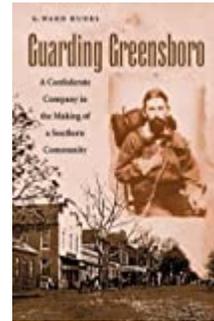




G. Ward Hubbs. *Guarding Greensboro: A Confederate Company in the Making of a Southern Community.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003. 344 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-2505-7.



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Creating Community in Civil War Era Alabama?

In *Guarding Greensboro*, G. Ward Hubbs offers a thought-provoking analysis of how white settlers living on the west-central Alabama frontier during the nineteenth century forged a “community” at Greensboro from a disparate collection of self-interested individualists. Hubbs argues that between 1819, when Greensboro was founded, and the end of the Civil War the local militia company became the rallying point for the formation of community solidarity. He asserts that between an early stage of self-interested individualism and a later period of coherent community was an intervening phase where individualists gradually joined voluntary organizations, one of which was the Greensboro Guards. Central to Hubbs’s overall argument is that the experience of the Civil War and the service of the Greensboro Guards militia company played the key role in the formation of strong bonds of local loyalty.

Hubbs’s work looks not at the destruction of community, as many other scholars have done for the Civil War period, but at how and when community-building took place. The author’s account focuses primarily on the white male settlers that populated Greensboro and the

surrounding area of Greene County and not on the slaves and women, who he argues played little role in creating civic community. Hubbs demonstrates that early frontier Greensboro was not known for “community,” which he defines as a social network of “enduring commitments” to a larger group (p. xiii). To the contrary, early Greensboro was known for gambling, land accumulation, greed, violence, and vice. The author views the laws suits growing out of the 1837 financial panic as evidence of an absence of community; Hubbs shows only “transient and autonomous self-seekers” during this founding period.

During the second phase of community-building, Hubbs explains how a series of voluntary associations emerged in Greensboro including the Free Masons, local churches, and the Greensboro Guards. According to Hubbs, the evangelical churches that infiltrated west-central Alabama in the 1810s and 1820s were elitist groups, organizations people joined only to make financial ties. Hubbs’s argument here reminds us of William Faulkner’s Thomas Sutpen darkening the door of the church only to find a bride in Rosa Coldfield. During the 1830s and 1840s, Hubbs sees the cooperation between

overlapping voluntary associations as a period of integration and consolidation. He points to the failure of townspeople to bring the railroad as evidence of limited commitment to the community as a whole. In the end, however, he believes one association—the local militia company—rose above the rest to become the symbol of Greensboro.

The militia company that played a central role in Hubbs's assessment of community development formed in 1823, following the Denmark Vesey slave insurrection in Charleston, South Carolina. The company participated in the 1836 Creek War, but it did not leave the town for the Mexican War. Hubbs argues that the Greensboro Guards were already so attached to the town in 1846 that they did not want to leave. By the end of the antebellum period, the Guards represented the community because they have played a central role in its protection from Indians and slaves.

Hubbs's argument that community had not yet formed in Greensboro until the late antebellum period does have its limitations. While the author argues that there was not a strong community bond until the last two or three years of the antebellum period, he does present some contradictory evidence. Greensboro's citizens gathered for a major celebration of George Washington's Birthday in 1832, which seems to signify an emotional bond to something larger than self-interested individualism. Likewise, the Greensboro Guards' decision not to serve in the Mexican War signifies some level of local attachment. Hubbs believes that the community was only in a budding stage when Southern University was formally established in 1857, thirty-five years after the founding of Greensboro. This event seems more like the culmination rather than the beginning of community formation. Furthermore, the failure to bring the railroad to Greensboro was not unique or necessarily evidence for a lack of strong community ties, as even well-established communities on the eastern seaboard of the South were unable to attract railroads due to limited funds.

The citizens of Greensboro strongly supported the Whig Party and the Know Nothings during the 1850s. According to Hubbs, this left a brief legacy of Unionism during the secession period. Greensborians overwhelmingly supported John Bell in the Presidential election of 1860. Hubbs, however, contends that the strong Unionism of the late antebellum period quickly evaporated across the black belt and in Greene County once secession was underway. Hubbs believes that by 1861, despite some evidence of lingering Unionism, most peo-

ple in Greensboro were united by a common support for the Greensboro Guards and the attempt to build a Confederate nation. According to the author, those few dissenters that remained were quickly ostracized or forced out.

During the war, the Greensboro Guards became Company D of the hard-fighting Fifth Alabama Infantry, which saw action in virtually every major campaign of Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. Hubbs argues that the driving motivation for most of these Alabamians was a desire to preserve the personal liberty of free white men (p. 103). Furthermore, Hubbs asserts that Greensboro's community spirit remained strong while soldiers were at the front. During the early part of the war, the Guards were involved in several important military actions. They lost men at Seven Pines and were virtually decimated at Gaines Mill and Malvern Hill during the Peninsula Campaign. Remaining members of the company were captured at South Mountain in September 1862. But, gradually men returned to the ranks where they participated in the famous "Stonewall" Jackson flank attack at Chancellorsville. In the aftermath of Chancellorsville, only thirty-five men remained. Throughout the conflict, Hubbs asserts that the men corresponded with the people at home through letters to the local newspaper, which shored up community commitment to the cause.

The final years of the war were hard for all of Greensboro's citizens. After the defeat at Gettysburg, the impact of the war on civilians back home in Alabama grew severe. Many soldiers at the front began to see Greensboro as a refuge from the war. Some women in Greensboro had doubts about the war, but according to Hubbs, they stayed committed to the Confederacy. Nevertheless, careful readers will find some evidence for the type of dissent Drew Gilpin Faust found in her *Mothers of Invention* (1996). Hubbs traces mass desertion in July 1863, yet finds only four deserters among the Greensboro Guards. By 1864, the Alabama home front was collapsing, but the Fifth Alabama continued to fight on at Wilderness, Spotsylvania Court House, in the Shenandoah Valley Campaign, and at the siege of Petersburg. Only one member of the Guard remained by the surrender at Appomattox. Ultimately, Hubbs believes that the men of Greensboro feared a race war and fought to the bitter end to prevent this. As far as the citizens on the home front are concerned, Hubbs's argument mirrors the work of William Blair in *Virginia's Private War* (1996), which also argued that, despite serious economic hardship, southerners remained committed to Confederate nationalism until the

end of the war.

At the heart of this well thought-out community study is the question: how much individual interaction and voluntary association make community? This is where Hubbs's notion of community is a little too slippery. Hubbs allows the reader to see community only when he wants them to see it and not simply when groups of people from all walks of life came together to celebrate an event or work together to form an institution. In light of this, Thomas Bender's definition of community should remain the gold standard. In a masterful work on community studies theory *Community and Social Change in America* (1978), Bender (borrowing from Ferdinand Tönnies) defined two types of communities, *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*. The small-town living of *gemeinschaft* was characterized by "a network of social relations marked by mutuality and emotional bonds" and the big-city experience of *gesellschaft* by "an artificial construction of an aggregate of human beings characterized by competition and impersonality."^[1] Bender further argued that communities typically evolve from *gemeinschaft* to *gesellschaft*. But, Hubbs contends the opposite for Greensboro; he sees the locality evolving from "voluntary associations" to "traditional notions of loyalty" over time, a reverse of Bender's process (p. 300). While Hubbs does address Bender in his work, he does not convincingly demonstrate the absence of a Bender-like *gemeinschaft* community in Greensboro during the entire antebellum period.

Another question emerges from how Hubbs frames his analysis. He argues that self-interest was antithetical to community-building in Greensboro. But, could self-

interest have actually been community in Greensboro? Southern historians have argued that individualism has been a dominant trait of southerners growing out of the frontier experience, but does it necessarily follow that no community exists where individualism is strongest? Clearly, communities dominated by self-interested individuals could thrive in the South, otherwise the Whig Party and the national market would not have penetrated sections of the southern countryside during the antebellum years. Could the self-interest of some members of a community in fact bring greater cohesion and loyalty to the whole by providing benefits like internal improvements and educational institutions to local places?

While some of the evidence Hubbs presents contradicts his central argument that a united community was absent in antebellum Greensboro, Hubbs has produced an interesting and nuanced narrative that deserves high praise. Hubbs is arguing for more reflective thought when historians use the term "community" and for this he should be commended. Hubbs forces us to think in spatial terms about when and where community developed in the South, and community studies historians should strive to produce such conscientious theoretical frameworks. Nineteenth-century community studies scholars and Civil War historians of all backgrounds should move Hubbs's study of Greensboro into the must read column of their book lists.

Note

[1]. Thomas Bender, *Community and Social Change in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 7, 17.

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