

Desertion in the Confederate Army: A Disease that Crippled Dixie

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ABSTRACT

As the Civil War progressed, desertion amongst Confederate soldiers infected the Confederate Army like a poisonous cancer. Although North Carolina mustered more troops to fight for the Confederacy than any other Confederate state, North Carolina also had one of the highest rates of desertion. In this paper, I examine the causes behind Confederate desertion of North Carolina soldiers. One main factor that motivated North Carolina soldiers to desert was desperate letters written by wives, sisters, and mothers begging their loved ones to stop fighting and come home amidst food shortages and other hardships. A second main factor was Southern elites' broken promises to look after soldiers' families by refusing to grow more food crops instead of the more profitable cotton. Lastly, the inability of the leaders of the Confederate Army and President Davis to take substantive measures to punish deserters or prevent others from deserting early in the war allowed desertion to spread with deadly effect as the war continued. While rigorously scrutinizing numerous primary and secondary documents, I argue that appeals from family and friends at home, disdain for Confederate nationalism, Union occupation of large swaths of territory, and the failure of southern elites to keep their promises all drove Confederate soldiers from North Carolina to desert.

During the Civil War, the South was significantly undermanned and lacked the industry and natural resources of the North. Disease and a shortage of medical knowledge and facilities reduced the number of troops in both armies, but the development that began to concern the Confederacy's leaders the most was desertion. From 1861 to 1865, around 23,000 North Carolina soldiers deserted, but about 8,000 of these men later returned to their posts.¹

Given the high numbers of desertion of North Carolina soldiers, this paper will primarily focus on Confederate desertion in North Carolina. Confederate soldiers, who were mostly poor farmers, first began to desert after the passage of the Conscription Act of 1862. Historian Francis B. Simkins opined that desertion was “the most disgraceful chapter in the history of the [Civil War].”²

Many parts of the South, including most of eastern North Carolina and Tennessee, were

¹ Hugh T. Lefler and A.R. Newsome, *North Carolina: The History of a Southern State*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1954), 446.

² Richard Bardolph, “Inconstant Rebels: Desertion of North Carolina Troops in the Civil War.” *North Carolina Historical Review*, XLI (April 1964), 163.

under Union occupation for much of the war. The presence of Union troops severely undermined morale and isolated those areas from the rest of the Confederacy. The Union Army's use of oath swearing demoralized Confederates but allowed them to secure protection for their families and homes. Wives and sisters wrote desperate letters begging their loved ones to stop fighting and come home amidst food shortages and other hardships. Southern elites also reneged on their promises to look after soldiers' families by refusing to grow more food crops instead of the more profitable cotton; furthermore, many of the rich extorted basic necessities and their doing so exacerbated already tough economic conditions. Desertion continued to spread throughout the Confederate Army as the high command did not take substantive measures to punish deserters or prevent others from deserting early in the war. Appeals from family and friends at home, disdain for Confederate nationalism, Union occupation of large swaths of territory, and the failure of southern elites to keep their promises all drove Confederate soldiers from North Carolina to desert.

Desertion began to appear in the Confederate Army in the first few months of the war. A "Wanted for Desertion" notice was posted in the *Raleigh Standard* on January 22, 1862 for twenty-three-year-old Thomas Pleasant Myers. Private Myers left Camp Magnum in Raleigh on December 25, 1861 and was soon classified as a deserter.³ According to Brenda McKean, "A volunteer who failed to show for his medical exam and training camp was considered a deserter," thus desertions began before conscription and continued throughout the war.⁴ Confederate law considered desertion as the abandonment of military service without approval and with no intention to return. The following are some of the many examples of desertion committed by Confederate troops: quitting one regiment to join another; absence without leave;

straggling – falling out of line of the march, or immediately before or during battle with intent to return; skulking – avoiding military service by fraud or other illegal actions; self-mutilation; malingering at the expiration of a furlough, during furloughs, or exemptions; and collusion with medical boards for exemption or with subordinate military officers for assignment to easy duties.⁵

Many soldiers who enlisted amid the excitement during the beginning of the war in 1861 believed they could go home after they completed one year of duty. In April 1862, the Confederate Congress passed the first of two conscription acts, which required men between the ages of eighteen to thirty-five, except men with critical professions and other approved exemptions, to enlist in the Confederate Army for three years' service or for the remainder of the war. In an attempt to address fears of slave insurrections caused by the Emancipation Proclamation, with so many white Southerners away fighting, the Confederate Congress passed a second conscription act in October 1862. An exemption included in that act that many poor whites came to abhor was called the "twenty Negro law" in which one white male was exempted from conscription for every twenty slaves on a plantation. This excerpt of a letter to North Carolina Governor Zebulon B. Vance from Private O. Goddin reveals the anger poor whites had against the exemption to the draft given to whites on plantations:

Please pardon the liberty which a poor soldier takes in thus addressing you as when he volunteered he left a wife with four children to go fight for his country. He cheerfully made the sacrifices thinking that the Govt. would protect his family, and keep them from starvation. In this he has been disappointed for the Govt. has made a distinction between the rich man (who had something to fight for) and the poor man who fights for that which he will never have. The [Confederacy's] exemption of the owners of 20 Negroes & the allowing of substitutes clearly proves it.

3 Brenda Chambers McKean, *Blood and War at my Doorstep: North Carolina Civilians*

4 Ibid.

5 Bardolph, "Inconstant Rebels," 189.

Healthy and active men who have furnished substitutes are grinding the poor by speculation while their substitutes have been discharged after a month's service as being too old or as invalids....Now Govr. do tell me how we poor soldiers who are fighting for the rich mans Negro can support our families at \$11 per month? How can the poor live? I dread to see the summer as I am fearful there will be much suffering now...⁶

The majority of Confederate soldiers owned no slaves, so the "twenty Negro law" became extremely unpopular across North Carolina and the Confederacy. The large number of Confederates who avoided conscription in North Carolina reveals that efforts to enforce conscription fell largely on deaf ears.

In addition to the Conscription Acts, the Confederate Congress in 1863 passed two additional laws that deeply angered southern whites: the tax-in-kind and impressment acts. The tax-in-kind law represented a tithe to the government that required farmers to give one-tenth of all their produce to Confederate officials. The impressment act gave specific committees the right to seize livestock, slaves, provisions, and wagons for the Confederate Army and to determine the price of recompense. Many North Carolinians who had no stake in slavery, especially those who lived in the mountains, considered these acts as infringements on their freedoms and found ways to resist.⁷ Gen. Simon Bolivar Buckner observed that "fully half of the East Tennessee and North Carolina troops from the mountain districts are not to be relied upon."⁸ The loyalty of the Home Guard and local militias could never be taken for granted. In a letter to his brother written from his unit in Henderson County, North Carolina, on June 15, 1863, J.A.W. Revis discussed the extent of desertion by soldiers from these mountain regions:

...the men is runing away an coming home nerly every day the Country is fool of them I sopose ther is somthing like ment in tran-sel vaney I sopose that thier is 8300 men [Transylvania County, NC] run away from the army now I dont think that war will last mutch longer boys. I want to see you the worst good god olmity may the time soon role on when the men may return home to ther native lands ther to dwell in peace untel the the mity hand of god Coles forthem.⁹

If J.A.W. Revis's number is correct, there were 8,300 deserters living in Transylvania County by the summer of 1863. His letter also reveals the attitude favoring peace that many soldiers, especially from North Carolina, developed by that stage of the war. Some ways men employed to avoid serving in the Confederate Army included: cutting off fingers, scaling skin to produce bad sores, feigning diseases, alleging impotence, and claiming to feel periodically like the female sex.¹⁰

The greatest concentration of pro-Union citizens was found in the mountain regions, where only 11.3 percent of people owned slaves.¹¹ There are numerous accounts of gangs of deserters who preyed upon the civilian population in North Carolina, and they targeted the wealthy in particular. McKean gives a detailed account of some of the most well known gangs in North Carolina:

Whites and coloreds combined to form gangs intent on robbing the countryside. The Lowry gang from Robeson County stole from their wealthy neighbors and distributed it to the poor. Several gangs used Fort Hamby in Wilkesboro as their base to commit depredations. It was reported that eighty-five deserters from Wilkes and adjoining counties gathered at Fort Hamby. The leaders of this gang, Wade and Lockwood, were deserters from U.S. General Stoneman's cavalry. The Wilkesboro Journal-Patriot reported these

⁶ McKean, *Blood and War at My Doorstep*, vol. 1, 380.

⁷ John G. Barrett, *The Civil War in North Carolina*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1963), 183.

⁸ Philip Gerard, "Deserters and Outliers." *Our State*, February 2014, <http://www.ourstate.com/deserters-outliers/> (accessed April 8, 2014).

⁹ J.A.W. Revis, "J.A.W. Revis to John M. Revis and D.W. Revis, June 15, 1863;" (Letter), Daniel W. Revis Letters, 1862-1863, State Archives of North Carolina (Raleigh, NC: 2014), <http://digital.ncdcr.gov/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15012col18/id/1267/rec/6> (accessed March 17, 2014).

¹⁰ Barrett, *The Civil War*, 185.

¹¹ McKean, *Blood and War at my Doorstep*, vol. 1, 363.

men to have the best army rifles. Deserters near Brunswick County fled to the Green Swamp in wartime.... The Dove Swamp and the Great Dismal Swamp in the East hid both runaway slaves and men escaping conscription or those who had deserted.¹²

One of the most powerful drivers of desertion amongst Confederate troops was the desperate appeal from home by loved ones and friends. One of the most blunt entreaties for desertion is portrayed in Charlotte E. Grimes' autobiography in which she describes the change in attitude by a Confederate officer, "It was said that Capt. Tom Settle, who was a great secessionist in the beginning, told [the soldiers'] wives if they wished the war to stop, to make their husbands desert and come home."¹³ Many women wrote Confederate officials, including President Jefferson Davis himself, to plead for their husbands to stay at home. The following letter was written by Martha Coletrane of Randolph County to the governor of North Carolina and is a heart-breaking plea:

Dear Sir this is a greate undertaking for me as i never wrote to a man of authority before [...] necessity requires it of me as we are nonslave holders in this section of the State [...]. i hope you and our legislature will look to it and have justice done to our people as well as the slaveholders [...] i can tel you the condition of my family and you can judg for your self what its condition woul be if my husban is called from home [...] we hav eight children and the oldest is not fourteen years old and an old aged mother to support, which makes eleven in our family and without my husband we are a desolate and ruined family for extortion runs so hie here [...] we cannot support and clothe our family without the help of my husban [...] i hope you will look to the justice of this section of the state and i trust you will hold the rane [reins] in your own hands and not let the confederate congress have full sway over your State [...] i appeal to you to look to the

white cultivators as strictly as congress has to the slaveholders and i think they men from 35 to 45 be hel[d] as reserves at hom to support ther families if the[y] are calld from home [...] it is bound to leave a thoasn [thousand]families in a starving condition in our country [...] we trust in god and look to you for some help for our poor children [...] so no more.¹⁴

Many soldiers were poor yeomen farmers, and their presence at home was vital to their families' survival. Katherine A. Giuffre discovered through research that soldiers whose absence most affected the stability of their families were more likely to desert than those whose families were less dependent. Giuffre also determined that soldiers who were heads of households were more likely to desert than those who were not. This assertion is backed by the increased rates of desertion around harvest times in June, July, and September.¹⁵

The shortage of food was most often mentioned in soldiers' letters home; minimal rations were distributed to soldiers for long lengths of time. Private Virgil Cavin wrote that near-starvation tested his determination and drove others to desert:

I dont think I can stay here and Starve wee dont get half a nuff to eat....I ant agoing to stay here more than tow or three weekes I will go some way or other I cant Stay here this way. I cant Stay here and starve the way I have to do I get a pint of meal a day I cant stay here the is a croud of us a going to come home. I hate to Stay here and Starve and I hate to go to the yanks I hant got much chance the wach [they watch] us So close that wee hant no chance... [but] the average from 8 to 10 men every night the cross the lines.¹⁶

Considering the South's lack of industry and the Union blockade, the Confederacy struggled severely to adequately feed, clothe, and arm its troops. In a letter from Cary Whitaker to his brother, the former reveals that the lack

¹² Ibid., 397.

¹³ Grimes-Bryan Papers (#16), East Carolina Manuscript Collection, J. Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina, USA.

¹⁴ McKean, *Blood and War at my Doorstep*, vol. 1, 365.

¹⁵ Katherine A. Giuffre, "First in Flight: Desertion as Politics in the North Carolina Confederate Army," *Social Science History* 21, no. 2 (1997), 245-263.

¹⁶ Bardolph, "Inconstant Rebels," 175.

of food and supplies directly caused soldiers to defect to the Union:

I think the people as well as the Government ought to make extra efforts to feed and clothe the soldiers, for if our soldiers were well clothed and fed I don't believe there would be one tenth of the desertions then. If the Yankees were fed and clothed as we are they wouldn't have an army a month, while if our army received their treatment, we would seldom have a deserter. Though I have a pretty good character for veracity at home, my friends would hardly believe me if I were to tell them of the destitution and suffering I have seen in the army-when in the Valley of Va, the snow on the ground, I have seen soldiers with their pants worn off up to their hips, and nothing but an old pair of drawers on, worn out and exposing the person in many places-and still were I to go to Halifax [NC] and point out this in the most glowing colors I would hardly get a dozen pairs of pants for the very army which is now keeping the enemy from their homes and firesides...¹⁷

Civilians at home did not fare any better, and these Southerners dealt with inflation and extortion of basic goods. An example of a starving wife desperate for her husband to come home is detailed in the following letter by Mary Cooper:

I have always been proud of you, and since your connection with the Confederate army I have been prouder than ever before. I would not have you do anything wrong for the world, but before God, Edward, unless you come home we must die. Last night I was aroused by little Eddie's crying. I called, What's the matter, Eddie? and he said, Oh, Mama, I'm so hungry. And Lucy, Edward, your darling Lucy, she never complains, but she is growing thinner and thinner, and Edward, unless you come home we must die.¹⁸

By 1863, the war had taken its toll on the spirits of most Confederate soldiers, and they

began to question the senseless bloodshed after the devastating battles at Gettysburg and Vicksburg. In a letter to his wife, Tarheel soldier John Futch wrote:

I can only assure you we are living the worst life ever lived. Our rations are short and our duty hard. I had one mes [s] of beans and squashes but I had to pay 1 dollar for them [.] I haven't had no money in more a month. I am comin [g] home the first chance I can get [.] I think that this war will end before long for I think that the yankes will whip us before long.¹⁹

In addition to desperate appeals from letters from home, there were other driving forces behind the desertion of Confederate troops.

One problem that plagued the Confederacy throughout the entire war was that the concept of nationalism was based on protecting one's home and family, and did not usually involve a great sense of loyalty to the Confederate government in Richmond. Peter S. Bearman argues that many Confederate soldiers deserted because their identity as Southerners was eroded by an "emergent localism," or their tendency to be more loyal to states and regions, nourished and organized within the Confederate army. Bearman also notes the view of many historians that suggest rancorous battles among the elite over state rights weakened Southern nationalism.²⁰ Governors Thomas O. Moore of Louisiana, Joseph E. Brown of Georgia, and Zebulon B. Vance of North Carolina all resisted Confederate efforts to conscript their states' male populations and impress supplies for the Confederate Army.²¹ Governor Vance tried to muster all the adult males he could into the Home Guard and state militia to round up deserters, but there simply were not enough men to find and apprehend all these individuals. Soldiers from all over the

¹⁷ McKean, *Blood and War at my Doorstep*, vol. 1, 395.

¹⁸ D.H. Hill, "The Women of the Confederacy," *Addresses at the Unveiling of the Memorial to the North Carolina Women of the Confederacy*, (Raleigh: Edwards and Broughton, 1914), 12-13.

¹⁹ Jayne E. Blair, *Tragedy at Montpelier: The Untold Story of Ten Confederate Deserters from North Carolina*, (Bowie: Heritage Books, 2003), 63.

²⁰ Peter S. Bearman, "Desertion as Localism: Army Unit Solidarity and Group Norms in the U.S. Civil War," *Social Forces* 70, no. 2 (1991), 321-342.

²¹ Mark A. Weitz, *More Damning Than Slaughter: Desertion in the Confederate Army*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 112.

South largely reacted negatively to the idea of conscription and reflected a scorn for the Confederacy and its officials. Norm Harrold of Ashe County, North Carolina, bluntly told President Jefferson Davis, “And now bastard President of a political abortion, farewell. ‘Scalp hunter,’ relic, pole, and chivalrous Confederates in crime, good-bye. Except it be in the army of the Union, you will not again see this conscript.”²²

The Union used oath swearing to allow Confederate civilians and soldiers held in captivity to effectively abandon the Confederate cause. Oath swearing was widespread in the western states of Tennessee, Missouri, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and northern Alabama. Union occupation of large parts of the Confederacy weakened the connection civilians felt to Richmond and caused some loved ones to entreat soldiers to come home. Mark A. Weitz explains the reason that many Confederate civilians and soldiers swore an oath of allegiance to the Union: “People unwilling to wait for the outcome, or looking at their situation and concluding that the rule of war in their little corner of the Confederacy had prevailed, took the final step to formalize the Confederacy’s defeat.”²³

In addition to devastating effects caused by Union oath swearing, the Confederate government also failed to establish and enforce a uniform punishment for desertion. From December 1861 until 1865, the Confederacy executed only 229 men for desertion (204 were killed by firing squad while 25 were hanged). North Carolinians made up more than half of those executed. In one instance, five Confederate soldiers were killed who, according to James A. Lowry, “deserted our army and joined the Yankees” outside of New Bern in 1864.²⁴ Both national and state Confederate officials, including Robert E. Lee, offered pardons to deserters who returned to their units, but this did little to stem the tide.

With the ever-increasing number of deserters in the state, North Carolina officials had to dedicate men to round up such individuals. These men became known as the Home Guard. There were three main regions of the state where the Home Guards encountered the most resistance from deserters: Washington, Bertie, and other eastern counties; Randolph, Moore, and Chatham counties in the Piedmont; and most of the upper mountain counties, including Madison County’s Shelton Laurel Valley.²⁵ McKean quotes the historian Yates who discovered, “More than 800 deserters were reported pillaging farmers of Randolph County and defying the local peace officers.”²⁶ Before the Home Guard came into existence, the state militia was primarily responsible for defending North Carolinians. The North Carolina militia, however, was poorly trained and could not adequately distribute food or protect civilians from Union raids. Evidence of the ineptitude of many militia groups is revealed in a woman’s journal, “...[W]hen Burnside’s army approached New Bern, the militia took the cavalry’s horses and fled to Kinston without stopping whereby forty horses rode to their death.”²⁷ The militia was limited to mostly old men and disabled soldiers, and conscription of young men made it extremely difficult for the state to fill militia ranks. An excerpt from a contemporary letter reveals that the militia was outnumbered in Henderson County North Carolina, “...there is more dezerter than there is malishey hear but some of them has gone angive up to go back.”²⁸ Not only was the state militia ill-trained and ill-equipped, there is evidence of mistreatment of both loyal civilians and relatives of deserters even by members of the militia. Missions nominally involving the hunting of deserters often involved personal disputes that led to violence. Furthermore, the militia and home guard were sometimes unreliable and stole from loyal citizens. An officer

22 Ibid., 108.

23 Ibid., 121.

24 James Addison Lowrie Collection (#983), East Carolina Manuscript Collection, J. Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina, USA.

25 McKean, *Blood and War at my Doorstep*, vol. 2, 884.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid., 883.

28 Sarepta Revis, “Letter: Sarepta Revis to Daniel W. Revis, June 7, 1863,” (Letter), Daniel W. Revis Letters, 1862-1863, State Archives of North Carolina, (Raleigh, NC: 2014), <http://digital.ncdcr.gov/cdm/ref/collection/p151012coll8/id/1232> (accessed March 17, 2014).

of the Fifty-sixth North Carolina militia admitted there was “indiscriminate plunder of property belonging to the deserters’ families, (such as wearing apparel and watches) and depredations on property of good citizens.”²⁹ McKean also provides chilling accounts of the militia and deserters terrifying the civilian population:

Mrs. Unus Riddle, a Tory, was robbed, whipped, and hung until almost dead, by secesh troops because she refused to tell of the hiding places. Sally Moore, age seventy, was whipped. The mother of an infant was tied to a tree. Her infant was put in the cabin doorway while the soldiers told her the baby would be left to die in the snow unless she would reveal her husband’s whereabouts. In Yadkin County, the deaths of two magistrates, murdered by deserters, caused other magistrates to fear for their lives. People complained that deserters had more friends than the militia and could get timely information of every movement to arrest them...³⁰

Throughout the war, militia and Home Guard units proved largely ineffective and committed atrocities that angered many civilians, further undermining support and leading to desertion.

After mid-1863, many Confederate and state officials, along with citizens and soldiers in the field, determined that the main cause of desertion by North Carolina troops was the peace movement, led by W.W. Holden, and the melancholy it created at home. As editor of the largest newspaper in the state, the *North Carolina Standard*, Holden argued that North Carolina should negotiate a swift peace and begin reconstruction. Holden also called for changes in conscription and tax laws, changes that attracted support from the poor, non-slaveholding classes.³¹

William Holden derided the Confederate government, for “it had lost its original character and had been perverted to despotic

purposes against her own rights and the rights and liberties of her citizens.”³² Many criticized Holden because he seemed overly eager to reach peace with the Union and accused him of being motivated by political ambitions. A North Carolina private described Holden’s role in desertions among Tarheel troops, “There has been a good many N. Carolinians shot in this army for Desertion old traitor Holden is Responsible for the most of it...”³³ The *Fayetteville Observer* criticized those who attended peace meetings by accusing many of desertion:

We have reason to believe that in at least one case a meeting was in great part composed of the immediate relations and friends of a number of deserters who are prowling about the woods in that neighborhood, and that its main object was to countenance the dastardly conduct of those deserters. Again we have heard that the prime movers of some of the meetings are men between 40 and 45, who are thus muddying the waters for the purpose of devising some mode of screening themselves from obedience to their country’s call.³⁴

Rulings made by North Carolina Supreme Court Chief Justice Richmond Pearson undermined the constitutionality of the conscription laws as well as the means of enforcement. This excerpt from a recent Our State blog posting reveals the effect Chief Justice Pearson had on the levels of desertion in that time period: “Increasingly, North Carolinians turned to the courts to combat the perceived draconian actions of Confederate conscription officials within the state.... Chief Justice Pearson saw the court as the protector of individual freedoms within the state, and as a result, he issued opinions going against the actions of the Confederate conscription officials.”³⁵ North Carolina Governor Vance engaged in an intense argument with the Confederate government in Richmond over North Carolina’s courts, while defending his

29 Barrett, *The Civil War*, 194.

30 McKean, *Blood and War at my Doorstep*, vol. 2, 889.

31 Barrett, *The Civil War*, 188.

32 Bardolph, “Inconstant Rebels,” 183.

33 *Ibid.*, 184.

34 *Fayetteville Observer*, “Fayetteville Observer: Newspaper article on NC politics and the peace movement, 17 Aug. 1863,” (News paper article), Newspaper Collection, State Archives of North Carolina, (Raleigh, NC: 2014), <http://digital.ncdcr.gov/cdm/com poundobject/collection/p15012coll8/id/12996/rec/7> (accessed March 15, 2014).

soldiers' contributions to the Confederate war effort in light of the increasing amount of North Carolina soldiers deserting from Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. For these reasons, the peace movement convinced thousands of North Carolina troops and civilians to abandon the Confederate cause.

Another impetus for desertion was the fact that Southern elites reneged on their promise to take care of soldiers' families. Many profiteers committed extortion by selling basic necessities at extremely high prices, which drove numerous families into near-starvation. Some scholars cite evidence from 1862 that the Southern planters broke their promise to the largely yeoman, non-slaveholding class by the planters' refusal to plant more food crops instead of the more profitable cotton. Mark A. Weitz describes the anger most whites felt towards the Confederacy's elites: "[The poorer citizens] had gone to war and 'risked death for the altar of their country' while an entire class of men used their wealth to hire substitutes and remain at home."³⁶ The conscription laws, impressment, and tax-in-kind acts also supported the idea that the war was a "rich man's war, poor man's fight." Weitz went on to claim that, "To hear that the elites not only withheld assistance but actually took advantage of the hardships and shortages of the war undermined and ultimately severed any sense of loyalty to the Confederacy, its cause, and its army."³⁷ In a society that was deeply stratified, the success of the South depended on a harmonious relationship between poor yeomen farmers and wealthy planters but much to the chagrin of the leaders of the Confederacy, that did not materialize.

In examining the literature on desertion amongst Confederate troops during the Civil War, there is a noticeable lack of secondary scholarship on the topic of cowardice.

Chris Walsh opines that stories of courage were more commonly recorded than those of cowardice, "It is not only because courage is more 'gratifying' than cowardice that it draws our attention: there is also a consensus that during the Civil War courage was much more common than cowardice."³⁸ Walsh also argues that cowardice and courage seem to have a kind of synergistic relationship, to the point that the former causes the latter. Walsh provides the example of Union soldier Jonathan Stowe's memory of charging, "forward with a rush lest your pride taunt you of cowardice."³⁹ While it is true that cowardice was a factor in soldiers staying to fight or fleeing from the battlefield, there is not enough evidence to suggest that cowardice was a significant factor in desertions amongst Confederate soldiers because it was not written about.

In conclusion, the causes of desertion of Confederate troops from North Carolina during the Civil War are complex and inter-related. Desperate letters from home had the greatest impact on persuading some men to abandon their units. A weakened sense of Confederate nationalism prevented many Confederate soldiers from feeling devotion to authorities in Richmond. Union occupation of large parts of the Confederacy and the use of oath swearing also struck blows to the hearts and minds of many civilians who were under Union control for much of the war. Furthermore, the existence of a strong peace movement in North Carolina led by the vocal W.W. Holden weakened troop and civilian morale and encouraged many desertions among Tarheel troops. The problem of desertion tormented the Confederacy's leaders from the very beginning of the war and proved to be a significant factor that caused the South to lose the Civil War.

35 "First Wednesdays – "It is important to have uniformity in the decisions of our judges..." North Carolina Civil War 150, November 6, 2013, <http://civilwar150nc.wordpress.com/2013/11/06/first-wednesdays-it-is-important-to-have-uniformity-in-the-decisions-of-our-judges/> (accessed April 15, 2014).

36 Weitz, *More Damning Than Slaughter*, 126.

37 *Ibid.*, 284-285.

38 Chris Walsh, "Cowardice Weakness or Infirmity, Whichever It May Be Termed": A Shadow History of the Civil War," *Civil War History* 59, no. 4 (2013), 492-526.

39 *Ibid.*

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