

Copperheads: The Rise and Fall of Lincoln's Opponents in the North

Tyler Anbinder

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Recommended Citation

Anbinder, Tyler (2007) "Copperheads: The Rise and Fall of Lincoln's Opponents in the North," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 9 : Iss. 3 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol9/iss3/10>

Review

Anbinder, Tyler

Summer 2007

Weber, Jennifer L. *Copperheads: The Rise and Fall of Lincoln's Opponents in the North*. Oxford University Press, \$28.00 hardcover ISBN 9780195306682

A Movement against the Civil War

The Copperheads

Scholars of Civil War America have long anticipated the publication of a thorough, modern study of the Copperheads. For years, the best general survey of the movement's history has been Wood Gray's *The Hidden Civil War*. Gray, who published his work during World War II, accepted as fact even the most patently partisan rumors of Copperhead conspiracies, hoping that these stories would teach Americans that they must quash all dissent during wartime. Gray's interpretation was eventually challenged, most prominently Frank Klement of Marquette University, who devoted his entire scholarly life to proving that the Copperhead menace in the Midwest was really a fantasy promoted by partisan Republicans. To readers with no stake in this scholarly quarrel, it seemed that the truth probably lay somewhere in between. But for decades, no one was willing to attempt a new history of the Copperheads. A number of excellent books and articles on dissent in the North have appeared in recent years, but these narrowly focused studies left students of the Civil War yearning for a definitive synthesis.

In many ways, Weber succeeds in delivering the modern, insightful study of the Copperheads that has been so long overdue. Weber states that there were four kinds of Copperheads and three phases to their movement. The four groups she identifies as most likely to become Copperheads were immigrants, strict constructionists, those who opposed emancipation, and those with familial or business ties to the South. The first phase of the movement, she argues, began with secession; emancipation brought many new adherents, while the bleak summer of 1864 proved to be, in Weber's view, the high-water mark of Copperhead popularity. Northern military victories late that summer doomed Copperhead efforts to stop the war and negotiate a settlement to the sectional

conflict. Lincoln's victory in the 1864 presidential election committed the nation to fighting until the South surrendered unconditionally, thus dooming the Copperhead goal of maintaining the Union as it was and the Constitution as it is.

Copperheads is extremely well written and never overloads the reader with superfluous facts or details, as do so many books that developed from doctoral dissertations. Anyone who thinks that professional historians today can only produce jargon-laden tomes irrelevant to those outside of academia will think again once they read Weber's engaging prose. Another strength of Weber's book is her use of soldiers' correspondence to help illuminate the impact of the Copperhead movement. These letters lead to her most original finding—that news of Copperhead activity, when it reached soldiers, helped to abolitionize the troops (102). Weber contends convincingly that reports of Copperhead speeches did not motivate many soldiers to desert, as Republicans feared and Confederates hoped. Instead, Copperheadism actually made troops *more* determined than ever to carry on, so that their sacrifices and those of their fallen comrades would not have been in vain.

While that finding is an important one, Weber's study ultimately leaves the reader disappointed. Part of the problem is that Weber never clearly defines what a Copperhead is. Republicans commonly used the term to describe those who did not support the war or even those who merely complained about the Lincoln administration's handling of it. Weber seems to uncritically accept this Republican definition.

During the war, however, the term Copperhead carried far more sinister connotations than did Peace Democrat, the term Weber uses interchangeably with Copperhead. Contemporaries did not generally use the term Copperhead to describe men like Ohio Congressman Samuel Sunset Cox, who appeared to be a reasonable, principled opponent to some aspects of using military means to end the sectional conflict. All but the most blatant partisans instead generally reserved the Copperhead label for those perceived to be *actively* aiding and abetting the Confederacy. These were men such as New York Mayor Fernando Wood, who proposed that the city secede from the Union, or New York editor James McMaster, who in addition to publishing (until he was jailed) a virulently anti-war newspaper, also helped Confederate spies in their efforts to disrupt the 1864 presidential election. Any Democrat might say that the draft was foolish or unfair, but only a Copperhead would advise men to actively resist its implementation.

Weber's failure to differentiate between the Coxes and McMasters in her story may relate to her book's origin as a dissertation entitled *The Divided States of America: Dissent in the North during the Civil War*. Despite its new title, Weber's book is still about dissent in general, not Copperheadism, which was a particular, extreme form of Civil War dissent. By choosing to change the title to *Copperheads*, Weber had a responsibility to more fully examine what it meant to be one and why some Northerners crossed the line from criticism to active resistance, while others did not. Readers looking to have such questions answered will find *Copperheads* disappointing.

Weber's book is thus particularly weak in analyzing the motivations of her subjects. She notes that some Northerners became Copperheads because of their dedication to Jeffersonian notions of strict construction of the Constitution (4, 18-19). But anyone familiar with the Louisiana Purchase knows that even the strictest of strict constructionists might bend his principles in unusual circumstances. It seems just as likely that many Copperheads who cited constitutional scruples as their motivation to oppose fighting the South were really driven more by a racist opposition to the inevitable improvement in the status of African Americans that a northern victory would bring. The Copperheads' complex motivations demand serious attention, but Weber merely lists them in several paragraphs rather than analyzing them in a sustained manner.

Copperheads also lacks sufficient detail on many of the key events in the Copperhead story. Late in the summer of 1861, the Lincoln administration began an effort, under the supervision of Secretary of State William Seward, to suppress Copperhead newspapers. Journals across the country were shut down as a result of this effort; a handful of editors were even jailed until they signed pledges of allegiance to the federal government and the Constitution. The closures brought the issue of Copperheadism to the forefront of public attention and prompted a fascinating debate on the extent to which public criticism of the government should be permitted during a civil war.

Yet this important episode in the Copperhead story merits just half a paragraph in Weber's book (36) and she mentions only New York even though the suppression of the Copperhead press took place nationwide. There is far more detail about this key event in Allan Nevins's fifty year-old *War for the Union* than in Weber's history of the Copperheads. Worse still, neither her

footnotes nor her bibliography cite the scholarly articles written specifically about the New York newspaper closures she describes. Nor does she cite the easily accessible primary sources on these arrests published in the *Official Records* of the war. Her bibliography lists an article on seventeenth and eighteenth-century revolutionary settlements and a book on Florentine political thought, but not a single work on Fernando and Benjamin Wood, two of the most infamous Copperheads in the nation (and the latter one of the New York editors whose papers were closed). The author of a history of the Copperheads must bring such scholarship to the attention of her readers.

Weber's book also offers frustratingly brief accounts of the Copperhead secret societies. Because she argues at the outset of her book that Klement underestimated their importance, the reader expects a detailed account of their operations to substantiate her assertion. But the reader is given only a couple of isolated examples and little sense of the scale of the societies' efforts. She tantalizingly states that federal and state files are filled with records that contradict Klement's interpretation (53), but does not direct readers to those files or explain why she interprets those records so much differently than Klement did.

As I finished *Copperheads*, I still did not know her protagonists as intimately as I should have. The book contains many more quotations of northern soldiers giving their opinions about the Copperheads than it does quotations of the Copperheads themselves. We are never told what a single Copperhead did before the war or after it. So while Weber's book is now the first place I will send my own students who seek to know more about northern dissent and its impact on the war, the definitive history of the Copperheads remains to be written.

Tyler Anbinder is professor of history and chair of the Department of History at George Washington University. He is the author of Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s (1992) and Five Points: The Nineteenth-Century New York City Neighborhood That Invented Tap Dance, Stole Elections and Became the World's Most Notorious Slum (2001).