

### Lincoln's Citadel: The Civil War in Washington DC

Matthew Norman

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## Review

Norman, Matthew

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**Winkle, Kenneth J.** *Lincoln's Citadel: The Civil War in Washington DC*. W. W. Norton and Company, \$34.95 ISBN 9780393081558

### A New Study of Wartime Washington

Walt Whitman, one of the thousands of new residents drawn to Washington during the Civil War, famously lamented in *Specimen Days* (1882) that the “mushy influences of current times” would prevent “the real war” from getting “in the books.” Taking a cue from Whitman, Kenneth J. Winkle, a professor of history at the University of Nebraska and author of *The Young Eagle*, a highly regarded study of Abraham Lincoln’s rise to prominence, presents an “interior history” of wartime Washington. While Whitman expressed some ambivalence about such a history that focused on the “countless minor scenes and interiors,” Winkle’s work seeks to tell the story of not only the president and his generals but also the stories of the “ordinary and often anonymous Americans who found themselves living within a capital under siege” (ix). From alleys and freshly dug graves all the way to the top of the dome of the U.S. Capitol, Winkle’s book offers a thorough, well-researched, and engagingly written account of the remarkable transformation that Washington experienced during the war.

As one who spent a great deal of time visiting the sick and wounded in military hospitals, Whitman believed that the experiences of those common soldiers were most important and yet most likely to be forgotten. For Winkle, the most profound transformation that occurred during the war was the transition from slavery to freedom. Much of the book therefore focuses on issues related to Washington’s African American community. Winkle contextualizes these issues by devoting the first few chapters to Lincoln’s experiences with slavery when he lived in Washington during his single term in the House of Representatives. The Washington that Lincoln first encountered in December 1847 was a provincial Southern city that came to life when Congress was in session. Most members of Congress rented rooms at boardinghouses, which Winkle compares to fraternity

houses because the boarders ate together and tended to socialize with each other. Lincoln rented a room at Mrs. Sprigg's on Capitol Hill, where Ohio abolitionist Joshua Giddings lived. Because of its association with Giddings and other abolitionists, Mrs. Sprigg's had become known as "Abolition House." Not all the Whigs at Mrs. Sprigg's shared Giddings's sensibilities on the slavery issue, but Winkle points out that Lincoln consistently voted with opponents of slavery during his first year in the House. Though the percentage of Washington's population that was enslaved was on the decline, slave auctions were conducted within sight of the Capitol, Mrs. Sprigg employed slaves, and the city's African American residents were subjected to a draconian Black Code. Both Giddings and Lincoln were shocked when one of the waiters at Mrs. Sprigg's was suddenly taken away when his owner decided to sell him. Winkle points out that following an unsuccessful attempt by abolitionists to transport slaves to freedom on the *Pearl*, there was a violent backlash against abolitionism in the city. As tensions grew in Congress, Lincoln began to vote against efforts to abolish slavery in Washington and opposed Giddings's proposal for a plebiscite on slavery that would have allowed the District's African American men, both free and enslaved, to participate. Lincoln drafted a plan for gradual, compensated emancipation in Washington that Winkle views as an attempt to prevent the Whigs from fracturing over the issue. Though Lincoln decided not to bring his plan to the floor, Winkle characterizes it as "a triumph of parliamentary pragmatism in the name of moderation" (51).

When Lincoln returned to Washington as president-elect, he had to sneak into a city that was largely hostile to his election, as evidenced by a riot protesting the result of the 1860 election and rumors of plots to assassinate him before he could take the oath of office. The city was neither ready for a Republican president nor a war. Washington's defenses were insufficient, there was only one hospital that treated fewer than 200 patients a year, and basic services, such as sanitation, were woefully inadequate for the existing population, to say nothing of the massive influx of people that the war would bring. Winkle vividly describes accommodations at the White House, Mrs. Lincoln's overzealousness for making improvements to the place, Lincoln's work routine, and the antics of the Lincolns' young boys, Willie and Tad. The neighborhood surrounding the White House had one of the city's highest proportions of African American residents. When the Lincolns arrived in Washington, three percent of the city's population remained enslaved and another fifteen percent consisted of free African Americans, including Elizabeth

Keckly, who became Mrs. Lincoln's dressmaker and friend. Lincoln brought a black man from Springfield as his valet and found him a position at the Treasury Department when the lighter skinned staff at the White House objected to him.

One of the great strengths of the book is Winkle's ability to interweave Lincoln's story with the story of the city during the war. Winkle argues that wartime Washington can be seen as a microcosm of the war itself, as the war brought numerous profound changes to the District. With the outbreak of the war, Lincoln and Congress proceeded to radically alter the city. The first task involved purging the city administration of those who were disloyal and Congress quickly reformed the archaic police force. Furthermore, preparations were made to accommodate the legions of soldiers who would protect the capital and utilize it as a supply base. The logistical achievements involved in this transformation are staggering. The army surrounded Washington with a thirty-seven mile ring of nearly seventy forts. The quartermaster department constructed over 400 new structures and telegraph lines connected all the various camps and forts. By 1864, more than one hundred military hospitals could treat over 18,000 sick and wounded soldiers. The Washington Arsenal stored over a quarter-million small arms and produced 100,000 cartridges for those weapons each day. The basement of the Capitol became an enormous bakery that produced 50,000 loaves of bread on a daily basis. By the fall of 1861, Washington was a depot for over 10,000 horses and nearly 3,000 mules whose daily allowance included 100 train cars of feed. All of these changes also brought problems, such as conflicts between soldiers and townspeople, disagreements between the civil and military authorities, and placed a severe strain on what was already a very poor sanitation system. Diseases, such as typhoid fever, were common and led to the deaths of many, including Willie Lincoln.

The city's African American residents experienced the most profound changes during the war. The District Emancipation Act of April 1862 freed over 3,000 enslaved residents and provided compensation to owners who were loyal to the Union. Congress also appropriated funds to colonize these newly freed persons and Winkle analyzes colonization efforts by Lincoln and some local African Americans. Lincoln met with a delegation of Washington African Americans in the summer of 1862 and made the case for colonization. The issue bitterly divided the black community; some favored it while most bitterly opposed the scheme. Ultimately, the colonization effort produced negligible results and Winkle concludes that Lincoln "never viewed colonization as a

realistic method for ending slavery; but only a way to undermine resistance to emancipation in the Border States" (261). Thousands of enslaved people from surrounding Maryland and Virginia sought refuge in Washington and helped transform a limited war into a total war. Ward Hill Lamon, a close friend of Lincoln and the U.S. Marshal for Washington, scrupulously attempted to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act. This led to a series of conflicts between Lamon, Congress, the press, and military authorities sympathetic to the plight of the enslaved. The tens of thousands of African Americans who came to Washington during the war forced the government to adopt policies and accommodations. Camp Barker and a hospital for freedmen were established and many who were able bodied found employment from the government. Conditions at Camp Barker were so poor that hundreds died from disease before the camp was closed. The military worked with a variety of philanthropic organizations to assist freed people in getting out of the camp and settling them on farms surrounding Washington. The most notable and lasting settlement was the Freedmen's Village established on the estate of Robert E. Lee in Arlington, Virginia.

Winkle praises Lincoln for the Emancipation Proclamation and asserts that it radically altered the meaning and purpose of the war. Henry McNeal Turner and other African Americans in Washington also believed the Emancipation Proclamation was of profound importance and celebrated its issuance on January 1, 1863. African Americans signed up to serve in what became the 1st United States Colored Troops. Turner was appointed a chaplain, while Alexander T. Augusta served as one of the few black physicians commissioned during the war. Congress repealed Washington's Black Code and African Americans were given standing in DC courts as witnesses and jurors. Public transportation was modernized with the advent of a horse railway system during the war but African Americans found themselves restricted to separate cars and inferior accommodations. Dr. Augusta, George Hatton of the 1st USCT, and others protested these conditions and by the end of the war Congress prohibited the exclusion of African Americans from all rail cars in the District. African Americans had not only become free but they seized new opportunities that the war provided and staked a claim to their rights as citizens.

These changes came with a high a price, as Winkle amply details the casualties of war and the care they received. Just as the Lincolns were not prepared for the death of their son, Willie, Washington was not prepared to accommodate all the deaths wrought by the war. The cemetery at the Soldiers'

Home was the only military cemetery at the start of the war and it was full by early 1864, so Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs started a new cemetery on the Lee estate at Arlington. In many respects Arlington is an ideal symbol of the changes that Winkle details, for the cemetery represents the enormous human cost of the war while the Freedmen's Village represented the promise and possibilities of freedom. The "last, tragic casualty" of the war, according to Winkle, was Lincoln's assassination (414). At the time of Lincoln's death, Washington was a much different city than the place he first encountered as a member of Congress. Winkle's use of both primary and secondary sources and his talent for crafting narrative history enable him to paint a rich portrait of wartime Washington that will engage and edify both scholars and general readers. Lincoln played a vital role in the transformation that occurred, but as Winkle successfully demonstrates, he was far from alone. Those wishing a glimpse of the real war will find it in *Lincoln's Citadel*.

*Matthew Norman is an Assistant Professor of History at the University of Cincinnati Blue Ash College.*