

“Other Souths”: The Civil War and Reconstruction in Alamance County, North Carolina

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By 1860, residents of Alamance County could hardly claim to live in the “backcountry.” The enterprising Holt family had constructed a textile mill with the latest New England technology in 1837; legislators had agreed to carve Alamance out of Orange County in 1849, bringing the administrative machinery of the state much closer to home; and slave and free workers had extended the North Carolina Railroad into the area in 1857. Notwithstanding these striking signs of political and economic integration, white residents of the county still retained some of the old Regulator spirit. Their legislators intermittently clashed with representatives from the more plantation-heavy counties to the east over such issues as access to the franchise and the tax rate on North Carolina slaves. Moreover, whites from Alamance also professed a stronger attachment to the Union than did slaveowners in the eastern portion of the state. Constitutional Unionist John Bell won the county with 53.6% of the vote in the presidential election of 1860, for example, even though Southern Democrat John Breckinridge carried the state.¹ In an even more decisive show of support for the Union, Alamance voters on February 28, 1861 rejected a proposed secession convention by a vote of 1,114 to 254.²

Indeed, it is the persistent resurfacing of dissent through the Civil War and Reconstruction in a county otherwise characterized by a robust commitment to the South’s overlapping hierarchies of race, class, and gender that makes Alamance County so interesting. Just as they did in communities across the Upper South, most whites from Alamance generally forgot their Unionism and embraced the Confederacy after Lincoln called for troops to suppress the rebellion on April 15, 1861. But not all county whites so easily discarded their Unionism,

¹ Digital Scholarship Lab, University of Richmond, “Voting America: United States Politics 1840-2008,” University of Richmond, <http://americanpast.richmond.edu/voting/interactive/> (accessed December 1, 2008). County voters cast 661 ballots for Bell (53.6%), 536 for John Breckinridge (43.5%), and 36 for Stephen Douglas (2.9%). Statewide, Breckinridge won 51% of the votes.

For accounts which situate Alamance County in the context of the rest of the state during the antebellum, wartime, and postbellum periods, see Paul Escott, *Many Excellent People: Power and Privilege in North Carolina, 1850-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985); for a treatment that includes the most recent literature, David Brown, “North Carolinian Ambivalence: Rethinking Loyalty and Disaffection in the Civil War Piedmont,” in *North Carolinians in the Era of the Civil War and Reconstruction*, ed. Paul D. Escott, 7-36 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2008). For the industrialization of the county, a process which simultaneously raised some prominent residents to political and economic leadership of the state and underscored the county’s differences from less industrialized Southern communities, see Bess Beatty, *Alamance: The Holt Family and Industrialization in a North Carolina County, 1837-1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999); also, Allen W. Trelease, *The North Carolina Railroad, 1849-1871, and the Modernization of North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), esp. 333-40.

² Walter Whitaker, *Centennial History of Alamance County* (Charlotte, N.C.: Dowd Press, Inc. for the Burlington Chamber of Commerce, [1949]), 113-14; Carole Watterson Troxler and William Murray Vincent, *Shuttle & Plow: A History of Alamance County, North Carolina* (n.p.: Port City Press for Alamance County Historical Association, 1999), 260. County historians disagree on the vote totals, and I have used the more reliably documented numbers from Troxler and Vincent.

and residents of Alamance comprised a significant proportion of the “Red Strings” (or Heroes of America), a secret organization formed by piedmont whites that worked against the Confederate government.³ During Reconstruction, in a more famous example of county residents’ flirtation with life outside of the Southern mainstream, Wyatt Outlaw stood at the head of a thriving biracial political coalition—until white supremacists lynched him on February 26, 1870. The duration and depth of white support for Outlaw, the intensity of the statewide reaction to his assassination (Governor Holden sent troops to the county to restore order, a decision which ultimately cost him his governorship when whites impeached him), and the entanglement of railroad labor in the county’s Reconstruction politics all make the Outlaw narrative a particularly fascinating variation on the mainstream account of black political expression and white repression.⁴

Historians now know, of course, that there was no such thing as a “solid South,” so the discovery of countervailing narratives within one Southern county is neither surprising nor, by itself, analytically significant. As the grand experiment in digital scholarship, the *Valley of the Shadow*, has shown, however, close analysis of distinctive subcultures can yield rich insights into Southern society as a whole.⁵ A new website, “Other Souths: Alamance County in the Civil War and Reconstruction,” is a modest attempt to facilitate close analysis of one of the piedmont region of North Carolina’s most dynamic counties during a critical period in American History.⁶ Like other digital archives, the website itself does not offer a strong analytical argument about the county, leaving users free to explore the sources on their own. Elon University hosted a mini-conference on Alamance County history in February 2008, in which visiting scholars demonstrated the wide range of questions that it is possible to ask of even such a limited dataset. The remainder of this essay will introduce the nascent website and some of the approaches considered by both scholars and students as they have explored its early iterations.

³ For accounts of wartime dissent within the county, see not only Escott, Brown, and Troxler and Vincent, but also Scott R. Nelson, “Red Strings and Half Brothers: Civil Wars in Alamance County, North Carolina,” in *Enemies of the Country: New Perspectives on Unionists in the Civil War South*, ed. John C. Inscoe and Robert C. Kenzer, 37-53 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001); Victoria Bynum, “‘War within a War’: Women’s Participation in the Revolt of the North Carolina Piedmont, 1863-1865,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 9, n. 3 (1987): 43-49.

⁴ Carole Watterson Troxler, “‘To look more closely at the man’: Wyatt Outlaw, a Nexus of National, Local, and Personal History,” *North Carolina Historical Review* 77, n. 4 (2000): 403-33; Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 274-85. For competing explanations for white violence in Alamance County, see Allen W. Trelease, *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), esp. 189-225; Scott R. Nelson, “Alamance: A Trenchant Blade,” in *Iron Confederacies: Southern Railways, Klan Violence, and Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 95-114.

⁵ Edward L. Ayers both reflected most profoundly on scholars’ ongoing difficulty defining the South and created with William Thomas the *Valley of the Shadow*. See Ayers, “What We Talk about When We Talk about the South,” in *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions*, 62-82 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996) and “The Valley of the Shadow: Two Communities in the American Civil War,” Virginia Center for Digital History, University of Virginia, <http://valley.vcdh.virginia.edu/>.

⁶ Charles F. Irons, “Other Souths: Alamance County in the Civil War and Reconstruction,” Elon University, <http://www.elon.edu/othersouths>.

“Other Souths” currently contains three relatively complete datasets about the county: manuscript returns for the federal population census of 1860, the 1860 slaveowner census, and Confederate service records. While some of this material is duplicated elsewhere online, there are unique characteristics to the presentation on “Other Souths” that enhance the site’s value to researchers. In recent years, a variety of nonprofit and for-profit corporations have made federal census information more readily available online. The best nonprofit sites, however, include only the aggregate census numbers and do not allow access to the manuscript census.⁷ The best for-profit sites, HeritageQuest and Ancestry.com, do allow access to the manuscript census returns, though HeritageQuest has an exceptionally weak search capacity (ameliorated somewhat by ProQuest editors’ decision to make images of the actual returns browsable). The search capabilities of Ancestry.com are much more powerful and can produce extraordinary results.⁸ Even so, the census materials on “Other Souths” still have added value for two reasons. First, it is possible to search the slaveowner and population censuses for values other than first and last name—by profession, gender, age, race, or amount of real or personal property, for example— or by any combination of these variables. Second, the site suggests links between records across the datasets. In other words, based on coding embedded in the site’s design, it suggests the individual in the Confederate service records (if any) that corresponds to the same individual in the population census.

These sorts of links across datasets are imperfect, because they are based in the final analysis on a scholar’s judgment. Matches between the slaveowner census and the population census, however, did not require any special guesswork, because the enumerator appears to have taken a similar (if not identical) route. For individuals in the population census, it is therefore possible to tell in almost all cases not only if he or she owned slaves, but if he or she came from a slaveholding household. The difficult instances come as a result of an error at the time of the original enumeration. The enumerator, W. H. Faucett, placed the sheets in an incorrect order when consolidating his material for submission. He then numbered his mistake, creating a pagination and sequence of household numbers that does not always match the actual order in which he visited the houses. As a result, it is sometimes impossible to know for certain if the first and second halves of a household that spans more than one page are correctly linked. Connections were generally more challenging to draw between the population census and the Confederate service records, in large part because enlistees sometimes lied about their age or produced variant spellings of their names. Notwithstanding these obstacles, it was still possible to link almost half of the fourteen hundred veterans to individuals present on the population census in 1860.

The Confederate Service Records themselves represent a great deal of behind-the-screen research. Before “Other Souths,” the most reliable compilation of Alamance County men who served in the Confederate Army appeared in *Confederate Memoirs*, prepared from John Moore’s

⁷ These sites are still an enormous boon to researchers. The best are the “Historical Census Browser,” University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/index.html> and “Selected Historical Decennial Census Population and Housing Counts,” United States Census Bureau, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/censusdata/hiscendata.html>.

⁸ “HeritageQuest Online,” ProQuest LLC, <http://www.heritagequestonline.com/hqoweb/library/do/index> and “Ancestry.com,” The Generations Network, <http://www.ancestry.com/>.

deeply flawed 1882 roster of North Carolina Troops.⁹ *Confederate Memoirs* served as only a starting place for “Other Souths” and was never regarded as definitive. Instead, the author and a student assistant checked the full roster of every unit mentioned in *Confederate Memoirs* in the much more comprehensive and carefully documented list of veterans now available from the North Carolina Office of Archives and History, *North Carolina Troops, 1861-1865: A Roster*.¹⁰ The strategy of scouring every single unit believed to contain an Alamance soldier yielded hundreds of new names, provided information on new enlistment events such as desertion, and allowed for the correction of a great deal of misinformation from the Moore volume. Like the census records, the military records are searchable by a variety of data fields other than name, including date of promotion, rank, place killed, etc.

These three datasets offer an extremely narrow window into wartime and postwar Alamance County, but one that still offers rewarding vistas from a variety of analytical perspectives. Robert C. Kenzer, Carole W. Troxler, and Scott R. Nelson offered three such examples at the February conference in Elon. Kenzer (University of Richmond) emphasized the way that databases like “Other Souths,” particularly when used in conjunction with more robust longitudinal platforms like Ancestry.com, can reveal settlement patterns and even neighborhood connections within a county.¹¹ Troxler (Elon University emeriti) illustrated some of the profound links between local and national history in her discussion of the Dunning school’s many connections to events and personalities from Alamance County, including the prominent antebellum jurist Thomas Ruffin.¹² Nelson (College of William and Mary) reprised some of his findings about the postwar political organization of the county and stressed the nature of the North Carolina Railroad as a political machine.

Elon students have used “Other Souths” as launching points for their own research projects. Joi Mayo, for example, noticed the extraordinarily high proportion of the county’s free people of color whom the enumerator classified as “mulatto” (over 98%). She also noticed that among these identified as mulattos were several individuals, particularly in the Corn and Jeffries families, who had accumulated significant personal and/or real property. She then used Alamance County to begin a study of deviations from the pattern identified by Loren Scheninger in his 1990 essay, “Prosperous Blacks in the South, 1790-1880,” in which only about half of the prosperous free blacks in the Upper South (but the vast majority in the Lower South) were mulatto. Among her findings was that the Indian peoples who appear in the census as “mulatto”

⁹ J. G. Tingen and others, *Confederate Memoirs: Alamance County Troops of the War Between the States, 1861-1865* (n.p.: [1860]); John Wheeler Moore, *Roster of North Carolina Troops in the War Between the States*. 4 vols. (Raleigh, N.C.: Ash and Gatling, 1882).

¹⁰ Sixteen of a proposed twenty-two volumes in this extraordinary series, now edited by Matthew M. Brown and Michael W. Coffey, are now available. *North Carolina Troops, 1861-1865: A Roster* (Raleigh: Office of Archives and History, 1966-). Since I re-checked only those regiments (and typically only those companies) in which Moore or Tingen had identified an Alamance County veteran, there remains the possibility that there are additional Alamance County veterans in unknown units.

¹¹ For more on the methodology of using census records to study settlement patterns, please see Kenzer, *Kinship and Neighborhood in a Southern Community: Orange County, North Carolina, 1849-1881* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987).

¹² For an illustration of how “Other Souths” can illuminate a broader narrative, search for “Thomas Ruffin” under the population or slaveholder censuses or confederate service records. The wealthiest individual in the county and owner of 100 slaves, Ruffin also gave his son and namesake to the Confederacy. Thomas Ruffin, Jr. enlisted early and as the highest ranking individual from the county.

may have skewed the numbers in Alamance.¹³ Zachary Usher and Cameron Swallen, on the other hand, used the dataset to evaluate the roots of the racial violence that took place during Reconstruction. Using rolls of Ku Klux Klan members from Alamance derived from the impeachment trial of Governor William Woods Holden and from Congressional investigations into Klan violence, the two independently examined the pre-war and wartime demographics of the perpetrators of the violence. The records showed broad support for the Klan from whites of every socioeconomic strata.¹⁴

Especially when paired with other online sources, the site has proved extensive enough to support several class writing assignments. Students in a course on North American slavery, for instance, studied emancipation in Alamance by using (among other sources): information on the county's slaves and slaveowners in 1860 from "Other Souths", names from the population census of 1870 from HeritageQuest, and Minutes of the 1866 Freedman's Convention from Documenting the American South. Students in a course on the Civil War studied enlistment in the Confederate Army using the data from Alamance in addition to legislation surrounding conscription also available via Documenting the American South. In both cases, students learned not only the truisms about the travails of emancipation and that conscription spurred enlistment, but also several surprises. Students were able to prove in the Civil War class, for example, that rank and class corresponded very closely at the outset of the war, but that promotion went to those with superior military records regardless of class by 1864.¹⁵

With the cessation of grant funding for "Other Souths" in summer 2008, progress on the site has ground virtually to a halt. Despite this indefinite pause, planned future installments will eventually render the site more user-friendly and richer in information. The addition of the population census for 1870 is essential, because in it for the first time the county's 3,445 enslaved persons appear as citizens—and because it enables a comparison of the condition of the county's white residents between 1860 and 1870. Smaller tables, including the names and political affiliation of elected officials; perpetrators and victims of Klan violence; and denominational affiliation will also improve the site. Ultimately, the addition of primary documents and images will add texture that numbers alone cannot provide, though this step is in the far distance.

Alamance County has already proven to be a rich field for historians to plow, and serious study has rewarded generations of scholars with colorful characters whose stories intersect with events in Raleigh and beyond. Hopefully, "Other Souths" will illuminate a few more patches of this exceedingly well trodden section of the Southern backcountry.

¹³ Loren Schweningen, "Prosperous Blacks in the South, 1790-1880," *American Historical Review* 95, n. 1 (1990): 31-56, esp. 44.

¹⁴ Names are especially accessible in *Trial of William W. Holden, Governor of North Carolina, Before the Senate of North Carolina, on Impeachment by the House of Representatives for High Crimes and Misdemeanors*. 3 vols. (Raleigh: "Sentinel" Printing Office, 1871), 1: 9-10.

¹⁵ For instance, *Minutes of the Freedmen's Convention, Held in the City of Raleigh, on the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th of October, 1866* (Raleigh, N.C.: Freedmen's Convention, 1866), online at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/freedmen/menu.html>.