

H-Net Reviews

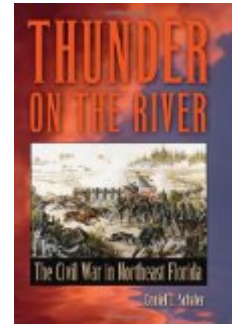
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Daniel L. Schafer. *Thunder on the River: The Civil War in Northeast Florida*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010. 352 pp. Illustrations, maps. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-3419-5.

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Published on H-CivWar (September, 2010)

Commissioned by Martin P. Johnson



Thunder in Florida

This useful text is a new manuscript that describes Jacksonville, Florida during the Civil War. It is well researched and provides numerous vignettes of the city and its people during the war. The first two chapters set the stage for the Civil War in Jacksonville and presents many characters in their prewar roles. It may be surprising to some that so many Jacksonville residents were from Northern states and supported the South once secession occurred. Others tried to mask Union leanings but eventually left under pressure.

Shortly after the war started, a sudden Union attack against Fernandina opened the doors to Jacksonville. The poorly sited, unfinished Confederate defenses provided little opposition to invaders who promptly began the first of four occupations. This initial occupation was not authorized, as there no plans to do more than show the flag. When the Federals arrived on March 12, 1862, many fled; those who stayed faced the variety of travails other Southern towns would experience. The Federals also explored well up the river, looking for contraband and vessels.

Federal troops left early in April but continued river patrols, initiating a series of shifting occupations dependent on military activity in the surrounding country. A second occupation lasted only a week before the Yankees retired to the coast, although they still retained control of the river. Runaway slaves took full advantage of the Union presence to escape down the river in small boats

or aboard gunboats.

When the Federals returned for their third occupation on March 10, 1863, many invaders were black soldiers from the 1st South Carolina Loyal Volunteers and another unit that would soon become the 2nd South Carolina. Both regiments were led by white officers and served in conjunction with other Northern regiments. Upon seeing black soldiers, Jacksonville residents had mixed emotions, to say the least. Of interest is the comment that some rebellious whites would rather be occupied by former slaves than Northern whites because they knew them as good men (p. 149). By April 1863, the Federals had left again, an event accompanied with considerable arson.

A year later, the Federal Army returned for good, immediately set up garrisons at selected river towns, and braced to hold the St. John's River basin against an expected counter attack. When the Confederates were successful at Olustee, Union reinforcements were rushed toward Jacksonville and other garrisons. The main route was via the St. John's River where the Confederate's had emplaced mines that sank several ships, including the *Maple Leaf*, a transport rented to the Union Army. As fast as the Federals removed the torpedoes, the Confederates placed more, hence the book's title.

As both sides came and went, refugees grew more numerous and many buildings were burned. A full chapter

is devoted to the Northern exodus. Like most refugees, these folk politically agitated for a strong Union military return to retake the town permanently. More importantly, the chapter on the Union exiles addresses military units composed of runaway slaves who took up arms to fight against the South. Two later chapters detail life for whites and blacks who remained in Jacksonville during the war. Throughout the text, there are references to what Floridians were doing outside Jacksonville. These comments provide a good picture of how the defenders of a neglected theater tried to fight their war against overwhelming resources. During and after the war, Union supplies were used to feed local residents, both black and white. Some Northern commentary about feeding freed slaves sounds far more Southern in tone than expected. Reconstruction did not proceed as well as expected and

its problems are discussed in some detail

The bibliography is extensive and represents the work of number students supported by grants. Schafer's blending of student research into his work represents the reality of a teaching academic interested in his students. A better map showing Union and Confederate military operations would have been helpful. The illustrations amplify the text in many cases, providing visual references to participants. Those showing the Federal occupation are even more relevant because they show Jacksonville as a town living under an army's domination. This book would serve well as a supplementary text in courses on the Civil War and Old South.

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Citation: Lawrence Babits. Review of Schafer, Daniel L., *Thunder on the River: The Civil War in Northeast Florida*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. September, 2010.

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