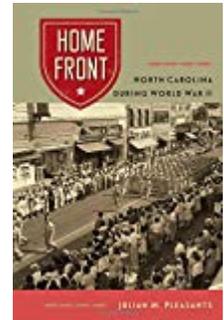


**Julian M. Pleasants.** *Home Front: North Carolina during World War II.* Tallahassee: University Press of Florida, 2017. 380 pp. \$89.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8130-5425-4.



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In 1964, historian Sarah McCulloh Lemon wrote a booklet aptly titled *North Carolina's Role in World War II*, providing an overview of the state's experience in the twentieth century's largest conflagration. This work remains in print and received a revision and expansion in 2013, linking the state's experiences in both world wars. [1] In *Home Front: North Carolina during World War II*, historian Julian M. Pleasants seeks to provide greater coverage to the individuals and wartime activities that impacted the state.

A professor emeritus of history and former director of the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program at the University of Florida, Pleasants earned his PhD at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and previously authored three biographies of mid-twentieth-century North Carolina politicians. His career work ably places him to explore the Old North State's wartime experience. The result, however, is underwhelming.

Pleasant argues that World War II proved beneficial to North Carolina. The war “helped move

North Carolina toward becoming a more productive, energetic, and enterprising state” (p. 11). To support his thesis, Pleasant draws from personal papers at state and university archives, student theses and dissertations, an array of oral histories, period magazines and newspapers, and various published primary and secondary sources. Through cogent, accessible writing, Pleasant's eleven chapters focus on one specific subject area where the war impacted the state. These include Selective Service, race relations, women, rationing, education, prisoners of war, submarine warfare, state military heroes/notables, economics, and military preparedness. He does not take his reader into a deeper analytical journal with the subject matter, opting instead to use the anecdotes and histories of the wartime experiences in North Carolina to support his argument the war changed the state.

Readers of *Home Front* will benefit from Pleasants's experience using oral history. He introduces the voices and words of participants throughout his chapters, merging more recent historiography

with the previous recounting of the state's wartime experience. No single participant's voice, or group of voices, works its way through all of the chapters. Mid-level managers and leaders are largely absent, with emphasis instead placed on the voices of common men and women. Pleasant leaned heavily on the oral history work of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and those gathered by the University of North Carolina Television. A review of his endnotes and bibliography indicate he did not work extensively with the rich and diverse military collection at the North Carolina State Archives. Over half of the state's counties collected records during the war and much of this material remains untouched by scholars decades later. This material might have enhanced his chapters or at least better illustrated them. A scant sixteen images and one map grace the 380-page manuscript.

Frustratingly, small factual errors appear with regularity in every chapter. While the writing avoids military jargon and is accessible for practically all ages, readers with a modicum of twentieth-century military or North Carolina history will find these errors increasingly distracting. To cite a few examples, Pleasants write about there being "only two verified landings of German spies on the East Coast" (p. 136) in World War II when there was a third in 1944 in Maine (Operation Magpie). Pleasants also makes no mention of Greensboro native Kenneth C. Royall serving as a defense attorney for the spies caught in the two landings of Operation Pastorius. Citing the reviewer's own work, Pleasants incorrectly mentions the Civil Air Patrol ceasing coastal patrol operations on August 1, 1943, instead of the actual date of August 31 (p. 144), and the *Enola Gay* is described as a "stripped down B-17" rather than a B-29 (p. 289).

Looking beyond the factual errors within the text, fault can be found in the matter of incorporating research publications about North Carolina's wartime years since Lemmon's 1964 booklet. On a basic level Pleasants accomplishes this yet

also regresses at points. Little is mentioned about the state's civilian defense operations, wartime natural and manmade disasters and their impact on local communities, the training of foreign military personnel in the state, convalescence and rest and recuperation centers, a more expansive list of state wartime notables, or strategically important military maneuvers in the state, particularly the 1941 Carolina Maneuvers and the 1943 Knollwood Maneuver. The military component of North Carolina can be summarized as the construction of bases and training facilities, production of war materiel, and operations of and against German U-boats along the state's coastline. This material mirrors previous studies.

These criticisms distract from Pleasants's emphasis on the home front and how the war affected state customs, traditions, and attitudes. Broadly speaking, Pleasants proves his argument. With a solid selection of primary and secondary material at his disposal, however, Pleasants provides readers with an underwhelming statement of the obvious: "The conclusion of the war on August 14, 1945, found North Carolina drastically different than it had been when the fighting started on December 7, 1941" (p. 304). Technically yes, the state was drastically different within a tight chronological framing. The author briefly teases at the future progression of the state. He notes how Tar Heels became exposed to new ideas, religions, and cultures, and that state government increased its reach and capability while federal defense spending had increased.

The postwar changes are highly relevant to the work and warrant a brief glimpse of where North Carolina went in the latter half of the 1940s. Pleasants previously published the biography of W. Kerr Scott, North Carolina governor from 1949 to 1953. In his 2014 book, *The Political Career of W. Kerr Scott: The Squire from Haw River*, Pleasants writes that when Scott entered office in 1948-49 the per capita income of North Carolina ranked forty-fifth out of forty-eight states, illiteracy remained a

problem, and 66 percent of the population lived in rural areas. He argues that World War II's economic surplus in North Carolina set the stage for Scott's success.[2] These metrics contradict the "drastic" impact of World War II on the state, at least in regard to its social/economic/political trajectory—primarily because Pleasant uses the exact same statistics to describe North Carolina in 1941 (p. 4).

Historian Bruce Schulman researched economic development in the south from 1938 to 1980 and found the state did not significantly profit from the war. North Carolina suffered the fourth-lowest ratio of war facilities to prewar manufacturing in the entire nation, with the state's leaders making "only lackluster efforts" to attract defense dollars.[3] Serious changes to improve the state's economy, race policies, and cultural infrastructure began to materialize and make significant gains in the mid-1950s and early 1960s. If anything, the war arguably proved an aberration for North Carolina and less a fundamental or drastic shift in the institutions and lives of its residents.

Beyond providing a more extensive one-volume overview of North Carolina in World War II, *Home Front* offers little new or previously lost information. The value of this work is found in the accessible writing and the bibliography. For potential scholars of the state's military history, Pleasants has provided a helpful starting point for researchers and inspiration for younger generations of Tar Heels to learn about where and how "the Good War" touched the lives and communities in the land of the longleaf pine.

#### Notes

[1]. Sarah McCulloh Lemmon and Nancy Midgette, *North Carolina and the Two World Wars* (Raleigh: Office of Archives and History, North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 2013).

[2]. Julian M. Pleasants, *The Political Career of W. Kerr Scott: The Squire from Haw River* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 3-4.

[3]. Bruce J. Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 99.

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