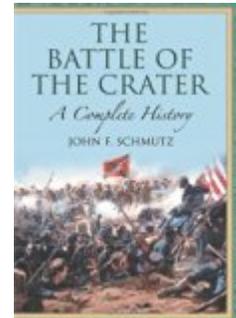


**John F. Schmutz.** *The Battle of the Crater: A Complete History.* Jefferson: McFarland, 2008. 428 pp. \$75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7864-3982-9.



**Reviewed by** Kevin Levin

**Published on** H-CivWar (August, 2009)

**Commissioned by** Matthew E. Mason (Brigham Young University)

The last several years has witnessed a sharp increase in the number of studies focused on the final year of the Civil War in Virginia and specifically the Petersburg Campaign. Much of this can be traced to a renewed scholarly interest in the evolution of the conflict from “limited” to “hard” war, the role of emancipation in redefining the purpose of the war, and a general consensus among historians that the post-Gettysburg period cannot be understood simply as leading directly to the Confederate surrender at Appomattox in April 1865. Given this sharp increase in attention to the Petersburg Campaign—plus the popularity of the movie *Cold Mountain* (2003), which included a vivid recreation of the battle—it should come as no surprise that historians would take a much closer look at the Battle of the Crater, which took place on July 31, 1864. The novelty of the mine explosion, the use of an entire division of United States Colored Troops (USCT) in the attack, and the close-quarter fighting that ensued present the historian with the ideal case study for understanding the broad parameters of the war in 1864.

This study by John F. Schmutz is the most recent and the most thorough contribution to this growing body of literature on the Crater.[1] Readers looking for a detailed account of the ebb and flow of battle as well as the broader strategic and operational decisions involved will be pleased. Schmutz has mined an extensive amount of archival sources as well as published accounts and provides a minute-by-minute account of the battle. His account includes the challenges involved in the construction of the mine, the destruction of the early-morning explosion of the mine, and the bloody fighting which followed. Although the author’s attention to tactical detail is impressive, the lack of detailed maps that might have focused on the regimental level and taken into account the complexity of Confederate defenses renders the narrative at times difficult to follow.

While the standard account of the battle tends to concentrate on the counterattack of Brig. Gen. William Mahone’s division around 9:00 am Schmutz demonstrates that much of the Confeder-

ate success that day can be explained by the steadfastness of Brig. Gen. Stephen Elliott's South Carolina brigade, which bore the brunt of the explosion along with other units from North Carolina and various artillery batteries. Schmutz also corrects the popular perception (no doubt influenced by *Cold Mountain*) that the Union attack never managed to advance beyond the confines of the crater itself. Such an image belies a Confederate position made up of a complex maze of earthworks, traverses, covered ways, and a host of other obstacles. The initial Union advance of three divisions in Gen. Ambrose Burnside's Ninth Corps managed to take and hold positions north and south of the crater and a series of bombproofs and cavalier trenches constructed behind the advanced line of the Confederate position. Schmutz provides complete coverage of the role played by the two brigades of USCTs in Brig. Gen. Edward Ferrero's Fourth Division. These units were involved in some of the furthest advances of the morning before they were pushed back, along with the rest of the white units, by Mahone's division. As in the case of black Union soldiers generally, the experience of USCTs at the Crater has rarely been acknowledged or understood.

If there is a criticism of Schmutz's handling of the evidence it is a tendency to overlook the important distinction between wartime and postwar accounts. Questions about Mahone's role and place on the battlefield must be understood in the context of the political revolution that took place in Virginia under his leadership of the widely popular and biracial party, the Readjusters. The four years of Readjuster control of the state assembly as well as the election of a Readjuster governor led to a bitter public debate that included attacks against Mahone's war record--some of it written by the men in his old command, including Brig. Gen. David Weisiger, who commanded the Virginia brigade in the division. In addition, any attempt to pin down the contributions to Confederate victory must also take into account the continued postwar debate between Virginians, who

exerted a great deal of control on how the battle was remembered and commemorated, and former comrades from North and South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama who cried foul over their inability to challenge accounts that placed the brunt of the responsibility for victory on Mahone's Virginians.[2]

The extensive and detailed coverage of the tactical level of battle also makes it difficult to follow important interpretive points throughout the narrative. Arguably, one of the most significant arguments made comes in the author's analysis of how Confederates responded to the presence of USCTs on the battlefield. Schmutz rightly points out that the men in Weisiger's Virginia brigade were outraged after being informed that the Union attack included large numbers of black soldiers and would have viewed their presence as something akin to "an insurrection of slaves": "Almost half of the brigade's men were from the immediate Petersburg area and saw themselves as standing between their relatives and friends in Petersburg and utter havoc of the same sort that Nat Turner had loosed on their kin years before" (p. 238).

Given the historiography's skewed coverage of how Confederates responded to the presence of USCTs, Schmutz's observation is both refreshing and significant. Unfortunately, he fails to apply these observations even more broadly. The men in the Virginia brigade would have indeed entertained horrific images attached to Turner's revolt and the attempted insurrection by John Brown, but most white Southerners--not just Virginians--in the Army of Northern Virginia would have acknowledge the USCT presence as a slave insurrection, given their antebellum roles and responsibilities in protecting their loved ones and community in a slave society. Schmutz also missed an opportunity to interpret the post-battle massacre itself and the march of black and white Union prisoners through the streets of Petersburg in full view of its citizens as an expression of this deep-

seated fear of slave insurrection. The author's failure to draw the full implications of his observations are compounded when discussing the evidence of the bayoneting of USCTs by their white comrades as they fell back from advanced positions following the Confederate countercharge as well as the limited evidence that black soldiers refused to take Confederates prisoners on more than one occasion. Schmutz should be applauded for including these accounts, as it highlights the confused nature of the fighting in and around the crater and the hatred and bitterness that defined race relations at the time, but the explanation as to why these unfortunate incidents occurred at all must be understood as stemming from a very different set of factors.[3]

Schmutz's ultimate goal is to better understand and explain the failure of the Union attack rather than focus on interpretive challenges such as race. Ultimately, the author builds his explanation for the Union debacle on a Joint Committee investigation, which placed much of the blame on General George G. Meade in contrast with an earlier investigation that assigned responsibility to Burnside. Schmutz goes on to point out multiple problems with the Union plan and attack, from the bickering between commanders at the highest levels to the incompetence on the division level, to the failure to remove obstacles in front of advanced positions that delayed the initial advance, to the failure to move quickly beyond the confines of the crater itself and into Petersburg. No doubt, all of these reasons played a role in this failed assault.

Though we are likely to see publication of additional studies of the Battle of the Crater in the future, we are unlikely to see one that matches the scope and detail of the fighting that took place. Readers interested in this traditional approach to military history will have much to consider. Those interested in the kinds of interpretive questions addressed by academic historians relating to soldiers, the home front, politics, and race will be

stimulated at different points in the narrative, but left wanting a more complete and thorough analysis.

#### Notes

[1]. Three books, including the present study under review, have been published on the Crater over the past two years: Alan Axelrod, *The Horrid Pit: The Battle of the Crater, The Civil War's Cruellest Mission* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2007); and Richard Slotkin, *No Quarter: The Battle of the Crater, 1864* (New York: Random House, 2009).

[2]. Kevin M. Levin, "William Mahone, the Lost Cause, and Civil War History," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 113 (2005): 379-412; Kevin M. Levin, "Is There Not Glory Enough to Give Us All a Share?: An Analysis of Competing Memories of the Battle of the Crater," in *The View from the Ground: Experiences of Civil War Soldiers*, ed. Aaron Sheehan-Dean (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky: 2007), 227-248.

[3]. See George S. Burkhardt, *Confederate Rage, Yankee Wrath: No Quarter in the Civil War* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007).

,

.

kindled

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

**Citation:** Kevin Levin. Review of Schmutz, John F. *The Battle of the Crater: A Complete History*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. August, 2009.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24292>



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