



Flush Times and Fever Dreams: A Story of Capitalism and Slavery in the Age of Jackson

Joshua D. Rothman

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In 1834 Virgil Stewart rode from western Tennessee to a territory known as the "Arkansas morass" in pursuit of John Murrell, a thief accused of stealing two slaves. Stewart's adventure led to a sensational trial and a wildly popular published account that would ultimately help trigger widespread violence during the summer of 1835, when five men accused of being professional gamblers were hanged in Vicksburg, nearly a score of others implicated with a gang of supposed slave thieves were executed in plantation districts, and even those who tried to stop the bloodshed found themselves targeted as dangerous and subversive. Using Stewart's story as his point of entry, Joshua D. Rothman details why these events, which engulfed much of central and western Mississippi, came to pass. He also explains how the events revealed the fears, insecurities, and anxieties underpinning the cotton boom that made Mississippi the most seductive and exciting frontier in the Age of Jackson.

As investors, settlers, slaves, brigands, and fortune-hunters converged in what was then America's Southwest, they created a tumultuous landscape that promised boundless opportunity and spectacular wealth. Predicated on ruthless competition, unsustainable debt, brutal exploitation, and speculative financial practices that looked a lot like gambling, this landscape also produced such profound disillusionment and conflict that it contained the seeds of its own potential destruction. Rothman sheds light on the intertwining of slavery and capitalism in the period leading up to the Panic of 1837, highlighting the deeply American impulses underpinning the evolution of the slave South and the dizzying yet unstable frenzy wrought by economic flush times. It is a story with lessons for our own day.

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