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Schooling In The Antebellum South: The Rise Of Public And Private Education In Louisiana, Mississippi, And Alabama

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Review

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Hyde, Sarah L. *Schooling in the Antebellum South: The Rise of Public and Private Education in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama.* LSU Press, $42.50
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Antebellum Education Revised

In nineteenth-century southern education, the lines distinguishing public and private were thin, and wisely Sarah L. Hyde casts a wide net in her new study, *Schooling in the Antebellum South*. Hyde writes against the common misconception that portrays "inhabitants of that region as shiftless bumpkins content with illiteracy and ignorance." (1) She admits that her narrative is not one of steady progress—rather, one of "setbacks and mistakes [that] seriously marred the system" (6)— and she does not present a "straight trajectory of progress." (168) But she clearly argues that southern schooling participated in the national mainstream, in step with national trends. By 1860, Hyde maintains, the outlines of a modern public educational system were coming into focus in the South.

Schooling the American South is a compact, very readable volume that mines the primary sources, covering a large historical literature. Hyde carefully combines institutional with experiential history and in the process nicely weaves individuals' stories into her narrative. She divides her book into chapters that cover home and private education, mostly during the early nineteenth century and before; the subsequent origins of "free" schools, or charity schools begun for those unable to afford private education; the growth of urban schools, especially in New Orleans, Natchez, and Mobile; the establishment of a rubric of statewide common school system; and the experiences of students and teachers inside the classroom. By the time the Civil War began, as she shows, more than a quarter million white Southerners were enrolled in these Gulf South schools.

Although Hyde asserts that the literature is scant, *Schooling in the Antebellum South* joins an abundant scholarship over the past three or four

decades that reexamines the role of education in the South. The notion that there was little public schooling in the region dates to early twentieth-century studies of southern education, but nowadays few scholars would dispute this. Rather, current scholars are considering key issues such as how this system was established and shaped, who it served and to what extent it established itself, and what continuities exist between antebellum and postbellum education. On these points, Hyde is less informative. Her strongest and most original material appears in her chapter on urban schools, and here she's on to something. Other studies have shown conclusively that the urban South led the way in mass education. Publicly supported schools in southern cities became a marker of an emerging urban ethos not only evident in Gulf Coast cities, but also in places like Richmond, Charleston, and Savannah. This appears to be less true in rural areas, where schooling of any kind was erratic, infrequent, and lacked substantial public support. The story of rural schooling has always differed from that of city schools, but the differences were especially pronounced during the antebellum era.

Schooling in the Antebellum South covers three states, but this reader wants to know the rationale for their selection and how they fit into a larger regional and national pattern. The states of the Old Southwest which Hyde studies possessed characteristics in school structure and funding generally absent in the Old Southeast states of Virginia and the Carolinas, as well as Border South states like Kentucky, Missouri, Tennessee and Maryland. Rather than general comparisons with Massachusetts, more revealing might have been comparisons with the diverse school experiences across the region.

Perhaps the most serious omission in the book is her treatment of black education. Early in the book, she acknowledges its absence. On the one hand, in a society in which slave literacy was criminalized, how possible was it to establish a mass educational system? She suggested slaveholders' unease in other parts of the book about the implications of mass education, but could more have been explored about how a slave society questioned learning among the white and black underclass. On the other hand, some scholars have shown that schooling for slaves did exist informally—indeed, that an underground system in some instances provided for learning and literacy. The slaveholders' prohibition on slave education, if anything, fanned enthusiasm for literacy as a marker of freedom—something immediately evident during Civil War and Reconstruction, when freed slaves rushed into schools in search of literacy.

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Schooling in the Antebellum South is nonetheless a welcome addition to the literature on southern education. Well written and organized, it is indispensable to students of the origins of mass schooling in the South.

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