

A Southern Community In Crisis: Harrison County, Texas, 1850-1880

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Review

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Campbell, Randolph B. *A Southern Community in Crisis: Harrison County, Texas, 1850-1880.* Texas State Historical Association, \$25.00 ISBN 9781625110404

Continuity Over Change

Randolph B. “Mike” Campbell’s study of Harrison County, Texas between 1850 and 1880 is an important work on Texas and the South during the Civil War and Reconstruction period, as well as a model for historians interested in social history methodology. Originally published in 1983, *A Southern Community in Crisis* was Campbell’s second book, and much of the research presented in it prefigures his later work on slavery and Reconstruction in Texas. This body of work has made Campbell one of the deans of Texas history, and he currently serves as the Chief Historian of the Texas State Historical Association. Fittingly, the Texas State Historical Association has now reissued Campbell’s monograph in an affordable paperback version, with a foreword by rising Texas historian Andrew J. Torget and a new author’s preface.

The book’s structure will be familiar to readers who are versed in historical community studies. The first chapter delineates the economic, social, demographic, religious, and political structure of Harrison County, Texas in 1850. The book then proceeds to chart these aspects of life in the county through the tumultuous years of secession, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and conservative Redemption. In the final chapter, Campbell profiles Harrison County in 1880 and identifies aspects of change and continuity over the preceding three decades.

As Andrew Torget notes in his foreword, the sources and methodologies employed in *A Southern Community in Crisis* are representative of the social history that was being produced beginning in the 1960s and 1970s. Campbell’s analysis benefits from the fact that “virtually every historical source traditionally employed in narrative and descriptive accounts is available for Harrison County”

(9). For scholars who are interested in quantitative and demographic methods, Campbell's work is exemplary. Twenty-eight tables display information derived from United States census data and from local tax, property, and probate records. Two appendices explain the usage of census information in the text. Rather than providing a dry account of land prices, voting patterns, and other data, Campbell produces a very readable narrative that draws upon a variety of manuscript and newspaper sources to give life to his subjects.

In utilizing the wealth of data that is available on Harrison County during the nineteenth century, Campbell contends with two major historical questions. The first concerns the relative preeminence of continuity or change as a characteristic of the American South during the Civil War era. Quantitative data on Harrison County's socioeconomic structure allows Campbell to argue, for instance, that although "emancipation meant a tremendous loss of property" (387) for planters, and that in the post-emancipation period "planters were being joined to some extent by merchants and townspeople in the wealth holding elite" (387), Harrison County planters actually increased their share of the community's wealth between 1860 and 1880 (389). Other measures of economic and social change outlined in the book also support Campbell's overarching contention that in Harrison County, continuity outweighed change during this period, at least in terms of the structure of wealth and power in the community. The end of slavery was the one major structural change in Harrison County during this period, but black political power was circumscribed after Harrison County's local version of "redemption" in 1878, several years earlier than a number of other Texas counties with large or majority-black populations.

The second major controversy that Campbell enters into is the question of Texas identity. Beginning with his opening salvo via *A Southern Community in Crisis*, Campbell has been a leading voice for the argument that Texas has been an essentially Southern state for most of its history, and may still be categorized as such today. Although scholars outside of the Lone Star State may be unaware of the controversy, Texas historians and cultural commentators waged something of a civil war for much of the twentieth century over the vexing question of whether Texas is Southern, Western, or something else entirely. The controversy continues today, although Campbell's interpretation seems to have gained the upper hand in academic circles in the early twenty-first century. In focusing on cotton-growing Harrison County, which is located on the Louisiana border in Northeast Texas and hosted the largest enslaved population of any Texas county in 1860, Campbell points toward his contention that the most heavily populated

regions of Texas in the nineteenth century were without question part of the larger American South.

Because Harrison County was (and still is) a place that should be considered Southern in its identity, Campbell is able to offer an important work on a locality that has broader implications outside the boundaries of both Harrison County and Texas. In the new preface, Campbell acknowledges that the concept of a “community,” as he describes Harrison County, is troubled by lines of conflict along the boundaries of race, class, and gender, an idea that perhaps could have been explored in more depth in the book. Nonetheless, this seems to be a relatively minor quibble for a thorough and useful book that effectively contributes answers to the questions with which Campbell is concerned. Readers will likely derive the most insight from *A Southern Community in Crisis* by reading it in conjunction with similar local histories, such as Steven Hahn’s *The Roots of Southern Populism*, which also appeared in 1983. By comparison with a place like the Georgia Upcountry over the same time period, Harrison County indeed seems to have experienced little structural change, a difference with wider implications for our understanding of the cotton-belt South in the late nineteenth century. Readers should also consult Walter L. Buenger’s *The Path to a Modern South* (2001), which examines Northeast Texas between the 1880s and 1930. Picking up chronologically where Campbell left off, Buenger finds that the counties located just to the north of Harrison experienced a great deal of social and economic change beginning in the 1880s, a trend that marked a divergence from the rest of the South. Thirty-four years after its publication, *A Southern Community in Crisis* remains essential reading for students of Texas, the South, the Civil War era, and social history.

Nicholas Roland is a doctoral candidate in United States history at the University of Texas at Austin. He is the author of “‘If i git home I will take care of Num Bir one:’ Murder and Memory on the Hill Country Frontier,” West Texas Historical Review 92 (December 2016). His research examines political violence in the Texas Hill Country during the Civil War era.