

Confederate Invention: The Story of the Confederate States Patent Office and Its Inventors

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Review

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Knight, H. Jackson *Confederate Invention: The Story of the Confederate States Patent Office and Its Inventors*. Louisiana State University Press, \$55.00 ISBN 978-0-8071-3762-8

Delving Deeper into Confederate Patent History

In the work that has been done on the Civil War, few potentially interesting topics have eluded scholarly attention. H. Jackson Knight, however, has found one in his new book on the Confederate Patent Office. Knight explains the functioning of this important, but overlooked, part of the Confederate government. Inventors needed a patent office to make inventing worthwhile; at the same time the Confederate government needed new technology to help fight the war. Knight, himself a registered United States patent agent, is uniquely qualified to undertake a study such as this. He discovered patent office records at the Virginia State Archives and at the Museum of the Confederacy in Richmond that had lain neglected by other historians. Knight had two goals in writing his book: to describe the Confederate patent system and the workings of the Confederate Patent Office and to explain why the southern states had so few patented inventions both before and during the war.

Knight begins with a discussion of patent law in the United States prior to the war, explaining how American inventors acquired and maintained patents. Unfortunately, he devotes so much attention to this subject that he does not get to the stated purpose of his work until chapter six. While an explanation of how patent law works was undoubtedly necessary, a more brief account would have made the book flow more smoothly and move toward the author's stated goals much faster. Following an account of patent law, Knight then addresses the question of why Southerners did not invent at the same rate as their northern counterparts. After discarding possible explanations such as that agriculture did not need new inventions, the South had too few educational institutions, and the South lacked the mills and other industry to spur invention, he settles on the idea

that immigration was the key. European immigrants overwhelmingly chose to live in the North, and supposedly had the technical expertise to invent, northern states received more patents. But, this conclusion is speculation on Knight's part, and he does not cite any evidence to support his contention that northern inventors were mainly recent immigrants, which one would expect if his theory was correct. On the other hand, his explanation of why, during the war, Confederates made so few inventions is hard to dispute: the uncertainty of the conflict stopped them from patenting inventions.

Knight conducts his review of the Confederate Patent Office itself by devoting a chapter to each year of its existence. This approach shows how the office developed throughout the war. At the end of each chapter, he discusses some of the inventions patented during that year. Because the act that created the Confederate Patent Office was based on the patent law of the United States, it functioned much like the pre-war office Knight described earlier in the book. Knight's account is the story of an overworked bureaucracy trying to keep the Patent Office in the black while still performing its duties to the best of its ability. The office's tribulations are evident in the yearly reports of the Commissioner of Patents to the Confederate Congress, required by the law that created the office. At first, these reports were long and detailed, showing a patent office, and a government, that was full of hope and vigor. But, by 1864 and 1865, Rufus Randolph Rhodes, who served throughout the war as the Commissioner, was reduced to writing one-page reports that contained little information due to a lack of paper, ink, and hope. The history of the patent office was a microcosm of the history of the rebellion itself.

The most impressive thing about this book is the meticulous research that went into it, evident in the 139 pages of appendices. The first appendix lists every patent recorded in the Confederate States Patent Office's annual reports and ledgers. Knight discovered that the widely quoted number of 266 Confederate patents is wrong because it did not include patents listed for the first months of 1865. The accurate number is 274, and the correction indicates that Commissioner Rhodes did his job to the bitter end. The second appendix provides a small biography of each person who received a patent or was assigned control of a patent. This appendix is valuable, in and of itself, as a record of who these Confederate inventors were and what they did before and after the war. The last appendix deals with the assignment book of the patent office and provides brief summaries of each assignment. This information will prove valuable to other historians who wish to build on the strong foundation of

Knight's work. Overall, this is an interesting and valuable study of a largely ignored but important part of the Confederate government and its war effort.

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