

# H-Net Reviews

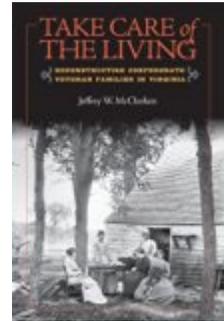
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jeffrey W. McClurken. *Take Care of the Living: Reconstructing Confederate Veteran Families in Virginia*. A Nation Divided: Studies in the Civil War Series. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009. Maps, tables, figures. 256 pp. \$39.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-2813-5.

Reviewed by Charles R. Bowery

Published on H-CivWar (October, 2010)

Commissioned by Martin P. Johnson



## Postwar Life in a Southern Community

Although Pittsylvania County, Virginia, with its county seat of Danville, was never the scene of combat or of Union depredations during the Civil War, this agricultural community in the south-central part of the state felt the war's impact nonetheless. Over 80 percent of the county's men of military age, or some 3,400, served in the Confederate military in some capacity, and the vast majority of these served in frontline units that fought in most of the major battles of the war's eastern theater. Compared with estimates that around 60 percent of Southern military-aged males served in the Confederate forces at large, Pittsylvanians clearly gave their all for the cause. A staggering one-quarter of these 3,400 men died during the course of the war from battle wounds, disease, or imprisonment, and almost 10 percent of the survivors were discharged from active duty during the war because of battle wounds or sickness. The war's physical and emotional toll was all-encompassing, and went far beyond the soldiers who served, extending to their loved ones.

In *Take Care of the Living*, Jeffrey W. McClurken, associate professor of history at the University of Mary Washington, mines the 1860 and 1870 U.S. Censuses, pension records, church and state records, and numerous manuscript sources to describe the various strategies that Pittsylvania veterans and their families used to cope with the war's effects. Other historians have written Confederate community studies, but McClurken's book is unique in that it focuses on the war's immediate after-

math and the ways in which survivors met their physical, financial, and spiritual needs. A series of case studies illuminates these strategies; McClurken documents a progression in the course of the 1870s and 1880s toward increasing efforts by the state to meet veterans' needs as private sources of support proved inadequate.

Pittsylvania County veterans, and the widows and families many of them left behind in death, tried first of all to cope with their loss by meeting their obligations internally. They sought to return to prewar occupations, but in many cases could not perform manual labor because of wounds. Many veterans and families moved locally or out of the county after they lost livelihoods and property. The next source of support was often the local Baptist Church. Churches offered financial and educational assistance for families and generally served as a support network. Much of this support was predicated on proper Christian behavior, and many supplicants were turned down or expelled from church communities for immoral activities. Local elites, usually businessmen, formed another source of support for veteran households in Pittsylvania County. William T. Sutherland, tobacco magnate, local and state government official, and Confederate veteran, survived and flourished after the war, maintaining his wealth and status. He was well known in the community, so veterans and family members frequently wrote to him for loans, outright cash gifts, or assistance in finding work. In most cases, Sutherland responded with some form of assistance, but these re-

relationships were mutually beneficial, as Sutherlin built what McClurken calls “human capital” that allowed him to achieve his own political goals.

Finally, the State of Virginia stepped in when other sources of aid failed to meet needs, offering assistance in two areas. The state’s mental hospitals, one in Williamsburg and one in Staunton, offered treatment to Confederate veterans struggling to adjust to peacetime life, and often to widows unable to cope with their loss. Many of the circumstances of these veterans appear similar to modern cases of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injury, but the author is careful in his analysis of nineteenth-century mental health procedures. In the late 1800s, the state also developed a system of pensions, artificial limbs, and assisted-living homes for veterans and family members. One of these, the Confederate Women’s Home in Richmond, did not close until 1989, and this reviewer remembers taking a primary school field trip to sing Christmas carols at the home in the late 1970s.

Virginia’s monetary support to her veterans never approached the scale of effort of the federal government, and it proved unsustainable into the twentieth century, but McClurken demonstrates that the Old Dominion recognized the state’s obligation to those who served and sacrificed.

While comprehensively researched, *Take Care of the Living* is not the final word on this topic. This well-written book points out the need for further study of other Confederate communities, and indeed of Northern communities as well. It is an especially timely book given the struggles of many families and communities to cope with the casualties of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Many of the support structures that McClurken identifies in postwar Pittsylvania—family, community, church, and state—are important resources for modern veterans and families. This book is a reminder of the all-consuming toll that war takes on the participants, both on and off the battlefield.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

**Citation:** Charles R. Bowery. Review of McClurken, Jeffrey W., *Take Care of the Living: Reconstructing Confederate Veteran Families in Virginia*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. October, 2010.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=30306>



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