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978-1-107-07524-5 - Rebels against the Confederacy: North Carolina's Unionists

Barton A. Myers

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Rebels against the Confederacy

In this groundbreaking study, Barton A. Myers analyzes the secret world of hundreds of white and black Southern Unionists as they struggled for survival in a new Confederate world, resisted the imposition of Confederate military and civil authority, began a diffuse underground movement to destroy the Confederacy, joined the United States Army as soldiers, and waged a series of violent guerrilla battles at the local level against other Southerners. Myers also details the work of Confederates as they struggled to build a new nation at the local level and maintain control over manpower, labor, agricultural, and financial resources, which Southern Unionists possessed. The story is not solely one of triumph over adversity but also one of persecution and, ultimately, erasure of these dissidents by the postwar South's Lost Cause mythologizers.

Barton A. Myers is Assistant Professor of Civil War History at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia. His book on American Civil War guerrilla warfare, *Executing Daniel Bright: Race, Loyalty, and Guerrilla Violence in a Coastal Carolina Community, 1861–1865*, won the 2009 Jules and Frances Landry Award for the best book in Southern studies published by Louisiana State University Press. He is the recipient of a grant from the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, a Russell Weigley grant, and a Mellon research fellowship.

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BARTON A. MYERS

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For Molly and Warner

And for my mentors:

Dr. John Morgan Gates, Dr. Jeff C. Roche, and Dr. John C. Inscoc

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Preface: The Murder of Thomas Ray

Sometime in 1862, a company of Confederate cavalry arrived at the home of Wake County, North Carolina, resident Thomas Ray to enforce the recently approved Confederate Conscription Act. Ray, twenty-two in 1860, was a member of a large extended family. He had four brothers: Wiley, David, Caswell, and Bryant, all of whom fell within the age range liable for military service. Thomas's uncle, William Perry, was a well-known Unionist "tory" who was arrested in 1862 on the fear that he would warn Confederate deserters of the state's conscript battalion as it searched for them, and on at least one occasion William Perry's young daughter was assaulted by these same Confederates while they searched their home. The conscript battalion shot his son, William D. Perry, during his own attempt to avoid Confederate service, and his four nephews were also eventually conscripted. It was Thomas's murder, however, that was perhaps most indicative of this family's loyalties during the war; Perry described in only one line what must have been a difficult experience for the entire Perry-Ray clan: "My nephew Tommy Ray was tied to a tree and killed because he refused to go in the army."¹

Thomas Ray left behind nothing in his own words; not a single scrap of writing about his political beliefs or his view of the world has been uncovered. Perhaps he was not even able to write his own name. He did leave behind his bold actions, however. Ray was not ambivalent about the American Civil War

¹ William Perry (Wake, Claim No. 13,200), Southern Claims Commission Case Files, 1877–1883, Records of the Government Accounting Office, Records of the Third Auditor's Office, RG 217, National Archives, College Park, MD (hereafter cited as Southern Claims); U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Population Schedule of the Eighth Census of the United States*, 1860. Wake County, North Carolina; High's Cavalry, which was responsible for the murder of Thomas Ray, is mentioned in three other Wake County Claims and may have been John S. Hine's Company B of the McRae Conscript Cavalry Battalion. This unit worked closely with Peter Mallet's battalion. Mallet was commandant of conscripts for the entire state of North Carolina. There are several Thomas Rays found in the 1860 census, but only one entry includes a Bryant Ray.

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or his own political position in the national crisis. Ray, a white man born in the upper South state of North Carolina, was a Unionist like his uncle William Perry, and his opposition to the Confederacy extended even to resisting the policy of conscription, which threatened to take him away from his home and family. Whether Thomas was committed to Unionism because of a political party affiliation or admiration for an antebellum leader like Kentucky Whig Henry Clay, or he was simply following his family's political loyalty to the Union, we will probably never know for sure, but his refusal to join the Confederate army points to the complex nature of Civil War loyalty and loyalty stories. Not all Civil War Unionists were willing to make the final sacrifice in the face of violence; many waited weeks or even months in the Confederate service before fleeing to safety, many of those men joining the Union Army after their successful escape. Thomas Ray's story forces a reckoning with the difficult conditions Unionists faced when resisting the Confederate government during the four years of Civil War and the complex realities of life as a political dissident within a Confederate state. The stories of Thomas Ray, William Perry, and hundreds of others open up a Southern Unionist angle for examining the American Civil War, a world of covert and violent resistance to the Confederacy but also a world of fear and silence. Understanding the experience and the lives of these rebels against a rebellion is the purpose of this book.

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This book is the culmination of nearly a decade of research rebuilding the world of Unionists and guerrillas in North Carolina during the American Civil War. It is a book about how peaceful political dissidents became violent and about how violent resistance diverged into different forms of rebellion against the Confederacy. Without the work of many pioneering scholars of Southern dissent and guerrilla warfare during the nineteenth century, the book could not have been written. I lack the space to thank them all here.

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guerrilla. Zachary Brittsan, Gretchen Adams, Ron Milam, Karlos Hill, Patricia Pelley, Abigail Swingen, and Alan Barenberg were wonderful colleagues and supportive of the project. James Sandy and Scott Thompson, two of my TTU students, have grown into fine historians in their own right as I worked on this book.

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Lexington, Virginia
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