

Civil War Petersburg: Confederate City in the Crucible of Civil War

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Review

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Greene, A. Wilson *Civil War Petersburg: Confederate City in the Crucible of Civil War*. University of Virginia Press, \$34.95 hardcover ISBN 9780813925707

Petersburg, Virginia: A City Under Siege

A. Wilson Greene, Executive Director of Pamplin Historical Park and the National Museum of the Civil War Soldier, has written a well-researched and extensive community study of Petersburg, Virginia, the Cockade City. Petersburg's importance as a logistical and transportation hub for Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia led to a virtual, if still somewhat porous, siege conducted by Ulysses S. Grant's armies between June 1864 and April 1865. During that campaign, Grant aimed at severing the Army of Northern Virginia's and Richmond's communications with the rest of the Confederacy, most of which passed through Petersburg. Grant gradually extended the Federal left from initial positions to the east of the Cockade City south and west to put his troops astride various railroads and roadways that fanned out along the city's southern arc. Grant's eventual success in this effort forced Lee's evacuation of Richmond and Petersburg, which in turn led to the surrender of Lee's army at Appomattox, arguably the effective end of significant Civil War military operations.

The military story of Petersburg's siege and fall is familiar to most Civil War historians, and one that has been ably chronicled in such works as Richard J. Sommers' *Richmond Redeemed: The Siege at Petersburg* (1981) and Noah Andre Trudeau's *The Last Citadel: Petersburg, Virginia, June 1864-April 1865* (1991), but Greene's work is a true social history of the city that includes its entire wartime experience. While Greene does cover in some degree the military campaigns that affected Petersburg, both major and minor, the focus is on the city itself, and the work should thus be seen in historiographical terms as a community study akin to Martin Crawford's *Ashe County's Civil War: Community and Society in the Appalachian South* (2001), Daniel E. Sutherland's *Seasons of War: The Ordeal of a Confederate Community* (1995), J. Matthew

Gallman's *Mastering Wartime: A Social History of Philadelphia During the Civil War* (1990), and Theodore J. Karamanski's *Rally Round the Flag: Chicago and the Civil War* (1993). Long ago, indeed, does Maris Vinovskis's 1990 lament on social historians' neglect of the Civil War now seem, with the veritable explosion of work on the topic in the last decade and a half. Greene's work is thorough in its research, with a prodigious bibliography filled with printed and manuscript sources on his topic, and the study's overall organization works well, sometimes moving back and forth between civilian and military perspectives. Thankfully, Greene and the University of Virginia Press provided adequate maps for the task at hand.

However, as competently done a study as it is, some readers, especially academic historians, might desire a sharper historiographical angle on Petersburg's relevance. This is perhaps especially pertinent in the wake of Edward L. Ayers's recent *In the Presence of Mine Enemies: War in the Heart of America, 1859-1863* (2003), which goes beyond the usual confines of the tightly focused and researched community study by comparing two different communities, North and South, and then using the comparison to address broader questions of contingency, causation, and historical method. Furthermore, one of Petersburg's more interesting demographic characteristics—that in 1860, 26 percent of free persons in the city were African-American—might have been a topic better developed during the work's wartime chapters. Greene does cover frictions between whites and blacks during the war, and the Confederate government's use of African-American labor for military purposes, but what at first glance appears to be an especially distinctive racial dynamic in the city might have received further and more extensive treatment. Petersburg is, of course, an interesting topic in itself, and while Greene is free to avoid the sometimes stifling shackles of academic historiography, such a perspective might have been fruitful, especially in a study published by a university press and fully in line with professional standards of research and documentation. These comments are relative quibbles, however; any book is properly the possession of its author, not its reviewers, and taken on its own terms, Greene has made a worthy contribution to our growing body of knowledge on Civil War social history.

Dr. Wayne Wei-siang Hsieh is an assistant professor of history at the United States Naval Academy. In the interest of full disclosure, Edward L. Ayers and Gary W. Gallagher both directed his dissertation at the University of Virginia.