Antebellum Southern U.S. Content in Business History Courses

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Introduction

Depending on who you talk to, southerners in the antebellum era were either greedy, slaveholding farmers who lived in a backward society, or they were prosperous owners of large-scale farms who just wanted to preserve their property and states’ rights. This contrast of opinions is analogous to the split personality that Americans exhibit regarding the Civil War and slavery.

In 2011, a survey by the Pew Research Center found that Americans were divided on the question of whether slavery was the cause of the Civil War. Of respondents, 48% said the war was “Mainly about state’s rights,” while 38% said it was “Mainly about slavery” and 9% said it was about both equally. The remaining 6% said it was neither or they didn’t know (Clark 2011).

Why is there so much division over questions of slavery and the Civil War? Some of the difference in opinion is correlated with race. A 1997 poll by ABC Network asked about agreement with the statement: “The federal government should pay reparations to African Americans.” Of African American respondents, 65 percent agreed, but only 7 percent of White Republicans agreed. Another question asked about agreement to the statement: “The federal government should apologize to African Americans.” Of African American respondents, again about 65 percent agreed, but only 23 percent of White Republicans agreed (ABC News 1997).

Commonly held but contested beliefs persist about the economy of the antebellum South as well. Typically the pre-war South is characterized as “poor.” According to Scott: “Although the South has often been branded as being backward because of its less developed transportation system, less urbanization, and less industrialization, the per capita income of its free citizens in the antebellum period seems to have grown just about as fast as it did in the rest of the country” (Scott 2001).

Another disparaging argument is that the South was technologically undeveloped. Others answer, for the southern cotton and textile industries, that: “Before the institution of slavery became fixed as the leading feature of the labor system in the cotton growing area of the United States, the manufacturing interests in this area prospered more than in any other part of the country. As the production of cotton with slave labor was found to be more profitable and attractive, the
institution of slavery grew in magnitude and importance, while manufacturing interests were neglected and allowed to languish” (Tompkins 1899, v).

Business history educators can help to sort out this confused state of knowledge about the antebellum South. They can present information about the major institutions and industries of the South, within the context of the economic environment of the time.

It is important to know southern history to understand American society, and it is important to know southern business history to understand modern business structure. According to Tolnay: “There is peril in neglecting the American South as we seek to comprehend modern conditions in the United States. The South embraced legal racial segregation and prohibited racial intermarriage longer than other sections of the nation. The vast majority of legal executions have occurred in southern states since the practice was reintroduced in 1976” (Tolnay 2015, 767).

The unique paths taken by southern development have led to exceptional characteristics that persist today. “The greatest concentration of evangelical Christians is in the South. And the history and influence of Dixie is evident in today’s political map of the United States. The sharp rightward shift of the Republican Party, beginning with Ronald Reagan, could not have been accomplished without a dependable southern base. In short, in order to fully understand contemporary American society, culture, and politics, it is important to know something about southern history” (Tolnay 2015, 767).

The antebellum South played important roles in the business history of the nation, in industries including: agriculture of sugar, tobacco, rice, indigo and especially cotton; cotton textiles; transportation, including steamboats and early railroad networks (Gamst 2004); the slave industry; iron production; and retailing (Blackford 2003; Blackford & Kerr 1986). These industries and others that emerge in the process will be used to categorize the topics and papers listed in the business history syllabi.

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the state of teaching of business history, specifically for the American Old South. This will be accomplished by reviewing the syllabi of U.S. business history courses, for content related to 1780-1860.

**Methodology**

The source material is syllabi collected for a 2012 conference on teaching the history of business, finance, management, and capitalism at Harvard Business School (Friedman & Jones 2012). The 52 syllabi had 46 authors and originated from 42 universities. The course domains of study were primarily U.S. (46 syllabi) and secondarily U.S. and Canada combined (6 syllabi). See Appendix 1 for a list of authors and universities. The list of universities contains many leaders in research and teaching of business history. Nevertheless, the data have the limitation of being a convenience sample.
The methodology was to read the syllabi and tabulate topics and sources therein, as related to the Southern U.S. from about 1780-1860. The data were tabulated based on topics, and the frequency that the topics appeared in the syllabi. The goal is for the tabulated data to reveal topical coverage of antebellum southern business history, and gaps therein. The results of the analysis appear in Table 1, and are discussed in the following section. Note that typically two independent coders would tabulate qualitative data, and discuss their findings to reach a degree of convergence. One coder was used for this research, and this is a limitation.

Data collection was focused on the Old South in the antebellum period. The antebellum period is defined as approximately 1780-1860, or the time period from the end of the American Revolution to the beginning of the Civil War. The Old South is defined geographically as the former Confederate States of America, plus Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland and Delaware (Smith 2011). Note that the focus on southern states results in the omission of important topics in the development of the antebellum U.S. economic and business environment. One example is developments in banking and finance, which occurred in Boston, New York, and Washington D.C. The center of financial innovation was outside the sphere of the South. Another example is early factory manufacturing, associated with the textile factories of Lowell, Massachusetts. The reader is asked to note that the list of topics is not meant to be comprehensive to antebellum U.S. as a whole.

Results of analysis

Table 1 presents a tabulation of the topics relevant to the antebellum South, and the frequency that the topics appeared in the syllabi. Some syllabi contained several topics of interest. Some syllabi contained no topics of interest, because the timeframe did not include the antebellum era, or the syllabi focused on topics that were relevant to the North and not Southern U.S.

**Table 1: Frequency of antebellum-era topics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Frequency N=52</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Slavery</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Economy</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial Revolution/Industrial Capitalism</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banking/Finance</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate form</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labor (excl. slavery)</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrepreneurs/Tycoons</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Railroads</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation Revolution</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Market Revolution</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What follows is a discussion of the important (frequent) topics in the syllabi, along with a list of representative sources. Most of the sources were found in the syllabi, although a few recent products of scholarship were noted as important contributors to the topics of interest. Note that the citations focus on monographs and journal articles. Books that covered a long span of history, from which chapters were excerpted, were omitted in this analysis.

Overall it is clear that the topic of slavery is well-represented, which is appropriate given its unique status in the Southern U.S. Political economy is the legal context provided by state laws, which include regulation of slavery, and hence these topics overlap. Conflicts between political stances on tariffs and slavery between the South and North characterized the antebellum era, and segued directly into the Civil War.

The industrial revolution was a global phenomenon, its effects on the South were evident in the mechanization of agriculture, emergence of early railroads, the appearance of steamboats on southern rivers and steamships in southern Atlantic harbors. The transportation and market revolutions of the era were also represented in southern life, and the syllabi features sources that highlighted the changing lives of men, women, blacks, rich and poor.

One may note the relatively infrequent appearances of some topics in the syllabi. Cotton and plantation life and economy were mentioned by only 9 and 8 syllabi, respectively. These topics may have been touched on in the sources on slavery, but more often were not developed as independent topics.

Surprisingly the Bank War and Indian Removal were only found 5 times each. These were significant and defining events during the Jacksonian Era. The Bank War pitted President Jackson and southern Jeffersonian agrarian ideals against urban northern financial elites, and resulted in a political “win” for the South. The Indian Removal was also championed by Jackson, and although widely condemned by history, the availability of former Indian land was a big economic boost for the South. These topics are important to understanding the southern mindset in action, and should be discussed among the antebellum era topics of any Business History course.

### Slavery

It is no surprise that slavery is the most frequent topic found in a studies of business and economics in the antebellum U.S. The syllabi included a wide variety
of scholarship on slavery, from the economics of slavery to the experiences of individual slaves. Slavery was not unique to the South, but no-cost labor served as an important factor in the economy, a uniquely inexpensive input.

**Slavery citations:**


**Political Economy**

The government had a hand in facilitating business in the antebellum period, with influence on money, banking, property rights, intellectual property, and the corporate form in particular. At a national level this activity was centered in Washington D.C.

**Political Economy citations:**


**Industrial Revolution/Industrial Capitalism**

The productivity of U.S. increased broadly when steam power replaced horsepower in agriculture, manufacturing, and transportation. The mechanization of labor also led to the decline of craft and artisan industries, and the emergence of factory production.

**Industrial Revolution/Industrial Capitalism citations:**


**Banking/Finance**

The antebellum era hosted a transformation in banking and finance, including the emergence of markets for credit and stocks, and vehicles for deploying investments in the economy. Most banking and finance dealings took place in the North, particularly Boston and New York.

**Banking/Finance citations:**


**Corporate form**

The antebellum era ushered in innovations in management and business organization, as industries consolidated to capture the benefits of economies of scale. These developments are seen as precursors to the rapid innovation in business management that coincided with the emergence of large corporations after the Civil War.

**Corporate form citations:**


**Labor (excl. slavery)**

The changes in business and the economy transformed the working lives of men and women in the antebellum South. These changes affected jobs in agriculture, textiles, transportation, and other industries. The syllabi included content that highlighted the working lives of women, blacks, wage laborers, and even plantation bosses.

**Labor citations:**
Entrepreneurs/Tycoons

Some innovative businesspeople had great success, and outsized influence on the emerging industrial economy. The “Robber Barons” came after the Civil War, but the antebellum had its share of entrepreneurs in the ice business, early steamboats, farm equipment, and early railroads. Notable business celebrities of the era include John Jacob Astor (early fur trade), Cornelius Vanderbilt (early steamboats), and Cyrus McCormick (farm equipment).

Entrepreneurs/Tycoons citations:


**Railroads**

The antebellum South featured some early railroads, and they eventually connected to what was to become a vast rail network and transformational force in the economy. Railroads are considered the cradle of business management as a practice.

**Railroads citations:**


**Transportation Revolution**

The “revolution” recognizes that railroads were a transformation force, but railroads served along with canals, roads, and steamboats to enable Americans and American goods to move west.

**Transportation Revolution citations:**


**Market Revolution**

The industrial revolution enabled producers to be more productive, to consolidate, and thereby produce surpluses of agricultural products and goods. The transportation revolution arose in part to move to goods to consumers. Merchants, bankers, warehousemen, wholesalers retailers, and shippers emerged to facilitate this trade.

**Market Revolution citations:**


**Cotton**

Agriculture in the antebellum South was known for several commodities, including tobacco, rice, and sugar; but cotton was king. During this time mill-woven cloth replaced homespun, and the demand for textiles drove increased demand for cotton. The South had fertile soil, the right climate, and cheap forced labor to produce cotton profitably. Slavery made cotton farming profitable, and increased cotton farming made slavery profitable, a Devil’s bargain for the southern economy.
Cotton citations:


Plantations

Generally producers of cotton, but growers of other crops as well, and self-sufficient producers and consumers of various commodities. Scholarship ranges from the economics of the plantation system to examinations of life on the plantation.

Plantations citations:


Iron and coal

Many locations in the antebellum South had the ingredients for a pig iron furnace: iron ore, limestone, hardwood trees (for charcoal), and a river (for transportation). The iron industry grew with innovations and demand by the railroads, as did coal mining.
Iron and coal citations:


Bank War

President Jackson was aligned with agrarian southern interests, whose preference for limited government and state sovereignty make them allies in what became Jackson’s war against the Second Bank of the United States (a national bank). Jackson won, the bank died, and the event foreshadows the conflict between the Jeffersonian ideals of the southern planter and the Hamiltonian aim of Northern “elites” to enrich themselves by financial means at the national level.

Bank War citations:


Indian Removal
General Andrew Jackson gained immense wealth from Natives that his armies defeated, and later as President Jackson championed the Indian Relocation Act that wrested millions of acres from the Cherokee Nation (Inskeep 2015). Jackson freed up land for U.S. expansion, in keeping with the acquisitive nature of the country shown in the Mexican War and the Louisiana Purchase.

**Indian Removal citations:**


**Conclusion**

The contribution of this paper is a snapshot in time of the content of business history courses at leading universities related to the antebellum South. This research shows the uneven coverage of topics related to the Old South. The major themes of change such as the industrial revolution, the transportation revolution, and the market revolution affected the South as well as the North, perhaps more so for the southern export-led economy.

Slavery and plantation production should be studied as uniquely southern elements of the economy, but the South also had its share of change due to industrialization as compared to the North. The results of industrialization such as agricultural mechanization, transportation, and nascent industries such as railroads, iron, and steamboats can be profitably studied in a southern context. National financial markets is a topic that is better located in the context of financial and federal government centers in the North.

The gaps in content in Business History courses revealed in this paper may lead to a more robust representation of business in the antebellum South. This in turn may shine a light on the dark corners of misperception about the antebellum South, and an appreciation of the role that the South played in the development of U.S. business and the economy before the Civil War.
References


Appendix A. List of business history syllabi authors and university affiliations (Friedman & Jones, Guide to Courses in Business History Volume 3, 2012).

I. CANADA & UNITED STATES

1. Anastakis, Dimitry, Trent University
2. Fleming, Keith, University of Western Ontario
3. Hall, Kristin, Laurentian University
4. Korbak, Chris & Joe Martin, Rotman School of Management
5. Smith, Andrew, Laurentian University
6. Stephen, Scott P., University of Winnipeg

III. UNITED STATES

16. Adams, Sean, University of Florida
17. Balleisen, Edward, Duke University
18. Bean, Jonathan, Southern Illinois University
20. Beckert, Sven, Harvard University
22. Block, Michael D., University of Southern California
23. Boston, Thomas D., Georgia Institute of Technology
25. Carlton, David, Vanderbilt University
26. Castaneda, Chris J., California State University
27. Clarke, Sally H., University of Texas at Austin
28. Dailey, Maceo Crenshaw Jr. & Damon Moore, University of Texas at El Paso
29. Darroch, James, Schulich School of Business, York University
30. Dunlavy, Colleen, University of Wisconsin
31. Friedman, Walter, Harvard Business School
32. Hochfelder, David, University at Albany, SUNY
33. Howard, Vicki, Hartwick College
34. John, Richard R., Columbia University
35. Johnson, Tom, Portland State University
36. Kawabe, Nobuo, Waseda University, Japan
37. Levy, Jonathan, Princeton University
38. Licht, Walter, University of Pennsylvania
39. Lipartito, Kenneth James, Florida International University
40. Mayo, Anthony, Harvard Business School
41. Mihm, Stephen, University of Georgia
42. Moss, David, Harvard Business School
43. Murphy, Sharon, Providence College
44. Murphy, Sharon & Elizabeth Bridgham, Providence College
45. Nicholas, Tom, Harvard Business School
46. Ott, Julia, The New School
47. Pertilla, Atiba, Stern School of Business
48. Pope, Daniel, University of Oregon
49. Rose, Mark H., Florida Atlantic University
50. Rosenthal, Caitlin, University of California, Berkeley
51. Schneiberg, Marc, Reed College
52. Shermer, Elizabeth Tandy, Claremont McKenna College
53. Sicilia, David B., University of Maryland College Park
54. Stern, Marc J., Bentley University
55. Sylla, Richard, Stern School of Business
56. Usselman, Steven W., Georgia Institute of Technology
57. Walker, Juliet E.K., University of Texas at Austin
58. Waterhouse, Benjamin, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill
59. Whaples, Robert, Wake Forest University
60. Wilson, Mark, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

61. Wright, Robert E. & Matthew Pehl, Augustana College

**Keywords:** *business history, antebellum South, Old South*

**Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners:** The gaps in content in Business History courses revealed in this paper may lead Marketing Educators to offer a more robust representation of business in the antebellum South.

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**TRACK:** Marketing Education