

# Connecticut in the American Civil War: Slavery, Sacrifice, and Survival

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## Review

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**Warshauer, Matthew** *Connecticut in the American Civil War: Slavery, Sacrifice, and Survival*. Wesleyan University, \$29.95 ISBN 978-0-8195-7138-0

### Understanding the Importance of Connecticut's War Experience

In 1965 John Niven published a well-researched book *Connecticut for the Union* as part of the centenary commemoration of the Civil War. The momentous African-American protest movements, a Second Reconstruction, were at their height but a fundamental reassessment of race in mainstream scholarship had yet to occur. In 2011 Mathew Warshauer published *Connecticut in the American Civil War: Slavery, Sacrifice, and Survival* as part of the sesquicentennial of the same event. In keeping with the theme of mutual sectional sacrifice that the centennial organizers emphasized, Niven avoided the controversial racial issue and stressed the state's defense of the Union. In contrast, Warshauer has put the issue of slavery and abolitionism at the center while also emphasizing sacrifice for the Union. He boldly, but accurately, states that "the land of steady habits" was characterized by "virulent racism" (2). What a difference fifty years made!

The new volume is popular history at its best. To the extent the public believes the mythology that Connecticut uniformly rallied to the cause of liberty and justice for all during the Civil War, Warshauer seeks to set the record straight. Although the sole author, Warshauer coordinated a group of graduate student researchers, mainly at Central Connecticut State University, where he teaches and recently retired as editor of *Connecticut History*. Primary sources are much present, particularly, informative newspaper accounts. He is also chairperson of the Connecticut Civil War Commemoration Committee and co-chair of the Connecticut Civil War Commemoration Commission. He has coordinated numerous events and spoken widely at public venues.

On a scholarly level, there is a rich synthesis in readable prose based on the outstanding scholarship. The overall paradigm is adapted from David Blight's

influential *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (2002). The point is that, in the decades after the fraternal bloodletting, ritualistic commemorations such as Decoration Day celebrated the heroism of North and South rather than justice for African Americans. The cinema provides but one example. D.W. Griffith's blockbuster film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) argued dramatically that white survival required unity of the Blue and Gray to subjugate the threat of Negro domination. As late as 1939, Victor Fleming's adaptation of Margaret Mitchell's book *Gone with the Wind* (1936) was about a manipulative woman and a roguish man carrying on a turbulent love affair with stereotypical depictions of African Americans during the Civil War and Reconstruction. These are the icons that Warshauer seeks to demolish. For the general public, chapter one provides a good integration of history as the title indicates "Connecticut within the Nation: Slavery, Race, and Politics, 1776-1860." William Lloyd Garrison aptly called the state "this Georgia of New England" (22). Connecticut was the only place in the region to disfranchise blacks. The Quaker schoolmarm, Prudence Crandall, now the state heroine, was in effect driven from the state for educating black girls. In my own work cited below, five of the six men executed for rape were black at a time when the African-American population was less than 3 percent of the total population. Gradual abolition did not mean equal opportunity for blacks; during the 1820s, blacks were imprisoned at ten times that of their percentage in the general population. During the Civil War, the Democratic Party's slogan of "the Constitution as it is and the Union as it was" fused a state's rights ideology with slavery, a legacy emanating from Andrew Jackson's administration during the 1830s. And the Republicans' opposition to the spread of slavery into the western territories usually had a Negrophobic context. Warshauer is especially cogent in playing off the Democratic *Hartford Times* with the Republican *Hartford Courant*, including the crucial gubernatorial contests pitting Democrat Thomas Hart Seymour against the victorious Republican William Buckingham. Interestingly in a survey of ubiquitous Civil War monuments he finds only two (in Waterbury and Hartford) that have any depiction of slavery or emancipation. His principled effort to gain access to restricted files on the hospital records of deranged veterans did not achieve success in time to appear in this volume and may provide revealing information on what is now called post traumatic stress syndrome.

A final point. Although the Fifteenth Amendment (1870) overrode Connecticut's prohibition on the black vote, it was not until 1876 that voters struck out the white only clause in the state constitution. Today Connecticut is

one of the most highly segregated states based on race and income. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*

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