Hall details these changes over time: during the American Revolutionary War intensive mining of lead for bullets also depleted the forests as wood was harvested to fuel furnaces. In the early twentieth century, hydraulic mining “poured” polluted wastewater into natural streams (p. 114). And in our own time, small communities have watched as jobs leave the area but the contaminated landscape remains, difficult to improve or market. Hall is well attuned to the environmental repercussions of economic decisions, an important reminder for those studying this economy.

Hall’s other contribution is in illustrating the value of following themes through to the present. He pays close attention to the changing relationship between private enterprise and government, and to the plight of the mine laborers and their families. This last theme is particularly tragic; in the chapter entitled “Left Behind,” Hall details the head-spinning combinations of shifting contracts, company acquisitions, and other corporate maneuverings that illustrate how communities found themselves grasping for survival in today’s economy. Virginians turned, with only limited success, to tourism and music in hopes of replacing the jobs lost in heavy industry.

Hall has covered a great deal of time and material in this short volume. While the narrow geographic scope of the book may limit potential audience interest, Hall has uncovered important themes for students of the southern economy. He has provided another reminder to historians about the diversity of the antebellum economy, demonstrated the importance of considering the environment, and proved the value of an eye for the long view of the American experience.

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doi: 10.1093/jahist/jat120


Remaking Wormsloe Plantation grew out of Drew A. Swanson’s postdoctoral fellowship at the Wormsloe Institute for Environmental History; his work entailed “writing a report on Wormsloe’s land-use history, using the rich archival resources available in the University of Georgia’s Special Collections as well as a few ancillary archives” (p. xii). The final product is a sweeping environmental history that covers the three centuries from 1732 to the present and that situates the famous plantation in the local landscape of the Isle of Hope on the Georgia coast and in the larger Atlantic world—“a portrait of a plantation and people rooted firmly in the Lowcountry environment yet connected to the broader world” (p. 11). As such, it is a case study that, without necessarily providing new and surprising findings, illuminates many of the central themes and arguments of southern environmental history: the disease environment, overlapping and conflicting landscape uses, the drive for mastery over...