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A Rogue’s Paradise: Crime and Punishment in Antebellum Florida, 1821-1861 by James M. Denham

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BOOK REVIEWS


The history of Florida since 1821, when it became part of the United States, long remained a little charted frontier that attracted few scholars. However, this era of Florida history is attracting a growing number of historians. One of them is James M. Denham, a fifth-generation Floridian who has written an engaging study of the forty-year period prior to the Civil War.

Focusing on the nature of crime and punishment, Denham provides a lively portrait of lawbreakers, victims, lawmen, judges, and citizens involved in the effort to establish a system of criminal justice in the new U.S. territory that became a state in 1845. Denham's narrative draws on extensive research in court records, newspapers, and unpublished manuscripts, through which the author has constructed a statistical profile of crime. However, he wisely relegates useful tabulations of his data to appendices, where they can be consulted without interrupting the flow of his narrative. (For a sample of Denham's approach, see his article in this issue of Tampa Bay History.) In chapters organized topically around types of crime and forms of law enforcement, Denham emphasizes the diversity of communities and experiences in Florida. For example, port cities like Tampa and its sparsely settled hinterland faced problems that differed from those in the more densely populated plantation areas of Middle Florida.

While noting some significant differences around Florida, Denham also identifies several important patterns in crime and responses to it. First, crimes against persons were far more common than crimes against property. However, the punishment for property crimes was more severe than for violent crimes, except in the case of murder. Whereas people convicted of personal violence usually paid a fine, sometimes as low as a few cents, thieves received jail sentences or corporal punishment, commonly a whipping. In choosing among possible explanations for this apparent anomaly, Denham stresses the impact of southern notions of honor which not only excused but mandated personal violence whenever certain values were violated. According to this code, a violent response to a verbal insult went unpunished, but violations of community standards, especially theft and crimes against public order and morality, were punished, often in public rituals that used whippings and pillories to shame perpetrators of crimes considered dishonorable.

Denham also points to Florida's sparsely settled frontier as a reason for its problems with law enforcement. His research indicates, for example, that the majority of indictments never reached a verdict. That is, most cases were dismissed or disappeared from the record because of the difficulties associated with rounding up the accused, holding them in insecure jails, and securing witnesses. The frontier not only created physical barriers to effective law enforcement, but it also "shaped the way people thought, acted, and responded" (3). In addition, Denham notes that Florida's vast frontier provided a haven for debtors, thieves, and other criminals. This led one Pensacola journalist to describe Florida as "a Paradise for Rogues" (13).
Denham’s book is a judicious and well written account of how Floridians defined crime, dealt with obstacles in punishing it, and created the beginnings of a criminal justice system. In addition, it provides a revealing view of everyday life as Floridians struggled to bring order to "A Rogue’s Paradise."

Robert P. Ingalls


Rowena Brady’s pictorial collection showcasing Tampa’s black community effectively illustrates African Americans’ varied experiences and contributions to the city’s past. Though not a historical essay, this work shares images of the African-American experience in Tampa and, in the process, illuminates a dynamic community that has not been well documented in the past. This pictorial account contains many photographs never before available to the public. Brady adds substance to this collection through explanations of photographs that help the reader understand the context of the times and events. Many activities and people depicted will be unfamiliar to the audience, which is precisely what makes this an important project. What strikes the reader most is the vision of a parallel African-American community existing alongside, but very much separate from, the white community.

The work opens with explanatory comments by Brady and a short description of African-American history in Florida contributed by Cantor Brown, Jr. This provides perspective for succeeding chapters, which generally follow a chronological order. Brady moves through the nineteenth century quickly, concentrating primarily on the period from the early 1900s through the 1960s. She chooses 1970 as the end of her chronology because, as she says, by then urban renewal and the negative impact of desegregation "undermined and eventually physically destroyed much of this community." The final two chapters of the book focus respectively on the history of St. Paul’s A.M.E. Church and notable individuals and groups in Tampa’s more recent past.

This work provides insight into many aspects of African-American life in Tampa - an experience highlighted by strong social, religious, and economic ties, but often characterized by inequalities of opportunity, pay, and status. Through pictures painstakingly gathered from personal collections and public archives, Brady gives us a sense of the daily lives of blacks in Tampa, although admittedly the book "concentrates on individuals who made contributions of substance." The importance of these individuals notwithstanding, the contributions of blacks from all walks of life were important in building and shaping both the African-American community and Tampa in general. It is particularly important to realize that within marginalized groups, economics was often less a determinant of social status or contribution to the community. Since the early days of Reconstruction, Tampa’s African-American community leaders have come from many walks of life.

Although largely marginalized by whites throughout the city’s history, the black community nurtured an independent spirit that insulated blacks to some extent from the racism around them. This book clearly documents the successes and pride of that "community within a community,"