



6-13-2016

Confederate War Etchings: Adalbert J. Volck's Visual Depiction of the Confederate War Effort

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Rose, Savannah G., "Confederate War Etchings: Adalbert J. Volck's Visual Depiction of the Confederate War Effort" (2016). *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History*. 192.
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Abstract

During the Civil War, both the Union and the Confederacy utilized art to convey their sentiments regarding different aspects of the war. Most Civil War enthusiasts often recall drawings and cartoons by Thomas Nast when they think about political cartoons of the 19th century. Nast drew numerous cartoons for the Northern newspaper *Harpers Weekly*, commenting frequently on the Confederate States of America, the Civil War, as well as the political corruption of the era. Nast grew in fame across the Union, but the Confederacy, too, had its share of political cartoons and drawings that criticized the Northern war effort. Though not very popular during the Civil War, Adalbert J. Volck created political cartoons that resonated strongly with the Confederate war effort and the Lost Cause following 1865.

[*excerpt*]

Keywords

Gettysburg College, Civil War, Confederate

Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

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This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Confederate War Etchings: Adalbert J. Volck's Visual Depiction of the Confederate War Effort

By *Savannah Rose '17*

During the Civil War, both the Union and the Confederacy utilized art to convey their sentiments regarding different aspects of the war. Most Civil War enthusiasts often recall drawings and cartoons by Thomas Nast when they think about political cartoons of the 19th century. Nast drew numerous cartoons for the Northern newspaper *Harpers Weekly*, commenting frequently on the Confederate States of America, the Civil War, as well as the political corruption of the era. Nast grew in fame across the Union, but the Confederacy, too, had its share of political cartoons and drawings that criticized the Northern war effort. Though not very popular during the Civil War, Adalbert J. Volck created political cartoons that resonated strongly with the Confederate war effort and the Lost Cause following 1865.

Adalbert Johann Volck was born on April 14, 1828 in Bavaria, Germany. As a young child, his parents decided that their son should focus on the sciences, sending him to the Nuremburg Polytechnic Institute. During his spare time though, Volck spent countless hours with a group of artists where he learned the basics of drawing and etching. He moved on to the University of Munich, where he once again studied science but longed to further his art career which led to him making use of Munich's art academy to continue to develop his skills. While in Munich, Volck participated in the rising political revolution in early 1848, causing him to flee Bavaria for New York City.



Adalbert J. Volck drew numerous drawings and cartoons to aid the Confederate war effort.
Photograph courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

Arriving penniless, Volck took up jobs making corks, teaching astronomy, and later working as a cabinetmaker. After making enough money, Volck moved to Boston where he became an assistant to a dentist before moving to Baltimore, Maryland in 1851 to attend the Baltimore School of Dental Surgery. Volck graduated in 1852, soon opening a dental practice in Baltimore where he lived with his wife for the remainder of his life. Immediately following the outbreak of the American Civil War, Volck became a champion for the Southern cause and soon began to work for the Confederacy in numerous ways. Volck immediately began smuggling medical supplies across the Potomac River as well as becoming a courier for the Confederacy. Volck developed a strong negative opinion about the Union following Benjamin Butler's military occupation of Baltimore, blaming Butler for most of the hardships the city suffered during the Civil War.

Volck's greatest contribution through to the Confederacy was through his artwork. Between 1861 and 1863, Volck created his first set of *Confederate War Etchings*, a multi-series collection of political cartoons, which criticized the Union while promoting the Confederate war effort. The cartoons were distributed in the Confederate nation, but due to the lack of accessibility many people outside of Baltimore did not see them. Though they were not distributed much during the time, they became a large component of the Lost Cause atmosphere following the Civil War. While Volck intended for numerous compilations of cartoons within the series to be released, only one book was given to the public as Union soldiers upon discovery had destroyed the others. Today, only one series remains and can be found at numerous museums and archives including Special Collections and College Archives at Gettysburg College.

The series at Special Collections contains twenty-nine political cartoons all expressing Volck's sentiments during the war, many of which align with the remaining members of the Confederacy. Volck's cartoons "The Worship of the North," "The Tracks of the Army," and "Slaves Concealing Their Master" reflect the artist's goals for his cartoons, effectively conveying the Confederacy's

sentiments regarding the Union war effort as well as the civilian treatment within the South by their 'Northern oppressors.'



“The Worship of the North,” by Adalbert Volck. Image courtesy of Special Collections and College Archives, Musselman Library, Gettysburg College.

In an elaborate scene of idol worship in his cartoon “The Worship of the North,” Northern leaders are shown sacrificing a white man to a shrine of “The Negro.” A black man sits atop this shrine, labeled “Chicago Platform” with busts of Lincoln as a serpent carved into its base. Several notable political figures appear in the cartoon including abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher bearing the sacrificial knife, Charles Sumner holding a torch to light up the pile of dead bodies behind the scene, and Horace Greeley holding a censer of snakes to represent the evil of the North. Depicted as an idol statue, John Brown as St. Osawatimie holds a pike while presiding over the scene, showing how the North “worshiped” violent abolitionists. Other figures such as Generals Henry Halleck, Benjamin Butler, Winfield Scott, David Hunter, John C. Fremont, Massachusetts Governor John Andrew, Vice President Andrew Johnson, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, and Harriet Beecher Stowe are all present in the crowd as well watching the scene of sacrifice. Through the cartoon, Volck radiates his view of the Northern war effort, believing that the Union fought to protect the black man, all the while sacrificing the white man to do it.



“Tracks of the Army,” by Adalbert Volck. Photograph courtesy of Special Collections and College Archives, Musselman Library, Gettysburg College.

A Confederate soldier returns to the site of his home to find his home in ruins following the movement of the Union Army through his land in Volck’s cartoon titled, “The Tracks of the Army.” The man returns to find his wife, horse, and dog lying dead among the ruins of his home, his possessions scattered along the ground. In the distance, another building burns, commenting on the vast destruction brought about by the Union Army. The woman lies dead among the rubble with a bare breast, indicating that she was a victim of sexual assault before being killed. Among the ruins, a cradle is overturned and the child inside stolen by Union troops. Half eaten food litters the ground while an open book reads: “By their deeds ye shall know them.” To further convey the death of the woman, Volck depicts vultures perched above the ruins, preying on this scene of destruction.



“Slaves Concealing Their Master,” by Adalbert Volck. Photo courtesy of Special Collections and College Archives, Musselman Library, Gettysburg College.

In “Slaves Concealing Their Master,” Volck attempted to convey the idea of the ‘loyal slave’ as an enslaved African American woman protects her master. The woman directs mounted Union soldiers away as her master cowers behind the door of her slave cabin. A vicious dog sniffs around the doorstep of the cabin, searching for truth in the woman’s story. A violent disruption occurred moments before the arrival of the Union troops, when the master demanded sanctuary as seen by the overturned chair and the frightened child clinging to his father, who was interrupted while cooking their meal. The master hides in the cabin, holding a small pistol, ready to protect himself if his plan fails. The woman voluntarily helps her master, conveying the idea of the ‘loyal slave,’ an idea which many Southerners believed during the Civil War was a justification for the institution of slavery.

Throughout the remainder of his life until his death in 1912, Adalbert Volck remained an unreconstructed Confederate. Unlike the political cartoons of Thomas Nast, Volck’s cartoons did not sway popular opinion as they reflected the opinion already present in the South. The etchings prove invaluable to any Civil War enthusiast as they proved a vivid image encapsulating the beliefs that composed the Confederate view of the war. Volck uses the cartoons to demonstrate the South’s belief in the loyal slave as well as their view of ‘Northern aggression’ toward civilians. Together, Volck’s images create a record of the themes that ran rampant throughout the Confederacy during the war as well as reflection on the harbored feelings that kept the Lost Cause alive in the years after the guns went silent. Volck created visual documents of Confederate identity during the Civil War with his drawings, giving contemporary historians a visual representation of the Confederate war effort as well as criticism of the north.

Sources:

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