

Freedom Rising: Washington in the Civil War

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Review

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Furgurson, Ernest B. *Freedom Rising: Washington in the Civil War*. Alfred A. Knopf, \$30.00 ISBN 375404546

Recreating Washington

A new capital for a reunited nation

Its location was the result of compromise; its topography was primarily lowlands that yielded swamps, poor drainage, and insects. It was uncomfortably hot and humid in the summer. It was our nation's capital. But the Civil War came, and with it a transformation. Almost overnight that inhospitable land became the target for an opposing army; its unfinished Capitol Dome became the symbol of a transforming yet incomplete nation. Armies of men now traveled through it on the way to the front. Military leaders used its buildings as a central command post from which to conduct war operations. Buildings rose, the population increased, infrastructure developed. In the end, lady liberty graced the Capitol Dome and the former gloom gave way to the city we know today.

Washington D.C. developed and defined itself out of necessity from the Civil War. Most Civil War books only mention Washington D.C. as a target or defensive position. Few, if any, look at the city itself and those who helped transform it into the center for democracy. Ernest B. Furgurson, a former reporter for the *Baltimore Sun*, with three other Civil War books to his name, has written an engaging and thoroughly entertaining and insightful book on Washington D.C. Having lived within the city's walls for several years I was amazed to realize how little I knew of its history. We see it on the news everyday and read of it as a physical destination in countless Civil War books. Yet we don't really *know* the city itself. Now we will.

Freedom Rising starts off discussing the construction of the capital building and its enormous dome. The start of the war found the dome half constructed, much like the democratic government which met in its hallways. Appropriately,

the book concludes with the completion of this dome and uses it to symbolize the triumph of the Union and the victory of a democratic form of government. Furgurson details how Washington could have been an untenable island in a sea of Confederate territory had Maryland seceded from the Union. Furgurson goes on to note the enormous amount of Confederate sympathizers who lived within the city and brazenly displayed their disloyalty in the streets up to the time of Lincoln's inauguration, only to disappear with the advent of sedition. Their numbers were quickly replaced by former slaves who fled their masters for the safety of the capital, and the wounded who filled many of the buildings. Furgurson goes on to recount the mood of the capital following the defeat at Bull Run, and how life changed during and immediately after the war. Also discussed are the steps taken by the military leaders to prepare the capital for provisioning the Army and caring for the overwhelming numbers of wounded soldiers.

Washington D.C. is not however the only topic discussed. Interwoven into the story are tangents on such topics as Lincoln's trip to Norfolk, slavery, the Emancipation Proclamation, the Merrimack, and the President's personal life and expenditures while in the White House. While these side stories are somewhat distracting, they are all told with some reference to the capital and help to move the story along while educating the reader on other aspects of the war.

The only real disappointment is found with Furgurson's discussion of the Lincoln assassination. While Furgurson tells of John Wilkes Booth's movements and actions prior to the fated shot, he only tells a portion of the story of the subsequent trial. Furgurson leaves the story mid trial and never resumes nor references it again. This is curious considering that it was the most celebrated trial of its day and one of the greatest in the city's overall history.

On the whole, **Freedom Rising** is a highly interesting, and entertaining read. It is well researched, containing few typographical errors or omissions. It fills a gap that has remained open and overlooked for too long. Readers will be pleased with their purchase and will finish its pages having learned a little more about the city that became a target and then a shinning capital.

John Benson is an attorney in Bucks County Pennsylvania. He is Past President of the Bucks County Civil War Roundtable.