



**Stephen V. Ash.** *Rebel Richmond: Life and Death in the Confederate Capital.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019. 296 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4696-5098-2.

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A fresh-faced lieutenant screams from a hospital bed. Shopkeepers fence stolen goods, while an equally entrepreneurial embalmer smuggles deserters and draft dodgers out of town in coffins. Neighbors hear a confectioner lashing an enslaved girl with a leather strap; the next day, the four-year-old child is found dead. In a filthy shack near the wharves, a young prostitute dies alone from a laudanum overdose. These kinds of stories are rarely commemorated with monuments or dramatized in reenactments. But they are all Civil War stories, and they all find a place in Stephen V. Ash's outstanding *Rebel Richmond: Life and Death in the Confederate Capital*.

Richmond was a national capital and a target for attack, a commercial hub and a manufacturing powerhouse, a haven for refugees and a place of captivity. But although historians have thoroughly documented the city's political and military histories, the experiences of its humbler residents, whose numbers swelled to more than 100,000 during the conflict, have received less attention. The purpose of Ash's book is to explore "how ordinary Richmonders"—black and white, enslaved and free, male and female, rich and poor, civilian and soldier—"fared in the maelstrom of war" (p. 3). Ash quite logically emphasizes Richmond's uniqueness, but the city's prominence in both history and historiography means that this

book will fascinate not only local historians but also readers interested in everything from common soldiers and women's history to class conflict and slave resistance.

Ash surveys life in wartime Richmond in a series of thematic chapters. The city's diverse population was fractured along lines of wealth, status, and occupation, but most Richmonders faced an increasingly severe struggle to get by as neighbors multiplied and resources dwindled in what one local paper aptly called the "metropolis of the South" (p. 19). Richmond's population may have tripled during the war as bureaucrats, soldiers, refugees, impressed slaves, and drifters, driven by force or free will, crowded into the city. With housing scarce and rents soaring, civilians squeezed into rented rooms, hotels, and offices while soldiers and enslaved laborers lived in nearby barracks and encampments and a growing number of captives—including political prisoners and captured Union soldiers—languished in jails and camps. And although proximity to a rich agricultural hinterland had kept antebellum Richmond well fed, wartime disruption and overcrowding created a parallel crisis of sustenance. As with the housing shortage, public efforts to increase food supply met with mixed results: most Richmonders did not starve, but the poor and the wards of the Confederate gov-

ernment waged a desperate struggle for subsistence.

Unlike food and shelter, jobs were plentiful in a city where fierce competition for workers pitted private manufacturers against public-sector employers and the military. Even though Confederate officers detailed soldiers to work in factories and other productive enterprises, the labor shortage remained acute, so considerable numbers of enslaved people, free blacks, and white women and children filled the void. Of course, with so many strangers coming and going, old fears of insurrection and new apprehensions of disloyalty fostered an atmosphere of suspicion. Deserters and Unionist agents did not topple the city's Confederate power structure, but the prevalence of crime and immorality, coupled with resistance by enslaved people, made many affluent white Richmonders fear the worst. The outbreak of Richmond's infamous bread riots in April 1863 seemed to portend a more general uprising of the city's motley underclass, and for the last two years of the war, local officials mixed poor relief with paramilitary repression in an effort to keep order. The proximity of military force reassured Richmond's elite, but the proliferation of military hospitals, complete with the sights, sounds, and smells of suffering and death, provided a constant reminder of the war's costs.

Ash has indeed brought "wartime Richmond to life as a city of flesh-and-blood men, women, and children of many sorts who responded in very human ways to extraordinarily trying circumstances" (p. 5). The success of this rich social history stems from diligent archival research. Ash delved into a variety of manuscript materials, including personal correspondence, the records of the Southern Claims Commission, church and hospital records, and letters received by the Confederate Provost Marshal's Office and the Confederate Secretary of War. These dusty files yielded a trove of poignant stories that demonstrate how Richmond's diverse residents navigated a city shaken

to its core by an increasingly revolutionary conflict. From the arrest of an African American bartender who allegedly spoke to a white man with "insolent and provoking language" (p. 175) to hospital matrons' attempts to brighten their dreary living quarters, *Rebel Richmond* compellingly illuminates how Richmonders lived, labored, and died in a city where the war sometimes reached the suburbs and was never far away.

This book complements previous accounts of wartime Richmond by Emory M. Thomas and Ernest B. Furgurson, which relied (particularly in Thomas's case) more heavily on published materials.[1] It also will provide opportunities for comparative analysis if read alongside other urban histories, such as Wendy Hamand Venet's study of Civil War-era Atlanta and William Warren Rogers Jr.'s work on Montgomery.[2] Indeed, what Richmond shared with other Confederate cities may be as important as what set it apart. Richmond's status as a political, industrial, and military center certainly made it a distinctly attractive target for Union strategists and a singularly powerful symbol of Confederate nationalism, and Ash quite reasonably underscores its uniqueness. But many aspects of Richmond's story had parallels in other Confederate cities. Union war planners coveted New Orleans and Atlanta; manufacturing boomed in Selma and Augusta; refugees streamed into Raleigh and Columbia. *Rebel Richmond* therefore underscores the centrality of cities to the story of the Confederacy. As Andrew L. Slap and Frank Towers have pointed out, for all the obvious importance of Southern plantation agriculture, and for all the Lost Cause paeans to an agrarian way of life, cities were at the heart of the Confederate project, from the meeting of secession conventions to the manufacturing of war materiel and the marshaling of armies.[3] *Rebel Richmond* demonstrates this point brilliantly and poignantly. Regardless of where they came from or why they were there, Richmonders—all 100,000 or more of

them—experienced an emphatically urban Civil War.

#### Notes

[1]. Emory M. Thomas, *The Confederate State of Richmond: A Biography of the Capital* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971); Ernest B. Furgurson, *Ashes of Glory: Richmond at War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996).

[2]. Wendy Hamand Venet, *A Changing Wind: Commerce and Conflict in Civil War Atlanta* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014); William Warren Rogers Jr., *Confederate Home Front: Montgomery during the Civil War* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999).

[3]. Andrew L. Slap and Frank Towers, “Introduction: Historians and the Urban South’s Civil War,” in *Confederate Cities: The Urban South during the Civil War Era*, ed. Andrew L. Slap and Frank Towers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015): 1-23.

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