

Thunder on the River: The Civil War in Northeast Florida

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Recommended Citation

Denham, James (2015) "Thunder on the River: The Civil War in Northeast Florida," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 17 : Iss. 1 , Article 12.

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.17.1.13

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol17/iss1/12>

Review

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Winter 2015

Schafer, Daniel L. *Thunder on the River: The Civil War in Northeast Florida.* University Press of Florida, \$19.95 ISBN 9780813060545

Emerging Slavery Economy and Disruption in Civil War Florida

Dan Schafer, professor emeritus at the University of North Florida, brings a lifetime of research to this well written, fast-pasted narrative of the Civil War in Northeast Florida. Most of his previous scholarly work has been directed toward exploring the development of this region during its English and Spanish antecedents. His numerous works on the social and economic life of the region, culminating in his long awaited *Zephaniah Kingsley Jr. and the Atlantic World: Slave Trader, Plantation Owner, Emancipator*, (2012), have enriched our knowledge of Florida, the South, and the Atlantic World. In 1984 Schafer assisted in the publication of a history of the Civil War in Jacksonville, but after nearly twenty years, decided to write an up-to-date regional history of the conflict. With the help of his students Schafer pursued a new study based on manuscripts and informed by current scholarship on the war. Schafer's study is excellent local history placed within the national context. It portrays the human cost of the war in a particular region of the South, joining other excellent regional studies such as Edward Ayers, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies: War in the Heart of America, 1859-1863*, (2003), Brian Steele Wills, *The War Hits Home: the Civil War in Southeastern Virginia*, (2001), William W. Rogers Jr. *Confederate Home Front: Montgomery During the Civil War*, (1999), David Williams, *Rich Man's War: Class, Caste, and Confederate Defeat in the Lower Chattahoochee Valley* (1998) and many others.

Florida, though largely derided at the time and later by historians as inconsequential in the Civil War, has begun to receive greater attention from scholars. Recent excellent full-length monographs have followed Florida troops in Confederate campaigns outside the state. Zach Waters ably chronicled Florida troops in Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. In a similar monograph Jonathan

Sheppard traced Florida troops' service in the Army of Tennessee. Tracy Revels and Fred Blakey have probed the home front carefully. David Coles and William Nulty have examined military operations within the state's borders. Florida's vast coastline, its numerous coastal skirmishes, and the Union blockade have attracted the attention of writers such as George Buker, George Pearce, and Irv Winsboro. Scholars have also explored the war in Florida from a regional vantage point, taking into account Florida's unique demographic and social diversity. In his study of Middle Florida's emerging slave-based plantation economy, Ed Baptist traces that district's journey to secession, war, and defeat, finding that the region's experience was typical of other Black Belt sections of the Old South. Canter Brown studied the Civil and Reconstruction's devastating impact on the Tampa Bay area. Brown and Robert Taylor—while reaching contrasting viewpoints--examined the state's connection to cattle, especially its vital role in the war, and the complicated dynamics that the commodity placed on settlers' lives in the Lower Peninsula.

Daniel L. Schafer's study of the Civil War in Northeast Florida adds immensely to these regional studies, and, in numerous ways, surpasses them all. The social life and the economy of Northeast Florida operated-- as it had going as far back as the English and Spanish periods--along the St. Johns River. By the 1850s the river port-sea port town of Jacksonville was poised to command the commerce of the interior. The economics of the region largely revolved around cutting and shipping lumber, yet by the 1850s the cotton trade had begun to flourish. Slave labor made these large-scale operations profitable, and by 1860, most whites—even Northern born ones—accepted slavery as essential to continued progress. As a shipping and commercial port Jacksonville handled lumber and cotton exports and received into its harbor and wharves all manner of goods from northern destinations. This commerce attracted merchants and tradesman from the North, and by the late 1850s they had accumulated substantial mercantile and commercial property. Even if these newcomers were pro-slavery their pro-Union sentiments were unacceptable--especially to many native whites who resented their growing wealth, power, and influence. By the late 1850s Jacksonville had numerous adherents of the Union cause, enough so that on the eve of the Election of 1860 Unionists were on the verge of taking control of the town council. This circumstance triggered an angry response from Democrats. They maintained that the only safe course for the state was to rally under the banner of white supremacy, the maintenance of slavery, and resist with force any attempt to ban slavery in the territories. Labeling Unionists

submissionists, Democrats moved with vigor to silence dissent. As secession, mobilization, and war came on, the region was consumed in violence and destruction. Vigilante repression directed against Unionists grew intense once war broke out. As Schafer explains, "With regulators, vigilantes, and Confederate troops moving freely throughout northeast Florida, conditions deteriorated to the point that Union supporters were in constant danger" (81).

Schafer vividly portrays the life, death, and destruction as Union troops invaded and occupied Jacksonville four times beginning in the spring of 1862. With each ensuing conquest and evacuation withdrawing Confederate and Union forces wrought devastation. The first to suffer were northern merchants, sawmill owners, and hoteliers who saw their property torched with the first Confederate withdrawal from the town. Each Union occupation and withdrawal from Jacksonville brought destruction to both property and persons, as each side moved to extract vengeance on those left behind. The final burning of Jacksonville by Union forces in March 1863, a seemingly senseless act, drew angry recriminations from Confederate leaders and some Northern newspapers alike. Jacksonville's occupation was a precursor to the St. Johns River's penetration, bringing with it large scale escape of enslaved people. Union gunboats plied the waters south of Jacksonville hundreds of miles into the interior, and home guard units thwarted the attacks in whatever way they could, including using torpedoes (mines). Schafer's book adds to our understanding of riverine warfare during the Civil War.

By February 1863, the region experienced one of the first major Union attempts to employ black soldiers in the war. Schafer's research adds to our understanding of the African American service in the Union Army, joining the work of Joseph T. Glatthaar, Dudley Cornish, and Stephen Ash, whose *Firebrand of Liberty: The Story of Two Black Regiments that Changed the Course of the Civil War*, (2008) was the first in-depth study of the African American units that took part in the invasion of Northeast Florida.

The final Union occupation set the stage for its offensive west culminating in the one of the last Confederate victories of the war, the Battle of Olustee, fought near Lake City in February 1864. Schafer adds to our understanding of this ill-fated Union offensive, in which Gen. Truman Seymour's Federals, advancing west along the railroad line, were overwhelmed by Confederates on February 20, 1864. After the bloody battle Union forces retreated back to Jacksonville, and continued to solidify their control of the town and its

surrounding areas until war's end a few months later. A continual theme throughout the book is the back-biting and squabbling among various Union commanders in the SC and GA region that continually frustrated local commanders in their attempts to capture and hold Northeast Florida.

Schafer's combing of previously untapped manuscript and newspapers sources in local and far-away archives furnished him with an extraordinary opportunity to draw a vivid, riveting picture that war visited on the region. His sources also provided him with a unique opportunity to draw large interpretations and conclusions about the purpose and the nature of the conflict, as the inhabitants themselves understood it. For example, Shafer writes: A fresh and intensive examination was given to the local evidence regarding slavery as the motivation for secession and war. It was concluded that the white residents of Jacksonville were so convinced that Northerners intended to limit the right granted by the U. S. Constitution to carry human property into the western territories, and eventually to abolish the institution of slavery altogether, that they embraced secession and war as their last desperate chance to preserve slavery. This may not be an entirely popular conclusion but the evidence for Jacksonville, especially the words of its own citizens, sustains it. (x-xi)

James M. Denham is professor of history and director of the Lawton M. Chiles Center for Florida History at Florida Southern College. A specialist in Florida, Southern, and legal history he is the author of six books including Florida Founder, William P. DuVal, Frontier Bon Vivant, forthcoming from the University of South Carolina Press.