

### The Civil War Diary of Gideon Welles, Lincoln's Secretary of the Navy: The Original Manuscript Edition

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## Review

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**Gienapp, William E. and Gienapp, Erica L..** *The Civil War Diary of Gideon Welles, Lincoln's Secretary of the Navy: The Original Manuscript Edition.* University of Illinois Press, \$45.00 ISBN 9780252038525

### Careful Scholarship Provides Needed Clarity to Welles' Valuable Record

Gideon Welles' diary has been an important resource for Civil War historians since its initial publication in 1911. His character portraits and detailed descriptions of events and issues provide invaluable insights into the inner workings of the Union government and the navy, but those who have worked with both the 1911 and 1960 editions of the diary know that both must also be used with caution and care. With this latest edition, edited by the late William Gienapp and completed by Erica Gienapp, scholars finally have an authoritative text covering the Civil War years that is beautifully annotated and easy to work with.

Both prior editions of Welles' diary were problematic, in large part because of the way the text evolved over time. After leaving office in 1869, Welles began tinkering with his prose. Phrases, sentences and paragraphs were edited to be more readable. Some sections were rewritten to take advantage of insights and clarifications that only became clear with the passage of time. During the 1870s, Welles compared notes with colleagues from the Lincoln administration and continued revising the diary based on new information. After his death in 1878, his son Edgar took responsibility for both the diary and his father's legacy. Selected passages were shared with John Nicolay and John Hay as they wrote their biography of Abraham Lincoln, but never the full diary. Edgar probably shared a typescript version with Nicolay and Hay that he had been working on and that contained his own editorial changes, including the deletion of passages that he thought were too harsh or did not reflect well on his father.

Edgar Welles's typescript became the basis for the first published edition of the diary that appeared in 1911 from Houghton Mifflin, who in turn seem to

have made additional edits so the manuscript would conform to house style. This edition also introduced an interesting chronological change. Welles began writing his diary in August of 1862, more than a year after he became Lincoln's Secretary of the Navy. After the war, he wrote a synopsis of that first year, which of course benefitted from hindsight. The 1911 edition started with that synopsis, with the idea that readers would be more interested in chronology of events than chronology of writing.

Although some contemporaries correctly guessed that the 1911 edition had been altered from Gideon Welles' original entries, scholars justifiably seized on the published version as an important new source. Welles' observations became required reading for historians and were cited repeatedly. Still, there was an underlying concern about the veracity of the diary, which led to the publication of a new edition by Howard K. Beale in 1960. Beale compared the 1911 edition to Welles' original diaries, which by then were housed in the Library of Congress. Unfortunately, he recorded the differences between texts on photographic images of the 1911 edition and used an arcane set of notations to tell the reader what was happening. Those who were truly dedicated could sort everything out, but Beale's edition had two major flaws. First, it never truly let the reader experience the diary as it was originally written. Readers could figure things out using Beale's notation system, but doing so always required an act of interpretation. Second, by working with photographic images of the 1911 edition, Beale accepted its index and lack of annotations. The 1960 edition therefore did not reflect the previous fifty years of scholarship.

The Gienapps edition of Welles' diary corrects all of these problems. The editors went back to the Welles' volumes in the Library of Congress to confirm what was originally written and what had been added later. They then created a new, clean edition that provides readers with Welles' thoughts as they first appeared, with the 1861 addendum properly placed as an appendix. The Gienapps included three additional appendices. The first consists of brief biographies of all the men who served in Lincoln's cabinet, and is new to this edition. The second appendix includes diary entries from the 1911 edition that do not appear in the Welles diary. They are included here because they likely came from Welles' day books, which have since disappeared, and fit in to the overall diary. The third appendix includes some of Welles' correspondence that reinforce diary entries and which also appeared in the 1911 edition. Finally, the Gienapps included an entirely new and more expansive index.

The new, clean edition makes this version of Welles' diary a real boon for historians, but what most will appreciate just as much are the extensive annotations that now accompany the text. Most names, places and events mentioned by Welles are explained by the Gienapps, often at some length, and with citations. Kudos to the University of Illinois Press for allowing the annotations to appear as footnotes rather than endnotes; the text is richer for it. This reviewer tested the scale and scope of the annotations by checking to see how several little known but nonetheless important events were handled. In every case, the Gienapps provided appropriate clarification.

The only shortcoming of this edition is that it stops with the end of the war and does not cover Welles' postwar service as Secretary of the Navy. This is likely the result of William Gienapp's unfortunate death during preparation of the manuscript. For that reason, the 1960 edition, which continues the diary until Welles left the cabinet in 1869, will continue to be useful to a subset of historians. However, for those working in the war years, this new version of Gideon Welles' diary is a noticeable and welcome improvement. This will be the definitive edition for decades to come.

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