

A Forgotten Front: Florida During the Civil War Era

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Review

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Weitz, Seth A. and Jonathan C. Sheppard, eds. *A Forgotten Front: Florida During the Civil War Era*. University of Alabama Press, \$39.95 ISBN 9780817319823

Perhaps the most tenuous claim in this otherwise fine collection of essays on the history and peoples of Florida between 1860 and 1865 comes in the opening paragraph. “Florida is often the forgotten front of the Civil War, both for scholars and in memory,” Seth Weitz declares in the volume’s Introduction, “as many often overlook the subject and tend to focus on what they deem to be the more significant theaters and participants in the conflict.” (1) That is an accurate description if browsing for Florida in general histories of the war, and one that might, in fairness, be said for any number of other states. But labeling the so-called Land of Flowers as “forgotten” tends to downplay the excellent scholarship by, among other historians, Stephen Ash, Robert Taylor, George Buker, and William Nulty. The editors might have better framed the volume by emphasizing that they take advantage of the latest historiographical trends to draw new conclusions about Florida’s contested past.

There is much history to highlight. Florida was one of the Confederacy’s least populous states, and yet supplied the Rebel war effort with a goodly amount of cattle, salt, and cotton. By 1865, Tallahassee was the only Confederate capital east of the Mississippi River to remain free from Union occupation. All of this came amid divided loyalties and a high human cost. About 1 in 8 white and black Floridians who bore arms served in the Union military. Among those who fought for the Confederacy, nearly 1/3 became casualties, a high rate of death and wounds even by the grim arithmetic of America’s bloodiest war.

The ten essays cover a wide range of topics. In his essay on antebellum politics, Weitz analyzes the increasingly radical turn that culminated in Florida declaring its secession from the Union almost immediately after South Carolina and Mississippi. The battlefield and its often-murky edges are examined by Jonathan Sheppard in his chapter on the failed Confederate

defense of the port city of Fernandina in early 1862, and by Zack Waters in his piece on the guerilla war that plagued much of the state.

The effort of the state courts to marginalize free and enslaved black men and women and the role of religion in sustaining the Confederate cause are detailed by David Parker and Chris Day. In their essays, Tracy Revels and Robert Taylor examine the wartime contributions and sacrifices made by women and, as soldiers, men of Hispanic descent.

Although what essays are the volume's strongest will vary by the opinion of the reader, especially engaging are those by Lauren Thompson, R. Boyd Murphree, and David Nelson. Thompson analyzes the role of class and race in moving Florida to declare its independence from the American Union. That the state had a high proportion of enslaved people in 1860 pushed many of the elite to argue, ultimately successfully, that their only protection from "northern fanaticism" was as a member of the so-called Confederate States. John Milton served as governor of Florida throughout much of the war, and his life and career are recounted by Murphree. Drawing upon Milton's letterbooks, housed at the Florida Historical Society in Cocoa and the State Archives of Florida in Tallahassee, Murphree offers a compelling portrait of a state official so committed to the Confederacy that, upon its collapse, he committed suicide. The war in memory, especially at Olustee, is analyzed by Nelson. Native-born southerners might have many reasons for continuing to remember their Confederate ancestors, but the recent public opposition to establishing a Union monument on the battlefield is no little distressing.

Like many edited volumes, this one suffers from minor shortcomings. There is a good bit of repeated information, especially concerning Florida's demographics in 1860. There also are some claims that a particular topic deserves greater study simply because it has yet to receive much study.

These are quibbles rather than serious scholarly shortcomings. *A Forgotten Front* offers excellent insight into Florida's significant contributions, for a state with a relatively thin population, to the Civil War. It's a history that may not be forgotten, but that certainly deserves the well-written and researched updating that it receives in this volume.

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