



The Final Frontiers, 1880-1930: Settling the Southern Bottomlands (Contributions in American History)

John Otto

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An examination of the settlement history of the alluvial bottomlands of the lower Mississippi Valley from 1880 to 1930, this study details how cotton-growers transformed the swamplands of northwestern Mississippi, northeastern Louisiana, northeastern Arkansas, and southern Missouri into cotton fields. Although these alluvial bottomlands contained the richest cotton soils in the American South, cotton-growers in the Southern bottomlands faced a host of environmental problems, including dense forests, seasonal floods, water-logged soils, poor transportation, malarial fevers and insect pests. This interdisciplinary approach uses primary and secondary sources from the fields of history, geography, sociology, agronomy, and ecology to fill an important gap in our knowledge of American environmental history.

Requiring laborers to clear and cultivate their lands, cotton-growers recruited black and white workers from the upland areas of the Southern states. Growers also supported the levee districts which built imposing embankments to hold the floodwaters in check. Canals and drainage ditches were constructed to drain the lands, and local railways and graveled railways soon ended the area's isolation. Finally, quinine and patent medicines would offer some relief from the malarial fevers that afflicted bottomland residents, and commercial poisons would combat the local pests that attacked the cotton plants, including the boll weevils which arrived in the early twentieth century.

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