

### Persistence Through Peril: Episodes of College Life and Academic Endurance in the Civil War South

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## Review

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**Platt, R. Eric and Holly A. Foster, eds.** *Persistence through Peril: Episodes of College Life and Academic Endurance in the Civil War South*. University Press of Mississippi, 2021. PAPERBACK. \$30.00 ISBN 9781496835048 pp. 264

R. Eric Platt and Holly A. Foster's volume of essays about higher education in the Civil War South appears at a unique moment in the history of American higher education. Having endured more than two years of the Covid-19 pandemic and a gross resurgence of white supremacy and anti-Black violence, our educational institutions are indeed persisting through great peril. Within higher education, educators, students, and administrators have had to reimagine the delivery and content of course material, the effectiveness of long-held pedagogical practices, and the emotional and psychological welfare of students living with new vulnerabilities. In hindsight, the fact that any education occurred at all since March 2020 is remarkable.

The editors and authors of the volume under review share a similar sense of astonishment that southern colleges, universities, and academies remained open during the American Civil War. Although many institutions closed during the war, a handful remained open: South Carolina Military Academy (Columbia, S.C.); Wofford College (Spartanburg, S.C.); Mississippi College (Clinton, M.S.), Spring Hill College (Mobile, A.L.); Tuskegee Female College (Tuskegee, A.L.); Mercer University Wesleyan Female College (Macon, Ga.); the University of Virginia (Charlottesville, V.A.); Virginia Military Institute (Lexington, Va.); the University of

North Carolina (Chapel Hill, N.C.); and the fledgling Trinity College (now Duke University, Durham, N.C.).

*Persistence through Peril* comprises essays about each of these institutions and suggests that the mere fact of their survival is, in itself, noteworthy. In some respect, it is an important point. Individual essays prove that these schools not only remained open, but they also enrolled students, staved off threats of violence, and even created spaces for both classical learning and new courses. While the book's introduction underscores the utility of institutional histories, the editors do not convincingly demonstrate why historians of the Civil War, the American South, and American intellectual history should notice them because they do not engage deeply with historiographical literature in these related fields.

It is not inappropriate to suggest that Civil War era historians would expect answers to this so-what question, for it's not a new one. In 1965, George M. Fredrickson's *The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union* ensured that the life of the mind ought to matter for Civil War historians by showing how a small cohort of northerners used the war for Union as an opportunity to rethink ideas and intuitions in American life. In 2015, Loiren Foote and Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai revived this line of inquiry in their collection of cutting-edge essays about the history of northern intellectual life in their book *So Conceived and So Dedicated: Intellectual Life in the Civil War-Era North*. This book raises questions about how the Civil War shaped educated-Americans' ideas about antebellum ideas, the relationship between nation and state, and the future of individualism.

When Foote and Wongsrichanalai's book appeared, I wondered what a similar volume about the South might include. How might a wartime study of educated people in pursuit of ideas add to what we know about familiar topics: the reactionary historical and literary movement of

Lost Cause, the rise of militant vigilantism among white men, and a memorialization culture that blurred fact and fiction for the region and the nation. While the volume under review here does not ask that question, some standout essays reveal the potential for the history of education to grow Civil War era historiography.

This volume reveals that educators and students saw war as a time to rethink, though not dispose entirely of, the classical curriculum. While most institutions continued antebellum practices of classical learning, others began to innovate their curricula. Christian K. Anderson, for example, shows that students at the South Carolina Military Academy learned about the history of the U.S. Constitution by reading the writing of John C. Calhoun, an enslaver and pro-slavery politician from South Carolina. They were not alone. In another fascinating essay, R. Eric Platt and Donaven L. Johnson use the student writing at Spring Hill College—a Jesuit institution in New Orleans—to show how the college created an atmosphere for generating Confederate patriotism. Similarly, another strong essay reveals that Mercer University—a Baptist College—began to teach a class about slavery as war raged around them in Georgia.

These examples remind us that, unlike our experience teaching and learning during the Covid-19 pandemic, the crisis in southern higher education during the Civil War era was a self-inflicted one. White elites were so invested in human bondage, anti-Black violence, and white supremacy, that they went to war to protect and perpetuate chattel slavery. This was the war that disrupted college life in rebel states. With the exception of Don Holmes's essay about the University of North Carolina, which "faced its greatest battles not during the war, but after," including into our present moment, the collection itself is surprisingly casual about the ramifications of the wartime educational developments in the South, especially during and after Reconstruction.

In short, this book seems useful primarily for education researchers with an interest in history. While some of the essays have potential for further development, others do not engage with archival research or historiographical debate in new or innovative ways.

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