

My Old Confederate Home: A Respectable Place for Civil War Veterans

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Review

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Williams, Rusty *My Old Confederate Home: A Respectable Place for Civil War Veterans*. The University Press of Kentucky, \$34.95 ISBN 978-0-8131-2582-4

A New Look at Civil War Veterans

It has sometimes been claimed that Kentucky is more Confederate today than it was during the Civil War. Kentucky's dual identity as both a loyal state in the Union and as the home of southern gentility was reflected in that state's treatment of its Confederate veterans. Rusty Williams's *My Old Confederate Home: A Respectable Place for Civil War Veterans* is a lively, amusing, anecdotal retelling of the checkered history of that state's home for Confederate veterans.

While Kentucky remained loyal to the Union, and contributed more troops to the Union army than to the Confederate, its self-image as a loyal state was shaken by President Lincoln's proclamation of emancipation and other actions that, in the eyes of many Kentuckians, betrayed the principles upon which the state chose to remain loyal. In the years after the war Kentuckians identified more and more with the "Lost Cause" that many had fought for, and many more had sympathized with. Certainly in the postwar period, service in the Confederate army was almost a requirement for election to high public office as the ex-Confederates (most notably, Governors McCreary and Buckner) dominated politics.

The Kentucky Confederate Veteran organizations, and later the Kentucky branches of the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), observed other southern states establishing retirement/nursing homes for their aging veterans, deciding that Kentucky should have a home of its own. The key figure promoting this movement, a man who looms large in this book, is Bennett H. Young. A wartime lieutenant, this former John Hunt Morgan trooper who led the raid on St. Albans, Vermont, lent his speaking skills, organizational abilities, and

unmatched political contacts to the cause. Young proved an extremely effective lobbyist, raising funds from private individuals, from the veterans groups, and later from the sympathetic state government.

In 1902 the Kentucky Confederate Home Board of Directors purchased an abandoned luxury hotel situated in PeeWee Valley, Kentucky, 16 miles east of Louisville. Originally a resort hotel for wealthy Louisville residents, the hotel provided accommodations far superior to those of most other veteran's homes. However, it was designed to house only a limited number of inhabitants, and the requests for assistance increased far beyond the home's capacity. Increasing costs were a constant problem: the original idea envisaged housing and board only, but increasingly, as the veterans aged and got sick, the home evolved into a nursing home demanding a medical staff and hospitalization.

As the costs increased, the state government increasingly questioned whether having a separate home for veterans was more cost effective than simply subsidizing the veterans' medical care in their home communities. However, the home provided a visible symbol of the state's commitment to veterans, that private subsidies could not. Nevertheless, as the passing years thinned the ranks of the wartime generation, political support for the home eroded until the home (with only 5 remaining inhabitants) closed its doors in 1934.

Author Rusty Williams is a natural storyteller. He tells the story of the home largely through sketches of individuals closely associated with the home. The narrative flow can at times be disconcerting. Williams starts most chapters with an entertaining 2-3 page story of an individual, then uses that story to focus on a specific time or specific aspect of the home. The reader must connect the story with a substance often many years removed from that story. But Williams melds his storytelling with solid scholarship. His research into the home's records, as well as the individuals, is first-rate. He weaves the lives of the individual veterans into the narrative, with all their peculiarities on display. The home ran along quasi-military lines, with the residents wearing uniforms, eating meals at common times, and subject to strict discipline. Not surprisingly, many veterans evaded or broke the rules, particularly the rules against drinking alcohol. The homes' superintendents ranged from the strict to the easy-going. Each faced the problem of reconciling a restive occupant population on the one hand, and a cost- and discipline-conscious board of directors on the other.

One chapter focuses on a problem that has a modern ring to it. The UDC donated large sums of money and goods to the home, but for years the board of directors contained no female or UDC members. The ladies not unreasonably believed that as they were paying the freight, they should have a say so in how their money was spent. Williams relates this conflict and reveals how a major benefactress to the home, a distinguished and wealthy socialite and UDC activist, earned her fortune via her "disorderly house" in Dallas, Texas.

Rusty Williams's *My Old Confederate Home* joins a number of recent books and writings on postwar Confederate homes, notably R. S. Rosenburg's *Living Monuments: Confederate Soldiers' Homes in the New South*. With flair and humor, Williams relates the personal and political story of how a divided society cared and honored its living civil war veterans, and how through that care, society honored all veterans of all wars.

Bruce S. Allardice, who teaches history at a Chicago-area college, is the author or co-author of several books, including Kentuckians in Gray (University Press of Kentucky, 2008). His current book project is editing the diary of a Confederate riverboat officer.