

### The Sacred Cause Of Union: Iowa In The Civil War

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## Review

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**Baker, Thomas R.** *The Sacred Cause of Union: Iowa in the Civil War.* University Of Iowa Press, \$20.38 ISBN 1609384350

### Civil War Iowa Defined

Thomas R. Baker has written the first history of Iowa in the Civil War. Remarkably, no historian has explored the subject until Baker's *The Sacred Cause of Union: Iowa in the Civil War*. Baker is the associate dean of students at the University of Iowa and not a trained historian. However, his book is an important one and a useful addition to the literature on the conflict. It is focused on political and military history. The social history of the Iowa home front receives relatively little attention. Despite this, the book's strengths far outweigh any criticism.

Baker provides a thorough review of the important role that Iowa soldiers played in Union victory. He argues that Iowans supported the North because of a "cult of unionism" which was nearly a religious obsession. He writes that Iowans would have gone to war with New England if that region had fired upon a federal fort in Boston Harbor. While this point is debatable—and ignores decades of simmering regional tensions—such interpretations are easily forgiven due to Baker's strong research and clear narrative.

*The Sacred Cause of Union* follows the story of six individuals throughout the war, who are diverse in their backgrounds and experiences. Several of them are well known to those who study the state, including Alexander Clark and Annie Wittenmyer. Clark was a noted African-American leader in Iowa, a businessman, abolitionist, and reformer who fought against discrimination. Wittenmyer dedicated herself to aiding the Union cause during the war, agitating for improved medical care for soldiers. She eventually became president of the Iowa State Sanitary Commission, organizing aid for the state's soldiers. Other main characters in his story include Cyrus Carpenter, a Civil War officer and politician, and Private Charles Musser, who left an important diary of his

wartime experiences. Musser's letters are collected in the book *Soldier Boy*, an important first-hand account of the war by an Iowan.

Initial chapters place Iowa in its economic and political context before the war and introduce main characters. Debates over secession, recruitment, and local politics are also covered. Baker adroitly reviews the contribution of Iowa troops to the war effort. Iowa regiments assisted in occupying Missouri, helped win crucial battles such as Shiloh and Vicksburg and also made up a significant part of Sherman's army in 1864 and 1865.

Iowans helped the Union pacify and eventually control Missouri, battling guerillas and working as military police. Soldiers found little military glory but much hardship in counter-insurgency operations. Iowa troops played important roles in the battle of Shiloh in the spring of 1862, as well as at Fort Donelson and at the Battle of Pea Ridge in Arkansas. At Shiloh, 2,400 Iowans became casualties. Annie Wittenmyer, who happened to be on a hospital boat, cared for many of the wounded at Shiloh. In Iowa, Alexander Clark worked to raise a regiment of African-American soldiers.

Iowa soldiers fought across the South. In 1863, Iowa troops helped Grant win the Vicksburg campaign. Iowa units included Charles Musser, who wrote to his parents about the difficult environment and the carnage of battle. Late in that year, Clark successfully recruited a regiment of black troops, full of Iowans and escaped slaves from Missouri. The 60th U.S. Colored Troops was deployed to Arkansas in 1864. Their sacrifice helped later convince Iowa voters to support postwar civil rights laws. Fifteen Iowa regiments joined in Sherman's March to the Sea in 1864 and 1865, while ten more regiments fought in the abortive Red River Campaign that tried to take Shreveport, Louisiana.

The end of the war brought some civil rights advances for African-Americans in Iowa. In 1868, voters removed the word "white" from the state constitution, allowing blacks to serve on juries. The state's Supreme Court also invalidated school segregation. Clark served as U.S. ambassador to Liberia, while Annie Wittenmyer became President of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Charles Musser lived until 1934. After Reconstruction, white racism in the state helped roll back civil rights victories and many schools were segregated.

This clearly written and well-researched book is an important contribution to Iowa history and to the literature of the Civil War. Historians of the conflict, as well as anyone interested in the history of the state, or the war in the Trans-Mississippi West, will find it worth owning.

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