

Gallant Creoles: A History of the Donaldsonville Canoniers

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Review

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Marshall, Michael *Gallant Creoles: A History of the Donaldsonville Canonniere*. University of Louisiana at Lafayette Press, \$30.00 ISBN 978-1-935754-21-3

Study of a Little Known Louisiana Unit

Gallant Creoles is an ambitious retelling of Civil War experiences of a Confederate artillery unit organized from a small Mississippi River town in south Louisiana. Using an abundance of archival letters, diaries, regimentals, newspapers, and official records, Michael Marshall traces the history of these *cannoneers in gray* (spelled *canonniere*, en francais) as they faithfully served Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia in every major eastern theater action from the Peninsula Campaign to Appomattox. Writing with a flare rarely seen in regimental unit histories interspersed with quotations from contemporaries, the author describes in utter detail the uniforms worn, foodstuff eaten, and equipment utilized by these seemingly dedicated Confederates.

Marshall begins by recounting the early formation of the Donaldsonville Canonniere during the antebellum 1830s when they were without cannon for some fifteen years. Drilling and target practice was conducted in colorful plumbed uniforms using infantry muskets until two six-pounders were acquired in 1852. The ethnic makeup of the battery was most telling of the diversity of the bayou region with cultures ranging from English, Spanish Islenos, Germans, Irish, Italians, Scots, Poles, Swedes, Portuguese, African, and a preponderance of Creole and Acadian Frenchmen, complete with distinctive dialects and other cultural traits. Of special notation were the Free Men-of-Color field band and the less obscured (than most people probably realize) African slaves and servants who accompanied the battery into war.

The battery of men and guns traveled from Louisiana to their east coast destination aboard bumpy trains which proved to be the only irenic part of their journey. Upon debarkation and deployment into the Virginia countryside, it was

not long before the artillerists began to experience their first baptism of fire. In succession, the Donaldsonville Canoniers were active participants defending Richmond at the Seven Days' Battle; advancing with Longstreet at the Second Manassas; unleashing shot and canister into the advancing Union ranks at Sharpsburg and again atop Marye's Heights; repelling "Fighting Joe" at Chancellorsville; dueling with their counterparts at Gettysburg; outmaneuvering Grants butchering probes throughout the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, and Second Cold Harbor campaign; digging in at Petersburg; and protecting Lee's attempted retreat at Appomattox. It was said that the officers and men fought with "courage, fortitude, and good conduct" throughout these many engagements. (102) If anything short of patriotic duty and bravery existed, it goes unsaid.

When not in battle, the story progresses into grueling marches and make-shift encampments. Horses and men were tested to their limits pulling caisson and cannon through dust and mud, up and down steep hills, and into or out of active battles. Camp life proved to be somewhat of a reprieve where card games and songs could be played and sung, and letters written if rarely received. The men would often mention about the shortage of proper clothing, food, and equipment. They improvised, however, by acquiring discarded blue uniforms, hunting and foraging, and consolidating workable wheels, barrels, and wagons; that is until the arrival of fresh flour and meat or a new requisition of twelve-pounders, be it the desired Napoleons or Parrots. A favorite ruse was the "Sham charge" designed to draw enemy fire in order to "secure fragments of iron" for refurbishing into friendly ordnance. (316)

Of particular interest were the "great horde" of African Americans who accompanied the white Creoles in their defense of the Southern homeland and state rights. Throughout the many first-person accounts, "negroes" of free and slave status became actively involved in assisting as teamsters, musicians, and cooks. The servants, being "allowed to roam at will," were at their best when foraging for the army as it marched across Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. "They were quite an adjunct to the Commissary Department, gathering chickens, butter, [and] flour . . . with nothing to prevent them from making their escape," one source reported. (107-108) "Servants were more difficult to restrain than soldiers . . . [when insisting upon] universal pillage," wrote another. (186) This may best be explained when realizing that the most loyal of servants were most likely the most trusted in serving the planter and yeomen sons of the South; while the independent free person-of-color acted out of his own volition.

Gallant Creoles is deserving of serious consideration by the Civil War enthusiast. The book is descriptive, foot-noted, and fact-filled enough to meet the expectations of the most ardent historian and buff alike. The academic scholar, however, may find the lengthy (600+ pages cover-to-cover) straight-forward history somewhat of a detraction. The book suffers from a lack of analysis common to a university press publication. Why did the Creoles join and fight? Why were there reportedly few desertions even when the end of the war was apparent and news from the home front (even the burning of Donaldsonville, not once but twice) was most distressing? What feelings did the men have about slavery? Why were African Americans active participants throughout the campaigns? These questions and others leave the reader wanting.

In addition, the style of writing can best be described as untrained and antiquated. Although well-written and organized, nearly every paragraph is composed of an abundance of quotations, both standard and block. The author, lacking graduate-level training, is not to be faulted. The author feels it is important to allow the source to speak for itself as much as possible. Credit is most-deserving for producing a well-researched and complete history of a little-known yet significant Confederate unit. Without the analysis, however, the style tends to make this otherwise exceptional work a difficult read. In conclusion, Michael Marshall's *Gallant Creoles* is a useful addition to the ranks of Civil War literature. It would especially make a great supplement to Larry J. Daniel's *Cannoneers in Gray: The Field Artillery of the Army of Tennessee* (1985), and William M. Owen's *In Camp and Battle with the Washington Artillery* (1885).

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