

### Virginia at War, 1865

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## Review

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**Davis, William C. (ed.) and Robertson, James I., Jr. (ed.).** *Virginia At War, 1865*. University Press of Kentucky, \$40.00 ISBN 978-0-8131-3468-0

### Bringing the War (and a Series) to a Close

On January 1, 1865, in Richmond, Virginia, Judith Brockenbrough McGuire wrote in her diary, “Our children came over from Union Hill yesterday, to take their dinner from the contents of the captured box, and were detained by snow and rain.” While the white sugar, preserves, raisins and pickles in the box may have lightened her family’s spirits for a short time, the snow and rain were more indicative of the year to come. For McGuire, and for most other Virginians, life in 1865 was often like that particular New Year’s Day – inclement and dreary with brief splashes of sweetness and hope. In *Virginia At War, 1865*, the fifth and final installment in the series edited by William C. Davis and James I. Robertson Jr., McGuire and eight contemporary Civil War historians share different views of what it meant to fight, die, live, survive, and taste freedom in an Old Dominion transitioning from war to an uneasy peace.

The articles and McGuire’s diary entries combine to cover old territory and to provide new insights on the war and its aftermath in Virginia. Chris Calkins condenses more than three decades of research to offer a succinct account of the military operations in the first quarter of 1865 that culminated in Lee’s surrender at Appomattox Court House. Likewise, E. Lawrence Abel draws on his vast knowledge of Civil War-era music to paint a picture of how Richmonders continued to entertain and be entertained during some of the bleakest hours of the war. Ginette Aley focuses on how women and their families, both white and black, experienced life apart from, but always connected to, the battlefield. Her article is complemented by Jaime Amanda Martinez’s essay, which gives a broader picture of Virginia’s shattered economy in the months before and immediately after Appomattox. F. Lawrence McFall, Jr. relates how the town of Danville absorbed the flotsam of a sinking government and earned distinction as

the last capital of the Confederacy.

While all four of these articles are solid contributions to Civil War scholarship, the contributions of Kevin Levin, Ervin L. Jordan Jr., John M. McClure and Judith Brockenbrough McGuire are most noteworthy. Levin, in particular, breaks new ground with his analysis of the Army of Northern Virginia's demobilization in the weeks following Appomattox. Levin takes readers beyond the genteel and romantic image of Lee and Grant in Wilmer McLean's parlor to focus on the individual, ragged, disillusioned soldiers who trudged home in defeat to face an uncertain future. Although Levin acknowledges that reconciliation and reunion would come in time, it would not be the reality that Virginia Confederates faced as they returned home to rebuild their lives.

Ervin L. Jordan Jr. demonstrates in his article on Afro-Virginians after the war that former Confederate soldiers were not the only ones left to ponder what their new lives meant after Appomattox. It was a bitter-sweet time for former slaves: sweet because they were free and bitter because most former Confederates were not ready to fully accept that freedom. Like it or not, the two groups were partners in an awkward dance that neither would learn for many years to come. Jordan's article is followed most appropriately by John McClure's examination of the war's aftermath. McClure ponders some the same questions as Levin and Jordan while focusing on the steps taken by both the state and federal government to establish order in a commonwealth and a society largely destroyed and forever changed by war.

Like previous volumes in this series, the final words in *Virginia At War, 1865* belong to one who lived during the Civil War and to one who has spent most of his life researching and writing about it: Judith Brockenbrough McGuire and James I. "Bud" Robertson Jr. In diary entries richly annotated by Robertson, McGuire voices the hopes and the desperation of a dying cause while also dutifully recording the daily details of life as a woman and as a refugee in the Confederacy's capital from August 11, 1864, to May 14, 1865. As Robertson notes in his introduction to this last set of entries, "Reduced to two meals a day, and hearing weekly of the deaths of friends and acquaintances in service, the diarist continued recording her observations. The 1865 entries read like a long obituary for the Southern Confederacy" (152).

Not only did Robertson annotate McGuire's diary entries, he and co-editor William C. Davis wrote introductory essays for each volume and contributed their own articles along the way. They also assembled and edited the work of numerous well-known Civil War historians and new voices too. The ultimate success of this volume, as well as the four that preceded it in the series, should be credited to them.

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