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Fair to Middlin': The Antebellum Cotton Trade of the Apalachicola/Chattahoochee River Valley

Lynn Willoughby

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Doing business in the antebellum South required a very delicate balancing act - with the central role in the process played by the coastal merchant. From this vantage point the merchant manipulated the resources from the up-river suppliers and, through an intricate economic network and banking, provided cotton to the international brokers. It was, in effect, a closed system on each river under the careful control of the coastal merchants. This study focuses on the port of Apalachicola, Florida, and the businessmen who created a chain of international finance and trade in the promotion and distribution of the Old South's major source of income. "Fair to Middlin'" provides a detailed description of a regional antebellum economy in the Apalachicola/Chattahoochee River valley and reinforces the argument that the South was self-sufficient and not dependent on other regions for its food supply. Willoughby explains how the businessmen associated with the area's cotton trade coped with the poor conditions of transportation, communication, money and banking. Early regional economics revolved around the rivers that represented the primary transportation arteries for trade in the Old South. Cotton businessmen located along the waterway and on the coast neatly divided the labour necessary to market the region's major source of income. Local money and banking conditions retarded the economic growth of this frontier area, and only the innovations of these coastal businessmen enabled the continuance of this vital trade network. The advent of the railroad shattered this ongoing business arrangement and completely altered the cohesiveness of the river economy. Railroads fundamentally changed the business customs and trade routes so that boundaries of the once-separate river economies blurred and eventually faded, gradually leading to an integrated national economy.

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