FURSCA End of Summer Write Up

The Civil War was the United States’ bloodiest and deadliest war, with intense battles interspersed between long periods of boredom. To preserve the spirit and combat boredom, Union soldiers frequently wrote letters to home and kept personal diaries. For many ordinary white Union soldiers, it was their first time in the South, and their first time interacting with Southerners, both white and black. From reading scores of letters and diaries from white Union soldiers, I have found that everyday white Northern soldiers were fascinated by white Southerners, enough that they commented on their perceived character and behaviors in their diaries and letters home. While there was often disdain, there also was frequent sympathy for poor white Southerners with the assumption that they had been duped into supporting secession by rich, slave-owning white Southerners.

I began my FURSCA research with the question “What were white Union soldiers’ attitudes towards African Americans in the South during the Civil War?” Previous to the start of my research through FURSCA, I participated in Student Research Partners (SRP) under Dr. Marcy Sacks. Throughout the school year, I spent time researching white Union soldiers’ attitudes towards African Americans and it was beyond evident that there was plenty of research to be done on the topic. However, when I began my research over the summer through FURSCA, I continuously came across comments made by white Union soldiers about white Southerners that caught my attention. The comments caught my attention primarily because they were sociological rather than political observations. After doing some more research into prior academia, I found that while there was some talk about what I was finding, it was concerning a different question or a part of a broader research topic. Therefore, I decided to shift my attention to the question “What were white Union soldiers’ attitudes towards white Southerners during the Civil War Era?”. My research analyzes comments made by white Union soldiers about white Southerners in order to better understand how white Union soldiers’ perceptions of white Southerners contributed to their overall understanding of the war. The diaries and letters analyzed were pulled from both online and published works and collections at the Library of Congress and the Massachusetts Historical Society. Through FURSCA and the Julia Burd 31’ Memorial Fellowship, I was able to spend ten days in Washington D.C. at the Library of Congress and ten days in Boston, Massachusetts at the Massachusetts Historical Society, diligently reading through their rich trove of historical documents. Through an intense amount of reading diaries and letters, I managed to answer my question. I separated my findings into three categories: thoughts about white Southern women, thoughts about poor white Southerners, and attitudes towards the perceived cultural divide.

Through reading scores of diaries and letters, it is abundantly clear that white Union soldiers believed poor white Southerners were duped into fighting in the war by rich, white, slave-owning elites. One Union soldier wrote: “These people (poor Southern whites) had a worn look, as if something was wanting in the needs of both mind and body….Absolutely, there was a moral slavery of prejudice and ignorance, and all springing from “the institution” belonging to a few, whose injustices and evil these neglected ones fought so well to sustain”-Fiske Family Papers. Another Union soldier, Dennis Tuttle, wrote: “How many ruined hopes and ruined men there will be in the South at the close of this war. Men who have staked their all in a shameful wicked cause- then there will be thousand, ruined, who have been impressed against their will into the services of traitors.”. Similar to the comments made about poor white Southerners, many white Union soldiers commented on the cultural divide between the North and the South. Most of the comments springing from white Union soldiers first hand interactions with the Southern social structure. While marching through the South, white Union soldiers frequently commented on the behaviors and living conditions of poor white Southerners, some soldiers going as far as to call the poor Southern whites a different race. A female doctor, Esther Hill Hawks, wrote: “There are also many of the “poor whites” who are in even more desperate conditions. These Fla. Crackers are much less human than the negoes, more ignorant, dirty and lifeless-many of them look as if they had already been buried for months-their hair and skin and dirty, faded butternut clothes, look all of a piece. Even the negroe’s have great contempt for them.”. Another white Union soldier, Newton Colby, writing: “The old couple, the husband seventy-five, the wife seventy years of age, belong to that class known as “poor whites”. They own the house they live in and about fifty acres of good land, with a few cattle, hogs, and chickens, and yet I don’t believe you could find in the whole north a mechanic’s family, if the husband was sober and industrious, so devoid of comforts as this family seemed to be. And so ignorant too.” Through interactions with white Southerners, many white Union soldiers concluded that the North and the South were culturally incompatible.

While all three of the categories of my research are intertwined, I was most interested in white Union soldiers’ attitudes towards white Southern women. As white Union soldiers moved through the South they found that the women they encountered were particularly problematic and unladylike. Many women would chew tobacco which Union soldiers found disgusting, even more so that women were doing it. A white Union soldier, Donald Benham, writing: “I hardly see how they (Southern women) live, in fact they do not live they merely exist, they are poor sickly looking wretches, the women almost invariably chew tobacco, and our 1st Sergt Crittenden told me the other day that he actually saw one chew snuff…” But the thing I came across most often was accounts of women spitting on white Union soldiers as they marched through towns. Union soldier John Emerson Anderson wrote: “Even the women of this lovely valley express their hatred of us in more ways than one, by words and actions. They tell us we are destined to defeat and some of the lovely maidens in Winchester go so far as to spit in the faces of our soldiers.”(Picture of diary entry shown on the right) . While working in the Library of Congress, I spent some time in their prints and photographs reading room. In a popular magazine during the time, Harper's Weekly, I found a comic that mocked white Southern women. In the first slide of the comic the women were shown spitting on Union soldiers and depicted as ugly. However, the second slide is meant to depict the women after an order was passed called Butler’s Women Order. The order stated that if a woman was to disrespect a Union soldier they would be deemed a common woman of the town. The second slide depicts the Southern women as ladylike and suddenly unproblematic. Furthermore, some Union soldiers would write how they could never imagine themselves with a white Southern woman, further contributing to the perceived cultural divide.

While the comments made by white Union soldiers reflected their inability to fathom the reunification of the North and the South, their comments towards white Southerners even more so suggest that the Union was never truly united to begin with. With that, in the next few months I am going to complete a paper centered around my FURSCA research and hopefully, get it published in an undergraduate history journal. Also, I plan on presenting at Elkin Isaac Student Research Symposium in the spring. In the future, I am hoping to research how the immense cultural divide between the North and the South following the end of the Civil War shortly shifted into a unification among whites to prohibit the progress of African American.

In conclusion, FURSCA has allowed me to take a topic that I am truly interested in and explore the depths of it. The information I have collected throughout this summer has given me the ability to contribute to the never-ending conversation that is history. I can now confidently provide my insight and interpretation of one of the most crucial turning points in American history, and I am extremely grateful for that. Through FURSCA, I had the ability to gain experience in my desired field, and further develop crucial skills like time management, organization, and adaptability. I would like to thank the Julia Burd 31’ Memorial Fellowship for giving me this opportunity to not only grow as a student, but also as a person.