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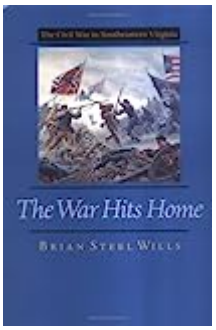


**Brian Steel Wills.** *The War Hits Home: The Civil War in Southeastern Virginia.* Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2001. xiv + 345 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-2027-6.

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## Soldiers and Civilians in Southside

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More Civil War battles were fought in Virginia than in any other state, yet comparatively few historians have sought to demonstrate what the impact of all that fighting was on Virginians themselves.[1] In *The War Hits Home*, Brian Steel Wills tells the story of the Civil War in one particular part of the Old Dominion, the region surrounding Suffolk on the south side of the James River, ambitiously weaving together the experiences of white and black civilians, Confederate soldiers, and Union troops. Wills purposely casts a broad net, explaining in his introduction that he "made every effort to keep this study from being easily labeled" (p. 5). In the end, however, it is in the interpretation of military movements that the book really shines.

Wills focuses his study on three southside counties (Nansemond, Southampton, and Isle of Wight), just north of North Carolina and bordered to the east by the Great Dismal Swamp. The Nansemond River connected Suffolk to the James River and then the Chesapeake Bay. Two railroads linked Suffolk to Norfolk (about twenty-four miles east) and to Richmond (about eighty miles northwest), making Suffolk into a commercial center. The region was largely agricultural, with its slaves and white farmers raising livestock, peanuts, and corn. Its white residents supported secession and war enthusiastically, particularly when measured by the seven companies that Southampton County sent to the Confederacy and the nine companies from Suffolk and Nansemond. To Wills's credit, he uses these soldiers as a window into the fighting that went on outside the borders of his study, using local men to personalize battles like Gettysburg.

The rail junction and river trade that made Suffolk a commercial center also made it important to both the Confederacy and the Union, with the town changing hands several times as a result. Indeed, Wills characterizes the war in this region as a series of "waves" that engulfed its people: first an influx of Confederate troops in 1861-62, then Union occupation in 1862-63, and finally a period as a "no-man's land" for the last third of the war. Each phase affected the lives of Suffolk's residents, leading some to leave their homes as runaway slaves or refugees, others to remain through increasing shortages and constant raiding.

The first phase, which saw Confederate troops flooding into the region to protect its waterways and railroads, was in many respects the easiest one for the white civilians to endure. Wills shows his command of a range of sources here and elsewhere in the vivid portraits that he paints of men like Colonel William Dorsey Pender, whom he describes as a "social peacock," "as much at war with himself as he was with the Union invaders" (p. 27). Wills uses Pender's letters to his wife, in which he describes (in great detail) his flirtations with local women, to illuminate both the stresses of war on husbands and wives as well as the degree to which the early months of the war had little material impact on the people of southeastern Virginia.

All of that would change dramatically when Union troops took control of Suffolk in the spring of 1862. This second phase of war saw Northern and Southern troops skirmishing for control of the Blackwater and Nansemond rivers, and civilians adjusting to life under Union occupation. In general, civilians found the Yankees to be relatively well-behaved, and fears of pillaging and mass arrests did not come to pass. Nevertheless, their presence led many whites to leave the region, "refugeeing" for the duration of the war. It is to Wills's credit that these refugees, particularly Missouri Riddick and her family, remain tied into his community story, much as did Suffolk's soldiers.

The high point of Wills's story comes when the war truly hits home–in the spring 1863 Suffolk campaign during which Confederate troops under James Longstreet threatened (though did not fully retake) Union control of the town. Wills defends Longstreet against criticism, at the time and from subsequent historians, that he challenged Lee's authority during this period for his own benefit, arguing instead that Longstreet struggled under the burden of multiple missions. Longstreet was variously instructed to gather supplies, make moves on Suffolk, and keep troops under John Bell Hood in reserve where they could easily be moved up to support the main Army of Northern Virginia. Given these competing imperatives, and bearing in mind that this was Longstreet's first command independent of Lee, Wills shows that Longstreet's caution was more than justifiable. On April 11, 1863, Confederate troops finally crossed the Blackwater River and pushed towards Suffolk. Though they surprised the Union troops there (under the command of General John Peck), the Northerners, aided by naval forces on the Nansemond River, ultimately held back the Confederates. Eventually, the Confederates backed off from Suffolk, and took the opportunity to gather enough supplies from throughout the region to help feed the army for several weeks.

Longstreet finally retreated from the area around Suffolk in order to join Lee's command at the battle of Chancellorsville; the Union troops evacuated Suffolk on July 3, 1863. The residents then entered Wills's third phase of the war, that of the "no-man's land," between Union and Confederate lines. In many respects this phase, coinciding with the collapse of the Confederate economy, was the most difficult for white Virginians, who had to contend with shortages and deprivation, in addition to periodic Union raids. Black Virginians also struggled, but took advantage of the war's upheavals to run away to freedom behind the Union lines. Several of them returned to Suffolk wearing the uniforms of the 2nd U.S. Cavalry.

*The War Hits Home* is strongest when discussing military matters–the movements of troops, the intricacies of strategy, the personalities (and frequently the foibles) of men on both the Union and Confederate sides. (A comprehensive map of the Suffolk campaign would have been useful.) Wills sets himself an ambitious task, and for the most part he succeeds in tying the Suffolk story in with the larger war. But his sections on the home front do not share the rich detail of those on the military; his conclusion about the strength of Confederate nationalism in Suffolk, while convincing, seems tacked on as an afterthought. But these are relatively minor points. Overall, *The War Hits Home* is an excellent example of the ways in which military and social history can be blended together, and one hopes that similar studies of other regions will follow.

Note

[1]. Two recent exceptions are Daniel Sutherland, *Seasons of War: The Ordeal of the Confederate Community, 1861-65* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), which explores the Civil War in Culpepper County; and William Blair, *Virginia's Private War: Feeding Body and Soul in the Confederacy, 1861-1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), which looks at the civilian experience across the state.

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