

### Warriors Into Workers: The Civil War and the Formation of Urban-Industrial Society in a Northern City

Paul Paskoff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Paskoff, Paul (2004) "Warriors Into Workers: The Civil War and the Formation of Urban-Industrial Society in a Northern City," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 6 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.6.2.30

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol6/iss2/30>

## Review

Paskoff, Paul

Spring 2004

**Johnson, Russell L.** *Warriors Into Workers: The Civil War and the Formation of Urban-Industrial Society in a Northern City.* Fordham University Press, \$55.00 ISBN 823222691

Basic training:

The army and the rise of industrial America

A truism about wars is that they profoundly change the societies and individuals engaged in them. That is, at least in part, the implication of the phrase the crucible of war. One would think therefore that a familiar theme of Civil War history would be the war's enduring impact on the men in the Union army as it first transformed them from pre-industrial civilians into soldiers and then, by dint of the discipline and hardships of army life, transformed soldiers into a suitable potential workforce for a rapidly industrializing postwar America. Curiously, only the first of these two transformations has hitherto been the subject of historical analysis. The second of the transformations is the central concern of Russell L. Johnson's book, **Warriors Into Workers**, which, as its title suggests, argues that service in the war prepared the northern laboring population for the demands and rhythms of factory work and urban living.

Although the book's geographical focus is the quintessentially average mid-19th century small midwestern city of Dubuque, Iowa, the book's two aims are nevertheless quite ambitious. First, Johnson seeks to determine the social status, occupation, and wealth of each of Dubuque's 1,321 volunteer soldiers—all soldiers from Dubuque had volunteered—and as many of these men who survived to be enumerated in the postwar census. His other goal is the more important one of demonstrating that army service in the war shaped Dubuque's soldiers into suitable human material for the city's postwar industrial economy. The crucial inference that Johnson wishes his readers to draw from his findings is that what happened in Dubuque and to its citizen soldiers during and immediately after the Civil War presumably occurred throughout the North.

Johnson derives his characterization of Dubuque and its soldiers from an analysis of data extracted from an impressive range of sources, including the Iowa and federal manuscript censuses and army and veterans' pension files, as well as a variety of Dubuque County records and published directories of the city of Dubuque. These data enable Johnson to determine the social and economic status of the city's men of military age, both those who served in the Union army and those who remained civilians, and to uncover the demography and economy of the city of Dubuque during the 1850s and 1860s. He uses these data to compute prewar and postwar rates of social, occupational, and geographical mobility for veterans and those who did not serve, and these mobility rates are intended to provide the essential quantitative support for his thesis about the war's role in preparing the way for industrialization. The collection of such information and its preparation for computer analysis are tedious and demanding tasks, and Johnson deserves the thanks of his readers and students of Civil War history for having executed the job with such success.

**Warriors Into Workers** is divided into two parts, along with an introduction, conclusion, and two statistical appendixes. Johnson uses the Introduction to present an historiographical essay and to lay out his thesis that military service in the Civil War. . . made a significant contribution to the creation of American industrial society, a contribution that has been heretofore unappreciated. For Johnson, the Union army paralleled urban life. . . and was also a workplace similar to a manufactory. . . . As he acknowledges, the argument developed in the book reflects the influence of the seminal work of two scholars, Maris Vinovskis and, especially, Richard Kohn. Both have urged historians to approach military history as a form of social history. In **Warriors Into Workers**, Johnson has answered their call.

The first part of the book provides a social, economic, and demographic portrait of pre-war Dubuque, as well as a description of the city as it geared up to play its part in the ever-growing war and a prosopography of the city's citizens who volunteered for the army. It is, however, in the book's second part that Johnson presents the evidence and develops the argument to support his central thesis about the transformative influence of wartime military service upon the men who left civilian life to become soldiers of the Union. The means by which the army achieved this transformation included training in the manual of arms and close-order drill and a harsh discipline that assured obedience to commands, order in crowded camps and, of course, steadiness in battle.

Victory over the Confederacy's armies was one result of this conditioning. Another was a change in the expectations and perceptions of millions of young men who, having been schooled to war, were also thereby prepared for the rapidly proliferating factories in the United States after 1865. In this sense, what Johnson has discerned is the means by which the Civil War fashioned a new mentalit  among an emerging industrial working class. His work therefore nicely complements that of Heather Cox Richardson, in *The Greatest Nation of the Earth*, concerning the transformation of the national government's orientation and reach under the leadership of the Republican Party during the war. Moreover, Johnson's findings are consistent with the shift in the world-view of northern intellectuals during the war, described by Louis Menand in his book, *The Metaphysical Club*. Taken together, Menand, Richardson, and Johnson support and amplify Senator John Sherman's trenchant observation that the Civil War had greatly enlarged the scope and magnitude of American capitalists' conceptions of what was feasible in the way of investment.

**Warriors Into Workers** presents a provocative argument that intuitively makes good sense, and one has the feeling that Johnson's thesis must or, at least, should be true. Although the quantitative evidence pertaining to mobility rates and wealth differentials between veterans and non-veterans does not bear directly on changing attitudes toward work and time, the data do provide at least inferential support for the thesis that Dubuque's citizens who joined the army came back from the war changed men. That having been said, Johnson's argument prompts the question of how important was the Civil War to the industrialization of the United States after 1865. Johnson does not assert that the war was essential for industrialization. He does, however, implicitly suggest that the rapidity and success with which the United States industrialized was a result of the war. According to him, the pace of industrialization was due in no small part to the fact the nation's capitalists could draw upon a supply of labor inured by war to hardship and accustomed by military service to discipline and working in large groups for a common purpose all desirable qualities in a factory workforce.

Put another way, Johnson makes a case for discontinuity, rather than continuity, in 19th century American economic history, and the watershed in the process of industrialization is the Civil War. According to him, manufacturing before the war was largely done by artisans paid by the piece; after the war, industrial production was increasingly carried out by large aggregations of wage

workers collected in factories and mills. In so arguing, Johnson perhaps over-reaches somewhat. During the antebellum years, there were several lines of industrial products, such as textiles, boots and shoes, and iron nails and rails, which were turned out by wage labor working in factories and mills. The disciplining and tempering of a workforce by military service clearly had nothing to do with the pre-war progress of those industries. Nor, for that matter, did large numbers of Great Britain's industrial workers of the 18th and 19th centuries acquire their work habits and time discipline in the army. Johnson's argument is further strained by his assertion that the hardships of military service and battle were similar to those experienced by an urban-industrial working class. William Tecumseh Sherman, after all, never said that industrial production was hell. But these overstatements do not seriously weaken an otherwise compelling argument, and **Warriors Into Workers** is a valuable contribution to our understanding of the central importance of the Civil War in American history.

*Paul F. Paskoff is an associate professor and chair of Louisiana State University's Department of History. His published works have dealt primarily with 19th century U.S. industrialization. He has recently completed a monograph on antebellum public policy.*