

Florida's Civil War: Terrible Sacrifices

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Review

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Revels, Tracy J. *Florida's Civil War: Terrible Sacrifices*. Mercer University Press, \$29.00 ISBN 9780881465891

Sacrifice at the Margins of the Confederacy: Florida and the Civil War

Of the tens of thousands of books published in the one hundred and fifty years since the American Civil War, only a scant handful have covered the state of Florida and its people. Why this seeming lack of interest from scholars? Perhaps it is the absence of bloody titanic battles like Shiloh or Gettysburg, or the fact that the Florida peninsula and panhandle were on the outer edges of the Confederacy. This historical neglect is truly unfortunate as Florida's wartime experience is a microcosm of the greater Confederate South during the struggle. Since the 1990s, a few new Florida studies have appeared, and now Tracy J. Revels' *Florida's Civil War: Terrible Sacrifices* joins the literature in an effort to help fill this void in the state's historiography.

Revels lays out how near-wilderness Florida became the third state to leave the Union and opt to join the new Confederate States of America in January, 1861. The giddy joy of secession soon soured as the new national government in Richmond made the strategic decision to all but abandon the peninsula state to the mercy of Federal forces. Even in the face of this, rebel leaders still expected Florida to supply its war machine with manpower, economic support in the form of items like cattle and salt, and finally a base for successful blockade-running. Over time these demands, combined with shortages of basic consumer products and the real threat posed by the Union navy and army, eroded support for the war. By 1865 the political and social fault lines already existing in the state ruptured and sapped civilian morale. In the author's view these divisions, when laid bare, exposed Floridians black and white to the horrors of a true civil war.

Professor Revels states in her preface that she hoped her book would be “a consideration of the social factors that shaped the state and its role within the Confederacy.” *Florida's Civil War* is indeed strongest when dealing with the

plight of Florida's women who tried to make do on the home front in the face of serious challenges. She also looks at black Floridians free and unfree, Unionists, and finally lapsed Confederates who turned to desertion and draft evasion. The Seminoles of Florida receive some attention, but for some reason Floridians of Hispanic origin none at all. Despite this omission the spectrum of Florida society from Middle Florida planters to "crackers" living on the south pine prairie is documented in considerable detail.

The bulk of *Florida's Civil War* covers military and economic matters relative to the conflict. Most of Florida's small urban centers were occupied early in the war by Union land and sea forces, and fighting in the state consisted of raids and counter-raids for years. The largest Civil War battle in the state, the February, 1864 clash at Olustee, ended in a costly Federal debacle. In the end Tallahassee managed to be the only Confederate state capital east of the Mississippi not taken by the Yankee army. Revels also chronicles the regimental histories of Florida soldiers serving in both the Army of Tennessee and the Army of Northern Virginia. While small in number these soldiers gave a good account of themselves on many fields of battle and returned home with honor intact.

The main theme of *Florida's Civil War* is the idea of the "terrible sacrifices" made by the people of Florida from 1861 to 1865. While this was indeed a daunting time, did all Floridians suffer as much as other sections of the Confederacy? Revels herself states that they "fared better as a whole than did the residents of the Shenandoah Valley or the citizens who stood between Sherman and the sea." (p. 123). The citizens of Atlanta, Vicksburg, and Richmond would have definitely agreed with that statement. Florida people on the home front did not have to endure large scale Union military campaigns or face the very real possibility of starving as the war ground to its conclusion. In fact they entered the post-war era in much better shape than many areas of the devastated South.

A concern about this study is the quality and use of primary and secondary sources by the author. Inexplicably the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* and *Navies* were apparently not consulted in the research for this Civil War study of Florida. Neither appear in the bibliography, though the *Army Official Records* are mentioned once in a footnote (Page 122, note 38). The secondary works cited are often very dated, and many important recent studies have been left out entirely. It is hard to imagine that Revels' interpretations would not have been enhanced by looking at such prominent Confederate-era scholars as Emory Thomas, Gary Gallagher, William C. Davis,

or Anne Sarah Rubin. Consulting and citing them would make *Florida's Civil War* a considerably stronger study.

While the author leans heavily on the scholarship of others, *Florida's Civil War* is written in an entertaining style that will appeal to popular audiences and scholars looking for a useful introduction to the subject. It does add to the literature on Civil War Florida, but the definitive study of the state's wartime experience remains to be written.

Robert A. Taylor is Professor of History and Associate Dean and Head of the School of Arts and Communication at the Florida Institute of Technology. Currently he is working on a military history of Florida from 1513 to the present.