

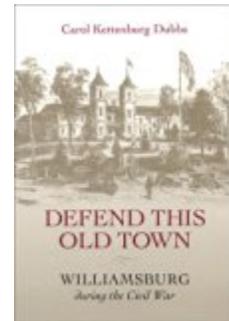
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Carol Kettenburg Dubbs. *Defend This Old Town: Williamsburg during the Civil War*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002. xvi + 406 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-2780-3.

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A Civil Community at War

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In *Defend This Old Town: Williamsburg during the Civil War*, Carol Kettenburg Dubbs offers a penetrating community study of a historic American city during the nation's most costly conflict. Dubbs's work is a culmination of more than a decade of research on the social structure and citizenry of the Virginia town. The author provides sound analysis of the 1862 battle of Williamsburg, the military occupation of the city by Federal forces and the lives of the Confederate citizens who faced the war's challenges. However, Dubbs is strongest in her focus on the role women and the Union military played in the Civil War experience of Williamsburg.

The book opens with an important overview of Williamsburg's strategic importance on the Virginia Peninsula only fifty miles from Richmond, a place at the heart of Union military planning in the spring of 1862. Confederate forces under John Magruder spent the majority of that period preparing a defensive line to protect the area east of Williamsburg. This defensive line would set the stage for a significant engagement around Williamsburg in May of that year when the Union forces under George McClellan marched up the Peninsula.

Dubbs's narrative of the May 5, 1862, battle of Williamsburg follows the Louisiana State University Press tradition of excellent operational studies of Civil War engagements. The quality of Dubbs's work on the Williamsburg clash parallels the work of Gordon C. Rhea

in his multi-volume history of the 1864 Overland Campaign. Especially helpful was the author's chapter entitled "PostMortem." This chapter brought valuable analysis to the battle by delving into the postwar debate over the outcome of the engagement and offering a balanced strategic assessment of the losses suffered. Both sides claimed victory in the press. Confederates claimed they held the field at the end of the day but Union soldiers argued that Winfield S. Hancock's successful right flank defense and maneuvering demonstrated that their forces were superior. Ultimately, Dubbs concludes that the battle benefited both sides by boosting Union morale and giving Confederates time to withdraw their supply trains toward Richmond in good order.

While discussing Confederate defense preparations, Dubbs develops the major figures and institutions in Williamsburg, including the community's largest employers, the Eastern Lunatic Asylum and the College of William and Mary. Prominent local citizens included Benjamin Ewell, the President of William and Mary when the war broke out. Ewell led many of Williamsburg's men off to war as a local militia organizer in 1861 and later rose to the rank of general in the Confederate service.

Through the author's discussion of Southern Unionist Lemuel Bowden and his family, she offers a valuable addition to the growing literature on Southern Unionists. Although the Bowden family suffered some criti-

cism from the local pro-Confederate population, they remained in the area up until the period of Union occupation. Patriarch Lemuel Bowden was then installed as mayor of the city until August of 1862 when he fled the area.

Besides men like Ewell and Bowden, Dubbs focuses a large portion of her work on the women of Williamsburg. Dubbs argues that Williamsburg's women played a central role in defending the old town from Union occupiers by using both manners and insults when the time called for them. Dubbs does an excellent job of relating the hardship which local women like Cynthia Coleman faced whenever the men of the town went off to war. She recounts their work in supplying the armies with clothing, their care of the infirm, and their struggle to find food during the harsh Virginia winters.

The town's slaves and free blacks also play an important role, although the author falls somewhat short in analyzing their lives. Dubbs recounts several stories of free blacks aiding the Confederate population as well as slaves running away from their masters. Source material may have played a factor in the author's decision not to focus a larger portion of the story on slaves and freed people, but a cursory review of the census or Southern Claims Commission records could have provided a more detailed picture. A chapter devoted specifically to discussing half of Williamsburg's sixteen hundred-person population would have made the book a stronger work overall.

Dubbs discusses the numerous raids and partisan operations by the Peninsula scouts and other Confederate cavalry in attempts to harass Union pickets and retake Williamsburg throughout 1863 and into early 1865. Despite a brief respite in April 1863 when Henry Wise's cavalry raided into Williamsburg and drove off the Union force there, the town remained in Federal hands throughout much of the war as an advanced outpost for the Union Army. Communication and relationships behind enemy lines were strained by this difficult situation. And, according to Dubbs, the end of the war brought no quick relief to Williamsburg, with most of its citizens returning sporadically and the local economy of the town remaining in shambles for a period of several years after the war.

Perhaps the most important contribution the book makes to Civil War scholarship is providing another

thoroughly researched community to test the arguments over the role Union military policy played in the lives of Southern civilians. The Williamsburg experience fits roughly the model forwarded by Mark Grimsley in his work *The Hard Hand of War* (1997). Grimsley outlines an evolution of Union policy from conciliation to pragmatism to hard war. Williamsburg citizens experienced firsthand each of these three phases of Union military policy. Carol Kettenburg Dubbs identifies Union authorities as lenient toward Southerners in the early war, with generals like George McClellan posting guards at the homes of many Williamsburg citizens for protection. But, as 1862 crossed into 1863 and as Federal administrators governing Williamsburg changed, the official military relationship with Southern civilians became ad hoc. Federal provosts awarded passes outside the Union lines and punishment for smuggling mail into the Confederacy on a case-by-case basis with no blanket policy. The longest segment of the Union occupation of Williamsburg is this pragmatic phase where the Southerners experienced Northern policy almost entirely on the whims of line soldiers and the Union provosts/governors. The civilians of Williamsburg saw a harsh change in late 1864 and early 1865 with the Union Secretary of War's orders to force an oath of allegiance upon the local population. Many citizens of the town viewed this forced oath with utter contempt and fear. This perceived infringement on Southern honor was Williamsburg's hard war. Since it was within federal lines during the majority of the war and remained relatively subdued, it did not face the overt destruction of Federal hard war policy as did other regions of the South.

The sum total of Dubbs's work is a solid community history of Williamsburg that is not likely to be eclipsed in the near future. The author's command of the primary sources and detailed analysis of social, economic, and military dimensions of Williamsburg's Civil War experience is impressive. The book fits nicely into the growing community studies genre with other works like Daniel E. Sutherland's *Seasons of War: The Ordeal of a Confederate Community* (1995). The volume reviews the Southern civilian wartime experience and fits nicely within this scholarship, which includes Steven V. Ash's *When the Yankees Came: Conflict and Chaos in the Occupied South* (1995). What emerges is not only an interesting narrative of a society at war but a valuable addition to the literature of an ever-growing field.

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