

# VOICES OF A BORDER STATE: EDITORIALS OF THE CIVIL WAR KENTUCKY PRESS

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## Abstract

In Civil War research, editorials often are used as anecdotal material to support or add dimension to a scholar's arguments. However, these pieces rarely have been warranted as texts to be examined, thus becoming an overlooked signature feature of a Kentucky Civil War newspaper. Kentucky's dividing position of neutrality and looming Confederate invasion prompted editorials to shed light on the support given to the Confederacy or the Union. This paper reviewed several Kentucky newspapers published mostly in 1861 and 1862. Many of these editorials expressed strong pro-Union support. Editors were aware of the need their papers filled at this critical time, and as the war heightened in the border state, many wrote passionately in support of the Union. Yet, they did so in such a way that their opinions educated readers, regardless of which side they took or how they felt. Civil War research will continue, but it is hoped that editorials published during this historic event will be regarded as more than mere anecdotes -- and recognized more as a newspaper's bold voice that deserves to be heard.

## Discussion

As one of the border states during the Civil War, Kentucky favored neutrality at the beginning of the war, and soldiers from Kentucky served in both the Union and Confederate armies. The state adopted a policy of neutrality until September 1861, when a pro-Union element gained control of the legislature. Regardless, a sizable pro-Confederate presence still remained in the state.<sup>1</sup>

The commonwealth shared strong ties to both the Union and the Confederacy, depending on the date and town. For instance, although Kentucky had adopted a policy of neutrality, Louisville was officially a Confederate city from April through mid-September 1861. With some newspapers, it was difficult to know whether northern sympathizers or loyal southerners published a specific newspaper. *The Louisville Daily Journal*, in its Oct. 31, 1861, issue published not long after Union occupation, printed a front-page article, "Declaration of Southern Independence," which dominated an entire column.<sup>2</sup> Editors sometimes tried to capitalize on these hardships in courting new subscribers, as the fighting increased southerners' demand for news.<sup>3</sup> In the 1860s, Americans' interest in the Civil War, and its collateral effects, caused a spike in demand for news reports. These were days of heightened concern, and

newspapers were one of the few resources that people relied upon for war news.<sup>4</sup>

The Southern press played an important role in the Confederacy, and while scholarly inquiry has focused on the Southern press, not much has been written specifically on Kentucky newspaper editorials during the Civil War. Kentucky, according to the U.S. Census in 1860, was classified as a Western state;<sup>5</sup> however, because of its cultural affiliation with the South, the commonwealth often has been considered a Southern state, at least informally. Nevertheless, editorials of the Kentucky press during the Civil War merit an examination to discern the kind of editorial attention given to the war.

This paper explores Kentucky's position as a border state through the lens of various newspaper editorials. A review of several Kentucky newspapers, including some in the Jackson Purchase region, published mostly during 1862 examined the editorials written about the war. These newspapers were chosen because of their availability, their editorials and other war coverage, and their different locations in Kentucky. In addition, editorials and war coverage from other Kentucky newspapers are noted through secondary sources.

### Division in the Press

Before the Civil War, the press in the Northern states had a significant presence in business and national politics. However, as the war began, the large newspapers began to see their circulation

numbers rise. Circulation for *The New York Herald*, for example, jumped from 77,000 to 107,520 copies a day after the firing on Fort Sumter and did not fall less than 100,000 for the remaining years of the war.<sup>6</sup>

On the contrary, the Southern press, consisting of small circulation weeklies, resembled that of an earlier America.<sup>7</sup> For instance, the *New Orleans Picayune* ran 5,000 copies. During the war, Southern newspapers found themselves in the same straits as other institutions of the Confederacy, deprived of capital, technology, raw materials and personnel.<sup>8</sup> The Press Association of the Confederate States of America never had more than 10 correspondents in the field. Across the Confederacy, there were perhaps 800 newspapers being published in the 11 states in 1861, of which about 80 were dailies.<sup>9</sup> In the Western states, 239 newspapers were being published.<sup>10</sup> According to figures published in the federal census of 1860, there were four daily and 57 weekly newspapers in Kentucky.<sup>11</sup> This was an increase from 38 newspapers in 1840.<sup>12</sup> Dailies were to be found in the largest cities, such as Louisville and Lexington. Some of the rural weeklies were locally influential.

Newspapers in Kentucky did not fit neatly into neither the Northern nor the Southern press. In fact, a division of the press was more apparent within Kentucky's borders, with editors mostly choosing sides based on

their region and the impact on it by issues, such as slavery. Before the war was launched, the *Lexington Observer & Reporter* published an editorial from the *Nashville Banner* that provided early indications into the coming of the war. The editorial criticized the Democratic Party in the South for agitating the issue of slavery by exciting "the prejudices of the Southern people against their Northern brethren, and hope to lead them on step by step until they are eventually ready to go to any extreme to which it may suit the purposes of political tricksters to advise them."<sup>13</sup> The serious proponents of slavery came from the state's south and west sections, where the lifestyle most resembled that of the Deep South, especially in terms of crop distribution.

The editorials in west Kentucky newspapers especially supported the Confederacy. Throughout 1861, most issues of the *Columbus Crescent*, *Hickman Courier*, and *Paducah Herald* – all in the Jackson Purchase area – contained content praising the Confederacy and cursing the Union.<sup>14</sup> Despite this sentiment, Kentucky was determined to stay loyal to the Union. George Warren, editor of the *Courier*, dismissed any resolutions favoring the Union as "fustian, bombast and nonsense."<sup>15</sup> Len G. Faxon, a veteran Democratic politician and editor of the *Crescent*, also called for disunion. In an editorial just as the state legislature convened to consider the national crisis, he wrote, "Kentucky may as well prepare immediately to go with the Southern States into a separate Confederacy – the sooner she does so the better it will be for her."<sup>16</sup>

Between December 1860 and May 1861, several southern states were seceding, leaving Kentucky torn between loyalty to its sister slave states and national Union. While pro-secessionist publications, especially those in the south and west, pressed for the Confederacy, other Kentucky papers, mostly in the north and east, urged a moderate Unionist course for all border states. Indeed, the election results of 1860 unveiled the prevalence of Unionism, which the newspapers maintained throughout the crisis.<sup>17</sup> This led Kentucky newspapers to hold hope for the Union and to discuss the issues.

While most Kentuckians approved the legislature's Unionism, most Jackson Purchase citizens did not.<sup>18</sup> Warren published in the *Courier*: "We know not what are the feelings of the citizens of the upper portion of Kentucky, but we can not believe their representatives are reflecting their feelings in the present Legislature."<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, in mid-February, Jefferson Davis was inaugurated as president of the Confederacy, and Alexander H. Stephens was installed as vice president. John C. Noble, editor of the widely read *Paducah Herald*, praised both men as "two of the wisest, calmest, firmest and bravest men in the South."<sup>20</sup>

Newspaper editorials shaped a newspaper's bold voice, perhaps becoming the signature feature of a Kentucky Civil War newspaper. One reason is because many

editors indulged in "fine writing," in that editors in Kentucky appeared to vie with one another to see who could use the most flowery language in presenting content to their readers.<sup>21</sup> Simple, direct language was not sufficient. Meanwhile, some editors were fierce in their publications. Faxon, for instance, wrote this about the Yankees: "bow-legged, wooden shoed, sour craut stinking, Bologna sausage eating, hen roost robbing Dutch sons of — ." <sup>22</sup> Faxon might have been Kentucky's most Southern-sympathizing editor, but there is no doubt that he spoke for most of his readers.<sup>23</sup>

Because of Kentucky's dividing position of neutrality and looming Confederate invasion, these editorials helped to shed light as to which side was favored, if such a perspective was offered. Mostly, a newspaper's proximity to a particular Kentucky region signaled its political persuasion and reflected the editor's preference for the Confederacy or Unionism eloquently in the editorials. Despite the Jackson Purchase's loyalty to the Confederacy, Unionism was the popular vote among Kentuckians and the press.

Throughout 1861, most Kentuckians wanted desperately to stay in the Union but out of the war.<sup>24</sup> As the war escalated and rebel forces began attacks, newspaper editorials pleaded for the war to end. Will Wallace Harney, editor of *The Daily Commonwealth*, criticized Gov. Magoffin's proclamation "to raise the confederates, at a time when the Confederacy army began to invade the state."<sup>25</sup>

"The recent changes in our State government are of great importance, and the easiest solution of the dangerous conflict of authorities possible. It is apparent, and has been for a year, that Gov. Magoffin gives rather a support to the rebellion by the embarrassment he throws in the way of destroying it. We do not charge him with downright disloyalty, but his opinions are such that, if honestly maintained, they could but interfere with the vigorous prosecution of the war, and that at a time when the utmost harmony was demanded."<sup>26</sup>

In one of its editorials, *The Daily Commonwealth* reflected a series of events that, it argued, prolonged the war, beginning with how the April 1860 Democratic Convention, the largest assembled at that time, could have lessened the need for the war had Stephen Douglas won the nomination. "No one doubts that a compromise in that convention would have saved the Union," according to the editorial, which also argued that the war could have ended on other occasions within a year:<sup>27</sup>

"Battles are now going on. Fredericksburg runs in blood. Davis has visited the West to arouse the Southwestern people, but there are still



indications of a possible peace. We have failed to receive it once by party animosity, once by planned treason, and once by the physical timidity of the chief executive. Will we fail again for either of these causes? We hope not."<sup>28</sup>

*The Louisville Daily Express* took war coverage a step further by publishing statistics on the costs of the war. This paper also documented an estimate of the value of the various kinds of property, such as cotton, bridges, railroads, sugar, buildings and more, all of "which has been ruthlessly destroyed by the rebels since the commencement of the present war."<sup>29</sup> The paper also printed an editorial, titled "War and Its Results":

"War cannot be carried on without expense. Every bullet that is projected, every cap that is exploded, and every grain of powder ignited, costs something."<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps one of the boldest Kentucky newspaper editorials observed in this survey and written during the Civil War came from *The Louisville Daily Democrat*, a Union supporter that preferred the days before the war when the Union was undivided. The editorial advocated that Kentuckians should side with "the Union unconditionally" and "stand by the Union with all its risks."<sup>31</sup>

"Here, in this Commonwealth, we are specially opposed to division. We shall not abide enemies for centuries to come North or South of us. We don't intend to have the soil of Kentucky as a battlefield, where rival nations shall fight for empire."<sup>32</sup>

*The Daily Democrat* further explained its concept of "unconditionally":

"Many of the professed friends of the Government, however, are not by any means for the Union unconditionally. They are not for the Union as it was made, and as it has been administered. They audaciously avow it. They want slavery abolished or no Union. The extreme South pretend that they would have remained in the Union upon conditions. We intend to have the Union first. We have the conditions already fixed in the Constitution. We prefer all the risks of damage or change of conditions to the hazards of a divided country."<sup>33</sup>

Other newspapers took notice of Kentucky's newspaper editorials and other signs of support to the Union. An editorial in the *Cincinnati Times* during the Civil War praised Kentuckians for their legacy of militarism and patriotism to the Union.<sup>34</sup> During

the Kentucky gubernatorial election of 1863, a pro-Union editor in Cincinnati commended Kentucky for preserving Henry Clay's love for the Union and not seceding.<sup>35</sup> The *Western Citizen* in Paris, Kentucky, also observed Kentucky's stronghold in keeping with the Union: "There is something in the very air of Kentucky which makes a man a soldier."<sup>36</sup> *Niles' Register* reprinted an editorial from the *Albany Argus* in New York: "There are no people on the globe who have evinced more national feeling, more disinterested patriotism, or displayed a more noble enthusiasm to defend the honor and rights of their common country."<sup>37</sup> Based on these accounts, it could be said that Civil War newspaper editors in Kentucky were not suppressed in their opinions supporting firmly Union preservation.

## Conclusions

Throughout American journalism history, newspaper editorials have been known at times to ignite reactions of all kinds from readers. Some might have persuaded the passage – or rejection – of a new bill. At times in journalism history editorials have even caused riots or duels. While editorials in Kentucky's Civil War newspapers might not have stirred such extreme reactions, based on preliminary findings of the editorials reviewed, the views expressed in them were noticed and helped to shape a deeper understanding for readers on how the war was impacting American economy, politics and slavery. Only the surface has been touched, and more research is needed in this area.

Civil War content became the primary material readers wanted, and the public appetite for timely and accurate news was a persistent legacy at that time of crisis. Though many newspapers continued to publish a range of miscellaneous and entertaining material, that sort of content was increasingly taking second place to the news.<sup>38</sup> The Civil War left a deep impression upon American journalism. After 1865 there was probably as much news in one issue of the average daily as there had been in the issues of a whole week before 1860.<sup>39</sup> Editors were aware of the need their papers filled at this critical time, and as the war heightened in the border state, many wrote passionately in support of the Union. Yet, they did so in such a way that their articles provided context for the readers, perhaps even educated them, regardless of whether the audience felt strongly one way or the other.

Discussion of the Civil War press doesn't stop at war's end, and the position of editorials during this pivotal moment in history cannot be dismissed. Scholarship needs to explore how newspapers and their editors continued to play large roles in the South's reconstruction. Henry Watterson, who was editor of the *Louisville Courier-Journal* for more than 50 years, took over the editorship of the *Louisville Journal* in 1868 from the aging George Prentice. As the editor of the *Louisville Courier-Journal* for more than 50 years, he

helped define Kentucky's reputation by linking Kentucky to the Confederate states as a pillar of the New South.<sup>40</sup> He sought to modernize the Old South using the northern model and remove the region from the North's political hold. While the *Louisville Courier-Journal* is one example, the role other newspapers played in rebuilding war-torn communities – amplified by the editor's voice – is an area for greater and more intense scrutiny.

Editorials particularly offered readers a framed perspective and sought to make sense of the war from their own lens. Further research of other editorials in Kentucky's newspapers during this revolution is needed and encouraged to determine whether other newspapers shared similar sentiments of ending the war or siding with the Union. By doing so, a greater understanding and appreciation of the hardships that plagued Kentucky as a border state during the Civil War can be embraced journalistically.

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Dr. Melony Shemberger is assistant professor of journalism and mass communication at Murray State University. In addition to Civil War newspaper editorials, her research focuses on female journalists Dorothy Dix and C.M. Reckert, open government laws, and journalism pedagogy. She is a lifetime member of The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi. Her hobbies are running, sports and photography. Dr. Shemberger was the speaker at the Spring Meeting of the JPHS.

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> "Kentucky in the American Civil War," *Wikipedia.com*, accessed March 9, 2014,

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kentucky\\_in\\_the\\_American\\_Civil\\_War](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kentucky_in_the_American_Civil_War).

<sup>2</sup> *Louisville Daily Journal* (Louisville, KY), Oct. 31, 1861, p.1.

- <sup>3</sup> Cal M. Logue, Eugene F. Miller and Christopher J. Schroll, "The Press Under Pressure: How Georgia's Newspapers Responded to Civil War Constraints," *American Journalism* 15, no. 1 (1998).
- <sup>4</sup> R. J. Brown, "How the South Gathered News During the Civil War," *HistoryBuff.com*, accessed June 2, 2014, <http://www.historybuff.com/library/refgather.html>.
- <sup>5</sup> U.S. Bureau of Census, *Preliminary Report on the Eighth Census 1860*, (Washington, D.C., 1866).
- <sup>6</sup> David L. Jamison, "Newspapers and the Pres," an essay from 19<sup>th</sup> Century U. S. Newspapers Database, Gale Cengage Learning. [http://www.gale.cengage.com/pdf/whitepapers/gdc/Newspapers\\_whtppr.pdf](http://www.gale.cengage.com/pdf/whitepapers/gdc/Newspapers_whtppr.pdf).
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> Brown, "How the South Gathered News During the Civil War," <http://www.historybuff.com/library/refgather.html>.
- <sup>10</sup> U.S. Bureau of Census, *Manufactures of the United States in 1860* Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census, Total of Manufactures Arranged Alphabetically and Numerically for the Western States. (Washington, D.C., 1865), p. 709.
- <sup>11</sup> U.S. Bureau of Census, 1860
- <sup>12</sup> Lowell H. Harrison and James C. Klotter, *A New History of Kentucky*, 1997, p. 159.
- <sup>13</sup> *Lexington Observer & Reporter*
- <sup>14</sup> Berry F. Craig, "Kentucky's Rebel Press: The Jackson Purchase Newspapers in 1861," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, 1977, pp. 20-27
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> Excerpt from the *Hickman Courier* in the *Louisville Courier*, January 17, 1861.
- <sup>17</sup> Erika J. Pribanic-Smith, "The War within the State: The Role of Newspapers in Missouri's Secession Crisis." In *A Press Divided: Newspaper Coverage of the Civil War*, ed. David B. Sachsman.
- <sup>18</sup> Craig, p. 22
- <sup>19</sup> Excerpt from the *Hickman Courier* in the *Louisville Courier*, February 6, 1861. In early 1861, a movement designed to keep Kentucky from joining Tennessee began in the secessionist Jackson Purchase.
- <sup>20</sup> Excerpt from the *Paducah Herald*, February 22, 1861, in Craig, p. 27.
- <sup>21</sup> Herndon J. Evans, *The Newspaper Press in Kentucky*. 1976, Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, p. 42.
- <sup>22</sup> Berry Craig, *Hidden History of Kentucky in the Civil War*, 2010, Charleston, S.C.: The History Press, p. 14.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> Craig, 1977, p. 26
- <sup>25</sup> *Daily Commonwealth*, Aug. 19, 1862, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> *Louisville Daily Express*, May 19, 1862, p.2.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> *Louisville Daily Democrat*, April 9, 1962., p.1.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> James A. Ramage and Andrea S. Watkins, *Kentucky Rising: Democracy, Slavery, and Culture from the Early Republic to the Civil War*, 2011, p. 99.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Andie Tucher, "Reporting for Duty," 2006, p. 147.

<sup>39</sup> J. Cutler Andrews, "The Pennsylvania Press During the Civil War," *Pennsylvania History*, 9, no. 1 (January 1942), 36, accessed May 30, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27766494>.

<sup>40</sup> Marshall, Anne E., *Creating a Confederate Kentucky: The Lost Cause and Civil War Memory in a Border State* (2010) The University of North Carolina Press: 51-52.