



2021

Gettysburg College Journal of the Civil War Era 2021

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/gcjcwe>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Recommended Citation

(2021) "Gettysburg College Journal of the Civil War Era 2021," *The Gettysburg College Journal of the Civil War Era*: Vol. 11, Article 1.

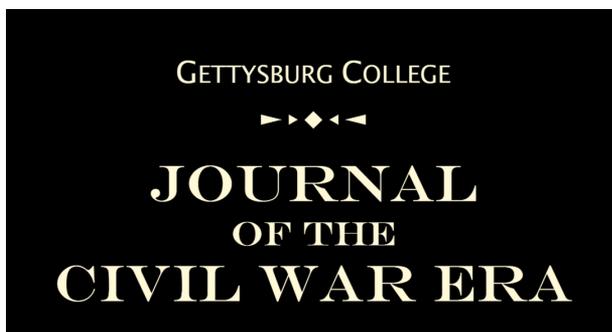
Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/gcjcwe/vol11/iss1/1>

This open access complete issue is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

Gettysburg College Journal of the Civil War Era 2021

Keywords

Gettysburg College, civil war



Volume 11 | Spring 2021

Editors-in-Chief

Christopher T. Lough, Brandon R. Neely, Cameron T. Sauer

Associate Editors

Sophia R. Crawford, James Douglas Duke,
Jaeger R. Held, Emily R. Jumba, Stefany A. Kaminski,
Emma Monzeglio, Abigail Seiple, Peter Wildgruber

Faculty Advisor

Dr. Ian A. Isherwood

Cover Image: "Uncle Sam Teaching the Canadian Lion a Little International Law," political cartoon by Thomas Nast in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, February 1865. Courtesy of Special Collections and College Archives Digital Collections (Musselman Library at Gettysburg College).

Interested in getting published in the *Gettysburg College Journal of the Civil War Era*?

If you or anyone you know has written an undergraduate essay in the past five years on the Civil War Era or its legacy, visit our website at <http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/gcjwe/> to enter have your work considered for next year's volume of the journal. Please review the following requirements and categories for publication.

Publication Requirements and Categories

Submissions should be typed in 12-point Times New Roman font and submitted as a Word document.

1. Academic Essays: We are interested in original research making extensive use of primary and secondary sources. Possible topics include, but are not limited to: military history, social history, race, reconstruction, memory, reconciliation, politics, foreign affairs, the home front, etc. **6,000 words or less.**
2. Book Reviews: Any nonfiction Civil War-related book published in the last two years. Authors should have knowledge of the relevant literature for review. **700 words or less.**
3. Historical Nonfiction Essays: This category is for works of nonfiction surrounding the Civil War that are not necessarily of academic in nature. Examples include essays in public history of the war, study of re-enactment culture, current issues in Civil War memory such as the sesquicentennial, etc. Creativity is encouraged in this

category as long as it remains a nonfiction piece. **2,000 to 6,000 words.**

Anyone with an interest in the Civil War may submit their work, including graduate students and independent scholars, as long as the submission is undergraduate work written within the past five years. If your submission is selected, your work will be published online and in a print journal, which you will receive a copy of for your own enjoyment.

Letter from the Editors

It is our pleasure to present the eleventh volume of the Gettysburg College Journal of the Civil War Era. This volume contains four academic essays, on topics ranging from battlefield mistakes to bluegrass music. The journal begins with C. W. Claiborne's "Analyzing the Interpretation of the Civil War in Bluegrass Music." This well-researched essay explores themes of reconciliation and emancipation in bluegrass music, as well as a consideration of how Confederate nostalgia became associated with the region of Appalachia. Second, Michael R. D. Connolly examines the relationship between Confederate officials and the Canadian people in "'Good Neighbourhood': Canada and America's Contentious Relationship during the Civil War". Third, Samantha Kramer investigates Ulysses S. Grant's actions at the Battle of Cold Harbor to determine the historical accuracy of his reputation in "Heaven Hung in Black: Grant's Reputation and the Mistakes at Cold Harbor". Finally, Ethan Wagner evaluates one of the worst civilian incidents of the Civil War in "Pittsburgh's Explosive Mystery: A New Holistic Study of the Allegheny Arsenal Tragedy", a compelling essay to conclude this issue.

Each year, the submissions to our journal improve dramatically, highlighting developments in the field of Civil War history and the continuing passion of students around the globe. Identifying the final pieces out of the dozens of well-written and deeply-researched submissions was a challenge which was only overcome by the hard work of our dedicated associate editors. Their commitment and consistency is commendable and we would like to thank them here: Sophia R. Crawford '24, James Douglas Duke '24, Jaeger R. Held '22, Emily R. Jumba '24, Stefany A. Kaminski '24, Emma Monzeglio '24, Abigail Seiple '23,

and Peter Wildgruber '24. We would also like to thank faculty advisor Prof. Ian Isherwood '00 for his constant guidance and support of student work. Finally, we also thank Musselman Library's scholarly communications librarian, Mary Elmquist, for her dedication to making student scholarship accessible.

We hope that this journal will offer our readers a unique view into several important issues and events of the Civil War Era. We are incredibly proud of our editorial team as well as this year's authors, who offer their brilliance in the pages of this volume. We look forward to their future contributions to the Civil War field. Please enjoy this volume of the Gettysburg College Journal of the Civil War Era.

Sincerely,

Cameron T. Sauers '21

Christopher T. Lough '22

Brandon R. Neely '23

Editors-in-Chief

Gettysburg College Journal of the Civil War Era

Contents

- iii Letter from the Editors**
- vi Contributors**
- 2 Analyzing the Interpretation of the Civil War in Bluegrass Music**
C. W. Claiborne | North Carolina State University
Academic Essay
- 39 “Good Neighbourhood”: Canada and America’s Contentious Relationship during the Civil War**
Michael R. D. Connolly | University of Ottawa
Academic Essay
- 69 Heaven Hung in Black: Grant’s Reputation and the Mistakes at Cold Harbor**
Samantha Kramer | Washington & Jefferson College
Academic Essay
- 91 Pittsburgh’s Explosive Mystery: A New Holistic Study of the Allegheny Arsenal Tragedy**
Ethan J. Wagner | Mercyhurst University
Academic Essay
- 119 Editor Profiles**

Contributors

C. W. Claiborne received a B.S. in Mechanical Engineering from North Carolina State University in 2021. He has had a lifelong interest in American history and is an avid fan of bluegrass music. Some of his other interests include hiking, camping, football, and collecting vintage music. You can read more about his interests at <https://cwclaib.github.io/> .

Michael R. D. Connolly is currently pursuing an M.A. in History at the University of Calgary. He previously attended the University of Ottawa, where he received a Joint Honours B.A. in History and Political Science in French Immersion. A Calgary native, Connolly served as a Member of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta from 2015 to 2019, making him one of the first openly LGBTQ+ MLAs elected in the province's history.

Samantha Kramer received a B.A. in History with a minor in English from Washington & Jefferson College in May 2021. In the fall of 2021, she will be attending the College of William & Mary to pursue her M.A. in History.

Ethan J. Wagner graduated from Mercyhurst University in Erie, Pennsylvania in May 2021, where he majored in History with a double minor in Political Science and Psychology. He also concurrently completed coursework for his Master's in Secondary Education: Pedagogy and Practice, which he obtained in December 2021.

ANALYZING THE INTERPRETATION OF THE CIVIL WAR IN BLUEGRASS MUSIC

C. W. Claiborne | *North Carolina State University*

The Civil War has had a lasting impact on all facets of American society and culture, but one of its more counter-intuitive results was its influence on bluegrass and the musical memories of generations of bluegrass fans. Though several studies have investigated the war's role in country music,¹ none have focused specifically on its role in bluegrass. This is especially pertinent given the divisive nature of the war's legacy in Appalachia, where much of bluegrass music originated in the mid-twentieth century. Bluegrass has typically viewed the Civil War through a reconciliationist lens, focusing on themes that fit well within the bluegrass idiom—such as separation from one's homeland or the loss of one's family—rather than the genesis and other ramifications of the war. Moreover, the racial and social volatility of the 1960s led to an increase in Confederate nostalgia and identification with the Old South in bluegrass music. While this pro-Confederate wave has since been replaced by a return to reconciliationist themes, there also

¹ See, e.g., Andrew K. Smith and James E. Akenson, "The Civil War in Country Music Tradition," in *Country Music Goes to War*, eds. Charles K. Wolfe and James E. Akenson (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 1-25; Phoebe Strom, "Defining Dixie: Southern Political Discourse in Country Music," Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies, Rhodes College, 2013.

exists a growing body of work with emancipationist messages.

The interpretation of the Civil War in bluegrass is also of interest due to the genre's musicological origins. A modern reinterpretation of traditional folk music, blended with elements of country, jazz, and gospel, bluegrass has often been defined by its conservatism. When gospel music began shifting to a more pop-based approach in the late 1940s and early 1950s, acolytes of traditional, unadorned gospel singing flocked to the burgeoning bluegrass scene. Accordingly, bluegrass has remained more openly religious than perhaps any other genre not formally tied to a confession. Its conservative tenor famously led urban folk artists to supplant bluegrass with their own brands of "popular folk" and blues in the 1960s.² But the popularity of bluegrass on college campuses in the same decade, along with the development of "folknik" communities and the "newgrass" movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s, worked to introduce a new wave of anti-establishment (often non-Southern) mindsets. This led some fundamentalists, including Don Pierce, longtime owner of the label Starday Records, to eschew bluegrass for its association with "people of doubtful loyalty."³ As such, bluegrass has found relatively

² Jens Lund and R. Serge Denisoff, "The Folk Music Revival and the Counter Culture: Contributions and Contradictions," *The Journal of American Folklore* 84, no. 334 (1971): 401-02.

³ Quoted in Jens Lund, "Fundamentalism, Racism, and Political Reaction in Country Music," in *The Sounds of Social Change*, eds. R. Serge Denisoff and Richard A. Peterson (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1972), 90.

recent popularity with both conservative and progressive audiences, in a musical as well as a political sense.

The mountain origins of bluegrass are equally important to this investigation. While the popular narrative of its emergence from Appalachia is oversimplified, it is true that the earliest bluegrass musicians and much of its source material originated in the rural mountain regions of the former Confederacy. Interestingly, many of these enclaves housed strong pockets of Southern Unionism during the Civil War, though these feelings were not universal. Given that the birthplace of bluegrass tended prominently toward Unionist sentiment compared to the remainder of the South, the fact that the genre later took to Confederate nostalgia becomes all the more surprising.

Before analyzing bluegrass itself, we must first examine the role of the Civil War in the musical forms that preceded it. Since more than fifth of the material in the bluegrass repertoire is drawn from the well of American folk music, it is important to understand how the conflict was received in folk songs.⁴ Additionally, it is important to examine how the genre typically known as “hillbilly music” interpreted the war, as bluegrass is generally understood to be an outgrowth of this movement.

The Civil War in Folk Music: 1861-1945

Folk music from the Civil War, whether songs invented by soldiers on the march or popular music known by entire

⁴ L. Mayne Smith, “An Introduction to Bluegrass,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 78, no. 309 (1965): 250.

armies, had a decidedly mixed impact on Appalachian repertoires. Despite the war's destructive consequences in the region, folklorist Newman Ivey White noted in 1952, "It seems strange that there are so few Civil War ballads in the mountains."⁵ Indeed, if one takes western North Carolina as representative, songs relating to the Civil War did not seem to comprise an overly important part of mountain repertoires in the early and mid-twentieth century. White's *Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore* found only "half a dozen pieces" stemming directly from the war.⁶

The *Brown* collection illustrates the complicated history of Confederate loyalty in Appalachia and the ways mountain residents interpreted the Civil War. A song like Pearl Webb's "Drummer Boy of Shiloh" from 1921 fit well within the existing body of mountain folk music, which has long valorized family values, as well as ballads of violent death and murder.⁷ The lyrics neglect to specify which side the drummer boy fought for, focusing instead on his death. They detail his hopes of finding an eternal resting place: "He raised his eyes and clasped his hands / And prayed before he died." The song also centers the impact of a fellow soldier's death on his surviving unit: "Each soldier wept like a child / Stout heart and brave they were."⁸ Similar motifs can be found in I. G. Greer's 1913 rendition of "The Last Fierce

⁵ *The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore*, ed. Newman Ivey White (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1952), 289.

⁶ *Brown Collection*, 488.

⁷ Smith, "An Introduction to Bluegrass," 249.

⁸ Pearl Webb, "Drummer Boy of Shiloh," collected 1921, in *Brown Collection*, 537.

Charge” (also known as “The Two Soldiers”), though this song features explicitly partisan lyrics. In cases such as these, words such “Rebel” or “Yankee” could easily be interchanged with one another when adjusting for syllable and meter.⁹ This agrees with Phoebe Strom’s recent claim that Appalachian war songs “transcended the boundaries of North and South” to describe a common experience on either side of the Mason-Dixon.¹⁰

Also worthy of note are the remakes of preexisting folk songs undertaken during the Civil War itself. Smith and Akenson cite the reworking of popular songs on the part of both Confederate and Union soldiers. In particular they note a Confederate reskin of “The Yellow Rose of Texas,” which laments the defeat of General John Bell Hood and the recapture of Nashville in 1864: “You may talk about your Beauregard / And sing of General Lee / But the gallant Hood of Texas / Played hell in Tennessee.”¹¹ In a similar vein, a Union parody of “Just Before the Battle, Mother” mocks Rebel soldiers for “drinking mountain dew” and contains verses on Confederate desertion.¹² The *Brown* collection lists parallel examples, such as an adaptation of a seventeenth-century broadside entitled “The Soldier’s

⁹ I. G. Greer, “The Two Soldiers,” collected 1913, in *Brown Collection*, 539-40.

¹⁰ Strom, “Defining Dixie,” 8.

¹¹ “The Yellow Rose of Texas,” collection year unknown, in *Country Music Goes to War*, 3; Smith and Akenson, “The Civil War in the Country Music Tradition,” 3-4.

¹² “Just Before the Battle, Mother,” collection year unknown, in *Country Music Goes to War*, 4.

Wooing,” in which a rich father disapproves of his daughter’s engagement to a poor young soldier.¹³

Mountaineers could also compose their own songs about the war, though this was generally less common than reworking preexisting songs; additionally, few of these original songs were ever transcribed or recorded. Speaking of what he termed such “native” American songs, folk music historian D. K. Wilgus notes that “few old ballads native to the area have survived.”¹⁴ One example of a Civil War folk song that did survive, however, is “Going Across the Mountain,” recorded by Frank Proffitt in 1962. Written by Proffitt’s grandfather, Wiley Proffitt, the song is distinctly pro-Union in nature: “Going across the mountain / To join the boys in blue.” In spite of this, the lyrics focus primarily on the war’s impact on the lives of soldiers and their families rather than partisanship.¹⁵

As indicated above, Appalachian repertoires featured an amalgam of material with varying degrees of pro- and anti-Union sentiment. The extent of Confederate sympathy in mountain folk music can best be summed up with the song “The Texas Ranger,” collected in Boone, North Carolina in the early twentieth century. “The Texas Ranger” originally detailed an unspecified conflict between American Indians and White settlers in Texas; through the process of oral

¹³ Maude Sutton, “The Soldier’s Wooing,” collection year unknown, in *Brown Collection*, 289.

¹⁴ D. K. Wilgus, “Country-Western Music and the Urban Hillbilly,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 83, no. 328 (1970): 159.

¹⁵ Frank Proffitt, “Going Across the Mountain,” *Frank Proffitt*, Folk-Legacy Records FSA-1, 1962, vinyl.

transmission, the army was transferred from its typical route toward San Antonio and the Rio Grande, and instead “marched from Western Texas / to old Virginia’s Land,” trading “Injuns” for “Yankees” and arrow for bullets.¹⁶

The representation of the Civil War in mountain folk music was therefore anything but unified. Musicians drew on a variety of sources and modified songs as they saw fit, reflecting the varied opinions on the war in Appalachia. The region was sharply divided between three groups: Unionists, Confederates, and those who felt the war did not apply to them.¹⁷ The development of folk music also reflects how many residents of Appalachia felt about the loss of the Confederacy, as many cared more about the lived experience of the war’s impact rather than ideological considerations.

All this changed with the Tin Pan Alley era of music production in the 1870s. The trend of popular music glorifying Southern culture began with Stephen Foster in the years just before the Civil War and reached its apex in the following decades. Phoebe Strom, summarizing the work of music historian Bill C. Malone, argues that this obsession with antebellum Southern life was an attempt to “mediate deep societal rifts along economic, racial, and regional lines,” adding that “the longing to return to Dixie evident in so many of these songs likely expresses a wish for the first

¹⁶ “The Texas Ranger,” collection year unknown, in *Brown Collection*, 545-46.

¹⁷ Wilma A. Dunaway, “Civil War in the Mountain South,” *Slavery and Emancipation in the Mountain South: Evidence, Sources, and Methods* (Virginia Tech Faculty Archives, 2013).

southern migrants, especially black migrants, to leave the North.”¹⁸

These themes continued through the late 1920s, when hillbilly music first entered on the national scene. The first recorded example of what is now commonly referred to as a hillbilly musician appeared in 1929, with Eck Robertson and Henry Gilliland recording multiple sides for the begrudging Victor Talking Machine Company. Much has been made about the roots of early hillbilly musicians and their ties to the Confederacy—Robertson and Gilliland even purportedly arrived at their first recording session clad in Confederate dress uniforms, as they had just attended a Confederate veteran’s reunion. Similarly, popular old-time fiddler Fiddlin’ John Carson was a noted member of the Ku Klux Klan, and frequently performed at fiddlers’ conventions organized by the United Daughters of the Confederacy. Yet several historians have downplayed these connections; in Smith and Akenson’s summation, “Conventions of old Rebel soldiers and fiddlers sometimes went hand in hand,” not because they necessarily supported one another, but because their participants often tended to overlap.¹⁹

More difficult to ignore, however, were the political activities of many early hillbilly artists. After the 1915 lynching of Leo Frank, a Jewish factory worker and suspected murderer of Mary Phagan in Atlanta, Fiddlin’

¹⁸ Strom, “Defining Dixie,” 6-7.

¹⁹ Smith and Akenson, “The Civil War in the Country Music Tradition,” 7.

John Carson reportedly took to the steps of the city courthouse and sang, “The Christian doors of heaven have sent Leo Frank to hell;” this eventually became the folk ballad “Little Mary Phagan.” Carson’s case was hardly unique; populist politicians of the 1910s often used traditional music to draw rural support,²⁰ and old-time fiddling was widely employed in the campaigns of radical politicians, including “Pitchfork” Ben Tillman and the White supremacist James K. Vardman.²¹ Even more indicative of hillbilly musicians’ conservative leanings were the topical anti-evolution songs of the 1920s, such as Vernon Dalhart’s 1925 song “The John T Scopes Trial: The Old Religion’s Better After All.” Written following the titular “monkey trial,” which saw populist politician William Jennings Bryan represent the state of Tennessee, Dalhart’s lyrics railed against evolution and the removal of God from public schoolhouses.²² A rash of similar hillbilly songs, including Uncle Dave Macon’s “The Bible’s True” from 1926, were published around the same time.²³

Fundamentalist songs like Dalhart’s, as well as pro-South songs such as Uncle Dave Macon’s “I’se Gwine Back to Dixie” from 1927, undoubtedly sold well among the rural audiences they targeted; however, these songs did not

²⁰ Lund, “Fundamentalism, Racism, and Political Reaction in Country Music,” 83.

²¹ Stein, “Living Right and Being Free,” 9.

²² Vernon Dalhart, “The John T. Scopes Trial (The Old Religion’s Better After All),” track A1 on *The John T. Scopes Trial (The Old Religion’s Better After All)*, Edison Records 51609-R, 1925, vinyl.

²³ Uncle Dave Macon, “The Bible’s True,” track A1 on *The Bible’s True*, Vocalion 15322, 1926, vinyl.

necessarily represent the ideals of Appalachian audiences.²⁴ Instead, they were often performances required by artists' record labels, who believed such songs would sell based on the popular "race-based" music advertising techniques of the time. As Phoebe Strom has written, "Hillbilly music was far less overtly pro-Southern than the mainstream music of the time," adding that the shoehorning of musicians to play stereotypically Southern songs was caused by a "pre-established and widely popular conception of tradition."²⁵

As can be seen, "native" Appalachian folk music focused primarily on the hardships of the Civil War and its impact on people's daily lives; it was hillbilly music that initiated the overt glorification of the Old South. Neither, however, focused greatly on the war, concentrating instead on the lives of common people and how the war changed traditional lifestyles. Hillbilly musicians and Tin Pan Alley songwriters in particular often focused on plantation life or the old homestead while neglecting to mention slavery or other issues surrounding the Civil War. With a review of the war's impact on the two main genres that lyrically preceded bluegrass music, the reception of the Civil War in bluegrass can be more clearly understood.

The Civil War in Bluegrass: 1945-2000

The music of the "classic" ensemble of Bill Monroe and His Bluegrass Boys, which first formed in 1938, has set the

²⁴ Uncle Dave Macon, "I'se Gwine Back to Dixie," track A1 on *I'se Gwine Back to Dixie*, Vocalion 5157, 1927, vinyl.

²⁵ Strom, "Defining Dixie," 6; 8.

repertoire for every bluegrass musician to follow, with many of his early releases becoming “standards” of the genre. Though an outgrowth of hillbilly music—due in part to the genre’s movement toward pop in the 1940s—bluegrass heavily relied on one thematic element of hillbilly music in particular: songs focusing on the singer’s rural home, and especially those that yearned nostalgically for a home now lost.²⁶ This is of prime importance, as the migration of Appalachian farmers to urban areas during the Great Depression and the Second World War was a major factor in development of the bluegrass idiom. As historian and musician Steve Watt has put it, “Bluegrass is *not* the music of Appalachian farmers... It *is* the music of these people and their descendants who have been forced off their farms.”²⁷

Bluegrass also continued to rely on themes already popular in Appalachian folk music, including death, the daily struggle of life, and salvation. A look into Bill Monroe’s early discography immediately reveals each one of these values, with “Mule Skinner Blues” being a work song, “True Life Blues” and “Rocky Road Blues” focusing on the struggles of daily life, and “Shake Mother’s Hand” and “I’m Traveling On” carrying religious messages. Moreover, “I’m Going Back to Old Kentucky” represents the bluegrass artist’s longing for return to a rural lifestyle.

As these songs indicate, bluegrass was initially a music of enduring the present and yearning for the past. As

²⁶ Smith, “An Introduction to Bluegrass,” 249.

²⁷ Steve Watt, “Letter to a (Hard-Driving) Bluegrass Band,” *The Radical Teacher* 3 (1976): 32.

such, bluegrass musicians would have no reason to honor the Confederacy, despite their glorification of the South in general. Though singers missed their old communities and expressed those longings through music, the Confederacy, along with similar topics such as slavery or plantation life, were marginal in their collective memories. This is perfectly logical; after all, it was the secession initiated by the planter class that wrought such misery in the mountains, even as Appalachia was a region noted for its distinct lack of slavery. Early bluegrass songs focused instead on love, life, and religion, rather than the Civil War. These themes were followed by most every major bluegrass band in the genre's early years, continuing into the late 1950s and early 1960s.

In 1959, the folk movement began to zero in on bluegrass music as its popular style of choice. The American folk revival accepted bluegrass as a legitimate style of folk for three reasons: first, most bluegrass instruments were acoustic and unamplified; secondly, many of the songs played by bluegrass bands were shared with the emerging folk movement, as they were drawn from the broader folk tradition; and finally, as bluegrass historian Neil Rosenberg has written, the genre's "instrumental styles... were seen as exciting innovations based on folk styles."²⁸ Shortly after the folk movement discovered bluegrass, themes surrounding the Civil War began cropping up in bluegrass songs.

The popularity of bluegrass with folk-based groups was not directly responsible for the renewed emergence of

²⁸ Neil Rosenberg, "From Sound to Style: The Emergence of Bluegrass," *The Journal of American Folklore* 80, no. 316 (1967): 149.

Confederate imagery. Rather, it was brought about through the creation of new war ballads by folk musicians. Former history teacher and songwriter Jimmy Driftwood is credited with the start of this movement after the release of his single “The Battle of New Orleans” in 1959 and its subsequent cover by Johnny Horton. Driftwood’s success led to a small spate of folk-style historical ballads, most notably Johnny Horton’s “Johnny Reb,” first written in by Merle Kilgore in 1959.²⁹ Driftwood capitalized on the moment with his release of *Songs of Billy Yank and Johnny Reb* in 1961.³⁰ This album, along with Reno and Smiley’s *Folk Songs of the Civil War* from the same year, marked a new era in bluegrass music.³¹ As Charles Wolfe has noted, “By the 1920s... Civil War songs and storied were receding into the misty past.”³² Yet the 1960s represented a new outgrowth of Civil War music in bluegrass.

Also taking place in the late 1950s and early 1960s was the chaos of the civil rights movement. Desegregation led to a number of country songs appearing with anti-Black and pro-segregation messages, largely from anonymous musicians with names such as Johnny Reb or The Sons of Mississippi. While this brand of segregationist music never had a large impact on bluegrass, its connections with the rise of “Southernization” in wider American culture, with

²⁹ Wilgus, “Country-Western Music and the Urban Hillbilly,” 174-75.

³⁰ Jimmy Driftwood, *Songs of Billy Yank and Johnny Reb*, RCA Victor LPM-2316, 1961, vinyl.

³¹ Reno & Smiley, *Folk Songs of the Civil War*, King Records 756, 1961, vinyl.

³² Charles Wolfe, “Bloody War,” in *Country Music Goes to War*, 26.

Governor George Wallace of Alabama its most prominent political leader, are undeniable.³³ While the movement can only be briefly summarized here, the most basic outcome of Southernization was a greater acceptance of the South as a legitimate cultural region throughout the US, with the Confederacy becoming representative of the South as a whole through the use of Confederate imagery by pro-Southern revisionists.³⁴ In short, the coalescence of civil rights and the folk movement allowed Civil War memory to become what Smith and Akenson succinctly termed “a touchstone of white southern identity.”³⁵

This trend of Southernization explains why a people-group who historically had weak ties to the Confederacy have since become bound up with Confederate nostalgia. Artists in the early 1960s were only one generation removed from the “first generation” of bluegrass musicians who migrated to the North and Midwest from Appalachia during the Great Depression. Through the later 1960s, these new musicians came of age in a world where the idea of the Confederacy was widely used to represent the South. Thus, the outgrowth of pro-Confederate songs during the civil rights movement fit within the broader trend of artists honoring their previous homelands, even if their ancestors may not have been proponents of secession.

³³ Stein, “Living Right and Being Free,” 26.

³⁴ Strom, “Defining Dixie,” 21; Stein, “Living Right and Being Free,” 26-27.

³⁵ Smith and Akenson, “The Civil War in the Country Music Tradition,” 19.

One of the earliest bluegrass songs referencing the Civil War that did not originate from a history-themed album was recorded in May 1963. Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs' "Poor Rebel Soldier" perpetuates numerous tropes regarding the Confederacy and Southern superiority as found in revisionist history. The narrator first meets the Confederates on a positive note: "We run Grant's big army in the land where it snows," where soldiers are kept warm by the "hot blood" running through their "rebel veins." Later, however, he deserts the army because he "Can't find me no woman in this Yankee land."³⁶

The song went over well with the college folk scene. Flatt and Scruggs first debuted "Poor Rebel Soldier" at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, and their live recording attests to the audience's enthusiastic response. Though the song does portray the Confederacy in a somewhat unflattering light (the narrator's desertion runs contrary to popular claims regarding the staunch loyalty and honor of Confederate soldiers), it does represent the first documented instance of bluegrass artists recording Civil War song not for explicitly historical purposes. It also represents the adoption of a reconciliationist approach to the war among bluegrass musicians that had previously been popular in folk music. This interpretation of the war would remain popular in bluegrass music until the late 1990s.

That bluegrass took on a largely reconciliationist perspective—downplaying the realities of slavery while

³⁶ Flatt & Scruggs, "Poor Rebel Soldier," track B5 on *Recorded Live at Vanderbilt University*, Columbia CL 2134, 1964, vinyl.

emphasizing the devastations of war—makes sense given the audiences that the genre catered to at the time. Chief among these were the more liberal college crowd, who were uninterested in hearing songs that overtly glorified the South; the folk crowd, who simply wanted to hear songs that sounded historical, regardless of their accuracy; and younger Southerners, many of whom believed that the Civil War was not fought over slavery due to popular revisionist arguments.

Bluegrass has always been a music rooted in a sense of place. Musicians often hailed—and continue to hail—from the South, especially the mountain South, with George O. Carney finding in 1974 that approximately seventy percent of bluegrass musicians came from below the Mason-Dixon line.³⁷ In the late 1950s, the folk movement first made the Civil War an acceptable theme in bluegrass; at the same time, reactionary conservative politics were working to rebrand the South, drawing ties in the process to the Confederacy. When one considers that the South became conflated with the Confederacy metonymically, the growing popularity of pro-Confederate ideology in bluegrass music in the mid-1970s is easy to understand.

Taking a step back from bluegrass and examining country music more holistically, Confederate imagery took the genre by storm in the late 1960s and early 1970s, especially in the new subgenres of Southern rock and outlaw country. Both idioms “made the South the possession of a

³⁷ George O. Carney, “Bluegrass Grows All Around: Spatial Dimensions of a Country Music Style,” *Journal of Geography* 73, no. 4 (1974): 35.

younger generation and a broader political base.”³⁸ As several music historians have noted, by this time “Bluegrass and Country-Western performances [had] converged in style and repertory,” with bluegrass concurrently becoming more open in terms of repertoire and expression of non-traditional ideas.³⁹ This can largely be explained by the genre’s expanding popularity outside the South with the open-minded college festival crowd. During this period, bluegrass saw a greater blending of styles but retained a pro-Confederate outlook on the Civil War due to the popular Southernization tactics of the time.

One group dating from this era of greater outside musical influence was Danny Davis and the Nashville Brass, which began performing in 1968. Starting out as a country band that incorporated brass alongside traditional country instrumentation, Danny Davis epitomized the growing fusion of genres and styles at the time. A self-described Yankee from Randolph, Massachusetts, Davis spent years convincing labels in Nashville that his blend of country and brass would sell, but was instantly popular among country and bluegrass fans alike once given the chance to record. One of Davis’s songs, “From Dixie With Love” from 1972, was a medley of “Dixie” and the “Battle Hymn of the Republic.”⁴⁰ Combinations of Confederate songs with patriotic ones were not uncommon; for instance, Mickey Newberry’s “American Trilogy” from 1971 blended the

³⁸ Strom, “Defining Dixie,” 37.

³⁹ Rosenberg, “From Sound to Style,” 149.

⁴⁰ Danny Davis and the Nashville Brass, “From Dixie With Love,” track B3 on *Live—In Person*, RCA Victor LSP-4720, 1972, vinyl.

same songs as “From Dixie With Love,” along with the spiritual “All My Trials.”⁴¹ These songs demonstrate the reimagining of “Dixie” in the public mind, with many Americans treating it as a patriotic song in praise of the US as a whole, indicative of broader shifts in attitude towards the Confederacy.

While a full study of “Dixie’s” reinterpretation is beyond the scope of this article, it would be difficult to discuss Confederate memory in bluegrass without at least touching on the song. As can be heard in his introduction to “From Dixie with Love,” Davis considers “Dixie” one of the most popular songs in American history. According to Carl Bryan Holmberg, as of the mid-1980s (and, to a certain degree, likely into the present), “The song ‘Dixie’ still produces enough impact that it is loved in many American communities, especially in rural areas... the song’s *music* has made its way into American psyches as a commonplace for the ‘Southern’ way of life.”⁴² This helps explain why “Dixie” has often found its way into instrumental licks or solos in songs that otherwise have no relevance to the Confederacy.

A more recent example of “Dixie’s” status as a stand-in for the wider South is Bill Emerson’s “The Grey Ghost” from 1987.⁴³ Emerson was inspired to write “The Grey

⁴¹ Mickey Newberry, “An American Trilogy,” track A1 on *Frisco Mabel Joy*, Elektra EKS-74107, 1971, vinyl.

⁴² Carl B. Holmberg, “Toward the Rhetoric of Music: Dixie,” *Southern Speech Communication Journal* 51, no. 1 (1985): 72.

⁴³ Bill Emerson & Pete Goble, “The Grey Ghost,” *Tennessee 1949*, Webco WLPS-0123, 1987, vinyl.

Ghost” after learning that First Lieutenant Franklin Williams, a member of John Singleton Mosby’s elusive band of Confederate rangers, was born and raised near his home in Fairfax County, Virginia. When asked about his song’s musical references to “Dixie,” Emerson verified Holmberg’s point in writing, “I incorporated elements of ‘Dixie’ into ‘The Grey Ghost’ to lend it some authentic southern flavor.”⁴⁴ Thus, bands incorporating “Dixie” into their music did not necessarily do so out of Confederate sympathies (though this should not be entirely excluded), but because the song had become symbolic of the South rather than the Confederacy alone. Further demonstrating this shift in meaning is an episode from George Wallace’s presidential campaign in 1964, when he visited Milwaukee and was greeted by approximately three thousand factory workers singing “Dixie” in Polish. Wallace later recalled a moment after his speech when “one fine-looking man grabbed me and said, ‘Governor, I have never been south of South Milwaukee, but I am a Southerner.’” Wallace agreed; “Of course he was.”⁴⁵

The late 1960s and early 1970s were the heyday of Confederate imagery in bluegrass. Songs such “Atlanta Is Burning” by The Boys From Indiana,⁴⁶ “Graycoat Soldiers” by Norman Blake,⁴⁷ and “Legend of the Rebel Soldier” by

⁴⁴ Bill Emerson, email message to the author, April 5, 2019.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Stein, “Living Right and Being Free,” 26.

⁴⁶ The Boys From Indiana, “Atlanta Is Burning,” *Atlanta Is Burning*, King Bluegrass Records KB 530, 1974, vinyl.

⁴⁷ Norman Blake, “Graycoat Soldiers,” track A5 on *The Fields of November*, Flying Fish 004, 1974, vinyl.

The Country Gentlemen⁴⁸ are just a few of the dozens of pro-Confederate songs released by prominent bluegrass artists. Perhaps the song that most overtly glorified the Confederacy was Bob Smallwood's "Rebel Soldier (Your Memory Will Never Die)" from 1975. The track opens with a question: "Could there be any greater cause / Than the one you fought for and lost?" and goes on to lament the deaths of several prominent Confederate leaders. The lyrics also carry blatant Lost Cause messages, stating, "Victory for you they said could never be / But you'll always be a winner to me."⁴⁹

While many of the pro-Confederate songs released during this era continued to reflect a reconciliationist attitude toward the war—with Sherman's March to the Sea a particularly popular theme—their favoritism toward the Confederacy was more marked than in previous years. By the late 1970s, though, bluegrass artists' interest in honoring the Confederacy had gradually become less pronounced. In 1977, for instance, folk musician Bill Steele wrote the song "Cedar Forest" about a Union soldier who deserts his regiment during the "foolish... politician's war," searching for a life of peace and contentment in marriage.⁵⁰ Similarly, the McPeak Brothers' "The Last Time" from 1978 details a

⁴⁸ The Country Gentlemen, "The Legend of the Rebel Soldier," track A2 on *The Award Winning Country Gentlemen*, Rebel Records SLP 1506, 1972, vinyl.

⁴⁹ Bob Smallwood, "Rebel Soldier (Your Memory Will Never Die)," track A1 on *Rebel Soldier (Your Memory Will Never Die)*, Old Homestead Records OHS 90030, 1975, vinyl.

⁵⁰ Bill Steele, "The Cedar Forest," track B2 on *Chocolate Chip Cookies*, Swallowtail ST-7, 1977, vinyl.

soldier's separation from his wife and homeland.⁵¹ The following year saw the release of the Cache Valley Drifters' "Masters/Dixieland Lady," a medley focusing on the separation of slave families prior to the Civil War and destruction of (presumably White) homelife during the war.⁵²

Another song that illustrates the public's changing attitudes toward the Confederacy is a medley from David Pengelly's 1977 release *Recorded Live*. Before playing an instrumental blend of "Dixie" and "Marching Through Georgia," Pengelly asked his Decatur, Georgia audience, "How many Yankees have we got in the audience tonight?" He was predictably met with little enthusiasm. However, when he followed up with the question, "How many Rebels have we got here tonight?" the reaction was, though somewhat more enthusiastic, nearly just as taciturn. The medley itself began with a solo banjo rendition of "Dixie," which elicited little response. But the second (and notably pro-Union) song immediately goaded the crowd to clap along in unison; Pengelly then lost all momentum he had gained by launching back into a slow version of "Dixie." The song's closing was met with a polite yet restrained cheer from the audience—perhaps half of the reaction to other

⁵¹ The McPeak Brothers, "The Last Time," track B2 on *Bend in the River*, County Records 711, 1978, vinyl.

⁵² The Cache Valley Drifters, "Masters/Dixieland Lady," track A3 on *The Cache Valley Drifters*, Flying Fish FF 081, 1979, vinyl.

bluegrass numbers from his show such as “Rockytop” and “Dueling Banjos/Foggy Mountain Breakdown.”⁵³

A decrease in Confederate sentiment through the late 1970s might not seem intuitive. After all, this was a period when Georgia governor Jimmy Carter was elected President, so-called “forced busing” was a hot-button political issue across the nation, and *The Dukes of Hazzard*, with a Confederate battle flag emblazoned on the roof of the Duke brothers’ car, the General Lee, was the top-rated show on television. Yet it was precisely this greater acceptance of the South in American popular culture—similarly represented by the expansion of major sports franchises into the South, such as the NHL’s Atlanta Flames in 1972 and the NFL’s Tampa Bay Buccaneers in 1976—that contributed to the decline in Confederate imagery and the substitution of the Confederacy for the South more broadly. Another reason for bluegrass music’s distancing from the Lost Cause was the public scrutiny faced by groups with overt Confederate associations and the new labeling of Confederate symbols and ideas as hateful.

Accordingly, as bluegrass progressed into the 1980s and 1990s, the open lionization of the Confederacy became increasingly uncommon. Though narrated from the perspective of “Rebel soldiers... from Tennessee,” Larry Sparks’ “Last Day at Gettysburg” from 1996 returns to more typical reconciliationist themes, focusing on “The fires, the dead, [and] the dying,” and evoking images of an “angel

⁵³ David Pengelly, “Dixie/Marching Through Georgia,” track B1 on *Recorded Live*, Shannon Records [no catalog number], 1977, vinyl.

band” beckoning the soldier home.⁵⁴ In a similar vein, The Seldom Scene’s “Dry Creek Run” from the same year tells of the death and destruction wrought by the Civil War, noting that the dead “weren’t just blue and they weren’t just gray,” and that “Death took no sides when it came that day.”⁵⁵

Bluegrass in the Twenty-First Century

The late 1990s and early 2000s largely reflected a softening of Confederate sympathies, as well as an increased focus on slavery and the Union. Released in 1998, Blue Highway’s “He Walked All the Way Home” tells of a soldier who walks home from the site of Lee’s surrender to his home in Southampton County, Virginia. Though also told from a Southern perspective, as indicated by the reference to Appomattox Courthouse as the place “where the deed was sadly done,” the song largely focuses on the “sadness [the soldier wore] like a mantle for the friends he lost in vain.”⁵⁶ Also from this period is Kevin McClung’s 2003 song “Tennessee,” which focuses on a soldier’s internal struggle with leaving home for war. With lines such as “I can’t help but feel strange / Heading north in a pouring rain,” the chorus

⁵⁴ Larry Sparks, “Last Day at Gettysburg,” *Blue Mountain Memories*, Rebel Records REB-CD-1726, 1996, CD.

⁵⁵ The Seldom Scene, “Dry Creek Run,” track 1 on *Dream Scene*, Sugar Hill Records SHCD-3858, 1996, CD.

⁵⁶ Blue Highway, “He Walked All the Way Home,” *Midnight Storm*, Rebel Records REB-CD-1746, 1998, CD.

asks an angel to “Make sure I find my way back home / To Tennessee” if the narrator dies.⁵⁷

One album that affords a unique look at the shifting nature of Civil War memory in bluegrass is Lonesome Ride’s 2002 album *Crossing the Wall*. This album is of particular interest because it was created by bandleader Gary G. Smith while researching his ancestor’s role in the war. It is composed mostly of self-written songs, which include themes such as soldiers longing for home, the disruption of family life, and even a “brother-fighting-brother” song—a theme popular in the Appalachian folk tradition. While it neglects the African American perspective that has increasingly found its way into bluegrass in recent years, it does offer a relatively unbiased account of the war. This is what makes *Crossing the Wall* so interesting: though it perpetuates the old reconciliationist approach in its avoidance of slavery, it contains little to no overt glorification of the South, returning instead to themes of wartime hardship.⁵⁸

Civil War songs in bluegrass slowed to a relative trickle in the mid-2000s. This can be tied to a decrease in public identification with the Confederacy since the 1970s, as well as a general avoidance of the Confederacy in music except among neo-Confederates, historical groups, or hate groups. Since the late 2000s, however, a new wave of Civil War bluegrass music has emerged. Liked in the 1960s, this

⁵⁷ Kevin McClung, “Tennessee,” track 6 on *Minor Indiscretions*, Mountain William Music [no catalog number], 2003, CD.

⁵⁸ Lonesome Ride, *Crossing the Wall*, self-released, 2002, CD.

second wave is likely due in part to heightened racial tensions in American politics. Yet the new generation of Civil War songs exhibits an increased diversity of lyrical themes and a minimization of pro-Confederate viewpoints. This has become even more important due to the weakening hold of Southernization in American culture since the 1960s.

Even recent songs that sound pro-Confederate on the surface, such as Balsam Range's "Burning Georgia Down" from 2007, were not typically written with the glorification of the Confederacy in mind. Despite the song's protagonist referring to Union soldiers as "devils dressed in Blue,"⁵⁹ songwriter Mark Bumgardner wrote that he simply wanted to "keep it historically accurate while having the story being told from the perspective of someone who was there," and that he "didn't want to make any political statement or pass judgement by looking through the lens of history."⁶⁰ Rather, Bumgardner and co-writer Milan Miller sought to tell a story of tragedy, sadness, and pain, using the Civil War as a framework.

More representative of this newer batch of music is a trio of songs from The SteelDrivers' catalog, including their 2008 song "Sticks That Make Thunder" and their 2015 song "River Runs Red." The former is told from the neutral perspective of a tree watching a battle unfold, using dissociation to point out the senselessness of violence. The tree recounts that "Some were the color of the sky in winter

⁵⁹ Balsam Range, "Burning Georgia Down," track 5 on *Marching Home*, Mountain Home Music Company MH11422, 2007, CD.

⁶⁰ Mark Bumgardner, email message to the author, April 10, 2019.

/ Some were as blue as the night,” in reference to the gray and blue of soldiers’ uniforms. It goes on to describe death and destruction in natural terms, saying, “When the light came again there was death on the wind / As the buzzards made way for the worms.”⁶¹ “River Runs Red” is less esoteric, stating bluntly, “No winners or losers / When you count the dead.” The song emphasizes that both sides suffered tremendous losses: “Now Rogers was from Alabama / And Thomas an old New York town / But soon they would die like blood brothers / In the stream where their souls would flow down.”⁶²

Both of these songs focus on the death and violence wrought by war, furthering a reconciliationist understanding of the Civil War in bluegrass. But The SteelDrivers followed a more emancipationist path in 2010 with the song “Can You Run,” which tells the story of a slave family watching the advance of the Union Army. The lyrics directly attack the slave society of the Old South: “Can you run to the freedom line of the Lincoln soldiers / Where the contraband can be a man? / [...] Wrap these hands of mine around a gun / And chase the taste of bondage from my tongue.”⁶³ Rhiannon Giddens’ “Julie” from 2017 tells a similar story, but speaks directly to the fears of Southern plantation owners over the loss of their slaves. Giddens, who is African American,

⁶¹ The SteelDrivers, “Sticks That Make Thunder,” track 8 on *The SteelDrivers*, Rounder Records 11661-0598-2, 2007, CD.

⁶² The SteelDrivers, “River Runs Red,” track 11 on *The Muscle Shoals Recordings*, Rounder Records 11661-9180-2, 2015, CD.

⁶³ The SteelDrivers, “Can You Run,” track 5 on *Reckless*, Rounder Records 11661-0624-2, 2010, CD.

stated in a 2015 interview that she drew inspiration for the song from Andrew Ward's book *The Slaves' War*.⁶⁴

Another way "Julie" differs from "Can You Run" is in its interaction between the slave and the plantation owner's wife, who tries to convince the slave not to flee. She employs a rhetoric of familiarity and complacency, saying, "You won't go / Leave this house and all you know / [...] Don't leave here / [Don't] leave us, who love you, and all you hold dear."⁶⁵ Likewise, Giddens gives voice to anti-slavery themes in her song "At the Purchaser's Option" from 2017, which tells of the breakup of enslaved families and their endurance in spite of separation. The refrain declares, "You can take my body / You can take my bones / You can take my blood / But not my soul."⁶⁶ Giddens and her former band, the Carolina Chocolate Drops, along with such artists as The Ebony Hillbillies, represent a new growth of African American folk music, and will likely continue to write racially themed songs as long as the legacy of slavery continues to hinder American progress.⁶⁷

Another emancipationist song is Mandolin Orange's "Wildfire" from 2016. The lyrics are explicit in their singling out of slavery as the cause of the Civil War, recounting that "too much money rolled in to ever end slavery / The cry for

⁶⁴ Frank Carlson and Mike Fritz, "Rhiannon Giddens performs 'Julie,' a song inspired by a slave's story," PBS NewsHour, April 15, 2015.

⁶⁵ Rhiannon Giddens, "Julie," track 3 on *Freedom Highway*, Nonesuch 558805-1, 2017, CD.

⁶⁶ Rhiannon Giddens, "At the Purchaser's Option," track 1 on *Freedom Highway*.

⁶⁷ Chris LH Durman, "African American Old-Time String Band Music: A Selective Discography," *Notes* 64, no. 4 (2008): 808.

war spread like wildfire.” The song continues with an attack on Southern racism, especially after Reconstruction: “The South was spent / But its true demise was hatred passed down through the years / It should have been different / [...] But pride has a way of holding too firm to history / And it burns like wildfire.”⁶⁸ Songs by Giddens, Mandolin Orange (now Watchhouse), and The SteelDrivers represent a departure from the reconciliationist messages of the past in their candid focus on slavery and the lives of enslaved people.

Finally, a song fitting better in the neo-folk tradition but still of interest here is “Ballad of the 20th Maine” by The Ghost of Paul Revere, released in 2015. The song recounts the story of Andrew J. Tozier, a real-life soldier in the 20th Maine, and his division’s near defeat at the Battle of Gettysburg. It carries a distinctly pro-Union sentiment, with lyrics such as, “We were steadfast as [Mount] Katahdin, hard as winter’s rain / Take that rebel yell with you to hell / We are the 20th Maine.”⁶⁹ The Ghost of Paul Revere represents a unique Northern perspective in bluegrass, reflecting the genre’s growing popularity outside the South. As bluegrass continues to find new audiences, more Civil War songs with a Unionist point of view are likely to emerge.

As the above examples demonstrate, modern bluegrass has taken up a more balanced approach to the Civil War, incorporating African American and Unionist

⁶⁸ Mandolin Orange, “Wildfire,” track 2 on *Blindfaller*, Yep Roc Records YEP-2487, 2016, CD.

⁶⁹ The Ghost of Paul Revere, “Ballad of the 20th Maine,” track 2 on *Field Notes Vol. 1*, self-released, 2015, CD.

perspectives, and finally corrected the reconciliationist view with the emergence of emancipationist music. Though Civil War themes in bluegrass were at a historic low by the 1980s, they have resurfaced in recent years due to heightened tensions over the war and its ongoing legacy. Moreover, the Lost Cause rhetoric so common in the early 1970s has largely faded from public performances and, while still extant in some corners, remains increasingly unpopular. The Civil War will undoubtedly continue to appear in bluegrass music due to the nature of the genre and how well the war fits within its traditional themes, but the rate and nature of these appearances will largely depend upon race relations and how the American society will continue to view the Confederacy and the Civil War as a whole.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Balsam Range. "Burning Georgia Down." Track 5 on *Marching Home*. 2007. Mountain Home Music Company MH11422, CD. DOI:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zyer-e4Okj8>.

Blake, Norman. "Graycoat Soldiers." Track A5 on *The Fields of November*. 1974. Flying Fish 004, vinyl. DOI:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PZ14uA_h-WU

The Boys From Indiana. "Atlanta Is Burning." Track B1 on *Atlanta Is Burning*. 1974. King Bluegrass KB 530, vinyl. DOI:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NV4x_h0RmtU

The Cache Valley Drifters. "Masters/Dixieland Lady." Track A3 on *The Cache Valley Drifters*. 1979. Flying Fish FF 081, vinyl. DOI:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CLohhPvWksU>

The Country Gentlemen. "The Legend of the Rebel Soldier." Track A2 on *The Award Winning Country Gentlemen*. 1972. Rebel Records SLP 1506, vinyl. DOI:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hx-5Gb5mLT0>

Claiborne

Dalhart, Vernon. “The John T. Scopes Trial (The Old Religion’s Better After All).” Track A1 on *The John T. Scopes Trial (The Old Religion’s Better After All)*. 1925. Edison Records 51609-R, vinyl. DOI: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJv-SjBwLzk>.

Danny Davis and the Nashville Brass. “From Dixie With Love.” Track B3 on *Live—In Person*. 1972. RCA Victor LSP-4720, vinyl. DOI: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n4rA_OcZGjw

Driftwood, Jimmy. *Songs of Billy Yank and Johnny Reb*. 1961. RCA Victor LPM-2316, vinyl.

Flatt & Scruggs. “Poor Rebel Soldier.” Track B5 on *Recorded Live at Vanderbilt University*. 1964. Columbia CL 2134, vinyl. DOI: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FIIdsVxmi85k>.

White, Newman Ivey, ed. *The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1952.

The Ghost of Paul Revere. “Ballad of the 20th Maine.” Track 2 on *Field Notes Vol. 1*. 2015. Self-released, CD. DOI: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kuvORvF04zQ>

Giddens, Rhiannon. “Julie.” Track 2 on *Freedom Highway*. 2017. Nonesuch 558805-1, CD. DOI:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zu5ZYXi6EiE>.

———. “At the Purchaser’s Option.” Track 1 on *Freedom’s Highway*. DOI:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6vy9xTS0QxM>

Horton, Johnny. “Johnny Reb.” Track B5 on *Johnny Horton Makes History*. 1960. Columbia CL 1478, vinyl. DOI:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JcBXsbaug34>.

Lonesome Ride. *Crossing the Wall*. 2002. Self-released, CD.

Mandolin Orange. “Wildfire.” Track 2 on *Blindfaller*. 2016. Yep Roc Records YEP-2487, vinyl. DOI:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEpefYukZ9E>.

McClung, Kevin. “Tennessee.” Track 6 on *Minor Indiscretions*. 2003. Mountain William Music [no catalog number], CD.

The McPeak Brothers. “The Last Time.” Track B2 on *Bend in the River*. 1978. County Records 711, vinyl. DOI:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8qwWF9-18D4>

Newberry, Mickey. “An American Trilogy.” Track A1 on *Frisco Mabel Joy*. 1971. Elektra EKS-74107, vinyl. DOI:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UQIzNs0nsIY>.

Claiborne

Pengelly, David. "Dixie/Marching Through Georgia." Track B1 on *Recorded Live*. 1977. Shannon Records [no catalog number], vinyl.

Proffitt, Frank. "Going Across the Mountain." Track B8 on *Frank Proffitt*. 1962. Folk-Legacy Records FSA-1, vinyl. DOI:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kiLRqaKrFg8>.

Reno & Smiley. *Folk Songs of the Civil War*. 1961. King Records 756, vinyl. DOI:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=thHSbqu1qD4>.

The Seldom Scene. "Dry Creek Run." Track 1 on *Dream Scene*. 1996. Sugar Hill Records SHCD-3858, CD. DOI:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hpXU0ZaIzvw>.

Smallwood, Bob. "Rebel Soldier (Your Memory Will Never Die)." Track A1 on *Rebel Soldier (Your Memory Will Never Die)*. 1975. Old Homestead Records OHS 90030, vinyl. DOI:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7cuGiqXAnw>

The SteelDrivers. "Sticks That Make Thunder." Track 8 on *The SteelDrivers*. 2007. Rounder Records 11661-0598-2, CD. DOI:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8WJSwqngedY>

———. “Can You Run.” Track 5 on *Reckless*. 2010. Rounder Records 11661-0624-2, CD. DOI: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=83KTgzk5Hw>
w.

———. “River Runs Red.” Track 11 on *The Muscle Shoals Recordings*. 2015. Rounder Records 11661-9180-2, CD. DOI:

Steele, Bill. “The Cedar Forest.” Track B2 on *Chocolate Chip Cookies*. 1977. Swallowtail ST-7, vinyl.

Uncle Dave Macon. “The Bible’s True.” Track A1 on *The Bible’s True*. 1926. Vocalion 15322, vinyl. DOI: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SRvjGbKgl2I>.

———. “I’se Gwine Back to Dixie.” Track A1 on *I’se Gwine Back to Dixie*. 1927. Vocalion 5157, vinyl. DOI: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kO9mPDlcoD>
w.

Secondary Sources

Carlson, Frank, and Mike Fritz. “Rhiannon Giddens performs ‘Julie,’ a song inspired by a slave’s story.” PBS NewsHour, April 15, 2015. DOI: <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/rhiannon-giddens-performs-song-inspired-slave-narratives>.

- Carney, George O. "Bluegrass Grows All Around: The Spatial Dimensions of a Country Music Style." *Journal of Geography* 73, no. 4 (1974): 34-55.
- Dunway, Wilma A. "Civil War in the Mountain South." Virginia Tech Faculty Archives, 2003. DOI: https://scholar.lib.vt.edu/faculty_archives/mountain_slavery/civilwar.htm.
- Durman, Chris LH. "African American Old-Time String Band Music: A Selective Discography." *Notes* 64, no. 1 (1985): 71-82.
- Holmerg, Carl Bryan. "Toward the Rhetoric of Music: Dixie." *Southern Speech Communication Journal* 51, no. 1 (1985): 71-82.
- Lund, Jens. "Fundamentalism, Racism, and Political Reaction in Country Music." In *The Sounds of Social Change*, edited by R. Serge Denisoff and Richard A. Peterson, 79-97. Chicago: Rand McNally, 1972.
- , and R. Serge Denisoff. "The Folk Music Revival and the Counter Culture: Contributions and Contradictions." *The Journal of American Folklore* 84, no. 334 (1971): 394-405.
- Rosenberg, Neil V. "From Sound to Style: The Emergence of Bluegrass." *The Journal of American Folklore* 80, no. 316 (1967): 143-50.

Smith, L. Mayne. "An Introduction of Bluegrass." *The Journal of American Folklore* 78, no. 309 (1965): 245-56.

Stein, Eric. "Living Right and Being Free: Country Music Tradition

Strom, Phoebe. "Defining Dixie: Creating and Deploying Country Music's Mythic South." B.A. thesis, Rhodes College, 2014. DOI: <http://hdl.handle.net/10267/21095>.

Watt, Steve. "Letter to a (Hard-Driving) Bluegrass Band." *The Radical Teacher* no. 3 (1976): 31-33. DOI: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20709049>.

Wilgus, D. K. "Country-Western Music and the Urban Hillbilly." *The Journal of American Folklore* 83, no. 328 (1970): 157-179. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/539105>

Wolfe, Charles, and James E. Akenson, eds. *Country Music Goes to War*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2005.

**“GOOD NEIGHBOURHOOD”:
CANADA AND AMERICA’S CONTENTIOUS
RELATIONSHIP DURING THE CIVIL WAR**

Michael R. D. Connolly | *University of Ottawa*

On May 30, 1867, Jefferson Davis, former president of the Confederate States of America, arrived in Toronto following his imprisonment after the Civil War. “I thank you for the honour you have shown me,” he exclaimed to the crowd that had gathered to welcome him for his five-month visit; “May peace and prosperity be forever the blessing of Canada, for she has been the asylum of many of my friends, as she is now an asylum for myself... May God bless you all.”¹

During the Civil War, Canada became a safe haven for Americans on either side of the Mason-Dixon line. Draft-dodgers, refugees, traitors, diplomats, and agitators all made the Province their home for a multitude of reasons. Yet while both Northern and Southern agents spent their efforts spying on each other and reporting intelligence back to their respective capitals, the Confederacy accomplished far more in Canada than the Union. In 1864, after years of courting politicians in Great Britain as well as Canada, Confederates decided to push their luck from across the northern border. Their planning culminated in two attacks executed from Canada: The seizure of the *Philo Parsons* on Lake Erie on September 19, 1864, and the raid on St. Albans, Vermont in

¹ Adam Mayers, *Dixie & the Dominion: Canada, the Confederacy, and the War for the Union* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2003), 20.

the following month. These attacks forced Great Britain to reassess its neutrality and Canada to adopt more stringent neutrality laws under pressure from the Union. They damaged the Confederacy's image in turn among Canadians who had previously been hospitable to Southern partisans, with figures such as Clement Vallandigham—an anti-war Democrat exiled from the North and then deported from the South—earlier finding refuge in Ontario. But the impact of the raids was far from universal, and many Canadians continued to hope for a Confederate victory well into the final year of the war. This article examines how and why so many Southerners, all the way up to Jefferson Davis, found their way in Canada during the and after the American Civil War.

Canadian Considerations

The Civil War coincided with a growing sense of Canadian national identity.² Accordingly, attitudes toward the war centred around three primary issues: The prospect of a stronger Canada when faced with a divided America; the morality of slavery; and republicanism as an alternative political structure. As historian Sydney F. Wise put it, most

² In 1841, British possessions in North America were merged into the Province of Canada, consisting of Canada West (also known as Upper Canada, or Ontario) and Canada East (also known as Lower Canada, or Quebec). Due in part to the conditions created by the American Civil War, the 1860s saw increased calls for the United Canadas to join with other British colonies in a single Canadian Confederation, governed by one Parliament and colonial administration. The Province merged with Nova Scotia and New Brunswick into the Dominion of Canada on July 1, 1867, laying the foundations for the modern Canadian state.

Canadians were not “pro-North” or “pro-South,” but rather “anti-North” or “anti-South.”³ From the American Revolution onward, the United States posed a constant threat to Canada, its territory, and its parliamentary democracy. This was a fact widely recognized by colonists and Britons alike. For many Canadians, it was clear that a strong Union was more likely to attack its northern neighbour than a divided one. Moreover, the British government believed that by inclining its sympathies toward the South—through the buying and selling of contraband, the harbouring of fugitives, and diplomatic recognition of the Confederacy—it might be able to prevent Canada from falling victim to the doctrine of Manifest Destiny.⁴

Given these considerations, Canadian politicians greeted the outbreak of war with some enthusiasm. In 1861, Joint Premier of the Province of Canada John A. Macdonald⁵ expressed his belief that the South would gain independence from the United States: “If they [Americans] are to be

³ Sydney F. Wise, *God’s Peculiar Peoples: Essays on Political Culture in Nineteenth Century Canada* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1993), 138.

⁴ George Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 217-21.

⁵ From its formation in 1841, the Province of Canada was governed by a Parliament with equal representation from Canada West and Canada East; this is the legislature referenced throughout this paper. Each region’s delegation was headed by a Premier, with the two men working in tandem as joint heads of government. John A. Macdonald served as Joint Premier from Canada West from 1856 to 1862 and again from 1864 to 1867. Upon Confederation, the Provincial legislature was replaced with the modern-day Parliament and Macdonald became Canada’s first prime minister.

severed in two, as severed I believe they will be, they will be two great, two noble, two free nations [that] will exist in the place of one.”⁶ Thomas D’Arcy McGee, Macdonald’s ally in Parliament and a fellow Conservative, voiced much the same sentiment in an 1863 letter to the *Toronto Globe*: “If stability be essential to good government, [the United States] have not had stability, and therefore, their description of government cannot be good either for themselves or for others.”⁷

In Macdonald and McGee’s view, the United States was doomed because it had failed to create a stable government like that of Great Britain. American institutions, from Congress to the presidency, lent inherent instability to the state. Further, by changing its head of state so frequently (prior to the Civil War, the United States had not had a two-term president since Andrew Jackson three decades earlier), the US government was unable to settle its affairs before another president from another party could take power with a new set of policies, patrons, and cabinet appointments. With a change in administration every four years from 1837 to 1861, it is easy to understand why Macdonald and McGee thought the United States was not built for longevity. For these men, the Civil War was but the natural outgrowth of republican democracy.

George Brown, an adversary of Macdonald’s in the liberal Reform movement and founding editor of *The Globe*,

⁶ Richard J. Gwyn, *John A: The Man Who Made Us* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2007), 245.

⁷ Thomas D’Arcy McGee, “Letter From the Hon. Mr. McGee: A Fair Trial for the Monarchical Principle,” *The Globe* (Toronto), July 6, 1863.

was of a similar mind. In an article from 1849, Brown attacked the United States for its preservation of slavery and Canadian annexationists for their desire to join the failing republic: “We turn... to this side of the Atlantic and ask what has the great and swelling Republic of the United States done for Freedom? We answer—nothing. We say it has gone back since it started into existence from its connexion with England.”⁸ An ardent abolitionist, Brown believed that America’s failure stemmed not from its republican institutions per se, but because it had failed to end slavery like Great Britain had done in the early nineteenth century. He was Garrisonian in his condemnation:

It is difficult to believe that the Government will be perpetually on the side of freedom, when the very preservation of that unholy bond, the Union, is based on the principle that in vast tracts of their country the human mind is placed under Russian restraint, that it is death in some places to teach children to read if they have a drop of coloured blood in their veins; that for a man to speak of freedom is imprisonment or possibly death from a lawless mob... They have maintained their own rights as the Emperors of Russia and Austria maintain theirs, but they have as little regard for liberty or the rights of others as these tyrants have.⁹

⁸ George Brown, “What Has Republicanism Done for Freedom?” *The Globe* (Toronto), December 6, 1849.

⁹ Brown, “What Has Republicanism Done for Freedom?”

Brown detested America for its hypocrisy. The United States styled itself as the land of liberty, yet continued to preserve slavery and even expand it throughout the continent. It laid claim to liberalism, and while it had a democracy in name, its ruling elite harboured similar attitudes toward the lower classes as European autocrats.

Brown's hatred of slavery inclined him to support the Union when the war broke out, but he remained distrustful of the North's republican tradition. Macdonald and McGee, for their part, were far more concerned for Canada and its future than the liberty of American slaves. In July 1861, Conservatives in Parliament cheered the Confederate victory at the First Battle of Bull Run until they were angrily silenced by Macdonald, as he understood the British government's need for strict neutrality.¹⁰ Yet sympathies for the South did not break along party lines; there were also a number of Liberals who expressed support for the Confederacy. Malcolm Colin Cameron, a Liberal politician from Ontario, stated in 1865 that "he had no hesitation in declaring that his feeling and sympathy were more aroused by the manly and brave fight the people of the Southern States were making for their independence, than by the attempts of the North to put them down." This remark came while debating an immigration bill before Parliament. Brown responded by contrasting Cameron's love of British

¹⁰ Gwyn, *John A*, 245.

freedom and his “sympathy with those who were fighting to keep 4,000,000 slaves in bondage.”¹¹

In short, Canadian feelings toward the Civil War were consistently mixed. As they argued over what shape their own country would take throughout the 1860s, many Canadians held an independent South to be in the national interest. A successful rebellion would prove the United States a failed experiment, demonstrating the rightfulness of Canada’s place in the British Empire to annexationists. For others, such as George Brown, a Confederate victory would spell doom for the millions of enslaved people south of the Mason-Dixon. While supportive of the Union effort, it is important to remember that Canadian abolitionists were often as hostile to republicanism as their pro-Southern counterparts. Following in the longer tradition of British abolitionism, they forcefully opposed slavery without questioning Canada’s broader political constitution.

Rebels in the Great White North

Divided attitudes toward the war did not prevent Canada from sheltering one of the Union’s best-known Southern partisans. Congressman Clement Vallandigham was a notorious Peace Democrat who, having lost his re-election to the House after Republicans in the Ohio state legislature gerrymandered his district, was arrested for delivering an anti-Lincoln speech and exiled to the Confederacy in the

¹¹ “Our Relations with Canada: Interesting Debate in the Provincial Parliament. The Alien Bill upon its Second Reading,” *The New York Times*, February 3, 1865.

summer of 1863.¹² However, he was equally unwanted in the South. Diarist Mary Boykin Chesnut thought Vallandigham useless to the Southern cause, writing on July 8, 1863 that “I am sure we could not trust him to do us any good, or to do the Yankees any harm. The Coriolanus business is played out.”¹³ Referencing Shakespeare’s tragedy, Chesnut believed Vallandigham had outlived his usefulness the moment he lost his seat in Congress.

Realizing the dearth of political prospects in the South, and sure that he would be killed if he returned to the Union, Vallandigham was more than happy when Jefferson Davis “ordered the Confederacy’s problematic guest to be escorted to Wilmington, North Carolina, where he could board a blockade runner bound for neutral British territory.”¹⁴ According to historian Robin Winks, Vallandigham was “fêted” at a “public dinner in Montreal” upon arrival in Canada in July 1863. He was visited by a number of elite Canadians, including William Walker, manager of the Grand Trunk Railway, as well as Governor Alexander Dallas of Rupert’s Land and Premier Macdonald himself. Vallandigham was even introduced on the floor of the Parliament by Thomas D’Arcy McGee.¹⁵ Given the Southern sympathies of many in government (see above),

¹² Fergus M. Bordewich, *Congress at War: How Republican Reformers Fought the Civil War, Defied Lincoln, Ended Slavery, and Remade America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2020), 173.

¹³ Mary Boykin Chesnut, *A Diary from Dixie* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1905), 216.

¹⁴ Bordewich, *Congress at War*, 231.

¹⁵ Robin Winks, *Canada and the United States: The Civil War Years* (Montreal: Harvest House, 1971), 143.

Canadian Tories were more than willing to accommodate their Copperhead visitor. While he had been worthless to the Confederacy while in exile there, from Canada Vallandigham was able to forward his political agenda and launch a bid for governor of Ohio.

Once settled, Vallandigham ran his gubernatorial campaign from Windsor, Ontario, just across the river from Detroit. He was assisted by Jacob Thompson, former United States Secretary of the Interior and Inspector General of the Confederate States Army, who was sent to Canada as a leader of the Confederate Secret Service. Thompson offered logistical support from the Confederate government. In turn, Vallandigham offered information regarding public opinion toward the war in the Union, however skewed his own perspective may have been. Thompson even offered money and arms to spark a Copperhead uprising in the Midwest¹⁶ after Vallandigham insisted that a “feeling of fatigue and rising anger had been building in the North following the staggering casualties at Gettysburg.” He believed that with only a slight push, “an uprising in the Midwest would create a second confederacy and end the war.”¹⁷ None of this was true. But whether he had received inaccurate information or had simply misread the results of the 1862-63 midterm elections, Vallandigham, in a direct attack on British neutrality, was working to incite violence in the United States.

¹⁶ Cathryn J. Prince, *Burn the Town and Sack the Banks: Confederates Attack Vermont!* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2006), 116.

¹⁷ Mayers, *Dixie & the Dominion*, 28.

Both Canadian and American authorities, well aware of the comings and goings of Confederate agents in Canada, kept a close eye on Vallandigham. Rumours circulated throughout the Union that Vallandigham was “conniving” with Canadians and Confederates “to let an armed steamer pass through the Welland Canal” into New York; the Rochester *Evening Express* further suggested that a “Canadian Gunboat” was “on the way to burn Sandusky [Ohio],” a city on the shores of Lake Erie.¹⁸ Though false, these rumours damaged Canada’s credibility in the eyes of many Northerners. The fact that Canada was known to harbour Southern fugitives and agents—and especially that it hosted the likes of Vallandigham in a town where he could see Detroit from his bedroom window—did not endear Northerners to their foreign neighbours.

The Union’s fears were almost realized from across the northern border on September 19, 1864. That night, a Virginian named John Yates Beall, Captain Charles H. Cole of the Confederate Army, and a group of around thirty Southern sympathizers attempted to free the Confederate soldiers held on Johnson’s Island, which housed a prison camp three miles off Sandusky Bay, Ohio. Organized in Canada, the plan was fairly straightforward. Cole was to prevail upon the captain of the USS *Michigan*, an ironclad warship stationed in Sandusky, to drug and subdue the ship’s crew. Then Beall and his company would steal a ferry (the steamship *Philo Parsons*), regroup with Cole, overtake the *Michigan*, turn its guns on Johnson’s Island, and liberate the

¹⁸ Winks, *Canada and the United States*, 148.

camp’s 2,500 Confederate prisoners. Finally, they would organize the soldiers into a small army and ravage the Midwest,¹⁹ although how exactly the conspirators intended to lead thousands of “sick, injured, and malnourished officers” was never fully explained.²⁰ But the raid did not go as planned, as the captain and crew of the *Michigan* caught on to Cole’s act fairly quickly. By the time Beall and his compatriots had arrived at Sandusky on the *Philo Parsons*, it was clear that Cole had not fulfilled his part of the mission. The crew returned to Windsor and scuttled the ferry. In their haste, however, Beall had broken British neutrality law by stealing baggage and arms from the *Philo Parsons*’ passengers, as well as the ship’s piano and one hundred dollars belonging to the ship’s captain. Because the conspirators had robbed the ship and violated Britain’s neutrality, Canada was able to extradite them to the United States on charges of robbery.²¹

The Canadian press was outraged by the attack. Even traditionally pro-Southern newspapers such as the *Toronto Leader* believed that the raiders had “abused Canadian hospitality” in their commandeering of the *Philo Parsons*.²² The colonial government was equally incensed. Governor General Charles Monck, who had urged Parliament to increase firepower on the Great Lakes earlier in the war, feared what the plot might spell for British neutrality.²³

¹⁹ Mayers, *Dixie & the Dominion*, 28.

²⁰ Winks, *Canada and the United States*, 288.

²¹ Winks, *Canada and the United States*, 290.

²² Winks, *Canada and the United States*, 290-91.

²³ Prince, *Burn the Town and Sack the Banks*, 90.

Monck wanted to ensure Canada's ability to thwart any future Southern incursions, requesting greater legal authority from Westminster to "seize vessels and munitions on the lakes, including the incendiary materials used by the rebels to fire on American cities." He also sought the authority to expel anyone suspected of violating British neutrality, or at least to imprison them, in his language, on charges of "levying war from Her Majesty's Dominions against a friendly power."²⁴

Monck knew that there was a greater problem at hand: that his government had been unable to track the actions of Southern agents in Canada. He was aware that spies and agitators were operating in the country, but had been promised by agent James Holcombe in May 1864 that the Confederacy "did not plan any hostile acts from Canadian soil," and that its actors "would not violate any local or Imperial laws."²⁵ By September of the same year, it was obvious that Monck could not trust what Confederate agents had told him.

At the same time as the *Philo Parsons* incident, the Confederacy was steadily losing control of its own territory. Generals Ulysses S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman had already pushed deep into the heart of the South (Union forces entered Atlanta just two weeks before the Sandusky raid), and the upcoming presidential election in November meant that Confederates needed to do whatever they could to terrorize pro-Union voters and embolden Copperhead

²⁴ Mayers, *Dixie & the Dominion*, 90.

²⁵ Mayers, *Dixie & the Dominion*, 35.

Democrats. While sliding autumn temperatures made another naval attack from Canada unlikely, the Union was forced to temporarily withdraw from the Rush-Bagot Treaty—a naval disarmament pact between the United States and Britain signed after the War of 1812—and reinforce the Great Lakes out of precaution.²⁶ As the Union believed Great Britain to be failing its promise of neutrality and knew that many powerful Canadians harboured Southern sympathies out of self-interest, this move only worked to heighten diplomatic tensions.

Northerners were still reeling from the raid on Lake Erie when they learned of a second incursion from across the border. This time, however, the consequences would be far greater. The raid on St. Albans, Vermont occurred on October 19, 1864, exactly one month after the *Philo Parsons* incident and the same day as a decisive Union victory at the Battle of Cedar Creek. In the days leading up to the attack, Southern agents arrived in the small trading town just south of the border with Quebec. Posing as Canadians in a hunting club,²⁷ the men went practically unnoticed by the locals, who “never paid much heed to the comings and goings of strangers,” as they were accustomed to traders and travelers frequenting their town.²⁸ At three o’clock in the afternoon on October 19, a twenty-one-year-old Kentuckian named Bennett Young, who had previously served with the expert Confederate raider John Hunt Morgan,²⁹ stepped out onto

²⁶ Winks, *Canada and the United States*, 293.

²⁷ Winks, *Canada and the United States*, 298.

²⁸ Prince, *Burn the Town and Sack the Banks*, 126.

²⁹ Prince, *Burn the Town and Sack the Banks*, 124.

his hotel's front porch, waved his Navy Colt revolver in the air and loudly proclaimed: "In the name of the Confederate States, I take possession of St. Albans!"³⁰

Young and his band proceeded to sack the three banks of St. Albans, stealing horses and weapons in the name of the Confederacy. Aware of the problems that had hindered the *Philo Parson* affair, Robin Winks writes that Young "had instructed his men clearly to stamp the raid as an act of war, but despite his own announcement from the hotel porch, his followers left themselves open to serious charges by the way in which they identified themselves."³¹ The raid itself lasted only a few hours but left a devastating psychological impact on the inhabitants of St. Albans. The goal was not to rape and pillage, but to strike fear into the hearts of Northerners and give them a taste of what Southerners were feeling at the same time. As one of the raiders put it:

I wish to say that killing women and children was the last thing thought of. We wanted to let the North understand that there were two sides to this war, and that they can't be rolling in wealth and comfort, while we in the South are bearing all the hardships and privations. In retaliation for [General Philip H.] Sheridan's atrocities in the Shenandoah Valley, we desired to destroy property, not the lives of women

³⁰ Winks, *Canada and the United States*, 299.

³¹ Winks, *Canada and the United States*, 299.

and children, although that would, of course, have followed in its train.³²

Today these actions would be labeled as terrorism, but in the context of nineteenth-century warfare, they were understood as revenge. The raiders were keenly aware that if Southern attacks in other areas were as successful as they had been in Vermont, if the *Philo Parsons* plot had gone off as planned, if Confederates had a proper army to invade the Union from Canada, then they could copy the scorched-earth tactics that Northern forces were using in their homelands.

At the raid’s conclusion, the agents rushed back across the Canadian border, followed by a posse of townspeople from St. Albans. Though they failed to capture most of the attackers, the pursuers did get a hold of Young after crossing into Quebec. But the St. Albans men, with Young in tow, were stopped by a British officer, who informed them that they were in violation of Canadian neutrality. The soldier then took Young to join the other raiders, who had already been apprehended by British forces.³³

Canadians were swift to condemn the raid. An article in *The Globe*, printed two days after the attack, protested that “Our country affords an asylum for thousands of Southern refugees, and it would be most infamous for the Confederate government to send men here commissioned to plunder our neighbours with whom we are at peace.” The author also

³² Prince, *Burn the Town and Sack the Banks*, 129.

³³ Mayers, *Dixie & the Dominion*, 110.

hoped that “the Confederate robbers were acting upon their own responsibility” rather than on orders from the government.³⁴ Canadians had every reason to be outraged: they had opened their doors to Southerners who, in turn, stabbed them in the back whenever it became convenient. The Confederates were also in a difficult position. By October 1864, with William Tecumseh Sherman fighting through Georgia and Philip Sheridan’s Valley campaign brought to a successful conclusion in Virginia, the tide had shifted in the Union’s favour. It was clear that the Confederacy would need to turn to increasingly drastic actions, even if it meant provoking a friendly nation like Great Britain.

Yet no nation was so provoked as the Union. Secretary of State William Seward believed that Canadians “were not displaying ‘good neighbourhood’ in permitting such raids to be planned in their midst.”³⁵ For Seward, Canada was responsible for the Confederate agents in its territory, whose conduct “might endanger peace with Canada.” Seward’s feelings were not helped by the fact that, during his trial, Bennett Young claimed that he was sent to Canada “as a commissioned officer in the provisional army of the Confederate States and that he had violated no law of Canada.”³⁶ Young contended that the raid was not planned in Canada and therefore did not violate British neutrality.³⁷

³⁴ “The St. Albans Raid,” *The Globe*, October 22, 1864.

³⁵ Winks, *Canada and the United States*, 303.

³⁶ James Morton Callahan, *The Diplomatic History of the Southern Confederacy* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), 235.

³⁷ Prince, *Burn the Town and Sack the Banks*, 204.

But the Union took the matter seriously, and was compelled to take diplomatic action in response.

Wars and Rumours of Wars

In his annual address to Congress on December 6, 1864, President Abraham Lincoln discussed the situation with Canada. He brought forward his recommendations for retaliatory action against the Province:

In view of the insecurity of life and property in the region adjacent to the Canadian border, by reason of recent assaults and depredations committed by inimical and desperate persons who are harbored there, it has been thought proper to give notice that after the expiration of six months... the United States must hold themselves at liberty to increase their naval armaments upon the lakes... The condition of the border will necessarily come into consideration in connection with the questions of continuing or modifying the rights of transit from Canada through the United States, as well as the regulation of imposts, which were temporarily established by the Reciprocity Treaty of the 5th of June, 1854.³⁸

The Reciprocity Treaty had eliminated customs tariffs between the United States and Canada, creating an economic

³⁸ Abraham Lincoln, “Annual Message to Congress,” in *The Civil War: The Final Year Told by Those Who Lived It*, ed. Aaron Sheehan-Dean (New York: Library of America, 2014), 497.

boom north of the border. The prospect of its revocation would deprive Canada of one of its most lucrative trading markets and force it to rely more heavily on Great Britain for imports.

Lincoln maintained that “the colonial authorities of Canada are not deemed to be intentionally unjust or unfriendly towards the United States... there is every reason to expect that... they will take the necessary measures to prevent new incursions across the border.”³⁹ He was not looking to attack Canada, but to prod Canadians into doing what he wanted of them: stop Confederate agents from working in the country and draft stronger neutrality legislation. He was also aware of the economic damage he could inflict to leverage his hand. An article from the *New York Albion* on December 17 questioned Lincoln’s ability to abrogate the Reciprocity Treaty and criticized his administration for failing to protect the Union: “The termination of the Reciprocity Treaty appears likely to pass both Houses [of Congress] at a gallop. Yet it is by no means certain that the Executive will be in a hurry to act in this manner... it does not desire to quarrel with the North West, whose interests lie [in the continuance of the Treaty].”⁴⁰ In other words, Lincoln needed to pay heed to the Old Northwest (known today as the Upper Midwest), where many Copperheads remained influential and where the Reciprocity Treaty was seen as an economic benefit. Yet in

³⁹ Lincoln, “Annual Message to Congress,” 497.

⁴⁰ “The St. Albans’ Raiders: A Canadian Difficulty,” *The Albion: A Journal of News, Politics and Literature* (New York), December 17, 1864.

the time between Lincoln’s address to Congress on December 6 and the *Albion* article from December 17, the judge presiding over the St. Albans case in Canada had handed down a ruling that further enraged the Northern public.

On December 13, 1864, after more than a month of hearings, Judge Charles-Joseph Coursol ruled that he lacked a warrant from the Governor General and that no machinery for extradition existed under the Webster-Ashburton Treaty of 1842.⁴¹ “Consequently,” he said, “I am bound in law, justice and fairness to order the immediate release of the prisoners upon all charges brought before me. Let the prisoners be discharged.”⁴² Needless to say, this was a result that neither Canada nor the Union was hoping for. On December 14, the United States Senate passed two resolutions condemning the ruling, and on the same day Governor General Monck stated that the ruling was absurd and ordered that the raiders be re-arrested.⁴³ He also urged the government to investigate Coursol for any possible misconduct.⁴⁴ Further, on December 17, the US State Department issued the passport controls that Lincoln had threatened in his message to Congress, bringing cross-border traffic to a halt.⁴⁵ In the span of just four months, Southern agents in Canada had gone from refugees to unwelcome guests, and Anglo-American relations from strained to

⁴¹ Winks, *Canada and the United States*, 313.

⁴² Prince, *Burn the Town and Sack the Banks*, 211.

⁴³ Prince, *Burn the Town and Sack the Banks*, 214.

⁴⁴ Mayers, *Dixie & the Dominion*, 176.

⁴⁵ Mayers, *Dixie & the Dominion*, 190.

nearly broken. The raiders were indeed re-arrested following Monck's order and put on trial with a different judge, but the damage was already done.

From late December 1864 to April 1865, the threat of war loomed over Canada and Great Britain like the sword of Damocles. One newspaper referred to the threat of invasion as “a war in anticipation” with the Union.⁴⁶ As the United States maintained a strong professional army that had been fighting for over four years, it was doubtful that Canada would remain in British hands were war to break out. For Confederates, a war between Britain and the Union would be a best-case scenario, as they believed the North would be unable to fight a two-front war. A clerk in the Confederate War Department wrote that “A war with England would be our peace,” and the diarist George Templeton Strong believed that a military reaction to Coursol's ruling “would be an inducement for Confederates to repeat the [St. Albans] raid” to push the North into war.⁴⁷ Canadian and British media began to turn even more strongly against the South. The *Telegraph* from Saint John, New Brunswick claimed that “the Confederacy was abusing provincial hospitality in order to embroil Great Britain in war with the United States.”⁴⁸ *The Globe* insisted in March 1865 that “There could be but one object in these acts—if at all acts of war—and that would be to occasion war between England and the

⁴⁶ Winks, *Canada and the United States*, 301.

⁴⁷ Winks, *Canada and the United States*, 303.

⁴⁸ Winks, *Canada and the United States*, 307.

United States, as such alone could aid their [Confederate] cause.”⁴⁹

Even as General Grant neared Richmond, the Confederacy had a newfound confidence on the world stage. The St. Albans raid had worked spectacularly to incite the Union’s anger against its colonial neighbour, and Canada’s neutrality laws had given Southern agents a chance at freedom. Yet as Robin Winks has written, “Any satisfaction gained in the South by the daring that the raiders displayed was more than offset by the feeling created in the Canadas that the Confederacy had abused British hospitality... Even papers that had been highly sympathetic to the South, like the *Montreal Evening Telegram* and the *Toronto Leader*, deplored the acts of ‘the brigands.’”⁵⁰

The raids destroyed any remaining credibility the Confederacy may have had in Canada as the fear of war and annexation by the United States increased. Addressing Parliament in February 1865, John A. Macdonald decried “those who had come to make use of our country as the base of operations against the United States, and to induce if possible a war between Great Britain and the United States.”⁵¹ Despite his well-known Southern sympathies, Macdonald was forced to move against the Confederacy to preserve peace with the Union. Even Lord Palmerston, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, acknowledged that the North should be allowed to voice its displeasure. In order

⁴⁹ “Latest from Montreal: The St. Albans Raid Case. Mr. Devlin’s Argument,” *The Globe* (Toronto), March 22, 1865.

⁵⁰ Winks, *Canada and the United States*, 306.

⁵¹ “Our Relations with Canada.”

to avoid “an angry debate” between the two nations, Palmerston recognized that “things did take place of which the United States were justly entitled to complain.”⁵² To pacify the Union, both Canada and Britain needed to ensure that another St. Albans would never happen again—and if it did, that its perpetrators could be extradited. In short, they needed to adopt more stringent neutrality laws.

Though it remained officially neutral throughout, the British government’s attitude toward the war had ebbed and flowed with the tide of Southern military fortunes. By 1865 it was confident of a Union victory—and while there were “many well-wishers both to the North and South” in Britain, popular opinion as the war neared its end was summed up in *The Times* of London: The Union and Confederacy “entered into this ill-advised quarrel without consulting us; we wish that they would put an end to it under the same conditions.”⁵³ This article was reprinted in the *Toronto Globe*, indicating that it spoke for many Canadians as well. Britons had simply grown tired of the war; they had lent assistance to the South when it suited them, but now were ready for the drama to be over with. War weariness was a sentiment understandably shared by the Northern public as well.

In February 1865, Canada’s Parliament finally passed a revised neutrality law in the hopes of preventing an Anglo-American conflict. The bill, dubbed the Alien Act, had three primary components. First, it enabled the Canadian

⁵² Callahan, *The Diplomatic History of the Southern Confederacy*, 237.

⁵³ “British Neutrality to be Maintained,” *The Globe* (Toronto), January 31, 1865.

government “to remove from this country aliens who are coming here and seeking an asylum in consequence of war, who may have in their own land by their conduct, proved themselves unworthy of that asylum.” It then cited the Neutrality Act, first ratified by the United States Congress in 1794 and updated in 1838, as an example of American legislation “prevent[ing] incursions into Canada.” Finally, the bill expressed its “purpose of requiring persons manufacturing arms and munitions of war, which might be suspected to be intended to be used in hostilities against the United States, to give an account of them.”⁵⁴ The chief goal of the Alien Act was to lessen friction with the United States, and in that it can be counted as a success. Its invocation of the Neutrality Act as a reminder of friendly relations in the past had even come at the suggestion of Secretary Seward.⁵⁵

The Conservative government, however, was not so willing to acknowledge American pressure. In Parliament Macdonald asserted that the act “had been initiated entirely at the suggestion of the Canadian Government, and not from any declaration, suggestion, and so much as expression of desire on the part of the United States Government to have such legislation.” George Brown repeated the claim on the floor of Parliament, adding that “he supported the bill, not as a partisan of North or South, but as a citizen of Canada, anxious to preserve the peace of the country, and prevent war between Great Britain and the United States.”⁵⁶ But it was

⁵⁴ “Our Relations with Canada.”

⁵⁵ Winks, *Canada and the United States*, 316.

⁵⁶ “Our Relations with Canada.”

obvious that the Alien Act had indeed been drafted at the North's insistence. As a matter of course, it also enumerated the extradition powers that Governor General Monck had earlier requested from London.⁵⁷ Although these powers came too late for Monck, they were part of Canada and Britain's efforts to maintain good relations with the United States no matter the outcome of the Civil War. Most pointedly, the act denied Confederates the ability to wage their guerilla war from across the Canadian border. Yet by the time it passed through Parliament, Sherman's March to the Sea had moved into the Carolinas and the Siege of Petersburg was well underway. The South had already lost.

Ottawa and Appomattox

Unfortunately for Canada, the Union was not as forgiving as it would have liked. Despite Parliament's appeals to the Northern government, the United States was unwilling to renew the Reciprocity Treaty. In a letter to British politician John Bright written less than a month before Lee's surrender, Senator Charles Sumner (R-MA) stated the following:

I came into the proposition to give the notice to terminate the Reciprocity Treaty, because I was satisfied that we could not negotiate for its modification, on a footing of equality unless our hands were untied... Congress has separated in good humor, without anxiety for the future, & indeed confident that we are on the verge of peace. My desire is that

⁵⁷ Winks, *Canada and the United States*, 292.

England should do something to take out the bitterness from the American heart—before the war closes.⁵⁸

Sumner was not opposed to continuing the Reciprocity Treaty, but the *Philo Parsons* incident, the attack on St. Albans, and the harbouring of Southern refugees did not endear the senator to Canada. While he lacked an appetite for armed confrontation after years of bloodshed, he wanted more than the steps already taken in the Alien Act.

Canada did attempt to “take out the bitterness from the American heart.” The Montreal Telegraph Company offered to work with the Union by diverting Confederate messages to Washington, but the State Department refused; according to Seward, the offer was “incompatible with the self respect of the U.S.”⁵⁹ The Canadian government also proposed financial restitution for the raid on St. Albans. This effort was more successful than initiatives from the private sector. In April 1865, the government paid a sum of \$60,000 to the three banks of St. Albans in compensation for the money stolen during the attack.⁶⁰ Thus the crisis in Canadian-American relations was brought to a close at the same time as the Civil War—even though the Confederacy bore most of the responsibility for the diplomatic nadir.

Canada had demonstrated its willingness to meet American demands in the form of neutrality legislation,

⁵⁸ Charles Sumner, “Charles Sumner to John Bright,” in *The Civil War*, 631.

⁵⁹ Winks, *Canada and the United States*, 326.

⁶⁰ Prince, *Burn the Town and Sack the Banks*, 230.

intelligence exchange, and cash. Yet the United States never reinstated the Reciprocity Treaty, which had done so much to grow Canada's economy during its short lifespan. Indeed, the Civil War would impact Anglo- and Canadian-American relations for decades to come. Canada's initial sympathies toward the South provided Confederates with a base for intelligence operations and guerilla warfare. Moreover, its willingness to accommodate other Southern sympathizers like Clement Vallandigham damaged Canada's relationship with the Union, and allowed Confederate agents to feel welcome enough to abuse British hospitality for their own benefit. The *Philo Parsons* affair and the St. Albans raid showed Canadians that many of their Southern guests were not mere refugees, but hostile actors conspiring against their closest neighbour. Canada's deficient neutrality laws pushed Great Britain and the Union closer to war, which would have been of significant benefit to the Confederacy. All of this led to a weakened Canadian economy and restrictions on the free movement of people and goods between Canada and the United States both during and after the Civil War. These conditions led in no small part to Canadian Confederation in 1867 and the foundation of the modern Canadian state.

Canadians were charmed by Confederates. Their charisma and aristocratic ways were similar to those of the English. Anti-Americanism further allowed Canadians to be fooled into a tacit support for Southern agents within their borders, hoping that a fractured Union would lead to a stronger British Empire. What resulted was a plate full of crow for Canada.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

“British Neutrality to be Maintained.” *The Globe* (Toronto), March 22, 1865.

Brown, George. “What Has Republicanism Done for Freedom?” *The Globe* (Toronto), December 6, 1849.

Chesnut, Mary Boykin. *A Diary from Dixie*. New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1905.

“Latest from Montreal: The St. Albans Raid Case. Mr. Devlin’s Argument.” *The Globe* (Toronto), March 22, 1865.

McGee, Thomas D’Arcy. “Letter From the Hon. Mr. McGee: A Fair Trial for the Monarchical Principle.” *The Globe* (Toronto), July 6, 1863.

“Our Relations with Canada: Interesting Debate in the Provincial Parliament. The Alien Bill upon its Second Reading.” *The New York Times*, February 3, 1865.

Sheehan-Dean, Aaron, ed. *The Civil War: The Final Year Told by Those Who Lived It*. New York: Library of America, 2014.

Connolly

“The St. Albans Raid.” *The Globe* (Toronto), October 22, 1865.

“The St. Albans Raiders: A Canadian Difficulty.” *The Albion: A Journal of News, Politics and Literature* (New York), December 17, 1864.

Secondary Sources

Bordewich, Fergus M. *Congress at War: How Republican Reformers Fought the Civil War, Defied Lincoln, Ended Slavery, and Remade America*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2020.

Callahan, James Morton. *The Diplomatic History of the Southern Confederacy*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1968.

Gwyn, Richard. *John A: The Man Who Made Us*. Toronto: Random House Canada, 2007.

Herring, George C. *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776*. Vol. 1, *Years of Power and Ambition: U.S. Foreign Relations, 1776-1921*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Mayers, Adam. *Dixie & the Dominion: Canada, the Confederacy, and the War for the Union*. Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2020.

“Good Neighbourhood”

Prince, Cathryn J. *Burn the Town and Sack the Banks: Confederates Attack Vermont!* New York: Carroll & Graf, 2006.

Winks, Robin W. *Canada and the United States: The Civil War Years.* Montreal: Harvest House, 1971.

Wise, Sydney F. *God's Peculiar Peoples: Essays on Political Culture in Nineteenth Century Canada.* Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1993.

**HEAVEN HUNG IN BLACK:
GRANT'S REPUTATION AND THE MISTAKES AT
COLD HARBOR**

Samantha Kramer | *Washington & Jefferson College*

When Ulysses S. Grant received his commission as Lieutenant-General on March 9, 1864, not only did he gain control over the entire Union Army, but was also subjected to mounting pressure from the White House to end the war as quickly as possible. It was an election year, and if Lincoln wanted any chance of winning re-nomination from his party, decisive victories on the battlefield were needed. With anti-war sentiment growing in the North, it was necessary to demonstrate that the war was at its end and that the Confederacy was on the brink of destruction. This would prove easier said than done; it took massive coordination to move the army in unison, the destruction of Georgia under Sherman, a long siege that left Richmond struggling to survive, and some of the bloodiest warfare yet to finally force Lee's surrender at Appomattox in April 1865.

It was the beginning of this grand offensive that caused contemporaries as well as historians to label Grant a butcher of his own men. Weeks of fighting during the Overland Campaign culminated in the disastrous assault on Cold Harbor, which left nearly five Union soldiers for every Confederate. Cold Harbor was undoubtedly Grant's worst defeat, but to pretend that the casualties were his intention or that he was indifferent to how many men he lost so long as he gained something in the end is unjust. To do so would

ignore the various factors leading to the battle, reducing a grand strategy to bloodlust over errors made by multiple parties. Grant did not set out to butcher his men, but in his desperation to end the war as soon as possible, his mistakes led to the deaths of the very men he was trying to save.

The Grand Offensive

When Grant stepped in as commander of the Union forces, he gained an army with a struggling chain of command, little coordination between the various divisions spread around the country, and an Eastern Theater with terrain that made any sort of troop movement a difficult and time-consuming affair. After his decisive victories in the Western Theater, Grant realized that if the army moved along three fronts at once, relentlessly pushing forward and keeping Lee's forces on the defensive, the Union could act as a noose locking the remaining Confederate Army in place and slowly strangling it into submission. By 1864, the goal was no longer to settle the war through large victories and force the Confederacy to surrender, but the complete destruction and capture of Lee's forces. Grant had seen too many battles in which commanders failed to give chase immediately after a victory, allowing Confederates to reorganize, lick their wounds, and settle into strong defensive positions that would push back the Union soldiers eventually sent after them. He was determined not to repeat these mistakes, preferring aggressive, continual assaults.

Equally central to Grant's strategy were flanking maneuvers designed to cut off communications and destroy supply lines. Virginia's food supplies were exhausted at this

point in the war, forcing it to rely on supplies from Alabama, Georgia, and the Carolinas.¹ As part of his offensive, Sherman and his men would advance from their position in Chattanooga and eliminate Albert Sidney Johnston's army near Dalton, Georgia before pressing forward to occupy Atlanta.² By capturing Atlanta and moving north through the Carolinas, Sherman would destroy the supplies necessary to sustain the Confederate war effort. He would also prevent Lee's army from fleeing further south to avoid the Army of the Potomac under Grant and George Meade, thus trapping them in place.

However, Grant was limited in how he could execute the northern prong of the Overland Campaign due to the proximity of Lee's army to Washington. The city had already come under attack twice in the previous years, and it would be disastrous for another attack to take place in an election year. The river systems of Virginia presented other obstacles, serving as defensive lines for Lee to hide behind as well as forcing the Union army to either work around them or find its way across them. The country was also heavily forested, and the roads narrow and poorly kept.³ The army itself had issues as well, especially in the chain of command. General Meade was unpopular with his officers, but was the hero of Gettysburg. Benjamin Butler lacked military ability, but wielded political influence. Ambrose Burnside also had political influence, but refused to serve under Meade and

¹ James Marshall-Cornwall, *Grant as Military Commander* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1970), 136.

² Marshall-Cornwall, *Grant as Military Commander*, 134.

³ Marshall-Cornwall, *Grant as Military Commander*, 136.

therefore acted as an independent entity rather than a reserve for Meade's army. Franz Sigel lacked military ability as well, but his appointment had helped ensure that German settlers in St. Louis would vote for Lincoln.⁴ Short of one of these men causing a serious mistake on the battlefield, Grant was virtually powerless to replace them with more competent commanders. So instead, he decided to rule his subordinates with an iron fist, instructing them to come straight to him during battle and to follow his instructions rather than their own whims.

Too many mistakes had been made in earlier battles on the part of flakey commanders, and Grant was keen that they not be repeated in the future. He told his officers the following:

I want you to discuss with me freely from time to time the details of the orders given for the conduct of a battle, and learn my views as fully as possible as to what course should be pursued in all the contingencies which may arise. I expect to send you to the critical points of the lines to keep me promptly advised of what is taking place, and in cases of great emergency, when new dispositions have to be made on the instant, or it becomes suddenly necessary to reinforce on command by sending to its aid troops from another, and there is not time to communicate with headquarters, I want you to explain my views to commanders, and urge immediate action, looking to

⁴ Marshall-Cornwall, *Grant as Military Commander*, 137.

cooperation, without waiting for specific orders from me.⁵

By early April 1864, each of Grant's commanders were given instructions for the imminent campaign. These instructions outlined separate directives and alternative plans that could be implemented based on further discussion with Grant or in case of emergency. Butler and Meade were ordered to move out against Lee's forces on May 4, while Sherman was to move his 100,000 men against Johnston the next day.⁶ There would be no slowing down or turning back for "Unconditional Surrender" Grant.

Critics of Grant's methods in the first month of the Overland Campaign often point out that other plans could have been implemented to prevent the bloodshed. But Grant was simply going off the information available at the time in order to make the most tactically sound decisions. In his biography of Grant, James Marshall-Cornwell argues that it might have been more effective to weaken the Confederate economy with a naval blockade and force a surrender through civilian pressure, reminiscent of Winfield Scott's famed Anaconda Plan. This position would have been strengthened with the Union's control of the Mississippi, which Grant had already one during his campaigns in the West.⁷ But such a blockade would have taken time that Grant did not have to bargain with. Moreover, a stronger blockade

⁵ Horace Porter, *Campaigning with Grant* (New York: Century, 1897), 38.

⁶ Marshall-Cornwall, *Grant as Military Commander*, 139.

⁷ Marshall-Cornwall, *Grant as Military Commander*, 137.

against Southern exports would have increased pressure on Great Britain and France, both of which relied on Southern cotton for their textile industries, to finally cave and support the Confederacy.

Marshall-Conway also argues that the casualties at the Battle of the Wilderness could have been avoided had Grant “handled [General Philip H.] Sheridan’s Cavalry Corps with more imagination,” and that, “had Grant pushed on rapidly to Spotsylvania through the Wilderness on the evening of 4 May... he would have beaten Lee in the race for Richmond, and would have been able to fight him with superior numbers in more open country.”⁸ Sheridan’s Cavalry Corps was a relatively recent invention; Grant had formed them earlier in March in response to the lack of coordination within Union cavalry units, who up to that point had primarily acted as independent side-line fighters. The Wilderness was the first test for the corps as a whole, so Grant’s choice to put these men straight into the thick of things can be construed as a suicidal waste of both men and horses. Yet of all that battles that Grant fought in the Overland Campaign, it is Cold Harbor that his critics point to as proof of his butcher-like brutality. Lieutenant-Colonel Martin Thomas McMahan, writing a few years later in a collection of first-hand war accounts, opens his criticism of the battle with the following:

In the opinion of a majority of its survivors, the battle of Cold Harbor should never have been fought. There

⁸ Marshall-Cornwall, *Grant as Military Commander*, 154.

was no military reason to justify it. It was the dreary, dismal, bloody, ineffective close of the Lieutenant-General's first campaign with the Army of the Potomac, and correspond in all its essential features with what had preceded it.⁹

It certainly does Grant no favors that this battle came at the end of nearly an entire month of bloody fighting, with heavy Union losses at both the Wilderness and Spotsylvania and the month's total casualties numbering over 60,000.¹⁰ By Cold Harbor, the army was exhausted from constant fighting and marching, and another battle did nothing to help the matter. Artillerist Charles Wainwright wrote in his journal, "I fear that the truth is that all the fight is gone out of our men. Grant has used the army up, and will now have to wait until its morale is restored before he can do anything."¹¹ This exhaustion caused delays in arrival for certain units, and forced Grant to repeatedly push back the assault, which historian Brooks Simpson has called "nothing short of stupid."¹² But if Grant had pushed forward and ignored his men, the soldiers would not have had time to rest after marching, and the commanders would have struggled to organize the assault.

⁹ *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, eds. Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel, vol. 4 (New York: Century, 1888), 231.

¹⁰ Johnson and Buel, *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, 4:171.

¹¹ *A Diary of Battle: The Personal Journals of Colonel Charles S. Wainwright, 1861-1865*, ed. Allan Nevins (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), 431.

¹² Brooks D. Simpson, *Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph Over Adversity, 1822-1865* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 325.

Once the assault was over, the controversy was not. The dead, trapped between the two lines, were left to rot among the wounded due to the fact that Grant and Lee could not agree to a ceasefire and were unable to be retrieved. Ernest Furgurson, who was not satisfied with other authors' criticisms of Grant, opened his book on Cold Harbor by referencing these abandoned men:

Never before and never again in the American Civil War were so many wounded soldiers left so long to suffer in plain sight of their comrades, their enemies, and the birds of carrion. Never did generals so blatantly place concern for their own reputations above mercy for their soldiers lying dying in the sun.¹³

Grant was not solely to blame in this instance, but it has still been used to bolster claims that he was a butcher. Grant may have worded his letters to Lee differently, and maybe that would have shortened the time he took to communicate. But perhaps Lee still would have still stuck to his militaristic formality and the discussions would have taken just as long. Certainly some of these criticisms are valid. Still, Cold Harbor was a perfect storm of mistakes on the part of both Grant and his commanders, pressure from higher up forcing Grant onward, horrible weather, and Lee taking advantage of every tactical opportunity presented him.

¹³ Ernest B. Furgurson, *Not War But Murder: Cold Harbor 1864* (New York: Random House, 2001), 3.

The Assault on Cold Harbor

While the fighting at Cold Harbor lasted from May 31 to June 12, it is the disastrous assault on June 3 that newspapers at the time and historians today point to for their charges of butchery. Yet the events of the days prior are what led to the bloody mess between the lines. Sheridan's Cavalry Corps first seized the crossroads at Cold Harbor on May 31, and were ordered to hold it at all costs despite counterattacks from Confederate forces under Robert Hoke. Union reinforcements were on their way from the 6th Corps under Horatio Wright, but in order to have them arrive on time, they were forced to march for fifteen miles through the night.¹⁴ As the fighting continued into the next morning on June 1, Sheridan's forces held out for four hours until Wright's men arrived at 9 a.m.¹⁵

Meanwhile, William Farrar Smith's 18th Corps, which has sat inactive since May 16, was ordered by Grant's chief of staff John Aaron Rawlins to move his men toward New Castle Ferry. But when they arrived, they discovered that Rawlins had made a fatal error: he sent them to the wrong location. They were eight miles away, and men dropped from heat exhaustion as the unit turned around to make it in time for battle. They had no ammunition, but still attacked when they arrived at 5 p.m. and even managed to carry the first line of Confederate rifle pits with the 6th Corps.¹⁶ Though this fighting on June 1 inflicted losses of

¹⁴ Marshall-Cornwall, *Grant as Military Commander*, 173.

¹⁵ Ron Chernow, *Grant* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), 402.

¹⁶ Marshall-Cornwall, *Grant as Military Commander*, 174.

more than two thousand men between the two units, Union forces managed to gain control of the roads to the James River as well as key tactical ground, which the rebels failed to take back in subsequent skirmishes.¹⁷

As Grant and his staff set up their headquarters at Bethesda church, the plan for the following days started to take form. One of the primary concerns at this point was encountering the rebels after they had already entrenched themselves, which had been a continual problem during the campaign. Accordingly, Grant wanted to move forward as early as possible on June 2 to reach Confederate forces before they had time to settle in. The subsequent battle was intended to roll up the Confederate right flank and drive a wedge between Lee and the Chickahominy River, with a main thrust by the 18th, 6th, and 2nd Corps while the 9th and 5th would wheel up, flank the rebels, and destroy their formations.

All five corps were on the line on June 2, but not on time or in shape for the planned assault at five p.m. Winfield Scott Hancock, with farther to march than other units, was late to take his position on the left. Smith had struggled mightily to arrive, and lacked the ammunition to be effective in an assault. Perhaps remembering earlier battles such as the Wilderness, where simply allowing units to fight when they arrived led to confusion and destruction, Grant decided on the fatal delay to allow his units time to prepare themselves before the assault. He also made an uncharacteristic judgment of Meade's military ability, entrusting him with

¹⁷ Chernow, *Grant*, 402.

the next day's assault. He also moved Wright's corps to the left, hoping to take advantage of what he saw as a weak spot in the Confederate line.¹⁸ As Grant later wrote in his memoirs,

Before the removal of Wright's corps from our right, after dark on the 31st, the two lines, Federal and Confederate, were so close together at that point that either side could detect directly any movement made by the other. Finding at daylight that Wright had left his front, Lee evidently divined that he had gone to our left.¹⁹

Not only had Lee taken advantage of the evident delay in hostilities and entrenched his men on their side of the battlefield; he was also quick to adjust his forces and follow the movements that Grant had failed to disguise.

Veteran soldiers had witnessed enough bloodshed to recognize the chaos about to unfold. Horace Porter, one of Grant's staff officers, was delivering orders when he noticed a rather peculiar sight:

As I came near one of the regiments which was making preparations for the next morning's assault, I noticed that many of the soldiers had taken off their coats... it was found that the men were calmly

¹⁸ Jean Edward Smith, *Grant* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 361.

¹⁹ Ulysses S. Grant, *The Complete Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant* (Lexington, KY: ReadaClassic, 2010), 348.

writing their names and home addresses on slips of paper, and pinning them on the backs of their coats, so that their dead bodies might be recognized upon the field, and their fate made known to their families at home.²⁰

At 4:30 on the morning on June 3, the units under Hancock, Wright, and Smith dashed forward to strike at the center and right-center of the Confederate defenses. This was the battle's largest body of troops exposed to heavy firepower, as Confederate artillery and infantry fired round after round into the approaching Union soldiers. One survivor referred to it as having "the fury of the Wilderness musketry with the thunder of the Gettysburg artillery superadded."²¹ Many soldiers were forced to use the corpses of their comrades in defense against the storm of bullets.²²

As Grant responded to dispatches at headquarters, Meade continued to give shaky and contradictory orders to his subordinates, unsure of whether to continue the assault. At 11 a.m., Grant arrived on the front to witness the disaster before him. Furious, and realizing that Meade had lost control, he managed to call an end to the battle at 12:30 p.m., but both sides continued shelling out relentless artillery fire for the next several days.²³ The assault on Cold Harbor was over, at the cost of 1,500 Confederate lives and nearly five

²⁰ Porter, *Campaigning with Grant*, 171.

²¹ Smith, *Grant*, 362.

²² Chernow, *Grant*, 404.

²³ Simpson, *Ulysses S. Grant*, 368.

times as many Union.²⁴ Yet according to official War Department figures, Cold Harbor was not even the deadliest battle in the Overland Campaign, with a loss of 10,058 killed, wounded, or missing compared with the Wilderness' 13,948 and Spotsylvania's 13,601. In total, from the first day of the Wilderness on May 5 to the end of negotiations at Cold Harbor on June 12, Union losses numbered 39,259.²⁵ But unlike these other battles, both of which forced the rebel army to retreat and the Union to gain critical tactical ground, nothing was gained to make up for the losses sustained.

Causes of Disaster

While at a surface glance Cold Harbor seems like nothing but an utter strategic failure on Grant's part, the causes of the disaster were not so simple. The Overland Campaign, which had started four weeks earlier, was unprecedented in American military history. At no point up to that time had there ever been two armies on US soil continuously fighting once another for such a length of time. Grant was worried that this battle could be the last time he had Lee out in the open and away from Richmond's defenses, and was determined to inflict a significant blow on rebel forces. Grant, like those in Washington, did not want a prolonged siege of the Confederate capital. The political pressure he faced certainly did not help the matter. While Union forces had been gaining ground, many on Lincoln's staff wanted Grant to take Richmond as soon as possible, even as the

²⁴ Chernow, *Grant*, 405.

²⁵ Smith, *Grant*, 365.

bloody fighting showed that this would take longer than expected. According to some figures, the war was costing the Union \$4 million per day.²⁶ So Grant felt forced to continue fighting, to continue moving, to continue taking ground in order to keep Lincoln from losing the election.

However, by the time of Cold Harbor, soldiers as well as commanders were completely exhausted. The weather compounded their fatigue, as Union soldiers in their wool uniforms were unaccustomed to the sheer heat and dustiness of Virginia summers. Lee's men also had the benefit of familiar terrain where they lived, traveled, and fought, while Grant was looking at terra incognita. The Confederate position enjoyed some natural strengths as well: the right flank was covered by the valley of the Chickahominy and the left flank rested on Totopotomoy Creek. The ground, although level, was covered in swamps, gullies, and thickets that limited the movement of approaching soldiers.²⁷ Lee took advantage of the delay that Grant took to entrench his forces, creating a seven-mile front of interlocking trenches supported by artillery. Horace Porter later recalled:

I have never before seen such extensive works constructed with such magical rapidity... They are intricate, zig-zagged lined within lines, lines protecting flank of lines, lines built to enfilade an opposing line, lines within which lies a battery which

²⁶ Marshall-Cornwall, *Grant as Military Commander*, 171.

²⁷ Marshall-Cornwall, *Grant as Military Commander*, 172.

must keep silent... a maze and labyrinth of works within works, and works without works, each laid out with some definite design either of defense or offense.²⁸

Confederate defenses were impregnable, and allowed rebel forces to use their infantry and artillery in conjunction to form the deadly volley of fire that some compared to the sound of an erupting volcano.

The failures of Grant's subordinates to cooperate or give effective orders had just as strong an effect as his own decisions or Lee's position. By June 2, the Union command structure was collapsing. Gouverneur K. Warren was fighting with those below him, Meade and Burnside had ceased communicating with one another like schoolchildren (which led to Burnside refusing to send Meade reinforcements), and Smith was still angry that Meade refused to help him with ammunition. Meade also left his corps commanders to plan their own advances, resulting in a lack of coordination within the columns and failure to undertake crucial reconnaissance.²⁹ When he did bother to give orders, they did not list the time they were intended to be carried out and lacked clear objectives or battlefield boundaries. One of his orders to Smith, which was received not long after midnight on June 2, vaguely read, "You will make your dispositions to attack tomorrow morning on General Wright's right, and in conjunction with that officer's

²⁸ Porter, *Campaigning with Grant*, 159.

²⁹ Simpson, *Ulysses S. Grant*, 324.

attack. This attack should be made with your whole force and as vigorously as possible.”³⁰ And in the heat of battle on June 3, Meade failed again to issue effective orders, ignoring logistics in favor of throwing men into the assault—the exact charge that critics blame Grant for. In his account of the battle a few years later, Smith recalled that

Later in the day I received a verbal order from General Meade to make another assault, and that order I refused to obey. I had carefully examined the entire front of my line, and was convinced that no assault could succeed that did not embrace a portion of the works in ‘front of my right,’ where I was powerless to make an attack. An assault under such conditions I looked on as involving a wanton waste of life.³¹

Even after it was clear that his attack was a failure, Meade considered renewing the assault. But rather than making the decision for himself and asking Grant for his opinion, Meade left it up to his subordinates to decide whether to continue. Wright and Smith both told Meade that their decision relied on that of others, and when Meade gave orders for them to attack independently of one another, both units remained in place rather than advancing. Grant made a mistake in trusting Meade, but he should not be blamed for Meade’s incompetence. Meade has been placed in charge of

³⁰ Marshall-Cornwall, *Grant as Military Commander*, 174.

³¹ Johnson and Buel, *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, 4:227.

the Army of the Potomac, and should have known his own limitations as a commander.

Grant's reputation was not helped by the fact that the dead and wounded lay trapped between the lines, but this was due to Lee's strict adherence to military protocol rather than any butcher-like mentality on Grant's part. Most of the dead, as the numbers clearly demonstrate, were Union men. But the firing did not calm down enough for a ceasefire to even be considered until June 5. Grant, recognizing an opportunity to help his dead and wounded men, immediately wrote to Lee to request permission for unarmed men to gather them during a ceasefire:

It is reported to me that there are wounded men, probably of both armies, now lying exposed and suffering between the lines occupied respectively by the two armies. Humanity would dictate that some provision should be made to provide against such hardships. I would propose, therefore, that hereafter, when no battle is raging, either party be authorized to send to any point between the pickets or skirmish lines, unarmed men bearing litters to pick up their dead or wounded, without being fired upon by the other party. Any other method, equally fair to both parties, you may propose for meeting the end desired will be accepted by me.³²

³² Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 351.

Yet when Lee's reply came the next day, it seemed that militaristic formality would be prioritized over humanity. He shot down Grant's request, saying that casualties should only be moved under a flag of truce. When Grant promised that stretcher-bearers would be waving white flags, this was not enough for the Confederate commander: he wanted Grant to send a flag of truce in order to request permission for a flag of truce.³³ It took until the evening of June 6 for Lee to accept Grant's plan. He allowed orderlies to be sent out from 8 p.m. to 10 p.m., in a manner nearly identical to the method that Grant had initially proposed, but the time had already passed when Union headquarters received Lee's letter near midnight. By the time Grant was finally able to get the bodies off the battlefield on June 7, all but two of the wounded had perished.³⁴

If Grant had been a senseless butcher, as those who point to Cold Harbor would have it, he would not have cared for the suffering of his men who laid dying, or showed regret for his actions. But he did. Captain Samuel H. Beckwith recalled Grant's depression following the battle, telling him that "the hardest part of this General business is the responsibility for the loss of one's men. I can see no other way out of it, however; we've got to keep at them. But it is hard, very hard, to see all those brave fellows killed and wounded. It means aching hearts back home."³⁵

³³ Simpson, *Ulysses S. Grant*, 328.

³⁴ Chernow, *Grant*, 407.

³⁵ Samuel H. Beckwith, "With Grant in the Wilderness, By His 'Shadow'; Chief Cipher Operator Samuel H. Beckwith, Who Was So Constantly in Attendance Upon the Union General as to Earn That

Other commanders and members of Grant's staff report similar encounters in the days after the battle. In his own memoirs, where it must have taken great courage to admit his feelings and failures to the public in such a candid manner, he wrote,

I have always regretted that the last assault at Cold Harbor was ever made. I might say the same thing of the assault of the 22d of May, 1863, at Vicksburg. At Cold Harbor no advantage whatever was gained to compensate for the heavy loss we sustained. Indeed, the advantages other than those of relative losses, were on the Confederate side.³⁶

Grant accepted the blame put upon him for the casualties at Cold Harbor, even if he was not entirely to blame. And if he were such a barbaric commander, he would have paid no heed to the exhaustion and poor conditions of his men. He recognized how his men were suffering when they arrived, and in order to help them, ironically ordered the delay that would kill so many of them.

Likewise, if Grant were a senseless murderer, he likely would have pressed forward with the attack without delay. While this would have prevented Lee from strengthening his left or building his maze of trenches, Smith's men would have had no ammunition, and the soldiers would have

Nickname, Reminisces of That Historic Battle," *The New York Times*, May 31, 1914.

³⁶ Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 353.

had been in no condition to fight. Moreover, Cold Harbor was not even as great a defeat as critics try to suggest. Historians such as J. F. C. Fuller and Bruce Catton point out that Grant's armies actually lost smaller percentages of their men in battle when compared with other Civil War generals, and the losses at Cold Harbor were similar in number to other battles such as Gettysburg.³⁷ While these losses appear larger because the Confederates lost so little and held their ground, the battle was still in keeping with the objectives of the Overland Campaign. Lee's forces were unable to go on the offensive at Cold Harbor, and the continual fighting that followed forced their retreat to Richmond, allowing them to be sieged and eventually to surrender at Appomattox.

³⁷ Chernow, *Grant*, 407.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Beckwith, Samuel H. "With Grant in the Wilderness, By His 'Shadow'; Chief Cipher Operator Samuel H. Beckwith, Who Was So Constantly in Attendance Upon the Union General as to Earn That Nickname, Reminisces of That Historic Battle." *The New York Times*, May 31, 1914.

Grant, Ulysses S. *The Complete Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*. Lexington, KY: ReadaClassic, 2010.

Nevins, Allan, ed. *A Diary of Battle: The Personal Journals of Colonel Charles S. Wainwright, 1861-1865*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962.

Page, Charles A. *Letters of a War Correspondent*. Edited by James R. Gilmore. Boston: L. C. Page & Company, 1899.

Porter, Horace. *Campaigning with Grant*. New York: Century, 1897.

Secondary Sources

Chernow, Ron. *Grant*. New York: Penguin Press, 2017.

Kramer

Furgurson, Ernest. *Not War But Murder: Cold Harbor 1864*.
New York: Random House, 2001.

Johnson, Robert Underwood, and Clarence Clough Buel,
eds. *Battled and Leaders of the Civil War*. 4 vols.
New York: Century, 1888.

Marshall-Cornwall, James. *Grant as Military Commander*.
New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1970.

Simpson, Brooks D. *Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph Over
Adversity, 1822-1865*. New York: Houghton Mifflin,
2001.

Smith, Jean Edward. *Grant*. New York: Simon & Schuster,
2001.

PITTSBURGH’S EXPLOSIVE MYSTERY: A NEW HOLISTIC STUDY OF THE ALLEGHENY ARSENAL TRAGEDY

Ethan J. Wagner | *Mercyhurst University*

On September 18, 1862, the Pittsburgh *Daily Post* reported on what it dubbed “the most terrible calamity which has ever befallen our city” just one day prior.¹ Yet the denizens of Pittsburgh’s Lawrenceville neighborhood were not the only ones faced with tragedy. For most of the country, what transpired on the banks of the Allegheny River paled in comparison with what was taking place to the south. On the deadliest single day in American history, the Battle of Antietam became a crucial juncture in the Civil War—it was the Union victory that prompted Abraham Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation—and was bound to capture most headlines. As the nation was bombarded with stories from the battlefield, other occurrences on that day have either lacked sufficient coverage or remained neglected in mainstream Civil War discourse.

In her recent book *Gunpowder Girls: The True Stories of Three Civil War Tragedies*, Tanya Anderson has

The author would like to thank Dr. Benjamin Scharff for his guidance in bringing this project to life, as well as Dr. John Olszowka for his assistance during the editing process. Additionally, special thanks go out to Mr. James Wudarczyk and Mr. Tom Powers of the Lawrenceville Historical Society for their hospitality and willingness to provide resources during the early stages of this research.

¹ “A Direful Calamity,” *Daily Post* (Pittsburgh), September 18, 1862.

lamented that September 17, 1862 was the deadliest day of the Civil War on two fronts. The first, Antietam, has been widely documented. But the little-known explosions at Lawrenceville's Allegheny Arsenal, which resulted in the tragic death of seventy-eight young workers, deserves a more proper study. As the worst civilian disaster of the war, its neglect in the national memory proves both surprising and regretful.² The scenes of horror outlined in local newspapers the next day described three consecutive explosions around 2 p.m., ripping apart the federal munitions laboratories and killing dozens of female laborers. Onlookers were only left with the sight of charred building remains and burning corpses, understandably suggesting "an appalling sight."³

The sparse literature that does exist on the Allegheny Arsenal has only considered the historical record from the day of the explosions onward. As a matter of course, it has neglected to examine how prior events leading up to the blasts might have shaped the day's events, which historian Arthur B. Fox has described as among "the most renowned in Pittsburgh history."⁴ Thus, the present study aims at a more holistic examination of the circumstances leading up to the explosions and how they might explain why this tragedy occurred—as well as who should be held responsible.

² Tanya Anderson, *Gunpowder Girls: The True Stories of Three Civil War Tragedies* (Kansas City, MO: Quindara Press, 2016), 44.

³ "Appalling Disaster," *Daily Pittsburgh Gazette and Commercial Journal*, September 18, 1862.

⁴ Arthur B. Fox, *Pittsburgh During the American Civil War, 1860-1865* (Chicora, PA: Mechling Bookbindery, 2002), 118.

Contemporary scholarship suggests that the arsenal disaster can most likely be attributed to a combination of negligence and misfortune, although the precise nature of its causation remains controversial. Narratives have also tended to dismiss the possibility of intentional wrongdoing. A broad approach to the story must consider historical realities that others have failed to properly examine, such as the established record of Confederate sabotage throughout the Civil War, local political tensions and Copperhead activity, and Pittsburgh's strategic significance. Ultimately, these considerations reveal that, while intentional wrongdoing was at least possible, the evidence suggests that the Allegheny Arsenal disaster can chiefly be attributed to the negligence of the DuPont Company, rather than that of arsenal commander John Symington and his associates.

Background on Allegheny Arsenal

Existing research on the explosions has centered around the two major investigations undertaken in their aftermath. Two days after the disaster, the city coroner gathered a panel of locals to collect eyewitness testimony.⁵ All agreed that the blasts likely originated from the roadway outside the laboratories, as barrels of gunpowder were constantly being delivered into the buildings for use in munitions production. Most of those interviewed stated that rules were clearly

⁵ Tom Powers and James Wudarczyk, interview by the author, Lawrenceville, PA, June 5, 2020. Ironically, the original transcripts of this investigation were destroyed in a fire at the county courthouse in 1882, leaving the reports from the *Daily Post* as the only surviving accounts of the proceedings.

posted, including directives that spilled gunpowder was always to be collected and disposed of. Witness Joseph Frick, who was delivering these barrels at the time, testified that it was customary to unload and distribute powder on the porch, allowing piles of excess to accumulate on the roadways outside in the days prior to the explosions. In addition, the compelling story of worker Rachel Dunlap, who reported seeing a blaze appear underneath Frick's delivery wagon just prior to the initial blast, corroborated the likely epicenter of the incident.⁶

Consensus began to fragment when others refuted these claims, arguing that they never saw powder spilled outside. Meanwhile, civilian arsenal superintendent Alexander McBride assured the jury that he swiftly reprimanded those who did not comply with the directive to not sweep loose powder onto the roadway, as he even hired workers whose sole job was to ensure that this did not happen. Rather, McBride stressed that he reported to his superiors on numerous occasions his concern regarding the DuPont Company supplying gunpowder in defective leaking barrels with routinely ill-fitting lids.⁷

The coroner's investigation settled on the theory that the blasts began on the roadway, as loose powder somehow accumulated and sparked fire. However, questions remained concerning the nature of the road itself. Frick further testified that he remarked to himself on several occasions how

⁶ "The Arsenal Catastrophe — Coroner's Investigation," *Daily Post* (Pittsburgh), September 20, 1862.

⁷ "The Arsenal Catastrophe."

uneven the road was and how one day an accident would surely result from shaken gunpowder. A Mr. K. Bracken substantiated this testimony, as he swore to have laid the stone for the road, which contained a mixture of freestone and was therefore highly susceptible to sparking if struck correctly by the iron of a wheel or horse's shoe.⁸ This seemed to carry great validity, as stone quarry expert William Baxter related how "the stone on the roadway at the arsenal grounds was as dangerous for striking fire as any I know."⁹

The jury panel concluded twelve days after the tragedy, where the majority opinion ruled that the explosion was caused by arsenal commander Col. John Symington, superintendent Alexander McBride, and other top associates, whose neglect resulted in unsafe conditions. Of arguably greater significance was the fact that this decision was not unanimous, as two jurors dissented, preferring to clear Symington and instead blame the incident solely on the negligence of McBride and other arsenal higher-ups. Both verdicts failed to officially implicate the DuPont Company for any direct, punishable involvement.¹⁰

Dissatisfied with the findings that blamed him, Col. Symington called for his own military investigation to be conducted by the Ordinance Department. He played a critical role in this inquiry, correcting the missteps

⁸ "The Arsenal Disaster — Continuation of the Coroner's Investigation," *Daily Post* (Pittsburgh), September 23, 1862.

⁹ "The Arsenal Disaster."

¹⁰ "The Coroner's Jury on the Arsenal Catastrophe: The Verdict — Two Jurors Dissent," *Daily Post* (Pittsburgh), September 29, 1862.

committed in the coroner's investigation where cross-examination was inexplicably neglected in favor of witness depositions.¹¹ However, determining a definitive answer proved difficult, as key eyewitnesses changed their stories or were not invited to attend. For instance, Frick complained of having been asked so many questions that he could no longer think straight, and Rachel Dunlap's story went unheard, as women were precluded from participating in military affairs at that time.¹² Furthermore, Symington only summoned witnesses who he could either discredit or were favorable to his cause.¹³

Ultimately, the military tribunal looked more favorably on Symington. Those assembled made several commendatory statements concerning his conduct, relaying how he "took every care and precaution... to guard against accidents of every kind."¹⁴ As a result, he was surely pleased with the ruling that he had no reasonable basis on which to be blamed. That said, he also had reason for dissatisfaction with the caveat to that same opinion, as the tribunal concluded by suggesting that "the cause of the explosion

¹¹ Tod Abele, "Allegheny Arsenal Explosion," *Battlefield Pennsylvania*, DVD, hosted by Brady Crytzer (Camp Hill, PA: Pennsylvania Cable Network, 2017).

¹² *Transcript of the Proceedings of a Court of Inquiry to Investigate an Explosion at the Allegheny Arsenal Lab on September 17, 1862, Convened on October 15, 1862 under Order 288 of the Adjutants General Office*, Record Group 153, Court Martial Records, National Archives, Mid-Atlantic Region, Philadelphia, 50.

¹³ James Wudarczyk, *Until the Morning Cometh: Civil War Era Pittsburgh* (Apollo, PA: Closson Press, 3012), 130.

¹⁴ *Transcript*, 101-02.

could not be satisfactorily ascertained.”¹⁵ While the need to get Allegheny Arsenal back up and running surely played into why the case was closed so quickly, Symington likely remained bitter.

Primarily referencing these two investigations, the present debate has leaned toward the idea that the military inquiry's findings appear valid. The most readily accepted theory remains that some source of iron sparked the road, igniting accumulated piles of gunpowder and causing a series of explosions. The resultant belief has maintained that negligence on the parts of Symington, McBride, other officials, and the DuPont Company all played a relatively equal role in an accidental tragedy.¹⁶ Yet this consensus has largely looked past significant components of the story, which challenge the idea that sabotage could not possibly be in play or that DuPont should not be more aggressively examined.

Confederates and Copperheads

An established record of Confederate sabotage throughout the war places it within reason to consider that something more sinister might have been to blame at Allegheny Arsenal. The South's agrarian society and paucity of manufacturing centers forced the Confederacy to resort to more unorthodox methods to gain some leverage against its industrial disadvantage. This came in the form of

¹⁵ *Transcript*, 101-02.

¹⁶ Tom Powers and James Wudarczyk, "Behind the Scenes of the Allegheny Arsenal Explosion," *Pennsylvania Legacies* 13, no. 1/2 (2013): 45.

government-financed subversion.¹⁷ The Confederacy was so committed to this strategy that President Jefferson Davis approved the establishment of an official “Band of Deconstructionists” by 1863, solely dedicated to undermining the Union war effort.¹⁸ If sabotage was undertaken prior to the Confederate president himself signing off a new force to carry out attacks, such an outcome at Allegheny Arsenal would have been ideal.

The Central Intelligence Agency’s 2017 report on intelligence during the Civil War documents a secret session of the Confederate Congress held in February 1864. At this meeting, a bill was passed to finance and reward acts of sabotage against the Union carried out by Southern sympathizers who had gained asylum in Canada. Moreover, these agents’ activities stretched as far south as New York, Ohio, and various cities in proximity to Pittsburgh, suggesting that more local sabotage could have occurred.¹⁹ Evidence suggests that sabotage efforts were not merely carried out by rogue radicals. Rather, there was a systemic, premeditated plan at the highest levels of the Confederate government, making it reasonable to question whether the only saboteurs in the North were those unlucky enough to be caught.

¹⁷ Mark K. Ragan, *Confederate Saboteurs: Building the Hunley and Other Secret Weapons of the Civil War* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2015), 1.

¹⁸ Ragan, *Confederate Saboteurs*, 134.

¹⁹ Central Intelligence Agency, *Intelligence in the Civil War*, drafted and prepared by Thomas Allen (Washington, D.C.: Office of Public Affairs, 2017), 43.

Other well-known incidents of Confederate subversion included those in Missouri, as the prevalence of the so-called “boat-burners” made St. Louis a hotbed of activity. By 1864, the Union had commissioned personnel to combat subversion and track down suspected spies.²⁰ Federal discoveries of such acts eventually became more routine with Provost Marshal James H. Baker’s sleuthing in St. Louis. He reported in multiple letters to Assistant Secretary of War Charles Anderson Dana how an extensive list had been compiled of men known to be employed by the Confederacy to “destroy government property and steamboats” on the Mississippi, leading Dana to promise “immediate attention to the matter.”²¹ Similarly, concern of widespread sabotage was recognized elsewhere, as several other Union officials, such as Major and acting Judge Advocate General A. A. Hosmer, reviewed the list of names and further added how “the subject is regarded as one of great importance.”²²

From the nineteen known saboteurs detained in St. Louis alone, it was determined that over seventy steamboats had been destroyed by Confederate-allied or sympathetic agents, many of whom were sent at the behest of Jefferson Davis. Edward Frazor’s confession to having met with Davis and Confederate Secretary of War James Seddon in Richmond demonstrates the length to which such acts would receive government support. According to Frazor, Davis

²⁰ CIA, *Intelligence in the Civil War*, 17-18.

²¹ “Sabotage of the Sultana: Provost Marshal J. H. Baker’s Report on the Boat-Burners,” *The Boat-Burners*, Civil War St. Louis, 2001.

²² “Sabotage of the Sultana.”

personally offered him a sum of \$400,000 to oversee sabotage efforts throughout the North.²³ The prospect of government-backed financial incentive had already been established, but the fact that Davis further urged saboteurs to cause as much damage as possible makes it likely that pockets of activity could spring up anywhere, at any time.

Eventually, rebels such as Joseph W. Tucker began receiving money from the Confederate government based on the price of the damages inflicted. A confidential letter between Tucker and Davis outlined the state's desire for more direct attacks on Union infrastructure, specifically armies, arsenals, and depots of stores as a means of "paralyzing the military strength of the federal government."²⁴ While this letter was not written until March 1864, Pittsburgh contained every type of Union infrastructure that Davis outlined as preferred targets.

In addition to examining Confederate sabotage with respect to intentional wrongdoing at Allegheny Arsenal, there also existed rampant political discord and violence in the Pittsburgh area. Allegheny County and neighboring Washington County were teeming with tensions prior to and throughout the war. Political polarization was especially visible in downtown Pittsburgh, beginning with Abraham Lincoln's initial bid for the presidency in 1860. Lincoln's campaign was a harbinger of war and greatly divided people in their opinions on the Union more broadly. Local

²³ "Sabotage of the Sultana."

²⁴ "Joseph W. Tucker and the Boat-Burners," *The Boat-Burners*, Civil War St. Louis, 2001.

Presbyterian minister Richard Lea said as much in a sermon following the arsenal explosions, recalling his conversation with congregant Agnes Davidson, who made a political pledge to “no longer be a secessionist from the government of God.”²⁵ The creation of an “us versus them” mentality suggests that the demonization of the Confederacy, at least among some Pittsburghers, was powerful.

City newspapers further catered to a split political base. While Allegheny County generally leaned Republican, citizens could expect to read entirely different accounts of presidential politics depending on their chosen source. The *Daily Gazette* strongly backed Lincoln, while the *Pittsburgh Post* advocated for Democrats and states' rights.²⁶ Best evidenced in the coverage of Lincoln's stop through the city en route to his inauguration in 1861, both the *Gazette* and the *Post* agreeably reported on how the Federal Street train station was crowded in anticipation of the president-elect's arrival. However, the *Post* relayed that the onset of rain had left the platform deserted, while the *Gazette* apparently saw thousands who eagerly remained. Allegheny County, which Lincoln proclaimed the “banner county of the state, if not of the whole Union” in his attempt to win over Southern sympathizers, clearly was not marked by partisan unity.²⁷

²⁵ Richard Lea, *Sermon Commemorative of the Great Explosion at the Allegheny Arsenal: At Lawrenceville, Pennsylvania on September 17, 1862* (Pittsburgh: W. S. Haven, 1862), 6.

²⁶ Len Barcoucky, *Civil War Pittsburgh: Forge of the Union* (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2013), 11.

²⁷ Barcoucky, *Civil War Pittsburgh*, 15-17.

Copperheads, or Northern Democrats who opposed the Civil War, later arose in and around Pittsburgh stemming from Lincoln's stance on slavery, conscription, and states' rights policies. Local Republicans accused Democrats of disloyalty and treason; as a result, violence spread into neighboring Washington County.²⁸ Pittsburgh journalist Len Barcousky explains that the borough of Burgettstown in Washington County was a "nest" of such activity by 1863. While the region became a hotbed of Southern-sympathizing Copperheads, the true nature of that sympathy was often less "secessionist" and more in favor of a negotiated end to the war and the preservation of slavery.²⁹ Though Barcousky only describes what was occurring in 1863, the presence of similar beliefs can be presumed just one year earlier, especially given the public anti-Lincoln sentiment among many in Allegheny County.

Washington County Copperheads were not all motivated by the singular desire for treason and bloodshed. Rather, many were simply resolute in their perceived need to defend traditional republican values, social order, the Constitution, and the Union.³⁰ These people of the rural North were so used to having agency over their daily lives that they could not fathom the idea of being told by the government to take up arms and fight alongside Black men

²⁸ Fox, *Pittsburgh During the American Civil War*, 201.

²⁹ Barcousky, "Eyewitness 1863: Civil War draft debate heats up Washington Co.," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (September 15, 2013).

³⁰ Eric D. Duchess, "Between Frontier and Factory: Growth and Development in Washington, Pennsylvania, 1810-1870" (Ph.D. diss., West Virginia University, 2012), 315.

for a cause which had little effect on them, if at all. The thought of giving in to such requests from the federal government presented the equally appalling prospects of a more structured system of authority which would surely attempt to ruin their lives.³¹ For the citizens of Washington County and in other areas throughout the North, conscription violated what they believed to be a cornerstone of the American republic: volunteerism over coercion.³²

Copperhead ideological motivation aside, there also appeared legitimate reason to believe that significant violence might erupt. As the *Daily Pittsburgh Gazette and Commercial Journal* reported, such “excitement” did occur in Washington County on at least one known occasion. In an article from August 1863, witnesses recounted a “war like demonstration” in Burgettstown. Copperhead demonstrators lashed out at Union cavalry units passing through, to the point that some sort of “difficulty” occurred, as pistol shots rang out and peace had to be restored. The article also cited the demonstrators’ disdain for all things Union, relaying how “it was evident that the presence of the United States uniform and flag was distasteful to them,” and how protestors were seen adorned in Copperhead and Butternut breast pins.³³

³¹ Robert M. Sandow, *Deserter Country: Civil War Opposition in the Pennsylvania Appalachian* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 59.

³² Sandow, *Deserter Country*, 75; Jennifer L. Weber, *Copperheads: The Rise and Fall of Lincoln's Opponents in the North* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 101.

³³ “Excitement in Washington County: Skirmish with Copperheads — Hot at Burgettstown — Arrests, etc.,” *Daily Pittsburgh Gazette and Commercial Journal*, August 10, 1863.

Motive for the attack surely had to extend beyond the cursory concept of wanting to derail the Union war effort. There were numerous cities of great strategic and symbolic importance to the North during the war, such as New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. Yet Pittsburgh was also critical. From the start, the rapid secession of states just south of Pennsylvania took Northerners by surprise, and they were quickly overtaken by paranoia. This appeared particularly true in Pittsburgh, as city officials recognized the potential for outside threat, and the local Committee of Public Safety issued a rallying cry in 1861 to “keep a sharp lookout for traitors.”³⁴ Considering that Pittsburgh was not much farther from the border than Sharpsburg, Maryland, locals had to wonder if their city was next to witness a major battle, especially with a federal arsenal in operation nearby.³⁵

This concern was heightened by the perception that government officials shared equal concern over the city’s importance and vulnerability. The War Department went on to record that its intelligence suggested Pittsburgh might be a logical target, calling it a “vital Union point.”³⁶ Meanwhile, reporters fueled the hysteria by construing a story of how the city was “in imminent danger of rebel

³⁴ Robert C. Plumb and George Pressly McClelland, *Your Brother in Arms: A Union Soldier’s Odyssey* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2011), 2.

³⁵ “Allegheny Arsenal Explosion and the Creation of Public Memory,” National Archives at Philadelphia, National Archives, August 15, 2016.

³⁶ George Swetnam, “Thirty Days of Panic,” *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 51, no. 4 (1968): 334.

attack.”³⁷ In fact, the city remained in a constant state of vulnerability, as the War Department found itself preoccupied trying to calm the fears of attack in Washington while simultaneously trying to supply the front lines with sufficient forces to sustain the fight. In consequence, Pittsburgh had only a thin staff of professional soldiers. Considering Pittsburghers had been so instrumental in creating the munitions at Allegheny Arsenal used to kill those supposedly coming for revenge, many believed that their involvement made them more pronounced targets.³⁸

Such paranoia and defensive actions were justified, as Pittsburgh's manufacturing proved instrumental in sustaining the Union war effort. None of its industries were more critical than Allegheny Arsenal, which singlehandedly produced or contributed around ten percent of all cartridges used by Union forces in the Western Theater.³⁹ However, the most important statistic in considering Pittsburgh as a possible Confederate target was the Fort Pitt Foundry's production, in coordination with Allegheny Arsenal, of sixty percent of the heavily artillery used by Union forces.⁴⁰ It stands to reason that a good site for any Confederate advance into the Union should be in the place where such a high volume of material was being furnished and a strong Copperhead base already resided.

³⁷ Swetnam, “Thirty Days of Panic,” 334.

³⁸ Judith Giesberg, “Explosion at the Allegheny Arsenal,” HistoryNet, March 31, 2016.

³⁹ Fox, *Pittsburgh During the American Civil War*, 109.

⁴⁰ Fox, *Pittsburgh During the American Civil War*, 135; 211.

Pittsburgh would have also been an attractive target for Southern attack because of its strategically significant physical geography. The city's proximity to the pivotal border states made it an easy target to conceivably access. Not far from the Mason-Dixon line, this region had its share of both pro- and anti-Lincoln sentiment. With the South in ruins and well-stocked Pennsylvania farms and factories nearby, it seemed only logical that Pittsburgh might be targeted.⁴¹ Since the Confederacy would have been eager to entertain the prospect of pillaging these Northern resources, Pittsburgh could truly have been called a critical "border city."

Additionally, Pittsburgh's geographic features made it crucial junction for Union supply lines at the midpoint between east and west, where advantages in place, labor, capital, and manufacturing coalesced to produce something extraordinary. As Samuel Durant asserted in his *History of Allegheny Co., Pennsylvania* from 1876, Pittsburgh served as a natural gateway, not only via its three rivers, but also because nearly all major railways had to converge at its terminals. Truly, as Durant said of this city, "a thorough and systematic development of all its resources, natural and acquired, cannot fail to make this point permanently one of the greatest manufacturing and commercial inland centers in America."⁴² Considering that Allegheny was one of the Union's premier arsenals, the city's ability to mediate a two-

⁴¹ Barcoucky, *Civil War Pittsburgh*, 10-11.

⁴² Samuel Durant, *History of Allegheny Co., Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: L. H. Everts & Co., 1876), 101; George H. Thurston, *Allegheny County's Hundred Years* (Pittsburgh: A. A. Anderson & Son, 1888).

front war effort made it worthwhile for the Confederacy to consider targeting.⁴³

Colonel John Symington

Given the record of Confederate sabotage along with the city's significance, Pittsburghers had reason to suspect something deliberate behind the Allegheny Arsenal explosion. They had even more reason to pin commander Col. John Symington as a likely suspect. Locals knew of his familial connections to the South, with his wife hailing from the slaveholding border state of Maryland, his son joining the Confederate Army, and his daughter marrying Confederate General William Boggs and sporting a Southern rosette to Sunday church services. However, residents did not know that he had previously signed a letter of recommendation to help one of his wife's relatives gain admission to West Point—a relative who happened to be named George Pickett and later led one of the most infamous Confederate charges of the entire Civil War at Gettysburg.⁴⁴

Ultimately, Symington's record, and that of his closest associates, must speak for itself. From the time he first arrived at Allegheny Arsenal in 1857, he never embodied the persona of a radical, treasonous mastermind. Rather, his appointment was more intended to be a laid-back

⁴³ Edward M. McKeever, "Earlier Lawrenceville," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 5, no. 4 (1922): 280-82.

⁴⁴ James Wudarczyk, "Explosion at the Allegheny Arsenal Rocks Pittsburgh," History Net, November 20, 2018; "Census Record — Symington and Boggs Family," original from 1860 US census, population schedule, NARA microfilm publication M653 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.).

retirement position where he, at the age of sixty-five, could serve out his final assignment to cap off an otherwise pristine, forty-plus year record of military service. This was especially significant considering he had already held prior appointments at federal arsenals in Washington, D.C., St. Louis, and Harpers Ferry.⁴⁵ While Pittsburgh offered an appealing target, if Symington wanted to carry out a major act of sabotage, it would have made far more sense to launch an attack during his appointment in the even higher-profile capital.

Symington lost the trust of many Pittsburghers before the war even began, as his involvement in what came to be known as the “gun incident” fueled an initial wave of rumors. Following orders issued at the behest of Secretary of War John B. Floyd in 1860, Symington worked to oversee the shipment of vast stores of artillery from Allegheny to other forts throughout the South. Pittsburghers were right to be outraged by this blatant attempt of Floyd’s, the former governor of Virginia and a Southern sympathizer, to allocate resources to his Southern friends on the eve of a looming war. Yet they were entirely incorrect in scapegoating Symington for nearly allowing this to happen.⁴⁶ While history has generally not been kind to the “just following orders” excuse, it does seem justified in this instance.

Symington can further be ruled out as an intentional saboteur due to his record of taking swift action against any

⁴⁵ Todd Abele, “Allegheny Arsenal Explosion.”

⁴⁶ Fox, *Pittsburgh During the American Civil War*, 13, 104; Barcoucky, *Civil War Pittsburgh*, 25.

dangerous activity at Allegheny Arsenal. Just under a year prior to the disaster, he wrote to his superior in Washington, General James W. Ripley, explaining his decision to fire much of the arsenal staff. As Symington reported, matches were discovered near packed munitions that were awaiting shipment. After what he called the “strictest investigation,” an inability to locate a single culprit required that he dismiss the area’s teenage male workforce, and he resolved from then on to hire only girls.⁴⁷ As researcher John Carnprobst suggests, boys were often more interested in playing with weapons of war than in making them.⁴⁸ It stands to reason that had Symington been sympathetic to the Confederacy, it would have made far more sense to keep the unproductive and dangerous boys on staff to either coincidentally cause an explosion or otherwise impede production.

Symington’s testimony and actions both before and after the disaster, as well as the vote of confidence from those closest to him, definitively rules out his intentional involvement. Less than two months prior to the explosions, he made his intentions clear that he wanted nothing more than to retire from active duty. In a letter to War Department higher-up General Edward D. Townsend, Symington formally submitted a request to step away from supervision

⁴⁷ John Symington, “Letter from Colonel John Symington to General James W. Ripley,” Allegheny Arsenal Records, National Archives and Records Administration, Mid-Atlantic, Philadelphia, October 2, 1861; quoted in Powers and Wudarczyk, “Behind the Scenes of the Allegheny Arsenal Explosion.”

⁴⁸ John L. Carnprobst, “Tragedy at the U.S. Allegheny Arsenal,” *Blue & Gray Magazine*, 1985, 29.

at Allegheny Arsenal.⁴⁹ The fact that this request was denied by senior military officials speaks both to his trustworthiness and that his decades-long record of professionalism made it unthinkable that he could have had anything to do with what later transpired.

Under oath at the coroner's investigation, multiple witnesses confirmed that Symington played the role of hero at the time of the blasts, coordinating rescue efforts and consoling victims.⁵⁰ Even arsenal superintendent Alexander McBride, whose own daughter Kate perished in the disaster, personally vouched that Symington never did anything to jeopardize lives or equipment at the arsenal and took every reasonable precaution to avoid accident.⁵¹ This plays an important role in Symington's defense, as McBride—a civilian who had nothing to lose by pointing the finger and every reason to be angry with Symington, whose leadership potentially resulted in the death of his daughter—declined to offer condemnation. Moreover, Symington was the one with everything to lose by calling for the military investigation, as a negative result promised to destroy his career.

Prior to the explosions, McBride repeatedly complained about the DuPont Company's practice of reusing wooden delivery barrels and storing dry powder in warm conditions. This practice, McBride explained, caused

⁴⁹ Edward D. Townsend, "Edward D. Townsend to Colonel James Symington, August 23, 1862," Letters Received at the Allegheny Arsenal, Records of the Chief of Ordinance, RG 156, National Archives and Records Administration, Mid-Atlantic Region, Philadelphia.

⁵⁰ "The Arsenal Catastrophe — Coroner's Investigation," *Daily Post* (Pittsburgh), September 20, 1862.

⁵¹ Wudarczyk, *Until the Morning Cometh*, 130.

expansion and cracks in the barrels, and allowed powder to easily sift through and fall to the ground.⁵² This concern was only heightened by the stone road's susceptibility to sparking against the constant force of iron-hoofed delivery horses, which was established in the early stages of both investigations.⁵³ Symington testified to never having been told of powder being furnished in such defective barrels and remarked how the containers had only ever been returned to DuPont at the company's request.⁵⁴ Furthermore, one must also wonder what Union military inquirer would possibly want to anger DuPont, given the company's importance to the nation's infrastructure. As the largest gunpowder manufacturer for the Northern war effort, any interruption to the supply chain due to prolonged safety investigations would have risked serious setbacks on the battlefield.⁵⁵

DuPont looks even worse when one considers that the same type of disaster was not exclusive to Allegheny Arsenal. DuPont-supplied munitions laboratories suffered no less than eleven explosions throughout the war, resulting in more than one hundred deaths.⁵⁶ While none were nearly as deadly as that which occurred at Allegheny, problems

⁵² Anderson, *Gunpowder Girls*, 53-54.

⁵³ Marylynn Pitz, "Allegheny Arsenal Explosion: Pittsburgh's Worst Day During the Civil War," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, September 12, 2012.

⁵⁴ "The Arsenal Catastrophe — Coroner's Investigation," *Transcript*, 73-84.

⁵⁵ Power and Wudarczyk, "Behind the Scenes of the Allegheny Arsenal Explosion," 51.

⁵⁶ Power and Wudarczyk, "Behind the Scenes of the Allegheny Arsenal Explosion," 51.

were rampant across the country. In each of these separate cases, the prevalence of worker complaints regarding foolish safety practices and the disastrous aftermath shows that what occurred in Lawrenceville also happened elsewhere to varying degrees. While most of these explosions were later determined to be the result of worker negligence, the consequences of lax safety oversight should have made DuPont realize the dangers of cutting corners with recycled barrels and ill-fitting lids at Allegheny Arsenal.

The notion of intentional malice at Allegheny Arsenal as early as 1862 is also questionable. The first documented evidence of Confederate sabotage comes from early 1863, perhaps suggesting that the war's escalation drove the South to greater desperation and took to government-sanctioned subversion only after the arsenal exploded. Moreover, the fact that Copperhead frustration in Washington County was primarily over forced conscription and the specter of having to fight alongside Black men likely only became a violence-provoking issue after the Emancipation Proclamation and Conscription Act in 1863. Lincoln's decision to shift the war from a push for reunification to a crusade for abolition only further damaged his relationship with the formerly moderate Copperheads.⁵⁷

While factors at play outside of Pittsburgh and the possibility of intentional wrongdoing require a more thorough examination, the historical record shows that the DuPont Company deserves the principal blame for the tragedy at Allegheny Arsenal. Symington ended up a victim

⁵⁷ Duchess, "Between Frontier and Factory," 253; 263-64; 272.

of this tragedy himself. For a man who graduated near the top of his class at West Point in 1815, enjoyed a long military career, and did not have disaster visit him in his mid-sixties, the only crime committed was by the investigators who tarnished his legacy and left him to retire in disgrace.⁵⁸ Symington was subsequently relieved of his command, went on leave of absence for about a year, was briefly reassigned to a Washington shipyard, then retired. He spent the last few months of his life distrusted and forgotten, dying in 1864.⁵⁹

The scenes of horror at Allegheny Arsenal presented a lesson in the newfound nature of war. It showed that a strict demarcation between battlefield and home front could no longer exist, as the strife did not distinguish between male combatants and innocent teenage girls.⁶⁰ The conflict required that the military quickly put the tragedy to rest, surreally symbolized by the disposal of the arsenal's charred remains in the Allegheny River and the rebuilding efforts undertaken immediately after the explosions. The real shame is that the women who died were patriots as much as their male counterparts on the battlefield, but remain forgotten.⁶¹ Unsurprisingly, few of the children who flock to the playground at Arsenal Park today, or who attend Arsenal Middle School next door, know of the events that transpired around them.

⁵⁸ Fox, *Pittsburgh During the American Civil War*, 103.

⁵⁹ Fox, *Pittsburgh During the American Civil War*, 124.

⁶⁰ Judith Giesberg, *Army at Home: Women and the Civil War on the Northern Home Front* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 70.

⁶¹ Giesberg, *Army at Home*, 168.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

The Daily Pittsburgh Gazette and Commercial Journal.
Pittsburgh, PA. 1862-63.

“Joseph W. Tucker and the Boat-Burners.” *The Boat-Burners, Civil War* St. Louis, 2001. DOI:
<http://civilwarstlouis.com/boatburners/tuckerandtheboatburners.htm>.

Lea, Richard. *Sermon Commemorative of the Great Explosion at Allegheny Arsenal: At Lawrenceville, Pennsylvania on September 17, 1862*. Pittsburgh: W. S. Haven, 1862.

Pittsburgh Daily Post. Pittsburgh, PA. 1862.

“Provost Marshal J. H. Baker’s Report on the Boat-Burners.” *The Boat-Burners, Civil War* St. Louis, 2001. DOI:
<http://civilwarstlouis.com/boatburners/boatburnerlist.htm>.

Transcript of the Proceedings of a Court of Inquiry to Investigate an Explosion at the Allegheny Arsenal Lab on September 17, 1862, Convened on October 15, 1862 under Order 288 of the Adjutants Generals Office. Records Group 153. Court Martial Records.

Pittsburgh's Explosive Mystery

National Archives, Mid-Atlantic Region, Philadelphia, PA.

U.S. Census Bureau. Census Record — Symington and Boggs Family, 1860. NARA microfilm publication M653, 1,438 rolls. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.

Secondary Sources

Abele, Todd. "Allegheny Arsenal Explosion." *Battlefield Pennsylvania*. DVD. Hosted by Brady Crytzer. Camp, PA: Pennsylvania Cable Network, 2017.

Anderson, Tanya. *Gunpowder Girls: The True Stories of Three Civil War Tragedies*. Kansas City, MO: Quindara Press, 2016.

Barcousky, Len. *Civil War Pittsburgh: Forge of the Union*. Charleston, SC: History Press, 2013.

———. "Eyewitness 1863: Civil War draft debate heats up Washington Co." *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, September 15, 2013.

Carnprobst, John L. "Tragedy at the U.S. Allegheny Arsenal." *Blue & Gray Magazine*, 1985.

Wagner

Central Intelligence Agency. *Intelligence in the Civil War*.
Drafted and prepared by Thomas Allen. Washington,
D.C.: Office of Public Affairs, 2017.

Duchess, Eric D. "Between Frontier and Factory: Growth
and Development in Washington, Pennsylvania,
1810-1870." Ph.D. diss., West Virginia University,
2012.

Durant, Samuel W. *History of Allegheny Co., Pennsylvania*.
Philadelphia: L. H. Everts & Co., 1876.

Fox, Arthur B. *Pittsburgh During the American Civil War,
1860-1865*. Chicora, PA: Mechling Bookbindery,
2002.

Giesberg, Judith. *Army at Home: Women and the Civil War
on the Northern Home Front*. Chapel Hill, NC:
University of North Carolina Press, 2009.

———. "Explosion at the Allegheny Arsenal." HistoryNet,
March 31, 2016. DOI: [https://www.historynet.com/
explosion-at-the-allegheny-arsenal.htm](https://www.historynet.com/explosion-at-the-allegheny-arsenal.htm).

McKeever, Edward M. "Earlier Lawrenceville." *Western
Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 5, no. 4 (1922):
277-86.

Pittsburgh's Explosive Mystery

National Archives at Philadelphia. "Allegheny Arsenal Explosion and the Creation of Public Memory." National Archives, August 15, 2016. DOI: <https://www.archives.gov/philadelphia/exhibits/allegheny-arsenal>.

Pitz, Marylynne. "Alegheny Arsenal Explosion: Pittsburgh's Worst Day During the Civil War." *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, September 12, 2012.

Plumb, Robert C., and George Pressly McClelland. *Your Brothers in Arms: A Union Soldier's Odyssey*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2011.

Powers, Tom, and James Wudarczyk. "Behind the Scenes of the Allegheny Arsenal Explosion." *Pennsylvania Legacies* 13, no. 1/2 (2013): 42-55.

———. Interview by author. Lawrenceville, PA, June 5, 2020.

Ragan, Mark K. *Confederate Saboteurs: Building the Hunley and Other Secret Weapons of the Civil War*. College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2015.

Sandow, Robert M. *Deserter Country: Civil War Opposition in the Pennsylvania Appalachians*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2009.

Wagner

Swetnam, George. "Thirty Days of Panic." *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 51, no. 4 (1968): 329-43.

Thurston, George H. *Allegheny County's Hundred Years*. Pittsburgh: A. A. Anderson & Son, 1888.

Weber, Jennifer L. *Copperheads: The Rise and Fall of Lincoln's Opponents in the North*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Wudarczyk, James. "Explosion at the Allegheny Arsenal Rocks Pittsburgh." HistoryNet, November 20, 2018. DOI: <https://www.historynet.com/explosion-at-the-allegheny-arsenal-rocks-pittsburgh.htm>.

———. *Until the Morning Cometh: Civil War Era Pittsburgh*. Apollo, PA: Closson Press, 2013.

York, Allen Christopher. "'Our people are warlike': Civil War Pittsburgh and Home-Front Mobilization." Ph.D. diss., University of Tennessee, 2018.

Editor Profiles

Sophia R. Crawford '24

James Douglas Duke '24 is a sophomore from Dover, DE. A double major in Anthropology and History with a minor in Civil War Era Studies, he is also a member of the College's Archaeology program. He has helped excavate the Jack Hopkins house on Gettysburg's campus and will continue excavations this fall.

Jaeger R. Held '22 is a History major with minors in Civil War Era Studies, Public History, and Peace and Justice Studies from southeastern Montana. An undergraduate research fellow at the Civil War Institute, during the summer of 2021 he worked at Harpers Ferry National Historical Park and received a Justin Research Fellowship to study US Army casualties during the American Indian Wars of the nineteenth century.

Emily R. Jumba '24 is a double major in Anthropology and History with minors in Spanish and Environmental Studies. The Civil War Era is one of her favorite periods of study.

Stefany A. Kaminski '24

Christopher T. Lough '22 is a double major in History and French from Raleigh, NC. He is the Editor-in-Chief of *The Gettysburg College Journal of the Civil War Era* as well as *The Gettysburg Historical Journal*. He has also worked in Musselman Library's Special

Collections and College Archives through the Brian C. Pohanka Internship Program at Gettysburg. An aspiring historian, his research has been published in *The Cupola* in addition to two forthcoming articles in *ASIANetwork Exchange* and *The Macksey Journal* at Johns Hopkins University.

Emma Monzeglio '24 is a sophomore from Glastonbury, CT. A History major, she has minors in Civil War Era Studies and Peace and Justice Studies, as well as a prospective minor in Public History. She has worked at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park in Virginia and is a Civil War Fellow on campus, where she has transcribed the letters and journals of a Civil War soldier.

Brandon Neely '23 is a History major with minors in Public History and Civil War Era Studies. He is a member of the Civil War Institute on Gettysburg's campus and has participated in a number of programs through the Eisenhower Institute. He has a special interest in archival research and recently completed an internship at Andersonville National Historic Site in Georgia.

Cameron T. Sauers '21 graduated from Gettysburg College in May 2021 with a major in History and minors in Public History and Civil War Era Studies. He spent three years as a fellow at the Civil War Institute and his last year as Co-Editor-in-Chief of *The Gettysburg College Journal of the Civil War Era*. His research has been published in *The Cupola* as well as the *Tufts Historical Review* and *The Macksey Journal* at Johns

Pittsburgh's Explosive Mystery

Hopkins University. He will begin graduate work in History this fall at the University of Kentucky.

Abigail Seiple '23 is a junior from Newtown, PA. A History major and German Studies minor, she is also enrolled in Gettysburg's social studies education program. She has had a lifelong interest in the Civil War era.

Peter Wildgruber '24 is a sophomore working towards a double major in History and German. The Civil War Era and early modern European history are among his favorite subjects, and he hopes to study abroad in Germany or Austria next year.