Confederate Cities: The Urban South During the Civil War Era

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Recommended Citation

Parrish, T. Michael (2016) "Confederate Cities: The Urban South During the Civil War Era," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 18 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.18.2.05

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol18/iss2/4>

Review

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Spring 2016

Slap, Andrew L. and Towers, Frank. *Confederate Cities: The Urban South during the Civil War Era*. University of Chicago Press, \$30.00 ISBN 9780226300207

Understanding the Civil War in an Urban Southern Context

"Confederate Cities" is not an oxymoron. That is true largely because the phrase "modern slaveholding South" is a perfectly sensible concept to discuss. Such is the thrust of much scholarship lately, and this book represents a major advancement in the discussion. More than anything, it shows that cities afford a sharp lens for examining the South in the Civil War era, revealing a picture of vigorous urban development, wartime upheaval, and dramatic transition.

Among the many volumes of scholarly essays on particular aspects of American history published during the last couple of decades, this is one of the best. Comprising a dozen forcefully argued essays—including the editors' superb introduction—the book also features a fiery foreword by David Goldfield (the dean of urban South historians), along with a welcome conclusion and a real index.

"We write too much about triumph and not enough about trauma," Goldfield reminds us. He blames the "battle-cry-of-freedom" school that emphasizes the glories of emancipation at the expense of the Civil War's catastrophic costs. "The story of the urban South in war and Reconstruction is the story of hope and heartbreak, of promise and betrayal, and ultimately, of tragedy. It is the story of America." (pages xi-xiii)

Editors Andrew Slap and Frank Towers launch the story with an introduction that amounts to the most complete and accurate analysis to date of the evolving historiography on Southern cities before, during, and after the war. American urban history—like religious history, economic history, and legal history—is swiftly becoming part of the mainstream because innovative

historians recognize that cities (large and small) directly influenced and were influenced by rural areas, interregional connections, and transnational networks. Scholars of the nineteenth century South now thrive on debating about modernizing capitalism's symbiotic relationship with slavery and the urban South as well as the urban North. Even historians who are not very interested in arguing about slavery's alleged modernity are focusing on cities as dynamic and contested environments involving class, race, gender, science, and other cultural concerns. All of those approaches are evident herein.

The essays are framed and mostly paired according to five parts: "The Big Picture" (i.e. broad context), "Secession," "Gender," "Emancipation," and "A New Urban South." J. Matthew Gallman and David Moltke-Hansen address the "big picture" by tackling the historiographic controversy over the urban South's modernity. The contrarian Gallman insists that slavery stunted urban growth, which in turn hampered the Confederate war effort. Moltke-Hansen argues that Southern cities and their communications networks, although smaller than their Northern counterparts, advanced rapidly before the war and contributed to four years of surprisingly effective propaganda supporting the Confederacy's nationwide struggle for independence.

Frank Towers notes that rural-based secessionists worked at odds with urban boosters, and vice versa, which ultimately undermined Confederate nationalism. But Lloyd Benson takes a transnational comparative approach to assert in fact the prominence of urban nationalists who deftly used the gendered language of family solidarity, combined with slavery and race, to enhance unification throughout the Confederacy. The theme of gender continues in essays by Michael Pierson, who explains the importance of manhood among Union soldiers occupying New Orleans, and Keith Bohannon, who conclusively refutes bread riots and other protests by urban women as strong and sustained evidence of gendered anti-Confederate political activism.

The section on emancipation includes three incisive essays on cities as hotbeds of African American politics: one by Hilary Green on the vital role of Freedmen's Bureau schools in Mobile helping to define freedom and citizenship; another by Justin Behrend on the political mobilization of freedmen in Natchez; and another by Andrew Slap on the proliferation of former black troops in Memphis to emphasize that cities attracted unusually large numbers of such veterans, who were politically active. The urban New South emerges in the essay by William Link, who dramatizes how Atlanta's wartime destruction, postwar

occupation, and heavy influx of freedmen and their families set the stage for the city's essence as a New South metropolis; and a final essay by John Majewski, who demonstrates that Hampton Roads successfully garnered outside investors and manufacturing to overcome antebellum limitations from slavery and environment.

In their conclusion the editors glean three revelations from the essays: the ever surging and increasingly important interplay between the rural South and the urban South; the crucial effects, both positive and negative, of cities on the Confederate war effort; the war's inducement of even closer connections and homogeneity between cities and the rest of the South, a trend that continued strongly in the postwar years and since; and most importantly the sudden increase and soon huge African American presence in the urban South; and happily the sharpening of our understanding of the Civil War in a complex and extensive urban context.

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