

A Generation at War: The Civil War Era in a Northern Community

Jane Turner Censer

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

Recommended Citation

Censer, Jane Turner (2012) "A Generation at War: The Civil War Era in a Northern Community," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 14 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.14.2.14

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol14/iss2/13>

Review

Censer, Jane Turner

Spring 2012

Etcheson, Nicole *A Generation at War: The Civil War Era in a Northern Community*. University Press of Kansas, \$39.95 ISBN 978-0-7006-1797-5

A Fresh Analysis of a Society in Wartime

In recent years growing numbers of scholars studying the Civil War have turned to social history, giving us fascinating portraits of people during wartime, whether soldiers, women, children, or workers—even women workers in munitions factories. Yet relatively seldom have these accounts focused on a single northern community, though southern towns and counties during the war have spawned extensive studies. All this makes Nicole Etcheson's new book, *A Generation at War*, a particularly welcome addition to Civil War histories.

Etcheson investigates Putnam County, Indiana, a rural midwestern county, during a time of change, and her choice is interesting for several reasons. Although, in the antebellum period, Putnam was a Whig county, Indiana remained the most Democratic state in the Midwest. Moreover, while Putnam was an agricultural county, with Greencastle, its largest town numbering only about 1,500-2,000, it also served as a railroad hub and was poised for further growth.

Despite the title of this book, Etcheson does not use a generational analysis; instead her three different sections (prewar, war, and postwar) scrutinize political and social changes in the period, 1850-1880. A chapter in each section examines African Americans in Putnam County and their activities. While perhaps striking some readers as unusual, given that blacks at their most numerous accounted for less than 3 per cent of the county's population, this focus is important to her thesis. All in all, it is in the African-American community and its impact on Putnam's political and social life, where Etcheson finds some of the deepest and most thoroughgoing changes.

The story opens on the tortured politics of the 1850s, as Etcheson chronicles the dissolution of the locally dominant Whig party under the repercussions from the Compromise of 1850 and later the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Her depiction of how Whigs and Know Nothings became Republicans follows generally accepted interpretations, but she also shows how the Democrats early injected racial issues and racist stereotypes into the elections. Republicans, while building a coalition against a South they considered "the slave power," also resorted to racism, pointing to their defense of white workers. Interestingly, Etcheson argues that the breakaway Democrats supporting southern candidate John C. Breckinridge in 1860 pulled enough votes away from the Douglas Democrats to ensure a Republican triumph in Indiana.

Etcheson's political focus during the Civil War centers on the Copperheads in Putnam County. While Daniel Voorhees, later a Democratic congressman, was the most prominent antiwar politician, the county saw widespread disaffection with the war and even mob action against the draft. Although the Democrats were weakened in some northern states, they remained a strong force in Indiana. The state, unlike some of its neighbors, did not allow Union soldiers in the field to vote there; neither were the Hoosier soldiers furloughed home to vote – actions that both indicated and added to Democratic power. Wartime political rifts ran deep as the Republicans viewed Democratic leaders as traitors, and a goodly number of the Democrats sympathized with the southern confederacy. Putnam County in 1863 held two Fourth of July celebrations because the political parties refused to picnic together. This contentiousness continued after the war, as Democrats criticized Reconstruction policies while Republicans reminded their fellow citizens of the wartime disloyalty of the Democrats.

Women and their roles and family life figure largely in Etcheson's chapters on society in Putnam County. Using families that left rich lodes of papers, she finds female dependence both the ideal and norm before and during the war. Although the war caused dislocations, the young husbands in her book expected their wives to look to them for decisions and family leadership. And Etcheson argues that women's entrance into the public sphere in the county, as shown by their roles as school teachers and reformers, was "never uncontested" (71). Ironically enough, what allowed some women greater independence in the postwar period would be their status as war widows or mothers deprived of the support of sons who died in the war. Traditionally, such widows and impoverished elderly women had lived with kin or depended on charity, but

governmental pensions provided such women with the wherewithal to retain independent households and educate their children. Etcheson also agrees with what other commentators have argued about the expansion over time in disability payments to veterans; by 1900 the lack of means testing or a requirement that the disability be service-related meant that three-fourths of surviving Union veterans were receiving governmental pensions.

Just as Etcheson traces political and social issues over time, she follows the African-American population in Putnam County longitudinally. Her first illustrative story begins in 1854 when three generations of the Peters family led by matriarch Tamar who, with her sons had been born in slavery in Kentucky, emigrated from Putnam County to Liberia. Although the reasons for the Peters family's relocation can not be pinpointed, Etcheson indicates the forces limiting black freedom, pointing to the unwelcoming nature of both county and state to African-American newcomers. Indiana's new constitution in 1851 excluded black migrants from other states and encouraged Indiana blacks to leave for Liberia. And, in fact, while the white population of Putnam County was growing through the 1850s, its black population declined, with even propertied families disappearing from the census rolls. Among the African Americans enumerated in the 1860 census, only one good-sized extended black family, the Townsends, remained from a decade earlier.

The Civil War, while destroying slavery in the South, also brought large changes for African Americans in Putnam County. In 1864 twenty-one-year-old Robert Townsend joined the army, serving in the 28th Regiment of U.S. Colored Troops. Although he survived the war, his undermined health led to his death in 1865. The patriotism of African-American soldiers, along with the unionism of the southern African Americans, whom Indiana soldiers encountered during the war, increased support for emancipation and lessened prejudice. In the 1860s the black population of Putnam County tripled (though still remaining below 100 people). And some of the new arrivals were Union veterans such as Wyatt James, a former slave from Mississippi who had served alongside Robert Townsend in the 28th Regiment.

Reconstruction meant change for both blacks and whites in Putnam County. Although local Republicans at first were hesitant about extending suffrage to African Americans, the denial of black rights in the South pushed them to support the Fifteenth Amendment. Over time, interest in Putnam County centered more on economic issues than Reconstruction, and the Decoration Day

festivities stressed reconciliation. Still, African Americans were able to build institutions such as churches. While most held unskilled jobs, they were able to educate their children and create stable communities. In 1879, the Exoduster movement out of the South, though primarily bound for Kansas, included black North Carolinians who moved to Indiana. Republicans in Putnam County, though worried about increased competition for jobs, welcomed the migrants; Democrats mocked and decried them. Although many of the Exodusters found their hopes disappointed in Indiana and remained only a few years, Etcheson argues that the Republican "encouragement of black migration into the county marked a revolutionary change from the attitudes of the prewar period, in which antiblack racism had been universally accepted" (259).

The Putnam County sketched by Etcheson remained fiercely partisan in its politics throughout the Civil War era, with Democratic racism a constant over time. Although the changes she finds for the white men and women seem muted, she does chronicle the transition from a prewar community in which African Americans were barely tolerated and barely free to a postwar period in which they could enjoy many basic freedoms, though sometimes undercut by segregation.

Etcheson's focus on one northern community allows her to bring together many aspects of life during the Civil War era. And her keen eye for the telling anecdote combines with her narrative skills to drive home her main points about continuity and change. While other scholars have pointed out the racism of the midwestern Democratic Party in this era, she thoroughly documents the persistence with which Hoosier Democrats resorted to racial stereotypes and denigration. All this combines to create an engrossing story and a compelling account.

Jane Turner Censer is Professor of History at George Mason University. Her most recent article about the Civil War is "Finding the Southern Family in the Civil War: A Review Essay," forthcoming in the Journal of Social History (Fall 2012).