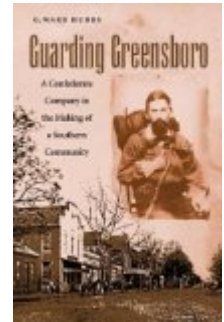


G. Ward Hubbs. *Guarding Greensboro: A Confederate Company in the Making of a Southern Community.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003. 344 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8203-2505-7.



Reviewed by Robert B. Gilpin

Published on H-CivWar (May, 2005)

They ask not for "furlough," they ask but to fight. For country and "flag," for God and the "Right" (p. 142).

This couplet, from a thirty-line poem titled "Yadkin," was published in the February 23, 1862 Greensboro Alabama Beacon. "Yadkin" was a moving memorial to Dr. Augustus H. Moore, a young physician from Greensboro, Alabama, and the first member of the Greensboro Guards killed in the Civil War. Shot down carrying the Confederate flag at the Battle of Seven Pines, Dr. Moore is just one of the hundreds of personalities that populate G. Ward Hubbs's account of this western Alabama town from the time of its founding to the early twentieth century.

Hubbs, an archivist and instructor at Birmingham-Southern College, makes clear that *Guarding Greensboro* is a deliberately local study, because "certain primary social relationships can be revealed only at local levels" (p. xiii). Indeed, the personal relationships of the residents of Greensboro form the core of the book, and they are Hubbs's engine to underscore the "circumstances that allow communities to be created" (p.

xiii). In particular, Hubbs focuses this creation process through the prism of the town's militia unit, the Greensboro Guards. Not surprisingly, Hubbs has also published *Voices from Company D* (University of Georgia Press), an edited collection of the diaries of eight Greensboro guardsmen. For Hubbs, Greensboro's guards symbolize the process of community creation that helped forge "something resembling the tight-knit Southern community of myth and legend" (p. xiii). By importing "ideals of manliness, patriotism, camaraderie and local pride" the guards "formed the town's only institution capable of uniting everyone" (pp. 49-50). While at times, that definition of everyone obscures blacks and poor whites, Hubbs does an excellent job of underscoring how effectively Greensboro's Guards transformed the town into a solid community.

By keeping the focus away from an exclusively war-based account, Hubbs shows that throughout the nineteenth century, Greensboro experimented with civil organizations of various stripes to foster a sense of civic coherence. In concise and engaging prose, the book describes townspeople's

flirtations with Masonic, educational, and ecclesiastic organizations, but Hubbs makes a strong case that until the Greensboro light artillery guards were formed in 1823, residents of Greensboro had not yet found a powerful enough vehicle to consolidate their civic passion. However, with the guards, Greensboro citizens began to develop a coherent and distinct identity. Hubbs shows that unlike previous organizations, the guards helped residents of Greensboro form a creation myth for their town just as they began to confront to growing dilemmas of secession (pp. 79-84).

But Hubbs's most crucial contribution to the burgeoning school of local community studies is his ability to keep the town's social accomplishments in the context of accompanying social costs. As Hubbs writes, "building a community in Greensboro was a drama of emerging loyalties, but it was also a tragedy of continuing exclusions"(p. xiv). Hubbs is at the mercy of his sources, the diaries and letters of white Greensboro residents, but he goes to some lengths to remind readers that "the two issues of community and slavery could hardly be separated" (p. 49). In so doing, blacks are not totally forgotten, but they certainly do not emerge with the same depth and personality that their white masters do.

In comparison to more synthetic works like Ed Ayers's *In the Presence of Mine Enemies* and Drew Faust's *Mothers of Invention*, *Guarding Greensboro's* particular strengths and weaknesses are occasionally evident. Because of the more limited geographic and human scope of Hubbs's study, some of the nuances of race and gender so well explored in Ayers and Faust are lost in the in-depth treatment of Greensboro's citizens. On the other hand, Hubbs is able to bring in a tremendous amount of human detail to many characters, letting his readers meet and experience the lives of the increasingly coherent town he describes.

Once the war began, Greensboro, like so much of the South, was forced to put those solidified beliefs to the most difficult tests imaginable

(and some that were almost inconceivable). In his account of the war years, Hubbs is able to powerfully demonstrate just how pervasive the beliefs that the Guards had come to embody really were. Hubbs's most admirable writing comes in his artful blending of microhistorical circumstances of Greensboro's experiences--women on the home-front and men at war--and the broader historical shifts of the war. However, Hubbs's account of wartime Greensboro also highlights some of the troubling interpretive choices in the book. At times, Hubbs seems to fall into lockstep with his diarists and letter writers, accepting wholesale their depictions of brutal and foul-mouthed Yankees or the battlefield gallantry of the Greensboro men, uncovering suffocating Union soldiers to ease their suffering (pp. 138, 183). Moreover, Hubbs essentially replicates a quaint and idealized vision of the post-Sumter South when he writes that "while the women took up their needles, the men took up their guns" (p. 112). These moments tend to detract from Hubbs's intimate involvement with the townspeople. Indeed, any occasional problems may be the result of too much intimacy and connection between Hubbs and his subjects.

Nonetheless, Hubbs goes to great lengths to show that the conception of Southern manhood that the Guards represented came with serious costs. "Yankees and black slaves gave [southerners] an essential component of [their identity]," Hubbs writes, "an antithesis. If slaves were black, then free men were white, and if Yankees were evil, then Confederates must be good" (p. 146). Unfortunately, as Hubbs points out, the antithetical mindset extended quite powerfully into the Reconstruction period and beyond. On the other side of this dynamic, Hubbs describes freed blacks no longer feeling obligated or beholden to the code of community that Greensboro had adopted through the Guards. Indeed, "freed people's basic view of society thus contradicted at every turn [white] premises of loyalty" (p. 207). In these moments, one is led to question the very strength of

the community that Greensboro seemed to demonstrate before the war.

But taking the book for what it sets out to accomplish, Hubbs has done a remarkable job. In his exploration of this small Alabama town and the role a volunteer military company played in fostering community identity, Hubbs underscores some of the powerful themes of the nineteenth-century Southern experience. Indeed, Hubbs is able to show that fighting "for country, flag, God and the Right" were ideas powerfully connected to very basic experiences of interpersonal loyalty and commitment. These ideas were forged in the crucible of a volunteer militia before Southern communities like Greensboro even began to imagine any sort of war. Drawing out this process of community formation, in itself, makes *Guarding Greensboro* a compelling and useful addition to homefront literature.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

Citation: Robert B. Gilpin. Review of Hubbs, G. Ward. *Guarding Greensboro: A Confederate Company in the Making of a Southern Community*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. May, 2005.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10521>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.