

The Civil War's Impact on Tennessee

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Essential Question: How did the Civil War impact the lives of women and African-Americans in Tennessee?

Tennessee was the last state to secede from the Union, in part because of strong Unionist sentiment in East Tennessee. Ironically, Middle and West Tennessee where secessionist feeling was strong quickly fell under Union control. East Tennessee remained in Confederate hands until late 1863. With thousands of Tennessee men off fighting the task of dealing with the occupation forces fell to Tennessee's women. At first, Union policy towards civilians in Middle and West Tennessee was very conciliatory. Many people in the North believed that Southerners had been duped into supporting the Confederacy and could easily be brought back to the Union. This idea was proven false as civilians taunted and disrespected Union forces who had been ordered to do them no harm. Women in particular felt that they could get away with a great deal of disrespect because of their gender. One Nashville woman went so far as to spit on a Union officer. The Union always punished overt acts of resistance such as spying for the Confederates, but eventually Union officers grew tired of the civilians actions and began to crackdown on all forms of resistance. Men and women were jailed, supplies were seized and farms were sometimes burned.

Part of the policy of conciliation had been to protect the institution of slavery and to return runaway slaves to their masters. Though Tennessee was technically exempt from the Emancipation Proclamation, Union officers stopped returning runaways to their masters. Thousands of formerly enslaved people poured into contraband camps near Memphis, Nashville and other cities. Conditions in the camps were terrible and thousands died of disease, malnutrition or exposure. The amount of assistance the contraband camps received largely on the personal feelings of the officers in charge. Some officers did their best to provide what supplies they could for the people in the camps. The camps in Clarksville and Pulaski benefitted from the efforts of Northern missionaries who came south to help educate formerly enslaved people. Men in the camps were encouraged to join the United States Colored Troops (USCT). Twenty thousand Tennesseans served in the USCT and showed their valor in numerous battles including playing a significant role in the Union victory in the Battle of Nashville in 1864. Other formerly enslaved people chose to stay on their former plantations to avoid the terrible conditions in the camps, but refused to work unless they were paid. Some went to the shanty towns that sprang up on the outskirts of Nashville, Memphis and Chattanooga. As conditions in the countryside deteriorated, African Americans and whites alike moved to the cities.

As the war dragged on, lawlessness descended on many rural communities. With so many men off fighting, there were few people left to enforce the law. Bands of robbers attacked isolated farmsteads and anyone traveling the roads. As a result, many families were too fearful to leave their farms. Both schools and churches shut down as it became too dangerous to attend. Both Union and Confederate soldiers seized horses, mules, food and other property. The seizures made it increasingly difficult for farm families to feed themselves and starvation became a real possibility for many. With so many of Tennessee's men off fighting, it was often up to the women to protect their property and families. Many women made the difficult decision to abandon their rural homes and move to cities where the Union provided rations to the refugees. In areas like the Cumberland Plateau conditions were made worse by the guerilla bands that roamed the countryside. These groups claimed that the killings they perpetrated were a justifiable acts of war, but in reality they were often settling old grudges that had little to do with Confederate or Union principles. The most famous of Tennessee's guerilla leaders were Unionist "Tinker Dave" Beatty and the Confederate Samuel "Champ" Ferguson. Following the war, Ferguson was one of the only two Confederates tried and executed for their actions during the war.

Sources:

Source: Paul Bergeron, Stephen Ash and Jeanette Keith. *Tennesseans and Their History*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999.

McKnight, Brian D. *Confederate Outlaw: Champ Ferguson and the Civil War in Appalachia*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 2011.

Student Activity

Compare the effects of the Civil War on women and African Americans in Tennessee using the Venn Diagram below. Then write a paragraph comparing or contrasting the two groups.


