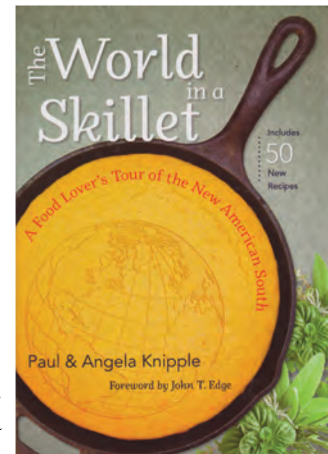
Reviews

The World in a Skillet: A Food Lover's Tour of the New American South. By Paul and Angela Knipple. (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. Pp. xvii + 269, foreword, preface, suggested reading, acknowledgments, index of recipes, general index. $35.00, hardcover)

The preface to *The World in a Skillet*, written by Southern Foodways Alliance director and well-known southern cooking evangelist, John T. Edge, begins with a description of Buford Highway in Atlanta, an area where an eclectic assortment of ethnic restaurants challenge the barbecue and cornbread paradigm that defines southern eating in the imaginations of many. The Knipples temporarily backtrack from Edge's welcome detour with a preface that summarizes the standard food history of the region beginning with initial colonial culinary encounters between Europeans, Native Americans, and enslaved Africans. The section entitled "Keepers of the Flame" builds on the expectations of the preface by offering tributes to and recipes for traditional southern items like greens, hoecakes, and crawfish étoufée. However, after this seemingly obligatory invocation of totemic foods (which is reinforced by cover art of a cast iron skillet filled with a perfect wheel of golden cornbread), the authors mercifully depart from the "mess o' greens" (pp. 6, 8) genre of southern food writing and begin to document the food practices of the "new global south" as manifested on Buford Highway (p.1).

Readers who, like myself, have lived in the south for many years without subsisting primarily on fried chicken and sweet tea in defiance of singular ideas about "down home" foods, will find the portrait of regional foodways as presented in *The World in a Skillet* refreshing. The authors capture a seldom documented southern food scene that is particularly familiar to residents of urban areas, where locals dine enthusiastically on dishes like "*Dua Cai Chua* (Vietnamese- Style Mustard Greens) and "*Mole Negro* (Oaxacan Black Sauce)" (pp. 110-111, 32-33). Recipes for these and other items designed to please an expanding southern palate are provided in the book. Helpful asides after each recipe, which the authors refer to as "kitchen passports," give tips on how to modify the ingredients to suit various preferences and dietary restrictions, a mechanism that further supports their depiction of southern foodways as evolving and adaptable.



The Knipples profile a number of cooks and restaurants throughout the south, giving biographical snapshots of a diverse group of food entrepreneurs who earn their living feeding the residents of the region. Their sketches of foodies with origins throughout the globe include those whose own food traditions mimic southern founding foodways due to the intertwining of similar colonial influences. They convincingly argue that cooks from Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba who relocated to the United States discovered that "the foodways of the Caribbean are not so foreign to the South, be-

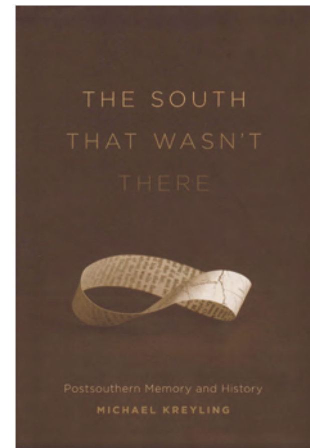
cause enslaved Africans brought similar influences to both areas" (p. 35). They also document the stories and cherished recipes of immigrants from geographically more distant spaces, including Hamad Nassan, a Kurd who was born in Iraq who now owns a restaurant in Nashville called the House of Kabobs. In a format used throughout the book, the Knipples tell Nassan's story of immigrating to the United States, landing in the South, and using his cultural heritage to make a living by opening a restaurant. Nassan personifies the theme of *The World in a Skillet* in his own eating habits. He tells the authors that his family dines out each week at a "Mexican, Chinese, or Persian" restaurant. "We try all different kinds of American food. It's good experience to use all these foods. You find something you never had in your life and something you like" (p.62).

By quoting liberally from interviews with the cooks whose recipes they adapted for this hybrid cookbook, the authors embed their dishes into complex personal histories, showing that the foods people create are both a reflection of pride in a distinctive cultural heritage and the product of intermingling traditions. Some of the individuals whose lives provide meaningful context for the meals they prepare are more prosperous and better established than others. The Knipples offer a poignant reminder of the fragility of some of their dreams when they gently suggest that their readers "check ahead if you plan to visit these folks" because "even in a good economy, restaurants can fail" (p. 253). Because their stories are so ably presented and are augmented by photos, readers of *The World in the Skillet* will likely find themselves rooting for their success. Their impact on the foodways of the region is obvious, and this moving book has a chance to reshape the ideas of those who think of "southern food" as monolithic and provincial.

--Jennifer Jensen Wallach

The South That Wasn't There: Postsouthern Memory and History. By Michael Kreyling. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010. Pp. xi + 223, acknowledgments, notes, works cited, index. $48.00, hardcover)

In *The South That Wasn't There*, Michael Kreyling argues that memory enables the construction of a communal identity, and southern literature reveals how such collective memory-making is "present-oriented," enabling communities to employ the (fictionalized) past to survive crisis in the present (p. 8). To illustrate his argument, Kreyling focuses on texts that illustrate the "stresses" caused by enlisting the past to serve the present (p. 9). Ultimately, he presents a convincing and engaging framework; however, a few of his chapters misread the significance of individual texts. Thus, like his earlier and influential, *Inventing Southern Literature*, *The South That Wasn't There* is both thoughtful and thought-provoking but leaves some scholarly work unfinished.



Kreyling's most convincing chapters are his second, fifth, and sixth. Focusing on the nonfiction of Robert Penn Warren, Chapter Two argues that Warren cannot fully excise and overcome the racism on which his identity as an elite, white, male southerner depends. Warren confesses and seemingly rejects his early (and overt) racism, expecting absolution, only to mask his later (and more subtle) racist ideol-

ogy, which refuses to acknowledge the agency of leading black intellectuals like W.E.B. Dubois and Malcolm X. Instead of seriously engaging a scholar such as Dubois, Warren bolsters his own authority by highlighting the accommodationist politics of Booker T. Washington and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

In Chapter Five, Kreyling analyzes the legal case surrounding Alice Randall's parody of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, *The Wind Done Gone*. Memory of the antebellum South often relies more on Mitchell's novel than on historical fact, and the amount of revenue the novel generates prompted Mitchell's estate to sue Randall and her publishers, claiming that the "sequel" was not authorized and, therefore, violated copyright law. Randall's attorneys countered that the novel is a parody and, thus, violated no laws but possessed the ability to transform the cultural meaning of the original. Significantly, the transformative power Randall's novel provides exposes and revises the original novel's inability or unwillingness to portray the historical fact of sexual exploitation during slavery.

Kreyling's concluding chapter highlights his underlying assumption that the South as such does not exist, but our conception, or memory, of it continues in powerful ways. To support the point, Kreyling analyzes several texts; however, his most insightful discussion concerns Octavia Butler's neo-slave narrative, *Kindred*. Butler's main character must remember slavery in order to come to terms with her identity as a black woman in California in the 1970s. Butler links past constructs of race and gender to those of the present, challenging us to reconsider just how far we have come. Butler's novel not only fills the silence of the past, as Kreyling argues, but also fills that of the present.

While the above chapters are quite convincing, Chapter Three is only partially so; in the conflict between the Vietnam War and US claims of democracy and innocence, Kreyling argues that fiction draws upon constructions of southern masculinity and honor to justify violence by presenting it as protecting the community. Ultimately, Americans were able to forget Vietnam, and safe-guard national identity, by nostalgically focusing on the Civil War. Despite the ample evidence Kreyling provides to support these claims, his relegation of female novelists to half a dozen pages is rather disappointing. Kreyling employs Bobbi Ann Mason's *In Country* to argue that even female-written Vietnam narratives portray honor as "exclusively masculine" (p. 77). While he acknowledges Mason's insightful critique of southern male honor, he spends much more time mis-reading her protagonist's (supposed) loss of faith in men and (what he argues is a) symbolic marriage to herself.

Unfortunately, Kreyling's first and fourth chapters present arguments even more suspect. The first primarily analyzes Toni Morrison's neo-slave narrative, *Beloved*. With the "absence of data" from enslaved individuals in the historical record, Morrison's novel creates collective memory where no history exists (p. 28). While Kreyling asserts that recovering the history of slavery "matters" (p. 25) because it continues to inform the present, he fails to expound on this raison d'être for Morrison's novel. After engaging some crucial African-American scholarship, Kreyling oversimplifies slavery's relationship to the present, effectively erasing race and present-day injustice, which often is the point of neo-slave narratives. He claims slavery's present-day relevance is that everyone is commodified by market capitalism. Surely, white college professors (author and reviewer included) are not commodified in the same ways that African-American women were and are.

Kreyling's fourth chapter, which focuses on the depictions of Haiti in the texts of William Faulkner and Madison Smartt Bell, similarly disappoints. Kreyling convincingly dismisses criticisms of *Absalom, Absalom!*, but that may be the only value in this chapter. Beginning with a conflation of Paris and Haiti (the power disparities surely make this questionable),

Kreyling criticizes the new southern studies for its alleged "annexation" of other regions, particularly the Caribbean, arguing that such relationships mirror neocolonial ones the United States more generally engages in (p.119). This might be the case if scholars approached Haiti in the manner that Kreyling does; however, a significant amount of global South scholarship remains hyper-aware of disparities in material resources and power. Kreyling, on the other hand, conflates Haiti not only with Paris but with the entire Caribbean, though islands in the region possess diverse histories of emancipation and independence. Dismissing global southern studies, Kreyling embraces theories by Antonio Benitez-Rojo who, though from the Caribbean, provides an over-sexualized, feminine construction of the region that is just as problematic as some colonial ones. To be fair, Kreyling acknowledges the sexist representations of women in both Faulkner and Bell; however, he spends more time and space excusing that sexism than he does critiquing it.

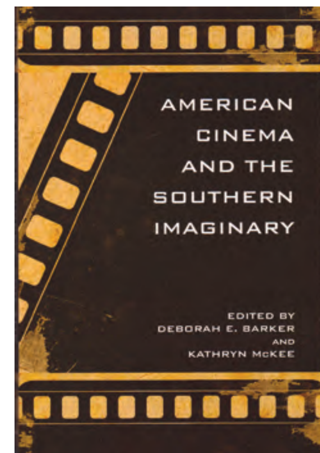
Lest the reader be left with the sense that Professor Kreyling's latest text is inadequate, this reviewer's conclusion unequivocally is that any scholar of southern literature, American literature, memory studies, or cultural studies must read Kreyling's *The South That Wasn't There*. While not without flaws, it will prove, as Kreyling's other texts have, to be an enduring staple of southern studies.

--Amy Schmidt

American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary. Ed. by Deborah E. Barker and Kathryn McKee. (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2011. Pp. ix + 375, acknowledgments, contributors, index. $24.95, paper)

The editors of *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary* make no claim to identify the southern film as a distinct motion picture genre. In the introduction to this collection of essays, Deborah Barker and Kathryn McKee say they will not even attempt to define what makes a film southern, instead broadening the idea under the umbrella of the "southern imaginary." Certainly, the southern film cannot be defined as neatly as the Western with its common plot conventions, character types, and iconography. Even place is difficult as a defining characteristic, since some of the movies mentioned in this collection are not set in the south; however, these essays all seem to come back to a common theme: race. Whether central to the essayist's objective or simply one of several factors discussed, race is mentioned in every essay in this book, perhaps stressing the importance of racial issues, whether explicit or implicit, in movies we might describe as southern.

"Part I: Rereading the Hollywood South" serves as a brief history of the early years of southern cinema. The first essay in this section, written by Robert Jackson, shows that the racism found in D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) was the rule rather than the exception in the first two decades of motion picture history. Riché Richardson's essay on *Gone With the Wind* (1939), the best known of all southern films, explores the importance of the character of Mammy as an authority on southern femininity, but spends too much time trying to make the



discussion contemporary by working in comparisons with the characters in the television series *Sex in the City*. Leigh Ann Duck has some interesting comments on race and the proliferation of chain gangs in the south in her essay on *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932), but my favorite essay from this section is Matthew Bernstein's analysis of Hollywood executive and screenwriter Lamar Trotti. I was not familiar with Trotti by name but have enjoyed many of the movies he wrote, including *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939) and *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1943). As described by Bernstein, Trotti was not only important as a screenwriter but as a "professional southerner," who was called upon by the studios to help them determine how a particular movie might be accepted by people in the south.

Part II about "Viewing the Civil Rights South" was somewhat disappointing because it included only three essays, one of which focused primarily on the 1959 film *Imitation of Life*, which was set in New York. The film and its theme of "passing" is certainly important in a discussion of race on film, but does it really belong in a book of essays about southern cinema? The essay on Spike Lee's documentary *4 Little Girls* (1997) provided little more than a description of how this landmark film was edited, but the essay on "Exploitation Movies and the Freedom Struggle of the 1960s" made for an intriguing conclusion to this section. Author Sharon Monteith shared information about three little-known exploitation films from the 1960s, all of which follow the troubles encountered by civil rights workers from the north as they travel into the segregated south. Monteith contrasts these raw, violent, sexually suggestive movies with the "narratives of affirmation" (p. 197) that have appeared primarily in TV movies since the 1980s, finding that the exploitation movies "captured what was ugly and irrational about segregationist rites of racial self-preservation" (p. 213) rather than the "liberal revisioning" (p. 197) in the more recent films.

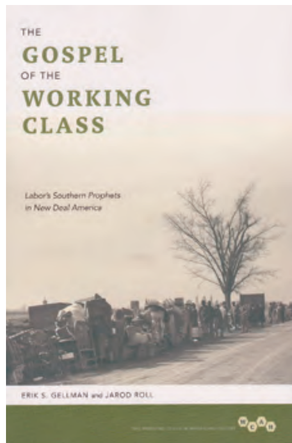
Some of the most fascinating reading comes in the final section, "Crossing Borders," which takes on a variety of different critical approaches to more contemporary films. Jay Watson uses postmodernism to tackle the idea of a "postsouthern" cinema by examining three movies that demonstrate a transition from the Old South to a restructured view of the region. R. Bruce Brasell writes about four movies that show the intersection of independent film, gay cinema, and the south to form a chronotope he calls "Humid Time." Other essays in Part III examine Native Americans in southern cinema, a Hollywood view of post-Katrina New Orleans, and the use of blues music as a tool of liminality in some recent movies.

Good movie criticism excites me with new insights about films I have seen and makes me anxious to view movies I haven't seen. This collection of essays accomplishes both.

--Ben Fry

The Gospel of the Working Class: Labor's Southern Prophets in New Deal America. By Erik S. Gellman and Jarod Roll. (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2011. Pp. xvi + 221, acknowledgments, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. $30.00, paper)

On November 5, 1936, in a small Baptist Church in Crosno, Missouri, Claude Williams, a white Presbyterian minister living in Arkansas, electrified the congregation's black sharecroppers and tenant farmers by preaching what Erik Gellman and Jarod Roll call "the gospel of the working class." Deliverance, Williams insisted, could only come through



labor unions: "We pray to our heavenly Father—not the white man's father . . . not the black man's father—but our Father. We ask, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Thy will be done in the union. That's what trade unionism is—the most Christian thing in the world." Williams' jeremiad found converts in that church, none more important than its minister, Owen Whitfield. The bond that these two preachers formed that day is at the center of this examination of the powerful interracial labor movement that activists built in Depression-era Arkansas and Missouri and spread to the assembly lines of Michigan, the cigarette factories of North Carolina, and the tire plants of Tennessee.

Gellman and Roll skillfully trace the upbringings of both Williams and Whitfield to show how each man arrived at that church in Crosno. Growing up the son of humble farmers from Tennessee, Williams imbibed his family's rebellious Cumberland Presbyterian faith—radical individualism, suspicion of wealth and displays of grandeur, Biblical literalism—and entered seminary after service in the Great War. Fueled by faith and a good dose of the Social Gospel, Williams responded to the Great Depression by challenging both the prerogatives of elites and the white supremacy that kept poor whites and blacks divided. After losing his pulpit in Paris and getting run out of Fort Smith for his radical politics, Williams began organizing for the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU).

Unlike most black men born in 1890s Mississippi, Owen Whitfield—through determination, luck, and the support of an uncle—managed to secure a good education. The Okolona Industrial School's lessons concerning "the power of ideas, dignity of labor, and 'spirit' of civic service" (p. 15) would inform many of his life decisions: embrace of Garveyism, call to the Baptist pulpit, migrations to Arkansas and Missouri, and enthusiasm for Williams' preaching of the gospel of the working class and the STFU.

The bulk of the book focuses on the religiously-infused interracial labor movement that Williams and Whitfield did so much to sustain. As personal squabbles, political infighting, planter opposition, and Congress's unwillingness to extend New Deal labor protections to agricultural workers conspired to tear apart the STFU, the pair organized the People's Institute of Applied Religion (PIAR). Adopting a nonsectarian approach but one styled after Holiness-Pentecostal revivals, PIAR offered a message to the poor: "faith would lead them to seek liberation within earth's horizons" (p. 115). This message, Gellman and Roll write, "stuck like pine tar to southern workers," and the PIAR quickly expanded, opening chapters during World War II in a number of southern cities and a few northern ones with large numbers of southern migrants (p. 119).

The authors do such a marvelous job explaining the powerful appeal of the gospel of the working class to southern workers that their insistence on its rapid postwar demise does not ring true. They argue that Cold War-era persecutions of radicals nearly crippled the movement and that the failure of Henry Wallace's 1948 presidential campaign "closed off any real space that might have existed for progressive politics" (p. 158). While the Cold War certainly made life professionally and personally difficult for both Williams and Whitfield, whose postwar travails are well documented, the gospel of the working class was more than just these two men and the movement had a much longer lasting legacy than the authors realize. Like pine tar, it was hard to get rid of. In Arkansas, for instance, the political alliance that blacks and trade unionists formed during

the World War II era survived into the 1950s and 1960s, forming the liberal wing of the state's Democratic Party.

Quibbles about the legacy of the gospel of the working class aside, Gellman and Roll have produced a fantastic book that has broadened understandings of interracial unionism during the Great Depression and World War II, highlighting connections between religion and radicalism, North and South, agricultural workers and factory hands, and black and white. Those seeking to understand the Delta's place in the nation need to read this book.

--Michael Pierce

The Accidental City: Improvising New Orleans. By Lawrence N. Powell. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012. Pp. 422, notes, acknowledgments, index. $29.95, hardback)

New Orleans remains the most fascinating, mysterious, and loved/hated city in the United States. As Shannon Lee Dawdy reports in her 2008 book, *Building the Devil's Empire: French Colonial New Orleans* (2008), in 1717, a year before the establishment of New Orleans, French missionary Father François Le Maire, who spent fourteen years in Louisiana, revealed that the "entire colony is a veritable Babylon." Similarly, a French military commander complained about the disorder that was reigning in the colony which, "to the shame of France let it be said, is without justice, without discipline, without order, and without police" (Dawdy p. 25). As depicted on its cover, Lawrence Powell's *The Accidental City* traces the story of the birth of New Orleans within a "savage" environment and its development through the French and Spanish colonial rule to Louisiana's statehood in 1812. Established in the middle of a swamp, Powell argues that the very existence of the "accidental city" was a result of European rivalries and imperial ambitions.

Initially unpromising, the settlement of New Orleans became a crossroads for the borderlands in North America. In his first two chapters, Powell examines the French exploration of the Mississippi River and of what is now New Orleans, as well as their confrontations with the English and Spaniards over territorial expansion within the region. In 1682 Robert de La Salle reached the mouth of the Mississippi and claimed the territory of *La Louisiane* for France. Immediately, the "discovery" spurred Madrid to chart the coastline of the gulf and look for the famous river. The race for land grabbing in the Lower Mississippi Valley gave birth to the contested borderlands between French Louisiana and Spanish Texas. On the eastern border of the newly French claimed territory, a French expedition, led by Jean Baptiste de Bienville, the future founder of New Orleans, successfully confronted an English warship that trespassed into their waters in 1700. The French understood the urge to settle the disputed territory. The city was prone to flooding and infested with snakes and mosquitoes while hurricanes battered it regularly. New Orleans was characterized as the impossible, but inevitable city by historians.

The second part of the book covers the early years of the improvised city. Powell's work confirms the chaos that reigned in the capital of Louisiana during its first years. The diverse types of people who filled New Orleans' urban spaces and worked its nearby plantations—the

elites and the commoners, *les grands* and *les petits gens*, as well as Africans and Indians, slave and free—each had ideas of their own about what constituted community. By the second generation, the Creole generation, the economy, politics, and social structure of the New Orleans region had drifted very far from France's original intentions. In addition to the disorder, smuggling pressed the colony to the edge of bankruptcy. By 1763, Paris would throw in the towel that, in part, led to the transfer of Louisiana to the Spaniards. The cession was also an expression of gratitude for Madrid's agreement to enter the Seven Year War on the side of France.

Next, Powell examines the developments of the city during the Spanish rule. By the time of the transition, the members of the Superior Council, who governed the colony, had grown comfortably autonomous in the French quarters, like other Atlantic Creoles of the Americas, drifting towards self-governance almost by default. In March 1766, the first Spanish governor Antonio de Ulloa arrived in New Orleans. In an attempt to control the economics of the newly acquired territory, Ulloa issued new commercial decrees that changed trade practices. The frustration of New Orleans' business community resulted in a mob insurrection that forced the Governor to leave. In his closing chapters, the author discusses the development of the Creole city and the hurricanes that hit New Orleans at the end of the 18th century. Powell devotes two chapters to the complicated struggle of the slaves as the institution of slavery in colonial New Orleans changed over time. After the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the city became an American gateway. In his last chapter, the author discloses the details of the complicated transfer of the city to the Americans.

The Accidental City unwraps the first two centuries of the history of the city with exciting details and valuable archival maps and illustrations. Powell offers a very insightful story of the rise of the city, its complexity and fluidity, and its development into the most exotic city of the United States. The book is exceptionally researched and wonderfully written.

--Sonia Toudji

New Roads and Old Rivers: Louisiana's Historic Pointe Coupee Parish. Photographs by Richard Sexton. Text by Randy Harelson, with Brian Costello. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012. Pp. xx + 172, preface, acknowledgments, Pointe Coupee timeline, appendix, suggested reading, index. $45.00, cloth)

This book falls nicely into a category of recent offerings on local Louisiana history that relies largely on beautiful photography and spare yet informative text to bring a particular place to life. Though this book may seem on first blush to be a "coffee table book" that merits simply a cursory thumb through, it is much more than that. It is a photographic and textual exploration of a piece of America that is poorly understood and little recognized.

Over the past several years, there have been numerous books exploring the Spanish influence and impact on North America, concentrating on borderland studies at the macro and micro scale. Many of these books center on the conflict between the Spanish and the English followed by Anglo-Americans as they wrestle for control of North America. As this topic has flourished, the role of a third European player in North America has been somewhat brushed to the sidelines. This would be the French, whose impact in North America was more than transitory, with the imprint of French culture clearly seen in isolated rural places like Pointe Coupee Parish. That the French involvement in what is now the United States has been relegated to a minor role—and the Spanish given so much more interest—is unfortunate, because the French legacy in the United States is both fascinating and richly rewarding.

The book begins with a Pointe Coupee (pronounced "Coo-Pee") timeline, which nicely positions critical events which occur both within and outside the parish. What follows is an introduction which positions Pointe Coupee (which means "the place of cut-off," based on the shifting of the Mississippi River) in Louisiana, and eight chapters which take the reader on a tour of the parish, using nicely drawn maps as a guide. The first chapter, of course, discusses the Mississippi River, which is the physical feature that gives life to the region, through its use as a transportation artery as well as the cyclical floods that enrich the soil but can alter life so dramatically. The balance of the chapters take the reader north, then west, then south through the parish, discussing and illustrating features such as False River, a sixteen mile long oxbow lake formed in 1722, the historic town of New Roads, the locks and dams of the river control structures, the Atchafalaya River, and Morganza Spillway.

The heart and soul of the book, however, and the cultural feature that figures most prominently in the many photographs, are the houses and their associated structures. Many of the houses are on the National Register of Historic Places, and several have been documented as part of the Historic American Building Survey (HABS) program. Most of the first houses in the parish were French creole houses, with their distinctive *chambre* and *salle* (bedroom and living room) layout and broad galleries, all raised above the floodplain. Both the exteriors and interiors of the houses are beautifully photographed, along with out buildings such as barns and pigeonniers, as well as the numerous oak trees which form such an important part of the cultural landscape of the American South.

The book also does a very nice job documenting the agricultural landscapes of the parish, which represent the economic lifeblood of this outpost of French culture in North America. Sugarcane and cotton were historically major crops in the parish, and remain so in the modern era. Lovely pictures of the cane fields of Pointe Coupee Parish are found throughout the book, as is a section explaining the cotton ginning process. Sprinkled throughout the text are vignettes of important personages from the parish, including John Archer Lejeune, the decorated Marine who gives his name to North Carolina's Camp Lejeune, and Julien Poydras, one of the largest early landowners in the parish and an important figure in Louisiana history.

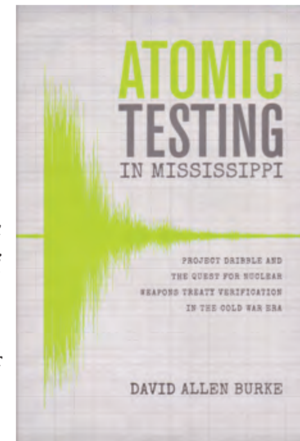
Named for the cut-offs formed by the meandering Mississippi, Pointe Coupee Parish remains largely cut-off to this day. There are no interstate highways slashing through the rural landscape, which means that much of the parish remains relatively isolated, though not untouched, by the changes that have swept over the North American landscape in the past 200 years. As this book describes, a drive through Pointe Coupee Parish is a bit of a journey back in time, to a corner of the American South settled by the French. With the parish today a part of the Atchafalaya National Heritage Area, there are likely to be more travelers willing to get off the highway and drive these roads less traveled. This wonderfully written

and illustrated book should serve to further whet the appetite of the adventurous traveler.

--Dean Sinclair

Atomic Testing in Mississippi: Project Dribble and the Quest for Nuclear Verification in the Cold War Era. By David Allen Burke. Introduction by William Bedford Clark. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011. Pp. xi + 194, acknowledgments and dedication, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. $39.95, cloth)

The recent nuclear saber rattling of North Korea makes David Allen Burke's *Atomic Testing in Mississippi* all the more interesting and relevant, offering historical background to the tensions of our time. And yet its title notwithstanding, the book does not offer readers as much history as one would expect or likely want. Rather, Burke's effort is a testament to the multi-faceted nature of nuclear weaponry in the modern age, for in an instructive manner, this information packed, comparatively short volume, touches upon seemingly every possible aspect of modern nuclear warfare, and all the technical aspects of the Mississippi testing. But in casting such a broad net, Burke has lost some necessary focus. Consequently, it is a book that can leave a reader wishing that for all its many virtues, it had gone in another direction or at least offered more in some of the ones it does touch upon. Indeed, while impressively researched and comprehensive on many levels, it is also a book that seems in search of its singular purpose and audience, as it careens between deeply detailed and complex explanations in some areas and simplistic, almost casual references in others, resulting in a frustrating inconsistency.



There is no denying that *Atomic Testing in Mississippi* is a masterful, impressively researched and detailed work of scientific history. But beginning with the title and continuing through the introduction, it promises to be more than that—and its failure to deliver a broader based treatment is ultimately disappointing. In many ways Burke's acknowledged original title, "Southern Devices: Geology, Industry, and Atomic Testing in Mississippi's Piney Woods" would have been a better one, for the treatment he accords the local geology, a treatment rooted in Burke's well supported assertion that its geology was the central reason the area near Hattiesburg was chosen as the site for the mid-1960's testing exercises, makes it the book's star and central character. Yet while his detailed treatment of the area's geology offers sufficient reason why the testing was done in Mississippi, the lack of comparative context makes even that aspect of the story less than compelling.

Atomic Testing in Mississippi is a book awash in detailed discussions and descriptions of distinctive scientific tasks, factors, and procedures. Even the most casual reader is likely to come away from this impressively detailed effort with the feeling that they have just been offered a step by step lesson in how to prepare and conduct an underground nuclear test. But at the same time, there is a major void as the book pays comparatively little attention to the human dimension of the story despite the fact that it was that which made the testing in Mississippi truly different and distinctive when compared to the other testing sites. Indeed, testing in Mississippi was different because unlike

the desert based ones in the west or those conducted in the barren wilderness expanse of Alaska, the Mississippi tests were carried out in the midst of a populated area, and thus had a greater potential for direct and immediate impact on the human populace. And yet there is precious little heart or humanity in this book, as the people are too often lost amidst detailed specifics about the width of the holes and extended discussions of salt density. Readers get some tantalizing glimpses—we are offered some insight into the life and grievances of the Tatum family who originally owned the land where the testing ultimately took place and we are introduced to Claudette Ezell who fears that her precious collection of wall mounted plaster of Paris plaques will be shattered when the test induced tremors occur—fears that ultimately proved unfounded—and we get quick snippets of some of the small town denizens who are excited at being a part of history. But these limited portraits, while too often either simplistic or focused on the eccentric, serve only to whet our appetite for more, for a greater understanding of the impact of the testing on the people of Mississippi and not just the obvious role the testing played as a next step in the continuum that was the Cold War arms race. We hunger to know what made this effort truly different. Burke makes clear where the Mississippi tests fit in on the time line that is the nuclear age, but beyond the unique geology that made it a perfect place to test, there is little to help the reader understand what made testing in Mississippi something truly different from all the other efforts.

Indeed, for all its impressive detail, too few of the broader issues are explored in the ways that would have served either the readers or the story. Burke notes that the testing efforts represented a challenge to the usual federal-state dynamic that was no small part of Mississippi culture at the time, but he all but ignores the broader context in which that debate was playing out, no small oversight, when we remember that all of the testing and the preparations took place against the backdrop of the race based turmoil that gripped Mississippi during this period. It is a telling omission, but reflective of the fact that the atomic testing narrative is devoid of any broader historical context.

Ultimately, while there is no denying the impressive and comprehensive treatment of the science issues that are at the heart of this book, that coverage is no less a problem, for both the title, as well as the introduction, promise more; and the tests themselves, especially taking place as they did in the midst of some of the most turbulent times in the history of Mississippi, events that have seemingly forever established the image of the state in the national consciousness, seem ripe for a richer type of treatment. Unhappily, and ironically perhaps, in a book that deals with the realities of the pine forests of the area, the author often loses sight of the forest for the trees, missing the opportunity to enlighten and educate all readers to an even greater extent.

--William H. Pruden III