

When Hell Came to Sharpsburg: The Battle of Antietam and its Impact on the Civilians Who Called it Home

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Review

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Cowie, Steven. *When Hell Came to Sharpsburg: The Battle of Antietam and its Impact on the Civilians Who Called it Home.* Savas Beatie, 2022. EBOOK. \$34.95 ISBN 9781611215915 pp. 785

In *When Hell Came to Sharpsburg: The Battle of Antietam and its Impact on the Civilians Who Called it Home*, Steven Cowie provides a comprehensive examination of the social history of Sharpsburg, Maryland and the impacts of the Battle of Antietam during the war and in the years following. Instead of the number of dead and wounded Cowie chose to look at the number of houses hit by war debris, the pounds of forage that the Army of the Potomac seized to feed their livestock, and the amount of money that the citizens never received for the losses sustained during and after Antietam. He interweaves the stories of individuals into the larger narrative of war and reminds the reader that even those loyal to the Union suffered tremendously when war came to their doorstep.

From the beginning Cowie thrusts you into the lives of the Sharpsburg residents and those in surrounding areas. On page 38, Cowie introduces Elizabeth Miller Black, a fifty-year-old widow who stood at her window when a shell exploded in a neighbor's home. Unnerved, she and her children fled town, only realizing once they began their journey that they were in as much danger, if not more, fleeing as if they had stayed home. Little did Elizabeth know that on September 16th, 1862, as she fled Sharpsburg, the Battle of Antietam was just about to begin, and would result in the bloodiest day in American History. Cowie sets the scene for what residents experienced leading up to the battle on September 17th and the impact that it had for generations to come.

The first two chapters introduce the area, several of the residents, and force the reader to confront the terror, anxiety, and destruction felt by those who lived in a town ravaged by war. Do I stay and protect my property from being raided by soldiers from both sides? Do I flee and hope that my family is safer away from the warzone? Do I move to my cellar and allow others in the community to hide with me? These are questions that the Millers, Pipers, Blackfords, and many

other families had to ask themselves and Cowie does a great job addressing each one, using the residents' own words and experiences.

Chapters 3 through 9 examine life directly after the war until approximately January 1863. Once the battle ended, the residents found themselves faced with several new issues. The first being how to resume life in an area riddled with death. Second, how do they begin rebuilding. Lastly, the one that will make the greatest impact in the years to come is how to coexist with an army that is staying on their grounds, commandeering their resources, and causing hardship in the community for an extended period. Residents of Sharpsburg endured tremendous loss during the battle and six weeks of occupation afterwards. During the week surrounding the battle their houses were injured by stray bullets and cannon fire. Their homes were pillaged by soldiers and anything of value taken. If they had anything left after the battle it was commandeered by the army hospitals to care for the wounded of both sides.

As the Army of the Potomac continued to reside in Sharpsburg, residents found their prospects for surviving the winter and planting for the next season dwindle. Farmers lost valuable land to burials and soldiers' encampments. Once the soldiers left, the loss of animals and hard-packed earth due to the armies' movements made it much harder to plow the land. They also lost a multitude of fencing, making it nearly impossible to contain animals and keep people from traveling over their fields. A disease outbreak also impacted the residents' ability to rebuild. Many locals died of typhoid and diarrhea or were incapacitated by illness for extended periods of time. Illness spread so quickly due to the karst land which allowed the mass amount of waste from both humans and animals to contaminate the ground water supplies.

The last three chapters examine the suffering of residents after Antietam. Armies from both sides continued to travel through Sharpsburg and make camp there throughout the rest of the American Civil War. The recurring occupations hindered the residents' ability to truly rebuild until the war came to an end. After the war, residents battled bureaucracy to try to collect monetary reimbursement for their losses sustained at the hands of the Army of the Potomac. Many claims were rejected by the government and those that were accepted often did not receive reimbursement for the entire sum claimed.

Cowie's extensive use of primary sources, especially his use of manuscripts makes this a phenomenal resource for anyone who is researching the social impact of the American Civil War. The way the book is organized will help future researchers analyze the different elements

that can impact a community after a battle or war. Cowie explores several factors such as the loss of property during the battle, hosting a standing army for several weeks, community support of hospitals and encampments while the army waits on supplies to be delivered, the ecological factors, disease outbreaks, and the impact on individual families. Though there is some discussion of military movements and the battles that occurred it is only used when necessary to help support the social impacts on the citizens of Sharpsburg. The quotes, statistics, and narrative help to create a cohesive exploration into the impact of the Battle of Antietam on the people of Sharpsburg.

Annabelle Blevins Pifer earned her master's degree in American History, with a focus on race and gender in the South during the American Civil War, from Norwich University in Fall of 2020. She currently resides in New Haven, CT with her husband and dog, Minerva. She can be reached at annabelleleeblevins95@gmail.com.