

Crucible of the Civil War: Virginia From Secession to Commemoration

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Recommended Citation

Crofts, Daniel W. (2007) "Crucible of the Civil War: Virginia From Secession to Commemoration," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 2 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol9/iss2/9>

Review

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Spring 2007

Ayers, Edward L., Gallagher, Gary W., and Torget, Andrew J., eds..
Crucible of the Civil War: Virginia from Secession to Commemoration.
University of Virginia Press, \$35.00 hardcover ISBN 813925523

The Old Dominion's Civil War A New Look at Virginia

This anthology features contributions from eight current or recent graduate students at the University of Virginia. All look at the Old Dominion between 1860 and the early 1870s. Rather than revisit the oft-trod terrain of military encounters, however, the authors search for broader context and meaning. They trace the impact of secession, war, and emancipation upon many different Virginians—privileged and ordinary, white and black, male and female. Virginia was by far the most populous and important state in the Confederacy. Her peoples suddenly found themselves on an often-terrifying roller coaster ride that reshaped their lives forever. I shall summarize some of the key points made in the eight essays and then offer a few reflections.

Andrew J. Torget, a co-editor of the volume, focuses on three counties in the Valley of Virginia that overwhelmingly rejected secession in February 1861, but then reversed course just two months later to embrace the new Confederate nation. When forced to choose sides in a war that appeared to be an assault on the South and the slave system, the white residents of Rockingham, Augusta, and Rockbridge counties flocked to the southern side. Torget reinforces the message of his mentor's fine book (Edward L. Ayers, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies: The Civil War in the Heart of America, 1859-1863*); these Virginians acted as they did to protect their investment in slavery.

Wayne Wei-siang Hsieh examines decisions made in 1861 by Virginia-born West Pointers. Because the army was a powerful nationalizing influence, substantial numbers of Virginia officers sided with the Union. Of those Virginians who graduated from West Point before 1830, more stayed loyal to the Union rather than follow the famed example of Robert E. Lee. The latter's

decision to side with his state thus was hardly carved in stone upon his birth. Lee better fit the profile of a younger West Pointer from Virginia, two-thirds of whom became Confederates. By denting Lee's halo and challenging the views of Lee's hagiographer, Douglas Southall Freeman, Hsieh will doubtless rouse indignation in some quarters.

Aaron Sheehan-Dean contends that southern unity was a product of the Civil War, not a precedent for it. This was especially the case in Virginia, a sprawling and historically disunited state that stretched from the Atlantic all the way to the Ohio River. Sheehan-Dean builds on the foundations laid by William G. Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion: Virginia and the Second Party System, 1824-1861*. Confederate Virginia became more united because the crisis of the Union finally ripped the Old Dominion apart. The stern imperatives of wartime forged a growing sense of state pride and allegiance among white Virginians who lived east of the Alleghenies.

Amy R. Minton perused the five newspapers published in wartime Richmond to learn more about how Virginians saw themselves. She finds that newspaper writers quickly promulgated a bracing stereotype of the patriotic Confederate—a public spirited person who displayed good character and respectability, and who practiced healthy self-denial. Northerners, by contrast, were selfish, degenerate, and had destroyed their respectability through an unbridled pursuit of gain. The North and South were therefore described in the Richmond press as polar opposites. These newly created definitions of Confederate identity contained no hint that southern cultural distinctiveness might be aristocratic or hierarchical.

Jaime Amanda Martinez shows that slave sales and slave hiring continued in Virginia until the very end of the war. Slave values did not keep pace with the rate of inflation, but there were sufficient would-be slave buyers to provide a market for an increasingly risky form of property. Even though male slaves, especially, often absconded during wartime, and even though the threat of ultimate emancipation hung over the Confederate war effort from September 1862 until the end of the war, patriotic Virginians boasted that Abe and his proclamation had failed to undermine white southern confidence in the slave system.

Andrew Witmer studies the interactions between white and black Baptists in Albemarle County during and after the war. White Baptists at one church

became suspicious of their black brethren in June 1861, a time when alarms about dangerous fifth-column elements were widespread across the South. By 1863, white Baptists in Charlottesville felt sufficiently reassured to allow formation of a separate black Baptist church. Not until the end of the war and emancipation, however, did most black Baptists secede from the biracial churches to which they had formerly belonged.

Caroline Janney captures a brief moment after the end of the war, when Ladies' Memorial Associations organized ceremonial reburials for martyred Confederate heroes. In October 1866 a crowd of 10,000 gathered in Winchester to dedicate the Stonewall Cemetery and to hear former governor Henry A. Wise denounce Reconstruction. Federal officials then cracked down, having decided that the embers of sectional division were being fanned by ostensibly commemorative services. Janney notes that this first display of Confederate adulation has been overshadowed by the more celebrated outpouring of Lost Cause remembrances toward the end of the century.

Susan Michele Lee trekked to the National Archives to read the applications for amnesty penned by Virginians in 1865, along with materials gathered in the 1870s by the Southern Claims Commission, in which pro-Union southerners sought compensation for property confiscated during wartime. She finds that white Virginians often claimed to have opposed secession, but then admitted to have sympathized with neighbors and friends during wartime. Such a stance might win amnesty but not compensation for loss of property. Black Virginians, by contrast, were far better positioned to demonstrate an unconditional pro-Union allegiance. We all wanted freedom and our rights, one noted.

These essays collectively demonstrate that the field of Civil War studies has widened in innovative ways. None of the eight contributors have produced drum and trumpet narratives. Instead, they shed light on matters that get short shrift in traditional Civil War historiography. Make no mistake: the war was the great juncture in the lives of civilians, quite as much as soldiers. It affected everyone and everything. Nowhere was this more the case than in Virginia, where armed conflict raged between 1861 and 1865. But the story goes beyond the clash of contending armies. Edward Ayers and Gary Gallagher have made the University of Virginia a hothouse for new Civil War era scholarship. They have challenged their students to come up with fresh research agendas. They have directed them to rich new lodes of primary source material. They have preached the discipline of looking at particular people in particular places and circumstances. One

eagerly awaits the appearance of more fully developed monographs, based on the ideas previewed in this anthology.

Daniel W. Crofts is the author of Reluctant Confederates: Upper South Unionists in the Secession Crisis (1989), Old Southampton: Politics and Society in a Virginia County, 1834-1869 (1992), and Cobb's Ordeal: The Diaries of a Virginia Farmer, 1842-1872 (1997). He is completing a manuscript entitled The Public Man Revealed: William Henry Hurlbert and the Coming of the Civil War.