

Capital Struggles: Montgomery Survived The War With Surprising Ease

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Review

CAPITAL STRUGGLES

Montgomery survived the war with surprising ease

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Rogers Jr., William Warren *The Confederate Home Front: Montgomery During the Civil War*. University of Alabama Press, ISBN 817309624

Montgomery, Alabama -- the first capital of the Confederate States of America, as well as the capital of the state -- is an interesting example of a fairly major Southern city during the American Civil War.

The populace was about evenly divided racially: half white and half black. There were 8,843 residents on the eve of the war; about 100 of the blacks were free, and they lived on the periphery of the town. We can be sure that the vast mass of the blacks hoped for Northern victory, but the vast mass of whites (with a few notable exceptions) were fiercely pro-Confederate.

The people suffered mightily as a result of the conflict, but their city was spared destruction. Federal troops did not operate near it until the end, when James Harrison Wilson's raiders accepted surrender without resistance. William Warren Rogers has done a commendable job of thoroughly researching the city and life therein, 1861-1865, and has written a pleasing and quite readable account which should have wide appeal.

Rogers has keenly studied other cities as well as Montgomery, and occasionally interpolates from known elements in one, in order to make strong plausible suggestions about the Alabama capital. He has scoured through all the necessary sources to adequately underpin his scholarship and has provided a number of good photographs as well. No major errors and very few minor ones were detected by this reviewer. Indeed, it seems that this book could serve not only for enjoyable and informative reading, but also as a reference tool for scholars.

While the Confederacy was predominantly rural, its cities were of vital importance. Montgomery provided a lot of materiel and personnel for the war effort. This city was especially significant for its business and factories, its hospitals, its storage facilities, and its transportation linkages: it was served by both rail and water-borne traffic.

Montgomery was not quite adequate in facilities to suit its being retained as the Confederate capital, but its location was a lot better for defense than was Richmond to where the government was relocated soon after Virginia's secession. The people of Montgomery constitute a most illustrative and informative case study of a Southern community during the war.

It is striking to learn how much interaction there was between whites and blacks. The public places were open to both (albeit in the theater there was segregated seating, for example). Slaves as well as free blacks enjoyed horse races, and frequently bet on them too. Urban blacks tended to enjoy a visibly better standard of living than did rural blacks, regardless of whether they were slave or free. At Christmas time, most of the whites felt too beleaguered to do much celebrating or to wear finery, but this was not the case with blacks, who made much merriment.

Despite the undeniable heavy impact of the war, in a great many respects life went on as usual. Schools continued to operate, and indeed, they proliferated. Several of them converted to military institutions -- giving good and sound instruction in drill and other martial qualities. Business thrived. The fire and police departments provided much-needed services. Public welfare agencies sprang into being. Formal arrangements for the care of orphaned children were engendered. Artificial limbs were manufactured in great numbers. New inventions were devised. Prostitution and public amusements of a less sinful nature continued unabated. The populace spent much time at the newspaper and telegraph offices, where notices of the war's ongoing progress -- and of the ultimate Confederate disaster -- were regularly posted.

Montgomery had been a prosperous place before the war, but the conflict wrought a great degree of change. Life changed most of all for the blacks and for the small minority of whites whose lifestyles had depended upon their ownership. Montgomery would become a prosperous place again, but not at first, and indeed not for quite a few years. The most lasting effects of the war upon residents were psychological, emotional, and soul-searing: those folks who

benefitted, benefitted mightily; those folk who lost, lost something that their progeny still struggle to understand and to accept.

Herman Hattaway is co-editor of the Shades of Blue and Gray Series published by the University of Missouri Press.