

# Michigan's War: The Civil War in Documents

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## Review

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**Quist, John W, ed.** *Michigan's War: The Civil War in Documents*. Ohio Press University, 2018 \$24.95 ISBN 9780821423127

Students, researchers and readers interested in the Wolverine State's contributions and roles in the Civil War have had plenty of sources available to them in local libraries over the years, some of them good ones – from reference volumes and bibliographies published by the Michigan Civil War Centennial Observance Commission and Wayne State University in the 1960s to a number of annotated and anecdotal histories for general readers by Michigan authors and scholars. Some of these titles, books by Richard Bak, Roger Rosentreter, Frederick Williams, Frank Woodford, and Jack Dempsey, appear in the bibliography of military history materials utilized in John W. Quist's *Michigan's War: The Civil War in Documents*.

But this book, a college-level text aimed at students and serious Civil War era readers, is more than soldiers' stories and the usual 'greatest hits' of Michigan in the war. Not that some past writers and editors erred in enumerating the heroics, battles and big personalities of the state in past annotations, but Michigan myths have too often part of collections for general readers. At the same time, the debates and discussions of slavery and its spread, and what, if anything, could be done about it was generally left to overviews of important Michigan political figures such as senators Lewis Cass and Zachariah Chandler and Governor Austin Blair. For example, almost every Michigan Civil War reader or buff knows the story of President Lincoln saying "Thank God for Michigan" when the first regiment from the state arrived in Washington D.C. in 1861, even though there isn't a single shred of evidence in the historical record that he said this. But like the story of Sarah Edmond Thompson, who joined the 2<sup>nd</sup> Michigan Infantry posing as a man and who wrote the incredible 1864 fiction known as *Nurse and Spy* after deserting (once her protectors resigned from the army), the tale is an accepted part of Michigan lore. These stories are testament to the power of myth, but after all, they are myth.

Thankfully, Prof. Quist pays little or no attention to these popular Civil War legends in *Michigan's War*, instead presenting the reader with an excellent collection of real, mainly contemporaneous documents preceded by short introductions and explanations on these participants and observers, their circumstances and situations. Then follow the personal letters, correspondence to newspapers, and official reports and communications, giving the experiences and thoughts of Michigan officers and soldiers, nurses and doctors, volunteers and African Americans. A small number of these documents and anecdotes come from the postwar memoirs of soldiers and a famous volunteer named Julia Wheelock, yet these are powerful and can't help but convey the war's emotional impact on the writers well after the battles were over. Many of the letters and articles center on the evolving meaning of and reason for the conflict, and the soldiers' feelings about it, such as arguments about the Emancipation Proclamation and the enlisting of African Americans in the Union Army. These are not just the opinions of desk-bound newspaper proprietors and politicians, though these views, too, are represented, in some of the speeches and editorials.

This excellent little book is the newest addition in Ohio University Press's series, *The Civil War in the Great Interior*, and Quist's selections for this new annotated Michigan Civil War history go beyond most of the standard recitations of the well-remembered personalities and incidents in previous survey-type nonfiction of the war. As the series' editors note in their preface, the individual scholars, like Quist, "have gathered evidence from farms and factories, rural and urban areas, and communities throughout each state to examine the relationships of individuals, their communities, the political culture and events on the battlefields." A general, non-academic Civil War reader, in other words, might think of it in terms of a small-scale comparison with James McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom* and its exploration of the political and social meanings of the war, but on a very local level as expressed by Michigan participants themselves.

*Michigan's War* provides, then, a wide range of instructive primary source material in a concise and accessible format, some that was familiar, but with some surprises, too. For example, there's an expressive letter by a soldier in the 4<sup>th</sup> Michigan Infantry telling of "war's transformations" – how an innocent boy who was not yet 16 had joined the army and turned into a hero of several battles, while another of his friends was "crippled in limb – broken in health" by the war. The letter writer, Walter C. White of Hudson, Michigan, was sure that though the

men were cold and miserable in bivouac, better days were coming. But White was wrong. I was familiar with him, because I'd described his death in action at Fredericksburg in a regimental history I co-authored several years ago; he was struck in the head by a bullet as he lay on the ground before the Confederate infantry along the base of Marye's Heights. Though I knew as I read his letter what was going to happen to him four days later, it was still moving and tragic.

Another example: One of the books I keep at hand as I read or write about Michigan in the war is Robert Garth Scott's excellent and detailed biography of Detroit's Gen. Orlando Willcox, *Forgotten Valor*. It's encyclopedic, but in *Michigan's War* I found a transcription of an interesting speech Willcox, captured at Bull Run, gave after he was released by the Confederates. Covered in the *New York Times*, Willcox described a kind of Confederate secret police/vigilante network or system of informants that he said monitored Southerners' speech and crushed dissent. "...[T]hey overawe thousands who would be for the Union if they dared," Willcox said of this unnamed organization, and he called for Northerners to organize similar networks to suppress Confederate sympathizers – "a despotism of the people." Willcox was not exaggerating about the terrible treatment of Southern civilians in Confederate prison, which he witnessed at Salisbury, N.C., and noted in his diary. I found this fascinating.

Michigan history buffs have noted with pride over the years of the state's contribution of over 90,000 men to the conflict (mainly in the Union Army and mostly volunteers), and that more than 14,000 didn't come home; more than 4,000 of these men were killed or mortally wounded. But there are also heart-breaking and troubling views here that reflect Michiganders' ambivalence over the war and abolition, and out-and-out racism. There's the letter of African-American John Jackson of Monroe, who wrote that though it was sad to have to leave the country of his birth, he knew he might find "all the civil and social rights and privileges of citizenship" that he couldn't have in the United States by joining a colonization plan and moving to Liberia or Haiti. There's a horrible account of a black man, John Taylor, arrested for attacking an Ingham County family, being dragged from the county jail and lynched in Mason, Michigan in 1866. And there's an incredible report by the provost marshal, or military police chief, of Huron County, who, with the county sheriff, was threatened and shot at by an armed mob when they tried to arrest men who had been drafted yet refused to report for duty in January 1865.

Lastly, let me just note that fans of the Sarah Edmonds/Franklin Thompson story and the silly but bestselling book of her alleged spy-in-disguise adventures would do well to pay attention to the accounts in *Michigan's War* of Anna Etheridge and Jane Hinsdale, women who initially joined the 2<sup>nd</sup> Michigan Infantry as nurses and attendants who actually had experiences that Edmonds' incorporated into her novel. All of this is good stuff, and *Michigan's War* has scores of such documents. Any serious reader of the state's history in the Civil War will not want to leave this book to college students.

*Kim Crawford is a retired newspaper reporter and author of The Daring Trader: Jacob Smith in the Michigan Territory, The 16<sup>th</sup> Michigan Infantry in the Civil War Revised and Updated, and coauthor of The 4th Michigan Infantry in the Civil War. He has written about Michigan Civil War soldiers for Michigan History magazine, served as guest curator for the Flint Sloan Museum's 2012 Civil War exhibit, The Brave and the Faithful, and has given talks on both the 4th and 16th Michigan Infantry regiments to historical societies and Civil War roundtables.*