

Echoes From a Distant Frontier: The Brown Sisters' Correspondence From Antebellum Florida

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Recommended Citation

Taylor, Robert A. (2005) "Echoes From a Distant Frontier: The Brown Sisters' Correspondence From Antebellum Florida," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 .
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol7/iss1/38>

Review

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Winter 2005

Denham, James M. and Huneycutt, Keith L.. *Echoes from a Distant Frontier: The Brown Sisters' Correspondence from Antebellum Florida.* University of South Carolina Press, \$39.95 ISBN 1570035369

Confederate conversion

New England sisters adopt Southern stance

The late historian Stephen E. Ambrose once commented that part of a historian's job description was to read other people's mail. Much indeed can be gleaned from the pages of faded letters, not meant for public consumption, about people and their times. Such is the case with a new edited collection of the correspondence of Corinna and Ellen Brown, two middle-class, educated New Englanders who moved to the raw Florida frontier in 1835. Professors James M. Denham and Keith L. Huneycutt of Florida Southern College have skillfully compiled and annotated a selection of Brown family letters that paint a vivid picture of life in the antebellum years.

The sisters and their family members reached their new Florida home in time for the outbreak of the Second Seminole War, the longest and costliest Indian conflict in American history. This war overshadowed their lives and that of the entire peninsula for seven long years. Their communications, mainly with artist-brother Mannerville Brown, abound with insights on the course of the struggle, the Seminoles, and with the quality of leadership in the American army grappling with an elusive foe. Not surprisingly, the Brown sisters ended up marrying an army officer and military surgeon who participated in operations until the 1840s. Their new status as army wives gave them a mobility that continued into the postwar years, thus giving readers the benefit of their views of life in Florida from Saint Augustine to Key West.

Initially, Ellen and Corinna were a bit unsure of the unique frontier society that they had joined. They were amused at the colorful Florida crackers they

encountered. Yet, by the end of their 15-year sojourn, the sisters came to accept more of what they saw, including the institution of slavery. No doubt their southern-born husbands helped them come to terms with what became a natural state of affairs. However, neither really accepted the societal constraints placed upon them due to their gender. More than once the Brown correspondence contains laments on their lack of financial opportunity and frustration at the slim options for women in mid-19th century America. Ellen Brown learned this full well when her soldier-husband James Willoughby Anderson was killed in action during the Mexican War, leaving her a widow with several small children to support.

Life was less than kind for Ellen and Corinna after they moved from the Florida peninsula in the 1850s. The latter suffered from a de facto separation from her spouse and the triumph of her inner demons in the form of drug and alcohol abuse. She died in an asylum in 1854. Ellen struggled on to raise her children and escape looming poverty, surviving on generous donations from relatives like Mannerville. She passed away in 1862 from breast cancer and was buried with her sister in New York, far from her old Florida home.

Of interest to Civil War scholars is Ellen Brown's conversion to the Southern cause as the sections slipped closer to civil war. In 1861, the former New Hampshire native wrote I have as much right to make the South my Country, as the German has to make the United States his country. She approved of secession and of her son Edward's decision to resign from West Point and enter the Confederate army as an officer. There he joined his uncle, Corinna's husband, in the ranks of the rebel forces. Both were destined to survive the conflict.

All in all, **Echoes from a Distant Frontier** provides a rare and interesting window into the lives of an antebellum family struggling to make their way on the southernmost frontier. The editors worked with deft pens to let the extended Brown family speak for themselves, and Florida and Southern history are richer for their efforts.

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