

For Slavery and Union: Benjamin Buckner and Kentucky Loyalties in the Civil War

Thomas H. Appleton Jr.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Appleton, Thomas H. Jr. (2015) "For Slavery and Union: Benjamin Buckner and Kentucky Loyalties in the Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 17 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.17.4.18

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol17/iss4/17>

Review

Appleton, Thomas H., Jr.

Fall 2015

Lewis, Patrick A. *For Slavery and Union: Benjamin Buckner and Kentucky Loyalties in the Civil War.* University Press of Kentucky, \$50.00 ISBN 9780813160795

Proslavery Kentuckians Saw in the Union the Best Protections for Their Aims

In the last half-century, military historians have often examined the course of the Civil War in border-state Kentucky. Generally left unexplored have been the social, political, and economic ramifications of the Brothers' War in the commonwealth. Happily, since 2010, this imbalance in scholarly analysis has been redressed in pathbreaking monographs by Luther Adams, Jack Glazier, Anne E. Marshall, and Maryjean Wall. To this impressive shelf must now be added Patrick A. Lewis' landmark study. With this first book Lewis, an assistant editor of publications at the Kentucky Historical Society, emerges as a preeminent student of the Civil War and subsequent decades of "adjustment" in the Bluegrass State.

Through the life and careers of Benjamin Forsythe Buckner (1836-1901) the author explains the complex ingredients that went into Kentucky unionism. In particular, he demonstrates why Buckner and other slave owners decided to cast their lot with the Union rather than to support secession. As Lewis convincingly argues, Buckner, above all, sought to preserve the slave culture of the Bluegrass. He believed that the maintenance of the Union—whose Constitution upheld the property rights of slave owners—offered the best guarantee to the continued existence of slavery, which he perceived as a vibrant, thriving institution. As Lewis writes on page 2, "Buckner was not a slave owner who was also a Unionist; he was a proslavery unionist."

In late summer and early fall 1861, Buckner worked to enlist his Clark County neighbors into Union service and eventually became a major in the Twentieth Kentucky Volunteer Infantry Regiment. He was motivated, in part, by

his desire to prove his character and manliness to his fiancée, Helen Martin, and her secessionist, slave-owning parents. For more than a year the couple endured long absences, during which time Buckner shared his feelings on the war and politics in extended letters to his betrothed. Fortunately, a small number of these letters have survived, and Lewis has mined them to great effect.

Again and again, Buckner expressed to Helen his frustration—indeed, anger—as the Union war aims shifted. In fall 1862, when he learned that President Abraham Lincoln had issued a preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, he accused the president of bad faith. If he and other proslavery Kentuckians had only known Lincoln's true intent a year earlier, he said, they would have embraced the Confederate cause. He pronounced the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation "a most abominable & infamous document" (p. 102). Never accepting emancipation as a war aim, Buckner agonized over his next move. He realized he could no longer remain in service, yet he feared leaving the army "in dishonor" (p. 109). In the early weeks of 1863, as the prospect of enrolling African Americans in the Union army loomed, Buckner tendered his resignation. He returned to Kentucky and married.

Buckner devoted the remainder of his life to restoring the world he had loved as the war came, a world committed to white supremacy. Along with other conservative whites in and out of government, he consistently denied civil rights, social equality, and economic opportunity to Kentucky's black citizens. Though the state legislature never enacted a poll tax or established literacy tests for voting, neither did it ratify the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, or Fifteenth Amendments. Former Unionists and Confederates found common cause in keeping the Democratic party in power for decades. Not until 1895 did the state elect its first Republican chief executive.

Thoroughly researched, persuasively argued, and elegantly written, *For Slavery and Union* merits careful reading and rereading.

Thomas H. Appleton Jr. is Foundation Professor of History at Eastern Kentucky University. He recently co-edited (with Melissa A. McEuen) Kentucky Women: Their Lives and Times (University of Georgia Press, 2015).