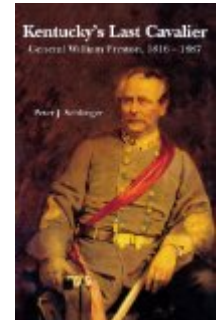


Peter J. Sehlinger. *Kentucky's Last Cavalier: General William Preston, 1816-1887.* Frankfort: Kentucky Historical Society, 2004. xx + 309 pp. \$33.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-916968-33-5.



Reviewed by T. R. Brereton

Published on H-CivWar (December, 2005)

A scion of elite Kentucky society, William Preston led a remarkably diverse, successful, yet ultimately disappointing life. In this biography by Peter J. Sehlinger, Preston's career as a Kentucky politician, diplomat, and Confederate general is painstakingly described. Preston was active in the early development of the city of Louisville and was a key participant in Kentucky's second constitutional convention in 1849-50, which was an early plebiscite of sorts on the issue of slavery. As a diplomatic envoy for the U.S. and Confederate governments, Preston spent several years in European capitals, where his fluency in French became quite useful. When the Civil War came, Preston sided with the South. His connections got him a brigadier general's star (his brother-in-law was Albert Sidney Johnston, and among his cousins was John C. Breckinridge), and he served briefly under Braxton Bragg. He acquitted himself honorably during the Kentucky and Tullahoma campaigns, and he was particularly effective at Chickamauga.

Preston was a vocal defender of slavery, and Sehlinger highlights the paternalistic racism typi-

cal of Preston's class. He was also heir to one of the oldest families in Kentucky, and thus held title to a large amount of land and other properties. Despite this, he seems to have been perpetually in debt, and even complained that he was land rich and cash poor. Sehlinger also describes a man who kept secrets from his wife, mostly financial, and partly familial. This is not surprising, given the clearly different spheres men and women inhabited, and the roles they were expected to play. The letters from Preston's wife are particularly revealing here, especially as her marriage crumbled into one of polite distance upon discovering husband's deceptions.

While tolerably interesting--Preston is not, after all, a household name in Civil War-era history--Sehlinger's work provides too much life and not enough times. The book is full of mundane details of Preston's and his family's personal story that test the reader's patience: land and business transactions, houses bought and sold, marriages and births, matters of personal finance, and a long section on Preston's son's failure to live up to his father's expectations. Readers unfamiliar with

the city of Louisville or its environs will be mystified by numerous place and street names, which Sehlinger drops casually and repeatedly throughout the book. Finally, Sehlinger frequently refers to Preston as "the Kentuckian," "the Louisvillian," "the Kentucky brigadier," "the Confederate Kentuckian," and so on. The repetition is wearing and distracting.

The world which Preston inhabits in this book is a narrow one. While it is the task of a biographer to concentrate on the subject at hand, he must also widen his focus. Given that Preston is not well known, the pinhole through which the reader views him is not helpful. Sehlinger's opportunities to expand that view are largely not taken. We learn, for example, that Preston's views on slavery were unorthodox for a slave owner (he was willing to manumit his own slaves); that he was instrumental in the whispering campaign that unseated Braxton Bragg from command; and that, as a dominant personality in Louisville, he fought for the fair treatment of immigrants and Roman Catholics in the city's politics. Rather than tie Preston historically to any of these matters--all more interesting than Preston himself--they are quickly shunted aside with a few sentences of comment. Placing Preston within the context of these larger elements, rather than noting them in the context of William Preston alone, would have made this book immeasurably more satisfying.

That is not to say Sehlinger's book is without merit. Preston was briefly American Envoy Extraordinary to Spain, in which capacity he pursued southern ambitions to purchase Cuba, as well as disposing of the *Amistad* claims. The former proved fruitless; however, in the latter Preston succeeded in negotiating a settlement satisfactory to both sides, although the resultant treaty was rejected by the Senate. Sehlinger's remarks on the *Amistad* case are cogent, and his discussion (albeit brief) of Preston's involvement in it provides welcome new information to the matter. The chapter on Preston's appointment as Confederate

minister to Mexico is most edifying and not to be found elsewhere. Preston was thrust into a confusing world of diplomatic maneuvering between the Confederacy, the United States, Mexico, France, and Spain. It seems a shame that Preston was never able to officially present his credentials to the Court of Maximilian I, and Sehlinger ably and amply describes the polite rivalry, manipulation, and calculated distance that kept Preston from his task. Equally notable are Sehlinger's revelations about life in Kentucky during the war, illuminated by letters from Preston's wife, and his difficulties in adjusting to the postwar era. Preston's reactions to both were at times equally poignant and self-serving.

In the end, *Kentucky's Last Cavalier* will be of interest mostly to local or state historians. Sehlinger's own writing frequently makes this work a difficult, even tedious undertaking. For Civil War historians or historians of the South, there are too many paths not taken, or not taken far enough, to provide compelling interest.

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

Citation: T. R. Brereton. Review of Sehlinger, Peter J. *Kentucky's Last Cavalier: General William Preston, 1816-1887*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. December, 2005.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11037>



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