

Show Thyself A Man: Georgia State Troops, Colored, 1865-1905

Barbara Gannon

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Review

Gannon, Barbara

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Mixon, Gregory *Show Thyself A Man: Georgia State Troops, Colored, 1865-1905*. University Press of Florida, \$79.95 ISBN 9780813062723

Between Service and Citizenship

The idea of the citizen soldier, particularly members of local militia units, has always been at the center of the ideal of American citizenship. Military service allowed men to claim citizenship based on their efforts to defend their community. Ironically, the people who most needed to receive the benefits of military service, African Americans, have not always been allowed to serve because white Americans feared that this service would translate into an upgraded political and social status. Despite these barriers, black Americans served: in the Revolution, the War of 1812, the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, and all the wars of the twentieth and twenty-first century. In the post Civil War regular Army, African American units provided a significant percentage of ground combat power, including two infantry regiments (24th and 25th) and two cavalry regiments (9th and 10th). Despite their service in wartime and peacetime, African Americans did not receive the same recognition as citizens until well into the twentieth century. Gregory Mixon, an associate professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and the author of *The Atlanta Riot: Race, Class, and Violence in a New South City* examines a lesser-known aspect of post-Civil War black military service--African Americans' service in state militias--in *Show Thyself a Man: Georgia State Troops, Colored, 1865-1905*. Mixon chronicles the service of mostly formerly-enslaved men in Georgia militia units from the end of the Civil War until a decade before World War I.

In the immediate aftermath of Union victory and emancipation, during the United States' military occupation, black and white Georgians created independent militia companies. According to Mixon, "both races mobilized their respective populations for political action during these years, with the militia

company serving as the centerpiece in that effort” (24). When black Georgians did so, Mixon argues, they were inspired by black independent militia companies in the antebellum north that had been a “medium by which free blacks established their claim as citizens of the nation and northern states” (25). After the war ended in Southern states, Mixon explains, these units provided self-defense for freed people and asserted “African American political, citizenship, and property ownership rights. Post-Civil War blacks therefore used the militia company as a way of declaring that they belonged and were members of the national polity” (25). In addition to examining the Georgia militia, Mixon also assessed other black militia units in the western hemisphere, such as Afro-Cuban organizations. He finds some important parallels in why these men served in military units, including the idea that militia service allowed these men to “find freedom, citizenship and belonging” (11) in their local communities.

Surprisingly, despite the politicized nature of these units, they survived “Redemption” and the reinstallation of white rule at Reconstruction’s end. No longer independent, these black units reorganized as part of the regular state militia and later the Georgia State Troops, Colored. In my view, this is the most intriguing part of Mixon’s story. It is true that these black units were segregated and not treated as well as white units, but it is astonishing that they were allowed to continue to operate until 1905. According to Mixon, it was the federal government that forced Georgia to retain black militia units and that may partly explain their survival. The focus of Mixon’s study is not white decision-makers who allowed black men to serve but on African American soldiers and why they created, maintained, and sustained these units in the face of white opposition. As such, he makes a detailed examination of specific units, for example, the Savannah Hussars--the only black cavalry unit in the state troops. Despite discrimination and systematic under-resourcing, the men of the Hussars and other black militiamen belonged to these units because they “defined national belonging as a critical part of their freedom” (188). Eventually, black soldiers’ dedication to their units could not save them. Ironically, it was the federal government’s post Spanish-American military reforms that allowed Georgia to disband all of its black state troops and create the all-white Georgia National Guard.

Mixon’s research into this critical aspect of postbellum life is impeccable and represents a significant contribution to the study of African American military history. The value of this study is only somewhat diminished by certain organizational issues related to the book’s structure. First, the introduction’s

format serves the rest of the book poorly. It spends a great deal of time on militias outside the United States and does not do what readers expect it to do, introduce the book. The first part of chapter one, which explains the author's purpose and thesis, should be in the introduction. The next section in chapter one returns to a transnational discussion of militias; the main topic of the book, Georgia's black militia, do not reappear until later. Given the value of this subject, this is unfortunate. In addition, the information on militias outside the United States is not well integrated into the rest of the book. His discussion suggests that a transitional approach to black militia service would be worthwhile but that this approach is difficult within the context of an examination of one state militia organization.

Despite these issues, this is a tremendously valuable study. One issue it does raise: do we emphasize the relationship between citizenship and military service too much? Based on how white Americans treated black soldiers in the past, this connection may have been merely theoretical, fodder for recruiting officers. Observing the success of recent political aspirants who have never served in the military, prompted my reassessment of this idea. Overall, I would recommend this book to anyone who wants to understand African American military service and the ambiguous relationship between military service and American citizenship.

Barbara A. Gannon is an associate professor of history at the University of Central Florida. She is the author of The Won Cause: Black and White Comradeship in the Grand Army of the Republic (2011).