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## **[Review of] Beleaguered Winchester: A Virginia Community at War, 1861–1865**

**By: Sheila Phipps**

**Abstract:** Book Review

DUNCAN, RICHARD R. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007 Pp. 395, \$40 (hbk), ISBN 0 8071 3217 9

Winchester, Virginia, located in the lower Shenandoah Valley and within about 100 miles of both the Union and Confederate capitals, became a strategic necessity for both armies at various times during the Civil War. In the past decade, Winchester has been included in several studies of military campaigns, political tension, gender conflict, and Confederate nationalism. Now Richard R. Duncan has synthesized recent studies and woven in a vast array of primary sources to make Winchester itself his subject. In *Beleaguered Winchester: A Virginia Community at War, 1861–1865*, Duncan offers a study of this border community, coveted by both armies yet difficult for either to hold.

According to Duncan, Winchester was the hub of several well-traveled roads and a stop on the Baltimore and Ohio railroad, while its surrounding countryside offered bountiful provisions for both soldiers and civilians. Occupation of Winchester by both northern and southern armies, whether for staging the next action or to keep the opposing army from access to it, took its toll on the town. Prior to the outbreak of war in the Upper South, the majority of Winchester residents opposed secession. So it is not surprising that during the war, and especially under occupation, conflict between Unionists and secessionists added to the normal suspense of wartime. Additional tensions included disputes between citizens and soldiers who "requisitioned" necessities from private property. Conflict arose as well between men and women as patriotism outweighed the obligations of gender roles. Secessionist women of Winchester, for instance, surprised Union soldiers with their inhospitable behavior. Even when the town rested between occupations, anticipation of the next disruption caused frustration.

Armies gathered in Winchester from the beginning of the conflict, putting a strain on space. Throughout the war, overcrowding brought with it epidemics; houses and churches were

commandeered for use as hospitals to care for the sick and wounded. Although quickly retreating armies offered citizens a wealth of goods when they left their stores behind, the general trend was shortages followed by inflated prices. Some of the greatest turmoil came from property destruction. Armies leaving Winchester with little time to prepare sometimes set fire to their own ammunition, leaving collateral damage in their wake. The six battles waged nearby could spill over into the streets of Winchester, also causing great damage. By the end of the war the town suffered a loss of over \$80,000 in property damage.

Duncan organizes this multi-faceted story both temporally and topically. Chapters are arranged chronologically, the main themes of each being major occupations and the generals in charge, namely Thomas Jonathan (Stonewall) Jackson, Nathaniel P. Banks, Robert Milroy, and Philip Sheridan. Although this is a history of war, Duncan only offers military movements and battles to explain the events affecting Winchester. For example, Jackson's Shenandoah Valley campaign in the spring and summer of 1862 offers the backdrop for Duncan's treatment of the frequently changing moods troubling Winchester society. Within the chronological thread he pauses occasionally to cover the various topics of dissension, depredation, damage, and death. Unfortunately, since issues worsened through time, Duncan's coverage of them in more than one chapter sometimes appears repetitive.

One of Duncan's most important contributions is his inclusion of the struggles faced by Winchester's civil authorities. Military officials, not local governments, are the usual focus of Civil War studies. Throughout Duncan's work, however, he spotlights the efforts of the mayor and town council to meet special demands of war, reminding readers that "constant upheaval did not permit normal governance by civil authorities" (p. xii). They supplied relief for families of absent soldiers and met approaching generals on the outskirts of town to formally surrender and request protection of property. Duncan thus posits that, although war was the main concern of Winchester citizens, the normal concerns of town officials not only continued, but were complicated by additional wartime exigencies.

Duncan is at his best when presenting his own narrative, but becomes somewhat awkward when weaving other historians' words into Winchester's story. And, unfortunately, this interesting work suffers from weak editing. There are many technical errors left in the book that more careful oversight could have prevented. Additionally, readers might wish that Duncan had expanded on the class distinctions he observed in the secession decision. His brief mention of mechanics' and tradesmen's opinions, rarely taken into account in political studies of the war, are tantalizing and cry out for further scholarship. Despite these shortcomings, however, Duncan artfully makes sense out of a most confusing period in Winchester's history.