

# The Confederate Homefront: A History In Documents

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## Review

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**Hettle, Wallace** *The Confederate Homefront: A History in Documents*. LSU Press, \$29.95 ISBN 9780807165720

### Merging Home Front and Battle Front

Wallace Hettle, Professor of History at the University of Northern Iowa is the author of *Inventing Stonewall Jackson: A Civil War Hero in History and Memory* an exploration of the authors who shaped our understanding of a civil war legend. Professor Hettle now offers us a collection of primary sources that present the story of the Confederate Home Front through the eyes of those who experienced the conflagration first hand. Hettle's goal is to demonstrate that the line between battlefield and home front is far from rigid and, as the Civil War was fought predominantly in the South, this collection of documents clearly illustrate his point. Moreover the array of sources the author uses unmistakably reveals the complexity of the war years. Here we have myriad voices from women, slaves, soldiers, politicians, ministers, journalists as well as more traditional military orders. The book, arranged chronologically, contains one chapter for each of the war years and a preface for each document presented.

For 1861 Hettle begins with rationales for secession, and goes on to include views of slaves, slave owners, and white women, as well as journalists and even the clergy. He also uses commentary on the first shots of the war and suggests that as fighting began in a city – namely Charleston, South Carolina - this underscores that home front and battlefield would never be distinctly demarcated. Also included is the Union struggle to determine a policy for the treatment of runaway slaves. A nice inclusion is a short account by Mark Twain whose irony highlights how quickly disillusionment might set in. This year marked much uncertainty but the centrality of slavery is plainly established.

1862 includes some unexpected perspectives. For example that of a female black abolitionist who had travelled south to the Sea Islands to educate former slaves. The two petitions from political prisoner to Tennessee Governor Andrew

Johnson give us a compelling view into inner dissent as does the prison diary of a Unionist. Early dissent is a focal point of this section as we read commentaries on the military draft, the human cost of battle, and the early use of black labor in Union occupied Mississippi.

Dissent and growing despair continue in 1863 as we read a grief stricken mother's letter describing her concerns about anti-Semitism, and bread riots. The inclusion of advertisements for runaway slaves highlights the difficulties of keeping the home front functioning smoothly. We also learn of the plight of refugees, the death of Jackson, and the evolution of Union policy to hard war. Moreover, even as guerilla warfare tore up the local countryside, planters were objecting to the impressment of their slaves on the grounds that it was an unfair tax.

In 1864, Jefferson Davis focused on raising morale in an address to South Carolina women encouraging them to marry a maimed soldier. The focus on slavery continues as we read Patrick Cleburne's proposal. The *New Orleans Tribune* (the only black owned newspaper in the Confederacy) celebrated the performance of black union soldiers at Fort Pillow and accused Confederate soldiers of barbarous behavior. By 1864 the end was in sight and the white run New Orleans newspaper, *De Bows*, warns that surrender would surely result in the subjugation of the South. The most moving document in this section is the despair expressed by a Confederate woman over the death and destruction to which she has been witness over the past three years.

Unsurprisingly 1865 is the shortest section and perhaps the least powerful. The selections here are somewhat confusing and depend heavily on post war memoirs. The inclusion of Edmund Ruffin's suicide note is the most powerful and a nice touch given that Ruffin also appeared in the first section when he claimed the "honor" of firing the first shot of the war.

Each section is concise and the excerpts themselves are brief which students often prefer. Perhaps a general audience would also like the brevity although I do not see the book's broader appeal. However, the presentation of multiple perspectives lends itself well to teaching the complexities of the war. What is especially valuable is that, while the author never tackles the question of whether slavery was the cause of the war, his selection of documents makes it crystal clear that the slavery question remained central from secession to the end of the war and beyond.

The main weakness of this book is the lack of contextualization before each document. In many cases the editor does not provide enough information and his comments sometimes lack accuracy. For example, Hettle does advise caution when using the WPA Narratives collected in the 1920s and 1930s, but he does not provide enough information on the vagaries of memory. Surely there should be a similar warning about the multiple memoirs that are used without differentiating them from contemporary letters and diaries. In fact the collection depends too heavily on post war memories. The volume would also benefit from a short introduction to each year setting out the major events of the war. Furthermore, a bibliography would be very helpful. These minor flaws do not however take from this very valuable resource especially in a classroom setting.

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