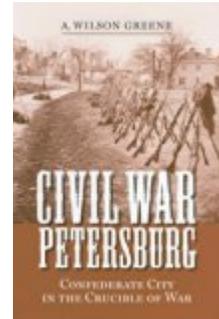


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

A. Wilson Greene. *Civil War Petersburg: Confederate City in the Crucible of War*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2006. xi + 363 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-2570-7.

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Published on H-CivWar (June, 2007)



Life on the Urban Southern Home Front

As A. Wilson Greene points out in his preface to *Civil War Petersburg*, there has been an increasing amount of scholarship in recent years dedicated to examining the lives of noncombatants during the Civil War. One genre of this scholarship might be termed the “community study,” in which the economic, social, political, and military impact of the war on a specific city or town is studied. This study, in turn, allows the modern reader to gain a feel for not only how the people viewed and reacted to great events of the time, but also how the war affected their everyday lives, particularly when war came calling at their doorsteps.

Greene, the executive director of the Pamplin Historical Park and National Museum of the Civil War Soldier, just outside Petersburg, has a natural interest in the city’s role in the war and, as his research makes clear, he makes good use of some wonderful source material in developing his study. His heavy reliance on primary sources, especially letters and diaries taken from the collected papers of individuals and families who lived in the city during the war, allows these citizens to speak to us across time, conveying their feelings and impressions literally as they were captured at particular moments in time. This, in turn, gives us the most accurate image possible of what their lives were like.

However, Greene is careful not to rely solely on these sources, lest he convey only the image of the city provided by those few who documented their lives. He also uses editorial comments and reports from the local news-

papers, as well as statistical data to tell his story. From all these sources, we see Petersburg as a thriving prewar commercial center whose strategic position astride the railway leading to Richmond would eventually make it subject to the longest siege of the war.

While Greene provides extensive detail on virtually every aspect of life in the city as the war progressed, two aspects stand out as particularly enlightening: the war’s impact on the African American population and the effects of financial inflation. The first is particularly interesting because Petersburg had one of the South’s largest free African American populations. In fact, as Green points out, in 1860, 36 percent of Petersburg’s African Americans were free, and, some 26 percent of Petersburg’s total free population was African American—the highest percentage of any city in the South (p. 8). Further, the majority of these free African Americans were women and they owned half the property held by the city’s black population. Some free African Americans managed to become quite affluent. In fact, one of the more interesting points in Greene’s book is that some of the free African American women who worked as prostitutes or became concubines to white men were so affluent that they actually owned their own slaves.

As the war progressed, the African American population’s situation worsened. Initially, both free black men and slaves volunteered to support the Confederacy by joining the cause as laborers to build defensive works and fortifications. While they appeared enthusiastic, Greene

states this enthusiasm was demonstrated primarily out of necessity, and did not reflect any true zeal for the Southern cause. The workers were paid, however, and the city actually provided some welfare and sustenance, however meager, for the families left behind in the Petersburg. However, as the war continued, the African American population was hit especially hard by increased racial tensions, which led to increased arrests and harsh punishment for African Americans accused of even the most petty of crimes. Further, along with the poor white population, they were devastated by the effects of rampant economic inflation.

Greene points out that, as was probably the case in much of the South, nothing did more damage to the city's economy than inflation, which was primarily fueled by a lack of commodities. He demonstrates this by citing some of the differences in prices between the winter of 1863 and the spring of 1864. During the winter months, butter rose from \$4.00 a pound to \$15.00, while the price for an egg increased by 1,500 percent in only seven months. Other staples saw similar inflation, with flour increasing from \$75.00 to \$300.00 dollars per barrel; beef rising from 30 cents to \$4.00 per pound; and meal elevating from \$12.00 to \$40.00 dollars per bushel.

Greene also documents the steady decline of the

city's commercial and industrial base. As supplies of cotton and tobacco diminished, the mills and tobacco warehouses began to close. Further, a lack of spare parts for machinery also severely limited the capabilities of those factories and mills that did operate. Eventually, many of the tobacco warehouses were converted to hospitals for wounded soldiers, but this loss in economic infrastructure further worsened life for both whites and African Americans, who depended on these mills, factories, and warehouses for employment.

Finally, with the siege of the city beginning in the summer of 1864, life in the city would markedly change. The regular bombardment by Federal artillery ended many of the few remaining social activities of the city, and disrupted the very patterns of daily life. The siege, which would last for ten months, left an indelible impact, which can still be seen today.

While this book is not the sort that many Civil War enthusiasts will flock to, it is an excellent scholarly study, and one that provides valuable insights into urban Southern life during the war. The fact that the subject city also became a key strategic point in the war provides for additional interest and the opportunity for further insight. In total, the book sets a new standard for its genre and one we hope others will strive to meet.

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Citation: Robert Thompson. Review of Greene, A. Wilson, *Civil War Petersburg: Confederate City in the Crucible of War*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. June, 2007.

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