

### Saving Savannah: The City in the Civil War

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## Review

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**Jones, Jacqueline** *Saving Savannah: The City in the Civil War*. Alfred A. Knopf, \$30.00 hardcover ISBN 9781400042937

### The City of Savannah and the Hard War

Scholars are paying increased attention to the role of cities in the antebellum, wartime, and postbellum South. This historiographical trend is refreshing, to say the least, and bids fair to finally overturn the stereotype of a region dominated by “moonlight and magnolias.” Jacqueline Jones’s new book, *Saving Savannah: The City in the Civil War* contributes to this literature.

Jones divides her book into three parts and traces the course of Savannah from its devastating yellow fever epidemic of 1854, through its embrace of secession and war to finally, Reconstruction, and its aftermath. It is a compelling story. According to Jones, Savannah was “dying” in 1854. Those who could flee the ravages of “yellow jack” did so, leaving behind poor whites and slaves to fend for themselves. A very destructive hurricane added to Savannahians’ woes that same year. By the end of 1854, the city’s economy was “in shambles” (25-33). Working together, the city’s slaves, free people of color, whites, and immigrants rebuilt the local economy by 1855. But the Panic of 1857 scotched whatever economic revival was achieved. Savannah was, on the eve of the election of 1860, a city dominated by wealthy whites.

That two-thirds of Chatham County voted for John C. Breckinridge came as no surprise to Savannahians. But the city’s wealthy classes worried about the impact war would have on the community. Moreover, there was grave concern that the large slave population would become militant. As Savannah prepared for war, the “cityscape” was fundamentally changed (132).

Governor Joseph E. Brown worked energetically to ensure Georgia was defended along its 118-mile coastline. On January 1, 1861—almost three weeks

before the state seceded—Brown seized Fort Pulaski, a formidable outpost guarding the Savannah River. Planters in surrounding counties were urged to volunteer their slaves to bolster coastal fortifications, and the Confederate government sent General Robert E. Lee to South Carolina and Georgia—specifically, Savannah—to oversee its defense. Whites, fearful of the possibility of a Federal attack, fled inland, taking their slaves with them. Savannahians worst fears were realized in November 1861, when the Federals seized Tybee Island, just a mile away from Fort Pulaski. Five months later, the Yankees shelled Fort Pulaski into submission.

The fall of Fort Pulaski had a tremendous impact on Savannah. For the remainder of the war, the city was chaotic. Crime surged and public drunkenness was common. Inflation, as in the rest of the Confederacy, spiraled out of control. Food shortages proved the norm rather than the exception. The outbreak of smallpox, diphtheria, and scarlet fever merely exacerbated a horrific situation. According to Jones, by the fall of 1863, Savannah was in a “wretched condition” (186).

A year later, Savannahians waited tensely for the scourge that was General William Tecumseh Sherman. Marching at will through the state and destroying everything in its wake, Sherman and his troops succeeded in making “Georgia howl.” To escape the fate of its sister Georgia cities, local officials rode out to meet the Union general and surrendered the city. The army of occupation helped to bolster the badly damaged local economy. Sherman also issued Special Field Order No. 15, designating the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia, as well as thirty miles inland from Charleston to the Florida-Georgia border, for the newly emancipated slaves to cultivate. It did, indeed, appear as if the Federal government would provide forty acres and a mule.

Savannah’s freed people of color worked assiduously with Federal authorities, opening schools, brokering contracts, and creating benevolent organizations. In due course, the city had a branch of the Freedman’s Savings and Trust Company. For the freedmen, Reconstruction seemed to bring hope. But as they quickly discovered, the removal of Federal troops and the return of native white conservatives to power stifled their hopes for land reform. By 1870, people of color were “near total exclusion from the formal machinery of power” in the city (352).

Jones has produced a well-written and well-researched book. But the title is misleading. This is not a book about Savannah and the Civil War. Rather, it is the story of Savannah and the low country's African-American population and how they struggled through slavery to war, and then to freedom. The book focuses on several key individuals, both black and white, and traces their experiences well in to the twentieth century. But it does not fully flesh out the travails of planters and plain folk, of freedmen and slaves within the context of the Civil War. Indeed, only four of the book's sixteen chapters discuss the war. One never really grasps what the war did to Georgia's "Forest City" and its inhabitants.

That said, one does glean a picture of a deep Southern port and how it responded to the sectional crisis and the Civil War. Its real contribution lies in chronicling the progress and setbacks of Savannah's slaves.

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