Slavery and Secession in Arkansas: A Documentary History

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Recommended Citation

Edwards, Gary T. (2016) "Slavery and Secession in Arkansas: A Documentary History," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 18 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.18.2.13

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol18/iss2/12>

Review

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Spring 2016

Gigantino, James J. *Slavery and Secession in Arkansas: A Documentary History*. University of Arkansas Press, \$22.95 ISBN 9781557286765

Charting Arkansas' Winding Course To Secession

The secession of the Upper South has always been a subject of particular interest because it was not an axiomatic result of the Republican electoral victory. Included among the four slave states that seceded immediately after Ft. Sumter, Arkansas took a longer and more distinctive path out of the Union than its peers. James Gigantino has assembled an excellent cross section of the most relevant documents that reveal how Arkansas inexorably moved toward secession from 1859 to 1861. And this concise time frame must be considered a plus as it allows for the fullest vetting of a most prolific period of political discourse. As editor he also provides important context with a thorough introduction to the entire collection that situates Arkansas relative to the events at hand. Gigantino then introduces each of the 80 documents in turn, which have been grouped into five chapters corresponding to the chronology of events. While some of the longest documents have been abridged many of the shorter ones are reproduced in their entirety. Overall the authors' original meanings have been successfully conveyed. The selections are largely taken from prominent political actors or observers and supplemented with citizens' resolutions from various counties.

It will come as no surprise, especially considering the book's title, that the documents are tied together by the common theme of slavery with an emphasis on its protection and expansion in the nation. Gigantino provides sources that reflect support both for and against disunion. It's interesting to note that the staunchest secessionists could also be breathtakingly bold in employing race in their arguments. For instance in his letter to the *Arkansas Gazette* (December 3, 1860), Senator Robert Ward Johnson declared that the North was already engaged in a "war to give freedom and equality to the negroes," although no

such political reality was then at hand. Likewise, Albert Pike was long against secession but when he finally penned his famous pamphlet on the eve of the state's first secession convention, it was a lengthy diatribe on state sovereignty going back to the Kentucky Resolution. Ultimately even someone like Pike appealed to race as his trump card as he warned that the next generation would not be able to safely absorb its growing negro population without the option to expand slavery into the western territories. However, most of the committed anti-secessionists were largely focused on securing the rights of slaveholders inside the Union as indicated by a resolution from Benton County citizens. Slaves comprised only 4 percent of that county's population yet whites were unified in their fear that secession would unleash a chain reaction and inevitably bring a war resulting in emancipation. Lastly, Arkansas attempted secession before and after Ft. Sumter. Both the failed attempt and the successful one were justified on grounds of protecting slavery—the first being explicit and the second being inferential to the text of the first.

Gigantino has performed admirably in his role as editor and commentator, however, he seems to pull his punch just a little when he initially frames the context. In the concluding paragraph of the introduction he writes, "just because slavery encouraged the state's political leaders to leave the Union does not mean that the average Arkansan who fought the war believed the same thing . . . a truism that likely applies for most soldiers from any southern state" (xxiii). This conclusion probably creates too much separation between the actions of politicians and soldiers. Scholars such as Chandra Manning, Joseph Glatthaar, and even James McPherson have argued that soldiers from both sides understood that slavery was the reason for the war. If Gigantino is right on this point then it seems that the documents would lose much of their interpretive potency as they speak more to the values and goals of the politicians rather than the soldiers. Whatever the average Arkansas soldier might have believed, Arkansas's political leaders ultimately argued for a Confederacy to protect slavery because they no longer had confidence that the Federal government would. Nevertheless, Gigantino has assembled a valuable collection of primary sources combined with insightful context. Indeed the book could even be considered timely, and therefore instructive, in recognition of the renewed rhetoric on state sovereignty and Confederate memory in our current age.

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