

Making a Slave State: Political Development in Early South Carolina

Jeff Strickland

Montclair State University, stricklandj@mail.montclair.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Strickland, Jeff (2019) "Making a Slave State: Political Development in Early South Carolina," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 21 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.21.2.25

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol21/iss2/25>

Review

Strickland, Jeff

Spring 2019

Quintana, Ryan. *Making a Slave State: Political Development in Early South Carolina.* University of North Carolina Press, \$90.00 ISBN 9781469641065

Ryan A. Quintana has written an outstanding book which challenges mainstream conventions about the role of slaves in state building, in this case South Carolina, from its inception as a colony to its development as a slave state. Quintana argues “that black Carolinians produced the state in four distinct ways: through their physical labor; as the objects upon and around which government discourse revolved; as a consequence of their daily movements delivering goods, supplies, and labor, which gave meaning to the state’s planned infrastructure; and through varied social and cultural meanings that slaves imposed on the landscape, which challenged the meaning and practice of liberal state space” (p. 6).

Slaves were simultaneously a strength of the state and the “within enemy” (p. 17). Quintana discusses how the Stono Rebellion influenced state policy throughout the second half of the eighteenth century. Slave insurrection, and slave resistance generally, remained high on the minds of South Carolina’s slavocracy. The slaveholding elite concentrated on transportation and security developments, expanding their developmental powers and knowledge along the way. Commissioners controlled the infrastructure projects and the requisite annual service, assessing slave holders in the immediate vicinity of road, bridge, canal, and other projects. In 1740, following the Stono Rebellion, South Carolina leaders passed a repressive slave code that regulated every aspect of slave life. Capital punishment occupied a central position in that code. Juridical authorities made a public example when they executed slaves for a variety of offenses, compensating slave owners for their losses (p. 44).

In chapter 2 on the Revolutionary Era, Quintana reveals the aggressive position which Charles Cotesworth Pinckney took, arguing that South Carolina needed slaves to be successful (pp. 48-49). The success of revolutionary forces in South Carolina depended on slaves. The 1782 Confiscation Act authorized revolutionaries to confiscate slaves from Loyalist planters. South

Carolina relied on many of those confiscated slaves to develop more territory through various infrastructure projects, including the Santee Canal Company (p. 68). Simultaneously, slaves resisted, often running away and even creating maroon communities along the Savannah River, directly challenging state sovereignty (p. 87).

Importantly, Quintana has arrived at this compelling argument through original interpretation of archival sources that have been accessible for decades. Historians have been aware of these documents for generations but nobody had put them together in such a coherent way—until now. For example, Quintana utilized the Charles Drayton plantation diary to discuss the necessity of slave mobility in chapter 3 (p. 90). He supplemented that source with William Bartram’s travel account (p. 93).

A section on the limits of control emphasized the rebellious inclination of slaves persisted into the nineteenth century regardless of the state’s efforts. Black boatmen epitomized the possibility of developed space when slaves and free blacks navigated the very infrastructure they had created toward their own ends.

Following the War of 1812, South Carolinians “sought to consolidate ever more authority within the hands of a centralized government that would become the primary conduit of power and of the people’s welfare” (p. 151).

The book is neatly organized and begins with the early eighteenth-century and includes a discussion of the Stono Rebellion and its influence upon the development of South Carolina. The book concludes with coverage of the Denmark Vesey Conspiracy. In May 1822, white Charlestonians responded to the Denmark Vesey’s planned insurrection. Many whites blamed the AME Church on the Charleston Neck. A period of severe repression followed as courts tried more than 100 cases, hanging thirty-five slaves and leaving their bodies at the boundary between the Neck and the Charleston city limits. Next, Charleston authorities focused their efforts on Forest Joe and his associates. Slaves and free blacks continued to frequent the numerous sites of resistance present on the Neck. In the 1840s, white Charlestonians argued for the annexation of the Neck in order to better police slaves who drank at grog shops and paid with property requisitioned from their masters.

Quintana ends the important book with a conclusion that really ties the book together. The notion that “slaves made the state” (p. 183) through their labor has broad implications for contemporary South Carolina politics and society. Quintana effectively demonstrates the legacy

of slavery in the political, social, and economic development of South Carolina. This book is a must read for specialists who study slavery and the American South.

Jeff Strickland
Montclair State University