Connecticut in the US Civil War

Matthew Warshauer ’90
Connecticut in the American Slavery, Sacrifice, and Survival

Editor's Note: CCSU Professor of History and Central alum Matthew Wiersbauer ’90 has generously allowed the Central focus to present an excerpt of his forthcoming book, Connecticut in the American Civil War: Slavery, Sacrifice, and Survival, to be published by Wesleyan University Press in 2011. What follows is a condensed version of his introduction to that book.

On July 29, 1860, Milo A. Holcomb of Granby, Connecticut wrote to Republican presidential nominee Abraham Lincoln: “I am not hostile to your election though You are represented to be an abolitionest and in sentiment I am a pro Slavery man. I would if I could have my way, authorize Slavery in New England and the importation of African servants.”

Holcomb went on, discussing Lincoln’s famous “House Divided Speech” in which he had stated that the nation could not continue half slave and half free. Clearly tired of the battle over slavery, Holcomb opined, “the agitating question of slavery as it Exists in these U. S. has distracted the counsels of this nation long enough, you are reported to have said that the country could not remain a united people one half Bound the other free, that all must be alike and I agree with your reported sentiment.”

Holcomb’s conclusion about the future of slavery, however, was not in accord with Lincoln’s. Yet he was not opposed to allowing Lincoln to give abolition a shot: “I am willing You should try the experiment, I do not believe you can effect emancipation. If you can I have no objection. I only want all sections to be alike. I want the Experiment tried abolish Slavery if you can. If you find you cannot as I am sure you will do, then let us have the other as it will then be the last expedient.”

A Problem for Connecticut

Milo Holcomb’s letter presents a problem for Connecticut. We, after all, were the “good guys” in the Civil War. Along with the rest of the North, Connecticut staunchly opposed slavery and rallied to halt not only the spread of the peculiar institution West but also the Southern rebellion that shook the Union to its very core. When considering Connecticut’s connection to slavery and the Civil War, many immediately think of the Amistad case, state heroine Prudence Crandall, the Underground Rail road, John Brown, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. These are certainly important and well-known events, to present an excerpt

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The reality, however, is far from the constructed memory that flowed forth in the many years and decades after the Civil War. The simple truth is that in the “land of steady habits,” one of the steadiest was a virulent racism. While New England was generally viewed as the national center of abolitionist thought, Connecticut stood apart. The famed abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, outraged by the Prudence Crandall affair, in which her school for black girls was attacked and ultimately closed by the town and state, derisively referred to Connecticut as the “Georgia of New England.” More than one historian has noted that, among her sister states, Connecticut was “the most inhospitable” to abolition. It is not that abolition failed to find a foothold. Rather, it was simply not nearly as wide-spread as many today believe. Moreover, whatever the number of Connecticut abolitionists, there were many more who actively opposed the advocates of anti-slavery and black equality.

The outbreak of the Civil War did little to change Connecticut’s racial sensibilities. The war did not usher in any widespread acceptance of blacks. Few of the state’s 55,000 men who marched to war did so with the goal of black freedom, and though many in the state came around to supporting Lincoln’s 1863 Emancipation Proclamation they did so primarily as a war measure that confiscated the South’s main labor force. The supporters of emancipation never fully embraced abolition and its belief in racial equality. The attitudes of both soldiers and those at home revealed that there existed a very clear difference between the two ideas.

Racism was so deeply entrenched that even as the war came to an end and emancipation was enshrined within the protection of the Constitution through the Thirteenth Amendment, Connecticut was still unable to shed its steady animosity to black rights. In 1865 the General Assembly passed an amendment to the state constitution removing the word “white” in describing who could vote and authorized a general referendum among the state’s residents to decide the matter. Voters readily demolished the amendment at the polls, revealing the unwillingness of Connecticut to accept any blacks as true members of the state or nation.

Nearly half of Connecticut’s population was steadfastly opposed to fighting the South. The state descended into chaos at the outbreak of the conflict, splitting into warring Republican and Democratic factions that sometimes faced off violently. Throughout the war the two parties maintained an intense opposition that put in jeopardy the state’s commitment to the Union. The most momentous outgrowth of this division was the 1863 gubernatorial election, which placed sitting Republican Governor William Buckingham against former Democratic governor and Mexican War hero Thomas Seymour. Had Buckingham lost this pivotal election, his fate might very well have been that of the state in its backing for the Lincoln administration and the Union.

The divisions between Republicans and Democrats in Connecticut reflected the larger complexities that separated the North from the South. These differences were at the heart of why the war should or should not be fought, as well as the complicated arguments over governmental power versus states’ rights, the sanctity of the Union, and the place of slavery within America. For Thomas Seymour and many of his Democratic brethren, secession, the right of a state to leave the nation, was entirely legal, and it was the agitation by abolitionists that was the great problem that precipitated war. They insisted that the North must recognize its constitutional obligation to protect slavery. Even those Connecticut residents who disagreed with secession and supported the war effort, readily agreed with some of Seymour’s points. They were, after all, not fighting on behalf of black freedom. They were not abolitionists.

For supporters of the war, the sanctity of the Union surpassed all other considerations, including slavery. This is the reason that so many marched forward under flowing banners to sacrifice their lives in such large numbers, to suffer the loss of limbs, the destruction of their families, and the misery that resulted for those at home. These men and those who supported
them placed the life of the nation ahead of their own. One simply cannot underesti-
mate the power of nationalism and the patriotic call to duty that responds when
the nation is threatened. It goes beyond the complexities of policy, arguments over
westward expansion, issues of states’ rights — though all of these are certainly inter-
mixed within larger issues of power and patriotism.

Even when the war ended, the issue of sacrifice continued to resonate as survivors attempted to
understand the conflict and come to grips with its incomprehensible death toll. Many came home physically
or psychologically crippled, only to find a home front that was reeling from the same stresses. To make sense of it all and to provide
meaning for those who had fallen and those who had lived, cities and
towns around Connecticut paid tribute through monuments that told
the story of service and a cause bigger than any one individual. Those
monuments continue to stand as our most direct physical connection to
the Civil War. They dot town greens and parks, and stand in the center
of many cities throughout Connecticut.

The “Enduring Challenge” of Race
These Civil War monuments also offer an additional reality and legacy of
the war. One that brings us back to the issue of race and the war’s causes.
Of the more than 130 monuments spread throughout the state, only two
include an image related to slavery or emancipation. As much as those of
the Civil War generation did not embrace abolition and march to battle
in defense of black rights, they, in the war’s aftermath, did not choose to
remember the war in terms of those goals. Rather, they focused on service,
sacrifice, and their own need to survive the war’s end. Once again, black
rights and their role in the great rebellion were pushed to the side. It took
almost 150 years before a tribute was erected in Connecticut specifically
to black involvement in the war. In the fall of 2008, New Haven dedicat-
ed a monument to the 29th black regiment. It is a stark reminder that the
Civil War remains alive in our memories, and that race is unalterably
interwoven within that memory.

This book has been written, and the Commemoration at CCSU has
been designed, to address the complexities involved in understanding
the Civil War. From its causes, to the internal clashes over fighting,
the experiences of soldiers and those at home, to the central role that
slavery and race played, Connecticut’s involvement in the war remains
complex, and the conflict’s legacy long lasting. With the widespread
belief that abolition and equality were the central motives of the Civil
War, the more complicated Connecticut story needs to be understood
so that we can, in historian David Blight’s words, better understand
race and emancipation as the war’s “most enduring challenge.”

Connecticut Commemoration
of the 150th Anniversary
of the Civil War

Work is underway for an ambitious Connecticut commemoration of
the 150th anniversary of the beginning of the Civil War —
a project launched at CCSU
by a planning committee
headed by Professor
Warshauer. In addition to the
publication of Warshauer’s
book, an academic conference
is being organized, and teach-
ers statewide have been invited
to develop school curricula on the
Civil War. Other events planned for the
three-day commemoration (April 15-17, 2011)
include a Civil War reenactors encampment at
Stanley Quarter Park in New Britain, staged
battle skirmishes, and exhibits from historical
organizations and museums. Yale University
History Professor David Blight will deliver the
keynote address at a conference inaugurating
the commemoration on April 15 at CCSU.

The commemoration is a collaboration of
more than 40 organizational partners, including
the Hartford Courant and many historical
societies and museums.

The Travelers is generously supporting the
commemorative activities. More details at:
www.ccsu.edu/civilwar.