

Driven From Home: North Carolina's Civil War Refugee Crisis

Carl Moneyhon

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

Recommended Citation

Moneyhon, Carl (2017) "Driven From Home: North Carolina's Civil War Refugee Crisis," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 19 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.19.3.25

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol19/iss3/20>

Review

Moneyhon, Carl

Summer 2017

Silkenat, David *Driven from Home: North Carolina's Civil War Refugee Crisis*.
University of Georgia Press, \$49.95 ISBN 9780820349466

Commonalities Considered: North Carolina's Civil War Refugee Crisis

Driven from Home is a study of the lives of the thousands of North Carolinians, white and black, who became refugees during the Civil War by David Silkenat, a social and cultural historian of the South who is currently a lecturer at the University of Edinburgh. In defining refugees, Silkenat encompasses all individuals, regardless of class or color, who are removed by the war from where they had been living. This book is an example of how our understanding of the past continues to change when scholars bring different questions to their topics. Silkenat makes clear that his work has inspiration and insights that come from his knowledge of the refugee crises that exist in the early 21st Century. This perspective does not mean that he imposes modern viewpoints on these individuals but rather skillfully asks questions of the historical documents that individuals unfamiliar with the problems of refugees would never ask. In addition to the usual topics associated with wartime dislocation, he also considers the psychological impact of this traumatic event.

Silkenat recognizes the contribution to the literature on Southern refugees by Mary Elizabeth Massey's *Refugee Life in the Confederacy* but points out that her original determination to examine the broader refugee phenomenon was deterred by advisors. As a result, her *Refugee Life* focused on the experiences of elite Confederates who moved to safety behind Confederate lines. Silkenat seeks to examine refugees in the broader perspective denied Masse, considering poor whites and blacks in addition to the well-to-do. He considers five types of refugees, with chapters devoted to each.

The first and second chapters examine the plight of whites and blacks who escape behind Union lines in eastern North Carolina. He concludes that these individuals may have suffered the greatest privation. Union forces never fully

responded to the flood of refugees, placing them in camps where they suffered from inadequate housing and food shortages that brought many of them close to starvation. In addition, these two groups faced considerable psychological trauma created by their uncertain status. Blacks faced the uncertainty of what exactly freedom meant, with government policies in constant transition, with Edward Staley, the military governor of the state, actually closing their schools and returning escaped slaves to their masters. White refugees lived in a world where their basic loyalty was constantly questioned. Black and white refugees both had to deal with military and civil authorities who viewed them from within perceptual frameworks and attempted to impose their own priorities on them.

Silkenat's third and fourth chapters focus on blacks and whites who moved to the state's Piedmont region in order to keep behind Confederate lines. Again, both groups faced the hardships of inadequate housing and supplies, but their problems were never as dire as those for the Union refugees. The rapidly increasing population of the region, however, created an economic crisis with rapid inflation of prices and shortage of everything from food to clothing. Problems were increased for white women whose husbands were in the Confederate Army because of North Carolina's program of relief. North Carolina law distributed relief funds based on the prewar population, failing to take into account the shifting population and thus providing inadequate funds to the communities where the greatest growth occurred. As to the slaves, Silkenat sees the refugee experience as weakening owners' authority over their slaves in communities that often were anti-Confederate and antislavery. Many slave owners found maintaining their slaves to be beyond their resources and began leasing their slaves to solve their problems. Others were forced to breakup their slave holdings, sometimes leaving behind those they considered least productive while bringing those they considered useful with them. Such upheaval ultimately broke down the masters' control over their slaves and Silkenat cites a growing amount of slave violence and an increasing number of runaways as evidence of an emboldened slave community resisting enslavement.

The fifth chapter considers the lives of girls sent to boarding schools. Silkenat sees these students as refugees in the sense that they were not living in their homes during the war. These girls generally did not experience the hardships that other refugees encountered although they found food more difficult to obtain at times and they also had problems finding clothing. Some schools actually advertised themselves as havens from the war and North Carolina's female academies saw an increase in enrollment through the war years

and remained financially viable. The students lived, however, in relative isolation and that condition worked to increase their anxiety. Homesickness was exacerbated. Without accurate news, rampant rumor and conjecture increased their anxiety. Silkenat sees the pervasiveness of Spiritualism among many girls as an indication of their disquiet. In the long term, the war may have had its greatest influence on these students. They found that the very purpose of education changed for many of them. With large numbers of men, who had dominated teaching prior to the war, in the army an emphasis was placed on preparing women to teach. The opening of a teachers department at Concord Female College in Salem is seen as reflective of this change. Silkenat believes that many of these students came to see teaching not only as a symbol of status but as a means of financial advancement and they went into teaching in record numbers. He finds that the Civil War marked a watershed in the demographics of teaching in North Carolina, shifting from a field where the majority of teachers were male to one where females were the majority. Also, spared from the real horrors of war many of these school girls would take the lead in remembering the war in a celebratory way. Silkenat refers to them as the architects of the Lost Cause.

A final chapter addresses the problems of those refugees who moved beyond the Piedmont into the North Carolina mountains. Much of his evidence for this chapter focuses on the refugee community in the vicinity of Flat Rock, near Mount Airy and Hendersonville in the far southwest part of the state. These refugees, fewer in number overall, did not face the same threats of overcrowding, famine, or disease suffered by their fellow refugees in eastern North Carolina or the Piedmont. They did find the local population inhospitable though. Those who brought in large numbers of slaves learned that the mountain people did not want them among them and especially their slaves. These refugees often faced threats and at times found themselves the targets of bands of deserters that gathered in the mountains. Their chances of being murdered increased in these far western havens.

Silkenat ultimately concludes that generalizing from the diverse experiences of the refugees is difficult and that the experience of each individual was unique. Still, he sees several overall themes present. The refugee situation was a humanitarian crisis created for all of them, even though the impact varied, by all of the forces produced by the dislocation of a sizeable population. They all confronted challenges of inadequate housing, insufficient food, social destabilization, and consequent psychological upheaval. In addition, he contends

that the displacement of so many people broke down the boundaries between the home front and the military front, destroying what he calls the human geography of the Old South. Civilians could no longer isolate themselves from the impact of the war.

Silkenat's conclusions would benefit from some effort at making a quantitative assessment of the extent of the refugee problem. It is unclear how many individuals or families within each group actually leave home. He relies, however, on qualitative evidence that makes that impossible. That evidence also restricts his conclusions in the same manner as Massey's study. The well-to-do refugees, largely those who sought to remain behind Confederate lines, left vast amounts of evidence concerning their plight and their feelings about it. Blacks and poor whites left no such firsthand accounts, leaving conclusions to be drawn from what others wrote about them or speculation as to the meaning of their behavior. None of this takes away from what Silkenat has done in here. It simply reflects a methodological problem that is virtually impossible for the social historian to get around. Indeed, Silkenat has written what may probably be as exhaustive a study of the refugee problem in North Carolina as can be written. Scholars and the general public interested in that state and in the Civil War will find it interesting, informative, and challenging in its interpretation.

Carl Moneyhon is a professor at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock currently working on an interpretive history of the Civil War in Texas. His most recent book is Edmund J. Davis: Civil War General, Republican Leader, Reconstruction Governor (Texas Christian University Press, 2010). Relevant to this review of the refugee problem are his The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994) and Texas After the Civil War (Texas A&M; University Press, 2004).