

Beleaguered Winchester: A Virginia Community at War, 1861-1865

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Recommended Citation

Duncan, Richard R. (2007) "Beleaguered Winchester: A Virginia Community at War, 1861-1865," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 4 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol9/iss4/1>

Interview

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Fall 2007

Interview with Richard R. Duncan

Interviewed by Christopher Childers

Civil War Book Review (CWBR): Why did Winchester's citizens believe that slavery was so interwoven in our social, domestic, and industrial life, that any sudden change would be destructive to us when slaves constituted only 16% of its population?

Richard R. Duncan (RRD): Slavery, even though minor in terms of the number of slaveholders and slaves, was an integral part of the town's social structure as a labor system and an instrument of racial control. Alarmed by the cry of abolitionists, Southerners saw the Republican Party as a threat to their society. In spite of a shared national history, economic ties with eastern markets, and as Jonathan Berkey notes, more involvement in market economy than other regions in the South, a sense of a southern identity made the issue a highly emotional one. In the secession crisis loyalty to their state sealed their decision as Virginians.

CWBR: The mythic image of Stonewall Jackson looms large in your book as the citizens of Winchester look to the general as a sort of savior. How did the city's citizens come to this belief in the heroic nature of the famed general?

RRD: The Winchester community, especially women, came to adore Jackson. His military background of serving in the Mexican War, teaching at the Virginia Military Institute, and becoming commander of the Valley District in 1861 afforded him status. As a staunch Presbyterian, Jackson developed a close

friendship with the Rev. James Graham and his family. His wife, staying with the Graham's during his Romney expedition, regarded the town as her second home. Jackson's performance at First Manassas, earning him the nickname Stonewall and enhancing his reputation as a general who would fight, caught the admiration of civilians. Despite his personally painful retreat from Winchester in March 1862, his continued presence in the Valley offered hope for his return. Recapturing the town in his dazzling Valley campaign, the community saw Jackson as their Moses in delivering them from the Egyptians.

CWBR: Why did Stonewall Jackson and the citizens of Winchester see the city as the key that locked the door to Richmond?

RRD: Winchester, as the major town in the lower Shenandoah Valley, became a key in the defense of the resources of the upper valley, so necessary in supporting the Confederate war effort in Virginia. Federal control over the region would also have meant endangering southern military operations in northern Virginia and jeopardizing Richmond's western flank. On the other hand, Winchester provided Confederates with a base to threaten western Maryland, southern Pennsylvania, and even Washington. Such activity could and did serve as a counter weight to Union pressure on Richmond.

CWBR: Just by the sheer number of times that Winchester changed hands in the course of the war suggests a chaotic quality to life on the home front in the city. Does any evidence exist that the Union occupation had a corrosive effect on the resolve of Winchester's citizens to fight for the Confederacy?

RRD: The constant flux of military movements and occupations from March 1862 to Sheridan's victory in 1864 created intense social and economic instability. Survival of disease, scarcities, destitution, skirmishes and battles around and through the town became the first order of life. The social elite, especially the women steeled in their determination to support the Confederacy, posed continuous problems for Union commanders. Others, less rigid, became increasingly pragmatic, while Unionist minority, despite gaining greater freedom during Federal occupations, remained cautious. Strained relations between Southerners and Unionists existed, but anxieties and uncertainties of a constantly changing military situation made embracing a *modus Vivendi* a necessity.

CWBR: You analyze the effect of the war on race relations in Winchester and its environs during the war years. How did the relationship between blacks—both free and slave—and Winchester's white citizens change over the course of the war?

RRD: With the coming of Federal troops slavery quickly disintegrated. Uncertainty of the status of slaves and the absence of control effectively brought about the institution's demise. Federals in auguring freedom antagonized Southerners and Unionists alike with their behavior and policies. The appearance of Black soldiers in 1864 accentuated for many their existing animosities. The war may have destroyed slavery, but racial attitudes remained in its aftermath.

CWBR: The relationship between civilians and soldiers—both Union and Confederate—forms an important part of the narrative. How did relations change during the war?

RRD: The relationship between civilians and soldiers varied considerably. Instability was ubiquitous and its social and economic impact unsettling. Most dangerous was the problem of discipline inherent in both armies. Hunger and boredom encouraged marauding and occasional acts of retaliation. Open hostility by southern women greatly aggravated tensions. Paranoia and suspicion of subversive activity, in turn, fueled punitive actions by Union commanders. Yet, despite antagonisms, relations improved as civilians and soldiers became more acclimated to occupations, but they always remained subject to the high spirits of a particular unit or its members, attitudes of a commander, behavior during a raid, or reaction to provocative incidents, such as the charge of a firing upon Federal soldiers by civilians in General Nathaniel Banks's retreat and the burning of Chambersburg, Pennsylvania by General Jubal Early's men in 1864. War worn, Unionists and Southerners learned to adjust as well as suffer indiscriminate predatory acts by soldiers of both armies.

CWBR: As the war intensified in 1863 and beyond, the specter of guerrilla warfare haunted those soldiers and civilians who had more formal expectations of how war should be conducted. How did partisan warfare affect the people of Winchester and how did they respond?

RRD: Guerrilla warfare posed serious problems for civilians. Care, however, has to be used in characterizing various groups. John Mosby's rangers were within the Confederate military structure and enjoyed Lee's and civilian

support. Irregulars, led by Robert Gilmor and John McNeil, were the more problematic and troublesome. Partisan warfare raised questions of legitimacy, but despite concerns Confederate authorities pragmatically learned to tolerate its use. Lack of discipline, even occasionally among Mosby's men, brought complaints and charges from civilians and even southern commanders. Beyond the pale were the marauding bands of deserters and outlaws. Their robbing and terrorizing the countryside brought outcries from Unionists and Southerners alike. Unfortunately authorities on both sides lacked sufficient forces to curb fully their activities and left civilians to endure their presence.

CWBR: Does the story of Civil War-era Winchester compare to experiences in other border communities? How do you see your work in comparison to, for example, Robert Tracy McKenzie's recent book on Knoxville, Tennessee or William Blair's study of the home front in Virginia?

RRD: Scholars have increasingly begun to examine the civilian home front in greater detail. Mark Grimsley with his *The Hard Hand of War* (1995) traced changing Federal policies from conciliation to hard war, while Stephen Ash in his *When the Yankees Came* (1995) examined the chaos caused by Union troops occupying areas of the South. Importantly, William Blair published his *Virginia's Private War* three years later. In painting a mosaic of wartime problems he provided an overall framework in understanding the war's impact on the state's civilian population. Localized studies, such as Robert Tracy McKenzie's work on Knoxville, Tennessee, and A. Wilson Greene's on Petersburg, Virginia, contribute to a broadening of an understanding of wartime conditions. Border towns—depending on their strategic location, variable Federal presence, and divided loyalties—faced difficulties not fully experienced by most interior communities. Winchester is unique in this respect. Four years of constant combat delineated more sharply civilian hardships, subtleties of opposition and loyalty, difficulties inherent in occupations, and the transformation of the war from conciliation to hard war.

CWBR: You describe the postwar recovery of Winchester and the Shenandoah Valley. Did Winchester fully recover from the war's lasting effects?

RRD: The Civil War exacerbated Winchester's economic decline. Already in the 1850s the town, as James Tice Moore observes, was becoming a comparatively minor goods-and-services market for neighborhood farmers. Its

postwar development, despite the coming of several small industrial plants, was relatively stagnant and rested mainly on its surrounding orchards and fruit industry. Arguably World War II and its aftermath provided the stimulus that brought a more dynamic change. The influx of capital, outside families, and an expanding middle class created a more diversified and vibrant economy which depended less on agriculture.