

Cracking The Solid South: The Life Of John Fletcher Hanson, Father Of Georgia Tech

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Review

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Dunn, Lee C. *Cracking the Solid South: The Life of John Fletcher Hanson, Father of Georgia Tech.* Mercer University Press, \$35.00 ISBN 9780881465624

The New South Expanded

Conventional wisdom (and history books) tells us that Henry W. Grady was the most outspoken person in favor of post-Civil War industrialization in the South. With Lee C. Dunn's book *Cracking the Solid South: The Life of John Fletcher Hanson, Father of Georgia Tech* we can now include another Georgian, John Hanson, in that conversation. Born in 1840 in Barnesville, Georgia, not much is known about Hanson's childhood, though Dunn surmises Hanson's education consisted of reading newspapers and the Bible (his father was a minister) and attending the old-field schools. When the Civil War broke out in 1861 Hanson enlisted as a private in the Spalding Grays, which later became part of the 2nd Georgia Battalion. When the 53rd Georgia Infantry Regiment was formed in May 1862 Hanson was commissioned adjutant with the rank of major. For the remainder of his life Hanson was referred to as Major. In this capacity Hanson fought in several major battles in the Virginia theatre of the war, including the Peninsula Campaign, the Seven Days' Battles, Antietam, and Chancellorsville. Just a few days after Chancellorsville, in May 1863, Hanson resigned from the Confederate Army for medical reasons; a surgeon's letter stated he suffered from nephritis and calculus, though years later Hanson claimed chronic bronchitis as the reason he resigned. Whatever the malady, he sat out the rest of the war.

It is in the postwar period though that Major Hanson established himself as an advocate for southern industrialization. Dunn describes Hanson as "an industrialist and visionary," and that he "personified the phoenix who rose from the ashes, becoming a leading Georgia advocate of the New South in the aftermath of the Civil War" (pg. 2). What perhaps makes Hanson stand out is that he was not just a spokesman for industrialization, he practiced what he

preached. At the peak of his career he controlled nine mills that manufactured hosiery, twine, cording, yarn, coarse fabrics, and fine Egyptian cotton fabrics. In addition to his textile interests Hanson founded the Columbus Power Company to generate hydroelectric power and presided over the Central of Georgia Railway and the Ocean Steamship Company (a subsidiary of the railway). Add to that his leadership role in the creation of a technological school in the state, Georgia Institute of Technology, and Hanson surpasses all others in preaching and practicing the New South industrial gospel.

Settling in Barnesville after the war, Hanson's entrepreneurial side emerged and he began a furniture enterprise with support and funding from Cyrus Wakefield of Massachusetts. It is significant to note his financial support came from the North, money being largely unavailable in the postwar South. In order to support his growing family Hanson got involved in a brick business and was an agent for the North American Life Insurance Company. In addition, Hanson formed a partnership in 1868 to run a warehouse to store cotton, and formed a similar partnership with his father for the same purpose. Always the hard worker, Dunn states that the Major held seven different jobs in Barnesville. In 1871 Hanson and his family moved to Macon, the heart of the cotton trade in Middle Georgia.

Hanson's move to Macon put him in the center of the cotton business in that part of the state and Hanson quickly became a commission merchant; also called cotton factors, merchants bought and sold cotton on commission. In his work as a merchant Hanson discovered an abandoned warehouse, which he purchased in 1876 along with his brother and Hugh Comer, a cotton merchant in Savannah. Their plan to open a textile factory came to fruition on September 15, 1876 with the opening of Bibb Manufacturing. In addition to textiles, Bibb was also a gristmill, though the textile portion of the factory was more profitable and eventually took over the entire property. In short order Hanson and his partners purchased a failing factory out of foreclosure and called it Bibb Mill No.2; the original Bibb premises was called Bibb Mill No. 1. By the fall of 1878 Bibb boasted 220 employees, and in five years (1876-1881) Bibb's value doubled. This was the beginning of Hanson becoming a leader of the postwar industrial movement in Georgia and the South.

In 1881 Hanson diversified his business enterprises by purchasing the *Macon Telegraph* and becoming the managing editor. The *Telegraph* became an avenue through which Hanson could espouse his belief in industrialization and

his desire to fight political corruption. In the latter cause he tangled with Henry Grady, the Atlanta Ring, and Grady's *Atlanta Constitution*. While both men supported industrialization in the South, their general outlook differed and they disagreed on many political issues of the day. Grady, though forward thinking on the southern economy, tended to look backwards on other issues, such as supporting a one-party system in the South, opposing equality for African Americans, and coming out against tariff reform. Hanson, on the other hand, supported equality for blacks, came out for tariff reform, and endorsed a two-party system in the South. In fact, he became a Republican in the 1880s and supported Benjamin Harrison in the 1888 presidential election (for which he was considered for a cabinet post). For his position on these issues Hanson was branded a heretic in much of the South, which perhaps explains his anonymity to history.

Another avenue Hanson pursued in his support of industrialization in Georgia and the South was the creation of a technological school in the state, a cause he championed in the pages of the *Telegraph*. The Major knew that if Georgia was to be competitive industrially, the state needed an institution to train students in chemical, mechanical, textile, and electrical engineering. Besides, he needed trained foremen for his factories. Hanson began his editorial campaign for this kind of institution in March 1882. A second approach Hanson used was to lobby the state legislature, and his conduit was Macon Representative Nathaniel Harris, who won a seat in the state House in 1882. Through Harris the legislature created a committee to study the issue of technological education in Georgia. The committee visited numerous campuses, including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, before recommending the creation of a technological school. For his part, Hanson personally lobbied both houses of the legislature in support of the bill to create this institution. Despite the committee's report and Hanson's efforts, the legislature did not pass the bill. Undaunted, Harris reintroduced the bill in 1885 and the Major continued to lobby the legislature. This time their efforts were rewarded with success, as the bill passed and the governor signed it on October 13, 1885. A year later Atlanta was chosen as the location for the school, and two years after that, on October 5, 1888, the Georgia School of Technology (later Georgia Institute of Technology) held its formal opening. Hanson's role in the creation of Georgia Tech should not be underestimated; a former vice-provost of academic affairs at Georgia Tech wrote this about Hanson: "More than any other individual, John F. Hanson deserves to be remembered as Georgia Tech's founder and the creator of its tradition of

promoting economic development through technological education” (pg. 104). Hanson is honored on campus with a student dormitory named for him.

The creation of Georgia Tech is probably the crowning achievement in John Hanson’s career in bringing industry to Georgia and the South. In *Cracking the Solid South*, Lee Dunn has done for Hanson what the Major did for southern industry. She has made Hanson a recognized figure and provided historians with a more forward thinking alternative to Henry Grady. On the postwar industrialization of Georgia and the South Hanson should now be mentioned equally with Grady. The book is comprehensively researched and put together well with a section of photographs relevant to Hanson. It is a significant contribution to our knowledge of the postwar industrialization movement in Georgia and the South.

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