

Decoding The Past: Reference Work Explains Civil War Vocabulary And Practices

Edward Steers

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Steers, Edward (2000) "Decoding The Past: Reference Work Explains Civil War Vocabulary And Practices," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 2 : Iss. 2 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol2/iss2/6>

Review

DECODING THE PAST

Reference work explains Civil War vocabulary and practices

Steers, Jr., Edward

Spring 2000

Varhola, Michael J. *Everyday Life During the Civil War: A Guide for Writers, Students, and Historians.* Writer's Digest Books, ISBN 898799228

Everyday Life During the Civil War is one of a series of guides published by Writer's Digest Books as a resource primarily for writers of fiction. The book consists of 10 chapters and four appendices that include such topics as wages, currency, food, games, language, technology, and arms and equipment. Additionally, there are several glossaries and lists of various goods and services along with their cost year by year.

Michl J. Varhola writes in the preface to his book that "it is intended to be a broad-based introduction to the day-to-day conditions, attitudes, and events of the period." For the most part, it meets this goal. As a resource for the fiction writer or for the educator, it provides an excellent source of information about subjects often referred to in Civil War literature without explanation. A description of the states and territories that existed at the time, the organizational structure of the respective armies, rural versus urban life, and how people entertained themselves are examples of well-covered subjects.

There are important areas, however, which only are touched upon lightly or are missing altogether, such as law enforcement, the treatment of civil liberties, the courts, and military justice -- all important in everyday life. Religion is another subject that is absent from the book. The assassination of President Lincoln and its aftermath are also missing except for a few sentences that contain errors.

There are other errors, albeit many are of a minor nature. For instance: in 1860, the United States flag had 33 stars, not 34 (Kansas was admitted in January 1861); the daguerreotype was invented in 1839, not 1837; John Wilkes

Booth was killed on April 26, not April 25; Lincoln and Johnson were the nominees of the "National Union Party" in 1864, a coalition party of Republicans and War Democrats (a very significant point that should be explained); and, according to the 1860 census, there were 3,953,587 slaves, not three million. If the book is to be a resource of factual information, such errors are troublesome.

These shortcomings, however, are more than overcome by the overall value of **Everyday Life in the Civil War** as a useful resource for filling in much of the background information and detail about the subjects it does cover.

Edward Steers, Jr. is author of His Name Is Still Mudd and Lincoln: A Pictorial History. He is currently writing an account of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln.