

Confederate Slave Impressment in the Upper South

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Review

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Martinez, Jaime Amanda *Confederate Slave Impressment in the Upper South*.
University of North Carolina Press, \$39.95 ISBN 978-1-4696-1074-0

Interactions Between Slavery and the State

Central to the Confederate military effort was the mobilization of its entire population – men and women, free and enslaved, white and black – in behalf of the new nation. How exactly a Southern Confederacy founded upon the ideological cornerstone of white supremacy and racial slavery deployed the 40 percent of its population that was enslaved has been a contested subject for a long time. Jaime Amanda Martinez's *Confederate Slave Impressment in the Upper South* provides one of the most detailed and sophisticated studies of one of the key components of this mobilization: the impressment of slaves on military fortifications.

As Martinez points out, slave impressment, by its very nature, provoked major disagreements between slaveholders and the Confederate army; between the various state and Confederate national governments; and between slaves and slaveholders. Meeting resistance at every turn, Confederate authorities nevertheless managed to develop an increasingly centralized and effective slave impressment system. In the two states under study – Virginia and North Carolina – slave impressment began as an ad hoc process in response to immediate Union threat and progressed to the state and then national level. Ultimately, the Confederate Engineering Bureau and then Conscription Bureau assumed full control of slave impressment, making requisition demands, establishing quotas, and returning slaves to their owners. In a close examination of records throughout these two states, Martinez finds each state responding to impressment demands with grudging acceptance.

Martinez also discusses the actual conditions of slaves on military labor duty. Often underfed and poorly clothed, lacking proper medical care, and toiling in damp and cold fortifications, slaves often became ill, escaped to Union lines,

or died. Slaveholders regularly complained about the mistreatment of their chattel property on loan to the army, prompting an official response from the Confederate national government to monitor rations and medical care, and to process claims for dead and escaped slaves. This proved to be one of many ways that the exigencies of war helped transform a so-called "states rights" Confederacy into a centralized and bureaucratic Leviathan.

Martinez's research is exhaustive and persuasive regarding the effectiveness of the states in meeting their impressment demands. However, the two states in question may be exceptional. Virginia was home to the national government, after all, and the constant threat of Union military conquest forced slaveholders to acquiesce to the demands of the military more readily than in states where the military threat seemed more remote. In North Carolina, planters closer to Wilmington and Union naval threats more willingly accepted slave impressment than did those in the Piedmont or the west. Other states may have been less successful in impressing slaves for military service, especially in the Mississippi River valley where ineffective military commanders garnered less respect from slaveholders, and early Federal military occupation forestalled the establishment of slave impressment bureaucracies. Alas, slave impressment may have been surprisingly successful in Virginia and North Carolina. But it is hard to conclude the same for other states based on this evidence.

In all, Martinez makes three significant historiographic interventions, some more persuasive and vigorous than others. First, she engages the debate held among scholars and heritage activists of how, and to what extent, African Americans contributed to the Confederate war effort. An epilogue entitled "Black Confederates?" forcefully and convincingly repels the suggestion that slave laborers in the Confederate army constituted "soldiers" in any meaningful way. Slaves provided essential service to the Confederate cause. But alas, their predilection to run to Union lines (long before "confiscation" was official Federal military policy) underscored the forced nature of that "service" to the Confederacy.

Second, Martinez demonstrates the ways in which Confederate military policy influenced and informed Union military policy regarding slave confiscation and eventual emancipation and enlistment. Scholars have long debated the precise timing, geography and implementation of Federal emancipation policy. By demonstrating the effectiveness of slave impressment, especially in proximity to the failed Peninsula campaign of the Spring of 1862,

Martinez connects Confederate policy clearly to the decisions among Federal commanders and politicians to expand its “contraband” policy on a larger scale.

A third intervention – and one Martinez attempts most explicitly – argues that the effectiveness of Confederate slave impressment policy indicates the remarkable administrative success of the new Confederate state. Against claims by Stephanie McCurry, William Freehling, Drew Gilpin Faust and others, Martinez suggests that whatever internal contradictions lay at the heart of the slaveholders’ new patriarchal republic, those never effectively impeded the new state in its execution of war aims. Rather, as Gary Gallagher has similarly argued, the Confederacy maintained its morale and fighting heft to the bitter end, losing only because of battlefield military defeat and not because of internal dissent. Here Martinez is least persuasive, not because her evidence does not suggest successful implementation of impressment policy – her evidence is rich and convincing – but because she mostly limits her assessment of slave impressment to administrative effectiveness and not to the ideological inconsistencies that undermined the Confederate project more broadly. Stephanie McCurry’s *Confederate Reckoning* evaluates slave impressment as part of a relational incoherence in the Confederate state-making project. Slaves served as both property and as persons, and were thus capable of driving military policy despite their supposed lack of independent will. And slaveholders, as both architects and servants of the Confederate state, could sustain neither the state nor slave system when challenged by a foe willing to appeal to slaves’ desire for freedom. Slave impressment brought both tensions to the foreground. In other words, the Confederacy may have suffered fatally by the success – not the failure – of the impressment policy.

Still, this is an important and deeply researched book that sheds important light on the process of state formation in the new Confederacy, the experience of slaves temporarily released from plantations and into the uncertain world of the battlefield, and the development of a counter-policy of confiscation, emancipation and enlistment by the Union. The appendix contains over twenty detailed tables recording slave impressment quotas and requisitions by county. The book provides a model for future studies of other states, where scholars can assess the impact of impressment more broadly on the functioning of the Confederate state. It is clearly written, well-organized and deeply sourced. As such, *Confederate Slave Impressment in the Upper South* is an essential study in the relationship between Confederate society, the Confederate military, and the Confederate state.

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