Confederate Cities: The Urban South During the Civil War Era

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One of the oldest and most familiar tropes in the historiography of the American Civil War argues that the conflict posed an urban industrial Union against a rural agricultural Confederacy. Presented as a clash of civilizations, this argument originates from antebellum secession advocates who argued for a distinctively rural pre-modern South, and was picked up in various guises by Lost Cause apologists and Southern Agrarians, and historians as varied as Charles Beard and Eugene Genovese. Although this conception of the Civil War South as distinctly rural continues to have a significant influence in how the general public views the conflict, academic historians have begun to fully recognize the importance of urban spaces to the Civil War era South, including how cities such as New Orleans, Richmond, and Charleston provided significant venues for slavery and the slave trade. Recent work Don Doyle, Gregg D. Kimball, Wendy Venet, Walter Johnson, and Alecia Long (among many others) has demonstrated that cities were not ancillary to the 19th-century South, but instrumental to its economic, political, and cultural development.

Confederate Cities builds on this scholarship, showcasing the fresh and vibrant work of 11 talented historians, many of them senior scholars. Edited by Andrew Slap and Frank Towers (both of whom also contributed essays), the volume grew out of a conference held at the University of Calgary in May 2012, where many of the essays in the collection were initially presented. David Goldfield’s succinct foreword sets the tone for the volume. Undeniably the most prominent Southern urban historian, Goldfield argues that ‘the story of the urban South in war and Reconstruction is the story of hope and heartbreak, of promise and betrayal, and ultimately, of tragedy’ (p. xiii). The war destroyed some Southern cities, but also spurred urbanization and created venues for both cultural growth and racial violence. These tensions underpin almost all of the essays in Confederate Cities.

The volume begins with three largely historiographic essays, including a lengthy introduction by the editors and contributions from J. Matthew Gallman and David Moltke-Hansen. To a significant extent, these essays reinforce a central premise: although overshadowed by the extraordinary urban growth in the North, Southern cities grew tremendously during the Civil War era. They developed robust infrastructure linkages, industrial sectors, social institutions, and cultural networks that only appear deficient when compared to the Northeast or Britain; taken on their own terms or placed in a larger trans-national context, the South’s urban
development appears remarkable. During the war itself, Gallman observes that these cities became targets for the Union, with five of the Confederacy’s ten largest cities occupied within 14 months of the war’s commencement. Yet, as Moltke-Hansen notes, the flood of refugees into cities caused a population boom that changed the demographics of the urban landscape for years to come.

The next two essays explore the role of cities in the Southern secession movement and the development of Confederate nationalism. Frank Towers examines how antebellum secession advocates claimed that disunion could transform a small city into the ‘New York of the South’. Here fire-eaters and urban boosters were sometimes at cross-purposes. They criticized Northern cities, but also sought to emulate them. These tensions between a modern cosmopolitanism and a pre-modern agrarianism, Towers argues, undermined Southern nationalism, Placing Charleston and Richmond in a transnational context with cities in Italy and Canada, both of which were undergoing nationalist moments in 1860s, T. Lloyd Benson argues that urban nationalists used metaphors of household and family to advocate for independence and unity. Benson notes, however, the way in which these metaphors were employed varied significantly, as slavery shaped how nationalists used gendered language to articulate their cause.

The idea of Southern cities as gendered spaces also features in the next two essays. In one of the more narrowly focused but intriguing essays in this collection, Michael Pierson examines how one Vermont soldier celebrated the Fourth of July in 1862 in Union-occupied New Orleans. The city, Pierson argues, provided recreation in the form of alcohol, brothels, and celebratory violence that allowed Northern soldiers to engage in leisure activities that reinforced gender roles. Keith Bohannon’s essay explores how Georgia women rioted against high food prices in 1863. Building on significant recent scholarship on Confederate ‘bread riots’, Bohannon demonstrates how poor women challenged gender expectations by engaging in mob action, how they targeted foreign (often Jewish) merchants, and how their actions may have spurred political action to provide greater poor relief.

Examining cities as sites of emancipation, the development of African-American institutions, and racial violence, the volume’s next three essays may be its most significant contribution. After 1865, newly freed African Americans migrated by the thousands into urban areas in search of economic and educational opportunities, political mobilization, and security, fundamentally transforming the urban demographic landscape. Examining Freedmen’s Bureau schools in Mobile, Hilary Green observes that black schools opened less than a month after Appomattox. Black schools received vigorous criticism from prominent local whites such as Dr. Josiah C. Nott, as well as a rash of arson attacks against the schools in their first academic year. In addition to the threats posed by hostile whites, black schools in Mobile had to overcome long-standing tension between African Americans and Creoles in the city. The success of these schools in Mobile provided a model for education across Alabama, culminating in a clause in the state’s 1867 constitution guaranteeing free education for children from the age of 5 to 21. While Green’s Freedman’s Bureau schools functioned as one form of political action, Justin Behrend examines the development black political activity in Natchez, the largest urban center in Mississippi. Behrend argues that it was not emancipation per se that transformed urban life in Natchez, but rather the ‘political mobilization of ex-slaves’ (p. 193). Occupied by the Union in July 1863, Natchez became a sanctuary for thousands of fugitive slaves. Living in contraband (refugee) camps, African Americans began the transition from slavery to freedom. They found employment and opened schools and churches, laying the groundwork for political mobilization. Not until 1867, with the arrival of black suffrage, however, were African Americans in Natchez able to fully capitalize on their numerical superiority in the city. Organized by the Union League and the Republican Party, black voters in Natchez took control of local government, forming a biracial coalition. Although a white supremacist campaign overthrow this short-lived political experiment in 1875, Behrend argues that the case of Natchez should encourage historians to view suffrage and political mobilization as an equally important inflection point as emancipation. Andrew Slap’s contribution examines how African American Union veterans congregated in Memphis. Occupied in June 1862, Memphis became an important recruitment site, with thousands of African Americans joining the United States Colored Troops. By the war’s end, the Memphis had become a black majority city, with more than 16,000 African American residents. Using pension records, Slap finds that African American veterans clustered in discrete neighborhoods. From his
sophisticated use of these records, Slap concludes that ‘African American veterans continued to transforming the region by helping to lead the urbanization of the South and laying the groundwork for the Great Migration’ (p. 186).

The collection’s final two essays zoom out to examine the long Civil War era’s effect on two very different urban locations. Providing a concise summary of the arguments he explores in greater detail in Atlanta, Cradle of the New South, Bill Link argues that the Civil War transformed the community from a frontier town to a city where African American played a pivotal economic role. William Tecumseh Sherman’s occupation in 1864 devastated Atlanta’s railroad network, but contrary to popular myth did not level the city itself, which quickly rebounded. Link argues that ‘the city’s revival was intimately connected to wartime developments’ (p. 254). Moreover, its rebirth was not autochthonous, but the product of significant northern investment.

The collection’s final essay may be its most enigmatic. As John Majewski admits, Hampton Roads is not a city, but a collection of communities that share a deepwater channel, what he terms ‘an urban region’ (p. 264). Despite its advantages as a natural harbor, the region never lived up to its potential until well after the Civil War. Plagued by an underdeveloped hinterland and persistent threats from yellow fever, Norfolk, Portsmouth, and other Hampton Roads communities failed to attract a substantial population or shipping traffic, despite efforts of figures such as Thomas Jefferson and Edmund Ruffin to champion the region. Only after the Civil War and the infusion of Northern capital into local railroads did Hampton Roads begin to recognize its potential.

In a collection as diverse as this, it is difficult to ascertain what takeaway messages emerge from its panoply of approaches. In their conclusion, Towers and Slap attempt to craft overarching connections between the essays, although each of their generalizations comes with clear exceptions. Southern cities were economically vital, except when they weren’t. Southern cities were distinct from their rural hinterlands, except when they weren’t. African Americans fared better in cities, except when they didn’t. Their difficulties in articulating broad claims about Southern cities during the 19th century reflects how different these cities were. In their economic outlook, demographics, and wartime experience, Richmond, Atlanta, and New Orleans had little in common. Indeed, the differences between Southern cities may be more profound and significant than the differences between Southern cities and their Northern counterparts.

Despite the heterogeneous nature of Southern cities, one feature that many of them shared was the profound role that the North played in their postwar development. In the post-war flourishing of Link’s Atlanta and Majewski’s Hampton Roads came in no small part because of the investment of Northern capital. The Federal government, in the guise of the Freedmen’s Bureau and veterans pensions, helped African Americans make the transition from slavery to freedom in Green’s Mobile and Slap’s Memphis.

Finally a minor quibble – like many books, the volume’s subtitle more accurately describes its contents than its primary title. Only a few of the essays focus extensively on the period from 1861 to 1865, with most entries either glossing over the war years or using it as a terminus or as jumping off point. This criticism does not detract from the volume’s overall value. Despite its title, Confederate Cities presents a balanced and diverse exploration of how the Civil War era transformed urban spaces in the American South. One of the rare edited collections without a clear weak contribution, Confederate Cities deserves a close look, not only by those interested in the Civil War era, but also by urban historians.

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