Old Petersburg and the Broad River Valley of Georgia
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Few historians left a greater mark on the study of Georgia’s history and the development of southern history than Ellis Merton Coulter. His accomplishments included editing the *Georgia Historical Quarterly* for over four decades, chairing the University of Georgia’s Department of History, and publishing an astonishing twenty-six books, ten edited volumes, and more than one hundred articles. Meanwhile, he helped create the Southern Historical Association and served as that organization’s inaugural president. Coulter earned the respect of students and peers, who acknowledged his stature as a leading voice in the emerging field of southern history.

Yet, Coulter, like many white southern-born historians of his era, never escaped the Lost Cause’s domineering influence on the region’s history, culture, and politics. The North Carolina native grew up surrounded by Confederate veterans and tales of northern atrocities. During his junior year at the University of North Carolina, Coulter applauded the installation of the “Silent Sam” Confederate soldier monument. He attended Confederate veteran reunions, engaged with various Confederate heritage organizations, and ardently defended racial segregation. Unsurprisingly, Coulter believed that the worst aspects of southern culture, such as slavery, racial violence, and white supremacy, could be defended through historical research. Coulter saw history as a powerful tool that explained and justified southern exceptionalism. From this perspective, racial segregation needed to be preserved regionally because southern race relations and heritage were exceptional and misunderstood beyond Dixie’s borders. Coulter’s scholarship devoted much attention to identifying and promoting
southern virtues. Coulter’s defense of the southern social order created several blind spots and ideological biases that have diminished his legacy.

In 1965, the University of Georgia Press published Coulter’s *Old Petersburg and the Broad River Valley of Georgia: Their Rise and Decline*. The book examines the development of Petersburg, Georgia, from the 1780s through the 1810s. Located between the Savannah and Broad Rivers, forty miles north of the established trading center of Augusta, Petersburg was, according to Coulter, “born of economic and social forces and out of the imagination of pioneer settlers and land speculators” (1). Coulter argues that Petersburg is a useful case study for understanding the boom-and-bust nature of American expansion. He successfully challenges previous scholars who had depicted the frontier as a land of unequaled opportunity and progress. In fact, Coulter suggests that there were as many busts, such as Petersburg, as there were success stories. Petersburg and other cities like it “lived, breathed, thrived for a time, and then utterly disappeared, leaving not even the legacy of their names” (1). Today, Petersburg lies forgotten beneath the waters of Clarks Hill Lake.

Coulter never identified himself as a microhistorian, yet like the robust scholarship that emerged from this new historical method, *Old Petersburg* asks big questions in small places. Coulter’s career spanned a period when the academy held local history in high esteem as a worthwhile form of academic research and publishing. Unlike today, mid-twentieth century historians examined local history in depth without fear that their peers would reject their work if it did not contribute to some larger historiographic debate. Local history could be researched, written, and shared widely without having to justify its purpose. The shelves of university libraries nationwide were filled with local histories that represented a major share of the academy. Historical associations continued to organize conference panels filled with local topics produced by researchers who often blurred the lines between professional historian and history enthusiast. Local history maintained a vital connective tissue that bound many scholars to history buffs in the communities that surrounded the nation’s colleges and universities. Those ties provided the study of history a larger place
in our national discourse than contemporary scholars enjoy but often reeked of nostalgic self-promoting family genealogy and lacked any sense of historical context capable of addressing the much dreaded “compared to what” and “so what” questions of analysis. Coulter’s writings, however, successfully bridged the divide between academic and popular histories.

*Old Petersburg* is a satisfying achievement as an excellent example of microhistorical analysis. Coulter’s research and writing display many merits consistent with contemporary historical methods. Foremost, the premise behind Coulter’s research was exceptional. During the late eighteenth century, Petersburg emerged as a boom town with the potential to compete with Georgia’s established economic and population centers of Augusta and Savannah. Rather than interpret Petersburg’s boom-and-bust history as an exceptional story, Coulter hypothesized that the city on the make had the potential to reveal much about the internal and external forces that confronted southern communities as they forged a new society. Coulter found in Petersburg a representative example that demonstrated the origins and tribulations of community formation in the Old South.

Coulter did an masterful job of documenting and explaining the complex networks of migration, trade, speculative investments, and transportation that connected Petersburg’s story to broader trends in early America. Although Coulter’s work includes the stories of numerous individual entrepreneurs, speculators, pioneers, and cotton planters, he skillfully avoided celebrating those individuals as exceptional founders by linking the motivations that drove their actions to broader national movements. Petersburg’s history fits nicely into a larger narrative of the post–American Revolution movement of people from the Upper South into Georgia before pushing further westward into Alabama and Mississippi. Ironically, the same factors that drove Petersburg’s quick rise contributed to its decline. Improving networks of trade, communication, and transportation, combined with the rapid expansion of cotton production on lands made available through the coerced removal of American Indians, transformed Petersburg from a boom town into a temporary stop for speculators and planters who saw vast opportunities in the Old Southwest.
Unfortunately, Coulter’s research neglected several groups who were victims rather than benefactors of those developments. Foremost, Cherokee and Creek Indians only appear in the work as a vanquished people who surrendered the valuable land that fueled expansion. Coulter, like many scholars at that time, did not consider American Indians to be agents in this process. He failed to consider how Cherokee and Creek Indian resistance and attitudes toward American expansion impacted Petersburg’s history. Instead, American Indians appear solely as the objects of white settler territorial expansion.

Likewise, Coulter cast black enslaved laborers as subordinate characters in a story where they likely played leading roles. Coulter devotes enormous energy examining developments in Euro-American culture, economy, and politics but omits any explanation of how black enslaved laborers both shaped and adapted to this changing social landscape. The forced migration of black enslaved laborers from the Upper South to the Old Southwest inflicted numerous hardships and changes on the victims of national expansion. Coulter missed opportunities to measure those impacts as he generally neglected to examine the lucrative internal slave trade that provided the cheap labor used to develop southern communities such as Petersburg.

Coulter also failed to use gender as a lens of historical analysis. The white women of Petersburg mostly appear as the mothers, wives, and daughters of influential white men. Although Coulter included a chapter on religion, his review of local church records ignored the central role that white women played in congregation development and administration. Coulter left unexplored the roles that women of all races played in the local consumer and export economy. The omission of women’s contributions is especially odd because so many of the local historians who penned community histories in the early twentieth century were women, although their works also underemphasized women’s roles. The absence of women in Coulter’s work illustrates the exclusionary blind spots that pervaded mid-twentieth century historiography.

Had Coulter incorporated those stories into his microhistory, _Old Petersburg and the Broad River Valley of Georgia: Their Rise and Decline_ would remain a model of community-level analysis and
research. Instead, the book presents a rather one-sided depiction of early American community development in an expanding slave society. Fortunately, subsequent scholars of southern community development expanded Coulter’s microhistorical methods to include a broader range of historical agents. Notable works such as Charles Joyner’s *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* (1984) or Orville Vernon Burton’s *In My Father’s House Are Many Mansions: Family and Community in Edgefield, South Carolina* (1987) advanced microhistorical analysis to new heights that borrowed heavily from Coulter’s methods while substantially expanding the definition of southern communities. Despite its limitations, Coulter’s work deserves attention as an early example of a long tradition among southern historians of asking big questions in small places.

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