H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Christopher Waldrep. *Vicksburg's Long Shadow: The Civil War Legacy of Race and Remembrance.* New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005. xix + 344 pp. $26.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7425-4868-8.

Reviewed by Alexander Mendoza (Department of History, University of Texas at Tyler)
Published on H-CivWar (February, 2008)

Eclipsing the Memories of Emancipation

When Confederate Maj. Gen. John C. Pemberton surrendered his army in Vicksburg to Maj. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant on July 4, 1863, the Rebels yielded control of the Mississippi River and dealt the South its second devastating battlefield loss in as many days. Particularly galling to Southerners was that the surrender of over 30,000 troops occurred on the Fourth of July, a bitter fact which kept Vicksburg citizens from celebrating Independence Day until the mid-twentieth century. Despite the significance of the Vicksburg bastion to the Civil War, in the years following the critical campaign, the Battle of Gettysburg, fought on July 1-3, 1863, would surpass the Vicksburg campaign in the nation's collective memory in military significance and romantic imagery.

Christopher Waldrep's *Vicksburg's Long Shadow: The Civil War Legacy of Race and Remembrance* is an attempt to correct this disparity between the eastern and western theaters and offer a fresh perspective of the significance of the Vicksburg campaign to Civil War memorialization. Waldrep's book is more than just a simple history of the Vicksburg National Battlefield Park. The study touches on a variety of themes: it provides a brief military history of the campaign that focuses on the contributions of African American soldiers; it traces how the memories of battles and leaders eclipsed the remembrance of freedom and emancipation; and it explores how the battlefield park came to symbolize the concept of national reunification in the midst of Jim Crow. Even though the author examines these and other subjects throughout his study, at the nexus of the history of Vicksburg National Military Park remain the competing memories of the campaign and the war. Waldrep thus analyzes the racial politics and justice underlying attempts by military men and politicians to celebrate the Vicksburg campaign. Similar to David Blight's *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (2002), Waldrep's study argues that Americans–North and South–rejected the remembrance of emancipation and racial equality in order to create a public memory that supported the moral uniformity of the Union and Confederate causes. "Reunion and reconciliation edged out race, and sentiment triumphed over ideology," the author writes (p. 227).

Waldrep begins his study with the war years, scrutinizing the strategic context of the war in the West. The author gives particular attention to the variant views of slavery among the Union troops, focusing on the ambivalent racial views these men demonstrated. He argues that while Union commanders used African American troops, they did so in part to provide promotions to white enlisted men who would have had limited opportunities in white regiments. Many of these white junior officers, Waldrep maintains, never lost their racial biases during the remainder of the war despite the contributions black soldiers made to the campaign at Milliken's Bend. By Reconstruction, the author notes, the presence of black troops in Mississippi had created myriad problems for Union commanders and Southerners alike. It was clear that the North's commitment to preserving the legacies of freedom and emancipation waned in the years following Gen. Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox Court House. The end of Reconstruction merely provided a return to the racial caste system of the antebellum era in the guise of the Black Codes and new social order. Waldrep highlights how Union and Confederate sympathizers continued to struggle in the postwar years over the issue of commemorating their comrades' deaths. The duty to revere fallen soldiers resulted in the federal government's establishment of the Vicksburg National Cemetery in 1866. Yet despite the imprint of the federal government on the city of Vicksburg, the North retreated and allowed the South to forge its own path with respect to civil rights. Clearly, the focus of the Union and Confederate veterans lay with the decisions of the high commanders and the experiences of Johnny Reb and Billy Yank.

The transformation of the memorialization process in

Vicksburg began in 1887, when Southerners celebrated the dedication of the city's first Civil War monument, an homage to Louisiana's state soldiers who died in the siege. Soon thereafter, the Lost Cause took hold in the South. Its principles denied the centrality of the role of slavery to the onset of the war and instead focused on the imagery of the brave soldier, the faithful slave, and the suffering, yet loyal, Southern woman. Yet it was a Union veteran, John Festus Merry, who petitioned to have Vicksburg named a national park in the 1890s. Merry, who had witnessed the dedication of battlefield parks in Gettysburg, Chickamauga, and Shiloh, believed that Vicksburg was just as important–if not more so–than these other battles. Merry's efforts soon included politicians and supporters from his native Iowa, and the aspirations of these Northern men revolved around using the park to attract black voters and making Vicksburg a symbol of national reunification. Obviously, establishing a national park could not be done without the help of Southerners, so Southern state legislators soon appropriated money for the park to meet the North's contributions for monuments. By contributing funds, the North became complicit in the South's interpretation of the war. Yet for the park's founders, it did not matter much considering that the themes of reconciliation and reunion trumped all else.

Waldrep also examines the themes surrounding the concept of reunification and how they affected events around Vicksburg. Specifically, the author notes that the success of veteran reunions at Gettysburg inspired Vicksburg veterans to hold their own gatherings at the turn of the twentieth century. Waldrep points out the irony that the two biggest veterans' reunions at Vicksburg, hosted in 1890 and 1917, were "rigidly segregated" (p. 195). Even though it had been Northern troops who had freed the slaves, whites rejected the black interpretation of the Civil War, which focused on freedom and liberty, in favor of reconciliation. Ultimately, the author argues, this proved useful for the American war effort in World War I as patriotism increased with the 1917 reunion.

Throughout the next several decades, Vicksburg continued to serve as a bastion of reconciliation and patriotism as the nation slowly retreated from the romance and sentimentality that the Civil War had inspired. As the interest in the war declined in the post-World War I period, a general isolationist mood prevailed. Nevertheless, during the Great Depression, the federal government continued to support Vicksburg's efforts to commemorate the Civil War by directing the Department of the Interior to take control of the park and shift the focus from memorializing soldiers to informing tourists. Waldrep traces the work of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) in transforming the park into a twentieth-century jewel. As this shift occurred, the author notes, Northerners running the park acquiesced to the South's interpretations of the Civil War, agreeing that slavery had little to do with the war and bringing a sense of "moonlight and romance" to the history surrounding Vicksburg (p. 281).

Waldrep concludes that the national government was complicit in its racism. By using the history of the Vicksburg National Battlefield Park, the author is able to trace how the federal government was able to maintain a presence in Vicksburg since 1863 but chose to withdraw from the legacies of emancipation and racial equality in order to accept the South's version of the war. Waldrep also suggests why the Gettysburg campaign captivated Americans. He argues that Gettysburg pitted white soldiers against white soldiers while in Mississippi, the campaign involved black soldiers, slaves, and dire situations. Ultimately, he concludes, it was not as "elegant" as that of Gettysburg and was thus relegated to secondary status by the late 1900s.

The author's ability to show how the process of memory worked with respect to the Vicksburg battlefield leads to a far more comprehensive portrait of the Lost Cause and the retreat from public memory of war's legacy of emancipation. Clearly Waldrep's previous scholarship on violence and the criminal justice system in the New South contributes to his study of the Vicksburg National Park. But the author does not solely rely on past works. Instead, *Vicksburg's Long Shadow* is bolstered by extensive research into manuscripts, newspapers, legal documents, and even works of literature to provide a truly comprehensive illustration of what the park came to symbolize to many. Not only is this study well written and persuasively argued, it contributes to the historiography of Civil War memory by carefully looking at the concepts of racial justice and segregation up to the civil rights era. The picture that emerges adds a new dimension to the remembrance of the Civil War and helps clarify the dueling interpretations and shifting memories that continue to exist today. This important study will surely serve as the standard for years to come.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Alexander Mendoza. Review of Waldrep, Christopher, *Vicksburg's Long Shadow: The Civil War Legacy of Race and Remembrance.* H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. February, 2008.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14123

Copyright © 2008 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.