

The Jackson County War: Reconstruction and Resistance in Post-Civil War Florida.

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Review

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Weinfeld, Daniel R. *The Jackson County War: Reconstruction and Resistance in Post-Civil War Florida.* University of Alabama Press, \$29.95 ISBN 978-0-8173-1745-4

A Unique Perspective on Reconstruction

The Jackson County War recounts the aftermath of the American Civil War in a western county of the Florida panhandle. Daniel Weinfeld's chief inquiry surrounds the nature and frequency of violence, with murder estimates in the county ranging "from close to one hundred to twice that total" between 1869 and 1872 (xi). To explain this hostility, the author proposes a "continuous narrative," starting with key wartime incidents in the county, continuing through emancipation and Reconstruction, and concluding with the cessation of violence in 1872 (xiv). Weinfeld's investigation also "explores the impact on Jackson County of political decisions emanating from Washington and Tallahassee and social and economic developments sweeping the postwar South. In addition, to explain the outbreaks of violence... [this book] shows how the people of Jackson County, Florida, reacted to the unfolding events of Reconstruction....."(xiv).

Largely relying on family papers and newspapers, Weinfeld's thin volume (143 pages of text) opens with a brief summary of the county's wartime experience before delving into the impact of emancipation and Confederate defeat. The early chapters deliver a county-level view of Freedmen's Bureau operations, an emerging social order, and shifting economic patterns, viewed through a host of local players and families, white and African-American, transplants and natives. Weinfeld deftly portrays the tensions within the county with federal officials, carpetbaggers, African Americans, and local whites jostling for economic and political position, social prominence, and even survival in the new environment. In chapters 3 and 4, the coming of Congressional Reconstruction brought political revolution, increased violence, and Republican Party machinations, as local Republicans sought to discern

friend from foe in the nebulous world of state and national politics. The middle chapters of the book focus on the violence within the county, as issues of law-and-order fused and conflicted with political choices, personal vendettas, and racism. Local (and to a lesser extent federal) efforts to quash the violence bring the narrative to its conclusion. The final chapter offers some thoughts on the motives behind the violence, and poses questions for future research.

As a somewhat anecdotal, rather unrefined narrative of post-war adjustment in a small Florida county, Weinfeld's book maintains the reader's interest. As a serious analysis of the changing conditions during Reconstruction, and the violence that attended those changes, the work falls short. *The Jackson County War* suffers from two major flaws, both stemming from promises set forth in the Introduction.

First, the reader does not come away with a sense of a "war," nor even a sense that the county was particularly dangerous. The author implies there may have been more than a hundred murders, and repeatedly uses the phrase "explosion in violence." Weinfeld discusses various casualty figures late in the text with numbers of murders ranging from 184 down to 23; in fact the narrative itself suggests something on the lower end (134-135). Weinfeld notes three murders in 1866 (28), one in 1867, which he even described as "an isolated event" (30), and one in 1868 (63). Over a third of the book has passed before the reader arrives at 1869 and another "explosion of violence" (78) that left five dead, but soon the author notes that "the summer passed with little violence" (80) and the county "was never freer of crime" (82). As Chapter 6 opens, in Fall 1869, the county "exploded with violence" again (83), witnessing a half-dozen killings in late September and October. But within weeks two-dozen federal soldiers had arrived, providing a "respite from violence" (97). Weinfeld claims this "restoration of calm" (102) only lasted until troops departed in April 1870, and cites a rise in threats, shootings, and night-riding; but there is little evidence of assassination or murder, and the year passed relatively smoothly -- including the fall election. Not until April 1871, with the elaborate discussion of one murder (carpetbagger John Dickinson), is there a hint of organized political violence (115-122). True, between nine and eleven murders occurred through 1871 (125), but while the author riles about the "accelerating rate of murders" and that the "number of murders steadily mounted" (126) he noted on the next page that "by the time of the KKK Hearings, violence was again waning in Jackson County" (127). Excepting a few weeks in the fall of 1869 and again in the summer of 1871, the situation in Jackson County could hardly be called a

war; violence was sporadic, often personal, and largely unorganized. While so much of the premise pivots on the allegedly violent nature of the county, the evidence as presented fails to convince this reviewer. Events lack the ferocity, the sustained focus, the organization, and the political motives consistent with other southern states during the same period.

The monograph also falls short of the larger context promised in the Introduction. The “continuous narrative” never fully congeals at the local level, nor does it embrace the larger elements of social, economic, or political change. For the latter, the events in Jackson County seem to play out in a vacuum; this reviewer believes that a dearth of broader research may account for this. The author brings to life, in a vivid manner, the situation in Jackson County, but the bibliography contains a mere three pages of Reconstruction literature. Weinfeld never attempts to draw in research about the Freedmen’s Bureau, about the impact of economic dislocation, the social and political repercussions of the Reconstruction acts, the significance of class and gender issues in postwar readjustment, or the larger economic shifts affecting the region. Scores of recent regional and local studies have provided significant insights into Reconstruction at the grass-roots level, but Weinfeld does not achieve this goal. Valuable scholarship was not incorporated; what might have become a fascinating micro-analysis of reaction and resistance never rises above a choppy narrative playing out in a vacuum. The study could have benefited greatly from Edwards Ayers on local violence; Paul Escott and Robert Kenzer on class and kinship; Walter Fraser and Steven Hahn on economics and class; David Blight and Drew Faust for their work on war and memory; Mark Summers and Michael Fitzgerald with the economic-political possibilities; Lynda Morgan, Clarence Mohr, and Peter Kochin for studies on readjustment and emancipation; and Joseph Reidy, Julie Saville, Jay Mandle, and John Rodrigue for their insights on economic realignments after the war. The author hardly mentions Jerrell Shofner’s seminal work on Florida, and omits entirely the recent *Blacks, Carpetbaggers, and Scalawags: The Constitutional Conventions of Radical Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008) by Richard L. Hume and Jerry B. Gough, which uses statistical analyses to evaluate the Republican party politics of Reconstruction states, in which Florida receives serious treatment. Weinfeld alludes to many of these aspects, but only in passing; without pursuing these avenues, developing these forces, or presenting a more holistic picture of the postwar environment, his goal of explaining the violence is unachieved, with no chance of success.

The failure to convincingly depict a county at war with itself, coupled with a lack of any larger social, political, or economic context, reduces the volume to a choppy, vignette-laden editorial. Chapters lack coherence and flow, as disparate paragraphs run contiguously, without a governing hand to apply priorities or focus. The author spends as much time discussing children's games as discussing the Military Reconstruction Acts; a paragraph detailing an assassination is followed by one discussing plans to annex the panhandle, followed by a paragraph lamenting summer caterpillar infestations (81-82). A reader glancing over the topic sentences of paragraphs will be hard pressed to deduce the theme of a chapter.

Certainly readers will be entertained by the engaging local flavor but as written, *The Jackson County War* does not accomplish what it purports. In his closing pages, however, are nuggets that portend a more developed, nuanced, and important study: One wonders if the violence was driven by the usual suspects (racism, defeat, etc.) or more a function of generational tensions among whites? Or, perhaps the chaos provided the opportunity for the settling of personal vendettas? Even economic stresses and social class factors seemed to play a role in Jackson County. In the end, Daniel Weinfeld asked valid questions, but has not yet produced a complete answer to the anomaly of Jackson County.

The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect the views of the Commandant or the U.S. Coast Guard.

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