USAbroad – Journal of American History and Politics. Vol. 3 No. 1S (2020)
ISSN 2611-2752

This way to Fun: Tourism Advertising in a Changing Deep South (1976–1981)

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Published: November 10, 2020

Abstract

The tourist image of the South has undoubtedly experienced a profound transformation in the last decades. From a romantic, exotic and anti-modern destination deeply linked with the Lost Cause narrative, the former Confederacy shifted its image towards a more complex and almost chaotic mixture of different captivating images and themes in order to lure visitors. Analyzing advertisements and documents produced by tourism bureaus in four southern states, the author argues how the main and decisive phase of this transition took place in the years between the mid-1970s and early 1980s both as a reaction to internal developments in the tourism industry and to profound changes in American culture and in its relationship with the "idea" of the South.

Keywords: Tourism; Advertising; U.S. South; Memory; Culture.

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Tourism has not been a major issue in Southern studies since recently, even though at times scholars have indulged in observing the links existing between Southern regional identity and the development of a tourist landscape in the area of the former Confederacy. This lack of interest has been partially overcome in just the last twenty years, with the publication of some fundamental works entirely dedicated to discuss the emergence and the development of the tourism industry in the South-Eastern US from a historical-cultural point of view, while also discussing the impact that tourism had on landscape and local societies. It is necessary to mention at least the volumes edited in 2003, 2008 and 2012 by Richard Starnes, Anthonis Stanonis and Karen Cox respectively, which appear essential to understand the evolution of the tourism industry in the South between nineteenth and twentieth century.[1] Historians, as Richard Starnes wrote, should look at tourism as a "causal force in history,"[2] or as magnifying glass through which to examine the past, culture, and even investigate national and regional identity. As suggested by Karen Cox, this seems particularly relevant for the US South, a region with a long history as a tourist destination.[3]

What emerges from these works is the extreme importance that tourism has had on the perception of the South and its overall image. In other words, the ideas usually associated to the South for most of the twentieth century were also developed as a tourist bait between the two centuries. There is no doubt that the classic images of the romantic "moonlight and magnolias" South, with its Scarlett O'Hara lookalikes and plantation homes, are not something that simply evolved over time in a neutral way. On the contrary, that kind of landscape and imagery has been pursued with great determination by southern elites with the precise aim of satisfying the desires and expectations of non-southerners and luring them down South as tourists. On this manipulation of the local imagery by the southern economic elite and its impact on tourism, the contributions by Rebecca McIntyre (2011) and Reiko Hillyer (2014) should also be mentioned.[4]

This new attention to the subject, however, leaves many questions unanswered. It can be argued, for example, that most of these recent studies have focused either on the early twentieth century (that moment, that is, when the South evolved from a region with a mostly exotic, mysterious and anti-modern image to something deeply linked to the Confederate Lost Cause and the "antebellum South") or, on the other hand, on a very recent period. Also, the study of tourism in the South seems to have been mainly interested in single attractions or in very narrow case studies such as cities or counties and in the organization of the physical sites and the way they narrated the past. What seems to be lacking is a broader look, a valid analysis of the image that the South offered to tourists beyond the single case of one or more areas or attractions. Moreover, surprisingly, overall little attention has been devoted to the period between the end of the 1960s and the 1980s, a period of profound change for the region and its perception.

Another fundamental element that scholars seem to have left in the background in the study of the image and perception of the South, is tourism advertising, which appears to be a very interesting and profitable source for investigating the self-representation of the region and its evolution over time. It is well known that for most of the twentieth century the South was a place where tourists were looking for well-established attractions and images, but how did these themes change or evolve over time? In Dreaming of Dixie (2011), Karen Cox dealt with the historical relationship between the construction of Southern imaginary and commercial (as well as tourist) promotion; but again, the time span of her analysis stopped in the early decades of the twentieth century, when "Dixie" became a popular national brand widely used for commercial purposes both in the North and in the South.[5] From that

1. Richard D. Starnes, ed., *Southern Journeys: Tourism, History, and Culture in the Modern South*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003. Anthony J. Stanonis, ed., *Dixie Emporium: Tourism, Foodways, and Consumer Culture in the American South*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008. Karen L. Cox, ed., *Destination Dixie: Tourism and Southern History*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012.

2. Starnes, introduction to Starnes, ed., *Southern Journeys*, 3.

3. Cox, introduction to Cox, ed., *Destination Dixie*, 7.

4. Rebecca C. McIntyre, *Souvenirs of the Old South: Northern Tourism and Southern Mythology*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011; Reiko Hillyer, *Designing Dixie: Tourism, Memory, and Urban Space in the New South*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014.

5. Karen L. Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie: How the South Was Created in American Popular Culture*. Chapel Hill: University of North

point on, a history of Southern tourism promotion is possible only through sporadic hints in broader studies on the American travel industry, Southern culture or through analysis of specific attractions.

This leads to confusion regarding the images and themes exploited by the Southern states for their promotional purposes. How long did antebellum homes, beautiful "Scarlett-type" girls and the romantic halo of the Confederacy actually remain as predominant in overall promotion as they were in the 1930s and 1940s? It would, indeed, be of particular interest to understand at what point in its history the South abandoned that kind of imaginary and what took its place. Although it is well established that during the 1970s the perception and symbolic role of the South, within American culture, changed profoundly, it has never been studied how these changes were reflected in the promotional image of the region. Indeed, the trend has been to consider the 1970s as an extension of the classic Old South imagery.[6] I would argue, instead, that the origins of the current image of the South, so indefinable and almost chaotic, can be traced back to the advertising material that was designed to attract visitors in the 1970s.

I've based my research on the analysis of the official promotional material produced by four Deep Southern states in the late 1970s, (Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina), a choice based on the assumption that the Deep South is the area where all the most peculiar characteristics of the South are found in their most pronounced form. My choice of a limited time span (1976-1981) was based on evidence that the 1970s was a period of great change for the South and for American tourism as well, such as, the rise of a new generation of moderate southern politicians and governors well determined to use tourism as a tool of economic development and image enhancement for their states; the rise of black heritage tourism as a well-recognized market segment; the cultural and social changes that occurred in the South as a result of the development of the Sunbelt; as well as the election in 1976 of Jimmy Carter, the first President from the Deep South and the so called "southernization" of American culture. A period, then, in which it was reasonable to expect a change in the image projected by the Southern states. In the 1970s, moreover, the United States took a new interest in the tourism industry, and this led to a new and important commitment by many different states to their domestic and international promotion. The point of my argument, therefore, is that in the second half of the 1970s a profound reshaping of the tourist image of the South became visible, a change that paralleled equally important transformations in Southern culture and society at large.

On a deeper cultural level, in fact, well outside the boundaries of tourism promotion, in the 1970s the South as a whole tried to find new "myths" in order to explain its new cultural and social realities. The old classical mythology of the Old South was no longer suitable, but it was not yet clear to anyone what would take its place. "We now live in a post-New South that nobody has yet given a name," George B. Tindall said in 1976.[7] White Southerners had undoubtedly changed as well, and more and more voices within the region were asking to leave the Lost Cause and the myth of the Old South behind, as they no longer validly represented Dixie and were certainly harmful to the future of the South. Black Southerners, moreover, began in that decade their struggle against the public display of Confederate symbols. Thus, it is not surprising that southern tourism officials also intended to project an up-to-date image of their states and to find new concepts to underline the uniqueness and peculiarity of the region.

Writing in 2003, Ted Ownby was almost surprised to find that the South of the early twenty-first century had no particular identity as a destination anymore but had, instead, several different characteristics gained from the land and climate, some parts of history, modern economic change, cultural creativity and other sources as well.[8] He defined the entire promotional image of the South through the concept of "variety trope," that is, the desire to emphasize the existence of an infinite number of different attractions suitable for every taste and all equally important. Almost 20 years after Ownby's

Carolina Press, 2011.

6. As stated, for example, by William F. Brundage, *The Southern Past*, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009, 310.

7. Quoted in Stephen A. Smith, *Myth, Media and Southern Mind*. Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1985, 133.

8. Ted Ownby, "Nobody Knows the Troubles I've Seen, but Does Anybody Want to Hear about Them When They're on Vacation?," in Starnes, ed., *Southern Journeys*, 248.

observations, little has changed, as I found by analyzing promotional booklets published in 2018.[9] This new identity, however, has its roots precisely in the 1970s.

Two different sets of problems related to tourism seem to have contributed to the need for these states to quickly change their promotion during that decade. First, the persistence of a negative reputation and an unfriendly image, at a time when the Sunbelt's economic boom demanded to project an image of security and progress. Observing the reports and the administrative documentation produced in those years, it's easy to understand how deeply concerned the local tourism industry was about popular perception. At the Alabama Governor's Conference on Tourism of 1979, a round table of experts in the field drew up a list of issues that thwarted or slowed down the tourism promotion efforts in the state. They complained about Alabama's bad image[10] and the same happened in Mississippi.[11] Even South Carolina had image-related problems. A survey held in 1979 reported that potential visitors had "no image at all" of South Carolina.[12] Outside the area of Atlanta and its surroundings, moreover, even the modern and international Georgia suffered some problems regarding the perception of its inhabitants.

The second problematic aspect for Southern tourism was the highly competitive market of the 1970s. As a destination, the South offered to its visitors pretty much the same type of attractions in each state. They all actively competed with the others for the same market segments, and their promotional strategies ended up looking similar in many ways. In 1979, for example, South Carolina's Park, Recreation and Tourism Department considered Carolina in direct competition with other Southern states as they all offered "similar products."[13] This also reflects a new trend in American tourism at large. During the 1970s, what Susan Session Rough called the great age of family vacations came to an end. Soon the white suburban middle-class family was no longer the main target of tourism promotion.[14] From the 1970s onwards there was the tendency to direct promotion towards specific sub-markets or specific interests, whether it be historical tourism, landscape and outdoors, local folklore, food tourism or the beach and so on. Long family trips by car were already "a thing of the past" in 1974, as stated by the Georgia Tourism Director[15]. Thus, Southern states had to deal with a double challenge. They had to build a more friendly and welcoming image and they had to promote themselves as entire worlds in miniature, full of every possible attraction, while at the same thing trying to differentiate from their competitors. This ignited the need for change.

Indeed, we found the "variety trope" already established in the mid-1970s in each of the four states. Sometimes this idea was reflected directly in some of the official promotional slogans used between the end of the 1970s and the early 1980s, which hinted at a wide range of attractions and different ways to have fun, such as "Alabama Has It All" or "You couldn't have seen all of me" (South Carolina), "Georgia ... This Way to Fun," and "All the things you're missing ... are yours in Mississippi."

But the variety trope was mostly evoked through advertisements, brochures and the official tourist booklets produced by each state. To further emphasize the abundance of everything, the states also resorted to a new strategy that appears to be a novelty in the tourism promotion of the 1970s, that is, they all created different tourist sub-regions, and each was promoted as "full of everything" but at the same time unique in some way. Also, if previously the offices produced almost exclusively general advertising valid for the entirety of their state, at the end of the 1970s there were different ads pre-

9. Giuliano Santangeli Valenzani, "Advertising the Deep South in 2018: an analysis of Destination Image through Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia travel guides," in *Ex-Centric South: Reimagining Southern Centers and Peripheries on Page and Screen*, ed. Urszula Niewiadomska-Flis (Valencia: Publicacions de la Universitat de València), 2019.

10. Governor's Conference on Tourism 1979, in Alabama Department of Archive and History, Tourism and Travel (ADAH) administrative files 1940-2010, SG 014974.

11. "Promote Tourism," Editorial, *The Clarksdale Press Register*, January 16, 1981, 4.

12. South Carolina Tourism Advertising - Proposal, Leslie advertising, 1979-1980, South Carolina Department of Archive and History (SCDAH) S200039, DPRT, marketing office, advertising proposal 1975-1998, advertising proposal 1979–1980, Leslie advertising.

13. Come see S.C, South Carolina's Tourism Advertising 1979-1980, Leslie Advertising, SCDAH, S200039.

14. Susan Session Rugh, *Are We There Yet? The Golden Age of American Family Vacations*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008.

15. "Driving Vacations 'Out'," *Statesville Record and Landmark*, February 27, 1974, 11-A.

cisely aimed at different market segments. There were ads dedicated exclusively to the outdoors and landscape, golf, historical attractions, fancy accommodations, fishing, beach tourism, hiking, hunting, state lakes, the idea of a "romantic getaway," the classic antebellum homes and even to black tourism.[16]

Black heritage was indeed the single most important news in Southern promotion. It should be said, however, that it was still an under-exploited part of the market. Black tourism was already well established in the South (and especially in Georgia, as much as the Deep South is concerned) but state tourism offices were only just beginning to perceive the need to open up to this theme. However, the second half of the decade appears to be the very moment in which black culture started to be part of the overall image offered to tourists. Alabama was the first state of the Deep South to officially enter the black heritage tourism market. The starting point was the campaign "Alabama the Beautiful," launched in 1979. The official booklet produced by the state tourism office clearly gave black society a place in the overall image. Consider, for example, how Alabama's history was introduced to the readers: "Alabama the Beautiful is part of the history of the Civil War. And the history of Civil Rights."[17] This appears the first case ever in which the civil rights struggles became part of the tourist landscape in a Southern state. Even more explicitly, one of the many ads produced in the campaign "Alabama the Beautiful" was entirely devoted to black history, as it stated that "No other state in the union is as rich in Black history as Alabama the Beautiful."[18] Then, just a couple of years later, in 1983, Alabama became the first state in the country to publish a tour guide dedicated exclusively to the black heritage. In Mississippi this process appears to be slightly slower, and the preparatory work for a similar guide began only the following year, in 1984. Other Southern states would follow. Again, it's not by coincidence that Alabama and Mississippi, probably the states with the worst reputation in the entire Union, were the ones who pioneered the way in the publication of guides for African Americans as a way to improve the overall perception.

Between 1976 and 1981, moreover, Alabama, Georgia and Mississippi started publishing some of their advertisements in magazines for African Americans, especially in "Ebony," one of the most popular publications in the country. The preparatory materials found in the archives in Georgia and South Carolina, moreover, show how the tourism offices considered the inclusion of minorities, especially blacks, a problem to be taken into account.[19] South Carolina also pursued a promotional campaign that emphasized the multi-cultural contribution to the history and culture of the state. The 1977 tourist brochure called, "SC. A Lot of it looks a little like a foreign country," underlined for the first time the contributions of the English, Irish, Welsh, French, Scottish, Africans, Jews, Swiss and German immigrants in Charleston. The black "Gullah" culture, also, became an attraction in the state promotional booklet. Travel offices also tried to make their states more friendly and attractive by using the native theme, the "Indian lore" so often evoked in the promotional material. As Denise Bates has highlighted, between the 1970s and the 1980's, an evolving Southern identity expressed a renewed interest in indigenous history and symbols because "Indians and Indian-themed histories offered Southern states an opportunity to redeem their tarnished images as the most racist and violent states in the nation."[20]

The variety trope, however, did not erase the pre-existing classic imagery at all. Themes and attractions were added to the old ones but did not override them. When it came to describe the

16. A good collection of ads dedicated to individual market segments are conserved in ADAH, , SG 037009, Tourism and Travel Administrative Files, Director's correspondence, Alabama the Beautiful ad campaign 1980-1982 and in the Mississippi Department of Archive and History (MDAH), Box 11532, Row 22, Bay 5, Shelf 2, S 1663.

17. Alabama the Beautiful, booklet, in ADAH, Tourism and Travel, Communications Division, Program Administrative files, 1961–1979, SG014284, Photo, brochures, pamphlet.

18. Alabama the Beautiful, ad, black history in ADAH, Tourism and Travel administrative files, Director's Correspondence, SG037009, Ads, Circa 1979.

19. In 1979, during the preparatory work for the new state booklet, it was suggested that more minorities should appear in the guide. Cfr: Minutes S.C. Parks, Recreation and Tourism Commission, September 28, 1979, SCDAH, S200025, Annual reports of the DPRT 1970-2000. In 1975, the Georgia tourism division made sure that a certain number of scenes in its new promotional film were dedicated to showing black people. Cfr Letter from Howard L. Rothchild, Gerald Rafshoon Advertising, INC to Roy Burson, Tourist Division, December 10, 1975, Georgia Archive (GAR), Travel Movie 1976, RCB 5296 Industry and Trade, Director's Subject Files 1977.

20. Denise E. Bates, *The Other Movement: Indian Rights and Civil Rights in the Deep South*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012, 143.

classic "moonlight and magnolias South," most of the advertisements from this era still appeared very similar to older ads from the first half of the century. Antebellum homes, Old South Romance and Civil War historic sites were mentioned frequently in advertisements and travel guides, often in a very characteristic Southern fashion. Somewhere, for example, the term "Yankee" appeared to indicate Northern unionists or even Northern tourists (however, the term appeared to be used in a playful sense). The Civil War was also often called The War Between the States, an extremely pro-Confederate name, used only in the South.

What happened, on the other hand, was that the classic antebellum and the Confederate South started to be just part of the new variety trope promoted by the states, one theme among the others. It was still an important part of the overall image, but certainly not the most important. Even the Civil War itself appears to be in a moment of transition from its traditional role of pivotal mythical event to be just part of a new variety. The director of the Mississippi tourism office, for example, complained in 1978 about "too much concentration on the Civil War on the sales pitch."[21]

To further clarify that they had changed and were now different, up-to-date destinations, all the four states devoted part of their promotion also to the theme of modernity. The idea that the Deep South could also be modern was not entirely new, and there are examples in ads dating back to the 1940s and 1950s. But the emphasis and strength with which the theme was exploited in this period is certainly new and unique. The four states boasted now of a vibrant city nightlife, fancy accommodations, trendy resorts on the beach, cosmopolitan destinations. This moment of transition is further highlighted also by several explicit textual references to the idea that the old and the new, the past and the future are equally important for the South and its states.

The strength and persistence of elements of the older classic imaginary, on the other hand, should not be seen as a Southern nostalgic resistance to change. Plantations, antebellum homes and Confederate memorabilia were not Southern fetishes that Northerners or Westerners looked upon with disapproval. Quite the opposite. Still today these are all-American icons, widely admired and romanticized by many white Americans. The same was true in the 1970s and in the 1980s. Even the United States Travel Service, the American national tourism bureau, used a "southern belle" in a crinoline skirt in front of an antebellum plantation in its only 1977 promotional poster for the South.[22] When newspapers, magazines or travel agencies in the North talked about the South, they had no problem at all in praising the beautiful homes of the slaveholders with great passion and pompousness, maybe playing in a joking tone about the rivalry between the *Yankees* and the *Rebs*. To many Americans, the South was still seen in the light of the antebellum charm and the old clichés even if the South was also offering a new whirlwind of themes and attractions, too generic and similar to those of any other place, however, to be equally representative of the region. In this sense, William Brundage wasn't entirely wrong when he wrote that "Columned mansions, white belles in hoop skirts, Civil War shrines – these were the icons of Southern tourism during the 1970s."[23] They were no longer the protagonists of the promotional image, but they were surely what many visitors of the South still wanted to see. Even Atlanta, despite its progressive and metropolitan appeal, boasted in the state advertising, most tourists came just to experience the Old Southern romance.[24]

During the 1970s and the 1980s, American culture showed great interest in the South, mostly in its links with the ideas of tradition, sense of community, family values, and as a reaction to the turbulence and disillusions of the present moment.[25] Therefore, a tamed and more amicable version of the old South perfectly fit into the context of the period. And a tamed version of the classic South was precisely

21. Letter from George Williams to Carol Ann, 1978, in MDAH, Box 11533, Row 20, Bay 26, shelf 1, S1663, Rg 76, Sg1, Memorandum.

22. Publications and Materials of the United States Travel Service, US Department of Commerce, United State Travel Service, 1977, Washington D.C.

23. Brundage, *The Southern Past*, 310.

24. Kathleen Clark, "Saving 'The Dump,' Race and the Restoration of the Margaret Mitchell House in Atlanta," in Cox, ed., *Destination Dixie*, 75.

25. An in-depth discussion of the perception of the South in the 1970s is offered in Tara McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003 and of course in Jack Temple Kirby, *Media-Made Dixie: The South in the American Imagination*. Baton Rouge, LS: Louisiana State University Press, 1978.

what tourism offices offered to potential visitors, through the image of a region where the modernity and a new social *status quo* intertwined with a simulated nostalgic look at the past, keeping the Old South alive for tourists, albeit perhaps even in a more kitsch version than before.

This is what emerges from the Deep South states' advertising, a region in search of new images, still uncertain of what would take the place of the old myths in the long run, but well intentioned to look attractive to everyone. No words are clearer and more meaningful than those used in a 1981 ad:[26]

> The South is a performer of many moods, enough to master any scene. She's whatever the script calls for, and that is, quite simply, whatever you want her to be ... The cornucopia of pleasures she offers is gigantic.

From that moment on, a path was laid and the face that the South showed the tourists in the following forty years became even more fragmented, with the addition of several new elements. The Old South, however, even if tamed and somehow kinder, is still there, ready to emerge in the American imagination, if necessary. McPherson, for example, noted a resurgence of the American passion for the classic Southern myths in the late 1980s as a form of reaction to the economic pressures of late capitalism, and as a sign of the rollback of the gains of the Civil Rights movement.[27] The question that would be worth asking, then, is why so little has changed since the late 1970s and what prevented the emergence of new, well-defined regional "myths" as strong and powerful as the old ones. The answer, perhaps, lies in the popular American imagination rather than in the South.

26. Honeymoon South, Travel South, 1981, in ADAH, Tourism and Travel Administrative files, 1940–2010, SG014977, Alabama the Beautiful campaign 1980–1981.

27. McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie*, 18.

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