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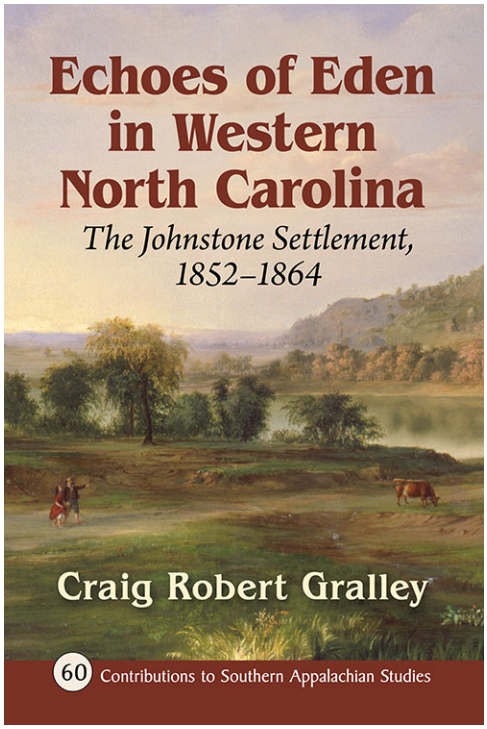
Discussion Guide

THE CIVIL WAR

DIVIDED LOYALTIES AND MOUNTAIN IDENTITY

Echoes of Eden in Western North Carolina: The Johnstone Settlement, 1852–1864



A wealthy Southern enclave. A community vanished.
A story buried for 170 years — until now.

Craig Robert Gralley

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Overview

At the start of the Civil War, the mountain men of western North Carolina answered the Confederate call with unexpected unity. News of the attack on Fort Sumter—and Lincoln's demand for more Union troops—convinced many who prized their independence that the fight was coming to their doorstep. Some felt bound by loyalty to North Carolina and most others by the expectation that a man defended his home when danger loomed. For a moment, enlistment surged on a mix of honor, duty, local pride, and the belief the war would be brief.

But the glow faded quickly. By the end of the first year, it was clear it wouldn't be a quick war. The demands of the Confederate government mounted: conscription officers combed the ridges, and impressment agents seized corn, hogs, and cattle from farms that could scarcely spare them. What had begun as patriotic duty now felt like a distant government stripping the mountains of both people and produce. Disillusionment spread, and the region's historic skepticism toward centralized power resurfaced with force.

As men deserted to protect their families, the hills filled with armed bands—mostly Confederate, with some profiteers, and others simply trying to survive. In this volatile world sat the Johnstone Settlement, wealthy, slaveholding, and staunchly Confederate. Their Lowcountry origins and affluence made them stand out in a region where most families owned few if any enslaved and scraped a living from the land. Early in the war the settlers' status offered security; later it made them targets. To deserters and bushwhackers shaped by hardship and resentment, the Johnstone Settlement became a symbol of a "rich man's war" that had taken too much.

Their story captures the war's intimate violence in the Blue Ridge, where loyalties shifted and danger came not from distant battlefields but from the next ridge over. The mix of early enthusiasm, rapid disillusionment, and deep political divides left scars that still echo in the region's identity today.

Readings

Please note some readings are on-line or are offered as comprehensive summaries to honor copyright prohibitions. Full articles or books are provided where permissions were obtained or where there are no copyright infringement issues.

- Gralley, Craig Robert. *Echoes of Eden in Western North Carolina: The Johnstone Settlement, 1852-1864*; Introduction; Chapter 5, "The Collapse of Eden: The Civil War Intervenes."

- Heath, Elliot. "What Our Past Can Tell Us About Polarization Now," *Columbia Political Review*, Columbia University, 2024. (Read on-line): Polarization

- McKinney, Gordon B, Layers of Loyalty: Confederate Nationalism and Amnesty Letters from Western North Carolina, *Civil War History*, Volume 51, Number 1, March 2005, pp. 5-22. (Summary provided)

- Oshnock, Kevin, "The Isolation Factor: Differing Loyalties of Watauga and Buncombe Counties During the Civil War," *North Carolina Historical Review*, Vol. 90, no. 4 (Oct. 2013), pp. 385-413. (Summary provided)

- Yeates, Richard E. Zebulon B. Vance as War Governor of North Carolina, 1862-1865, *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol 3., No. 1 (Feb. 11937), pp. 43-75 (Summary provided. The Summary's Focus, Vance and his constituents, is drawn from this article.)

Supplemental Reading

- Blackmun, Ora. *Western North Carolina: Its Mountains and Its People to 1880*, Chapter 20, "War Comes to the Hills," Appalachian State University, 1977, pp. 343-355. (Summary provided)

Discussion Questions

Note: These discussion questions span a wide thematic range and are intended as points of departure rather than a scripted sequence. Group leaders should select the questions most appropriate for their class, break apart sections with multiple questions, or adapt them to fit specific readings. (See Facilitator's Notes for more on how to guide the discussion.)

Geography, Isolation, and the Roots of Identity

In Civil War Appalachia, loyalty was never uniform. Wealthy, slaveholding enclaves like the Johnstone Settlement and Flat Rock existed beside Unionist or neutral families, creating a patchwork of allegiances within close proximity. Oshnock argues that the

Union/Confederate split was grounded in geographic location and economic integration—with Unionism a product of mountain isolation and minimal connection to the slave economy of the deeper South.

1. Oshnock belief that higher elevation correlated with stronger Unionism, while valley communities with commercial ties to the Lowcountry leaned Confederate. How does the Johnstone Settlement both fit and complicate this pattern? What does their Confederate identity in a predominantly Unionist landscape reveal about the limits of geographic determinism?

2. The Johnstone settlers were wealthy, slaveholding, and of Lowcountry origin—distinct from nearly every family around them. How did wealth and kinship networks shape their Confederate loyalty, and why did that same distinctiveness ultimately make them targets?

3. McKinney finds that roughly 40 percent of amnesty letter writers expressed no clear political allegiance, identifying primarily as "citizens" of their county rather than of state or nation. What does this intense localism suggest about how people in the mountains understood political community—and what, if anything, does it echo in how rural communities relate to national politics today?

4. Geography still shapes political identity: rural vs. urban, mountain vs. valley, interior vs. coast. Are the underlying forces—economic isolation, cultural self-sufficiency, proximity to markets and institutions—fundamentally similar to those at work in 1861, or have the fault lines shifted in kind, not just in location?

Conditional Loyalty and the Limits of Nation-Building

North Carolina was one of the last states to join the Confederacy, doing so only after Lincoln called up troops to suppress the insurrection following Fort Sumter. From the beginning, loyalty in the mountains was negotiated rather than given. As the war ground on—bringing conscription, impressment of crops and livestock, suspension of habeas corpus, and a "Twenty Negro" and other laws that exempted wealthy slaveholders from the draft—the Confederate government systematically alienated the very people it needed most.

1. McKinney and Yeates (and Blackmun in the Supplemental Reading) each describe a Confederate government that overreached and eroded its own base of support. What were the specific policies that caused the sharpest disillusionment in the mountains—and what does it mean that the same government asked poorer men to bear the

heaviest sacrifices while exempting the wealthy through the Twenty Negro and other laws?

2. Zebulon Vance entered the secession crisis as a committed Unionist and became the Confederacy's most effective—and most obstinate—state governor. He fought Richmond over conscription, civil liberties, and supplies, yet enforced the draft more vigorously than any other state. Does this make him a Confederate patriot, a states'-rights obstructionist, or something more complicated? What does his trajectory reveal about the nature of conditional loyalty?

3. McKinney, Blackmun, and Oshnock each approach mountain loyalty differently: through amnesty letters, through the collapse of civil order, and through the geography of slaveholding. Where do their interpretations converge—and where do they pull apart? What unresolved questions does Gralley's account of the Johnstone Settlement help clarify?

4. What conditions—then or now—tend to push people to reconsider loyalties they once held with confidence? Are the triggers structural (economic betrayal, policy overreach) or more personal (community pressure, fear, loss)—or does that distinction break down under examination?

Class, Violence, and the Collapse of Order

As the war dragged on, the Blue Ridge became a landscape of desperation. Deserters hid in the hollows. Bushwhackers—some opportunists, some ideologically driven, many simply hungry—preyed on isolated homesteads. Blackmun's account of Shelton Laurel, where thirteen men and boys were executed without trial by Confederate forces, illustrates how completely civil order had collapsed. Wealthy Confederate households like those of the Johnstone Settlement became targets not only for their politics but for their horses, food, and supplies. The violence was intimate and often personal, rooted in class resentment, survival, and scores settled under cover of war.

1. Bushwhackers and Confederate deserters ultimately destroyed the Johnstone Settlement. What does it mean that men who once nominally shared Confederate sympathies turned on one of their own? Did they ever truly share the same goals, or only a temporarily overlapping interest in resisting Union authority?

2. Blackmun documents the Shelton Laurel massacre: thirteen men and boys shot and buried in a common grave on the orders of a Confederate officer, against the explicit instructions of Governor Vance. What had to break down—institutionally, socially, morally—before that act became possible? What parallels, if any, do you see in how political violence becomes thinkable in societies under acute stress?

3. How did economic inequality shape wartime loyalty in the mountains—and how does the relationship between wealthy Confederate-leaning elites and poorer Unionist mountaineers echo modern debates about class, political power, and who bears the costs of collective commitments? Is the "rich man's war, poor man's fight" grievance a recurring feature of political life, or was it particular to this moment?

4. Vance emerges in the Yeates narrative as a defender of civil liberties against military overreach—resisting arbitrary arrests, condemning impressment, demanding due process. Yet he also enforced conscription more aggressively than any other Confederate state. How do we hold those two things together? What does his governorship reveal about the tensions between legal authority, military necessity, and moral responsibility?

Then and Now: Echoes Across the Divide

Heath surveys recurring cycles of political fracture in American history and argues that the forces behind our current divisions—partisan sorting, geographic clustering, economic grievance, and the breakdown of shared institutions—have precedents that reward careful study. The Civil War in the Blue Ridge was not a distant battlefield conflict; it was an intimate one, with danger coming from the next ridge over, loyalties shifting within families, and the meaning of community itself under assault. Today's divisions can feel similarly close to home: fractures that run through neighborhoods, congregations, and long friendships.

1. Heath identifies several periods of acute political division in American history. Which period most closely parallels our own? What does it suggest about whether current divisions are historically exceptional or part of a recurring pattern?

2. The mountain South today shows powerful loyalty to a national political movement while simultaneously harboring deep distrust of federal institutions—a combination that closely mirrors the "conditional Confederate" posture McKinney describes: committed to the cause, resistant to its government. Is this a structural echo, or a fundamentally different phenomenon rooted in different grievances and different stakes?

3. Community pressure, fear of retaliation, and the need to survive shaped political alignment in the wartime mountains—people who privately dissented but publicly conformed, or who changed sides when the cost of loyalty became unbearable. In what ways do similar pressures—social, professional, familial—shape how people express or suppress political views today? What makes honest expression possible or impossible?

4. The Civil War fractured communities in the Blue Ridge that had to go on living together afterward. What conditions made any kind of reconciliation possible—and what does the speed with which many amnesty letter writers "rejoiced" at the Confederacy's collapse suggest about the depth of their original commitment? What lessons from those fractured communities feel most relevant now?

5. Is there an historical parallel for the way wealth and family play a role in political identity today? If so, how?

6. What practices or commitments help you remain genuinely curious when political conversations become difficult—especially with people whose views differ sharply from your own? What does this history suggest about the conditions that make such conversations either possible or impossible?

Summary

Gordon B. McKinney

"Layers of Loyalty: Confederate Nationalism and Amnesty Letters from Western North Carolina," *Civil War History*, Vol. 51, No. 1, March 2005, pp. 5-22

In the fall of 1863, Governor Zebulon B. Vance—himself a son of the North Carolina mountains—warned that there was "an astonishing amount of disloyalty" in the western counties. His private correspondence grew increasingly bleak. By early 1864 he lamented that "our people will not pay this price" for independence, and by September he declared the war "a revolution of the politicians; not the people." These observations, grounded in Vance's intimate knowledge of the region, helped launch the enduring debate over the depth of Confederate nationalism in Appalachia.

Modern historians have revisited this question with far more documentation than Vance ever possessed. Some—Gary Gallagher, Drew Gilpin Faust, Benjamin Carp—argue that the Confederacy enjoyed "significant and consistent support" among white Southerners. Others—Paul Escott, William Freehling, Richard Beringer—echo Vance's view that popular support was fragile and eroded steadily under the pressures of conscription, taxation, and defeat. Yet both camps agree on several fundamentals: white Southerners felt threatened by Northern political developments after 1830; enthusiasm surged after Lincoln's 1861 call for troops; and many Southerners held their strongest loyalties not to nation or state but to family, neighborhood, and local community.

The mountain South complicates the picture further. Scholars such as Daniel Crofts and Freehling have shown that upland Southerners were often "reluctant Confederates," while others—Andrew Johnson, William G. Brownlow, and the founders of West Virginia—remained outspoken Unionists. Still, the region also produced committed Confederate nationalists, including Vance himself. The result was a bitterly divided landscape where guerrilla warfare "committed family against family and community against community."

Because few mountain residents left ideological writings during the war, historians have struggled to reconstruct their motives. Most people were preoccupied with survival—"caring for their family, securing food and clothing, raising and harvesting crops." To bridge this evidentiary gap, Gordon McKinney turns to a rich but underused source: the amnesty letters written in 1865 by western North Carolinians seeking presidential pardons under Andrew Johnson's Proclamation of Amnesty.

These letters—261 in total—were written by individuals who fell into Johnson's excepted classes: Confederate officials, wealthy property owners, and others who had held civil posts under the Confederate government. Though biased and written "under duress," they were composed before any "Lost Cause" narrative had formed, and many authors were surprisingly candid. They offer a rare window into how western North Carolina's local elites understood their own loyalties.

The occupational profile of the correspondents reveals the region's distinctive social structure. Over 60 percent identified as farmers, but only four called themselves planters—an absence that underscores how unlike the plantation South this region was. Many others were merchants, ministers, lawyers, or minor civil officials such as postmasters and tax collectors. These individuals were concentrated in older, more developed counties—Wilkes, Caldwell, Burke, Rutherford—and in Buncombe County's commercial hub of Asheville. Newly formed or remote counties like Cherokee, Clay, Mitchell, and Yancey produced few applicants.

One striking feature of the group is how few had served in the Confederate army. Of 259 men, only 36 had enlisted, and 16 more served in Home Guard units. Many openly admitted they had accepted civil posts "for the purpose of keeping himself out of the Army," as William M. Walton put it. This means the sample skews toward men less committed to Confederate military service—yet their letters still illuminate the region's layered loyalties.

A powerful theme running through the correspondence is localism. Nearly a third described themselves as "citizens" of their county rather than of the state or Confederacy. Their justifications for wartime actions often centered on family, neighbors, and community rather than ideology.

When the correspondents did articulate political loyalties, they fell into four broad categories:

Consistent Unionists

Older men especially emphasized lifelong devotion to the Union. Jacob Harshaw "deplored the sad event [secession] with his whole heart," while Larkin J. Bicknell wrote that opposing the United States was "sickening to the soul" because his father had fought in the Revolution. Some younger men cited dramatic acts of early resistance—B. F. Akins recalled helping tear down "the first cession flag raised in the county." Even those who later cooperated with Confederate authorities insisted their "political opinions…underwent no change."

Consistent Secessionists/Confederates

A smaller but clear group defended their pro-Confederate convictions. Mitchell C. King wrote that "the safety and honor of the pro-slavery states required their secession." These were the only correspondents who mentioned slavery explicitly. Some, like William H. Thomas, accepted defeat but refused to concede that secession had been unconstitutional.

Unionists Who Became Confederates

This was perhaps the most conflicted group. Many had opposed secession but felt compelled to follow their state once North Carolina left the Union. Vance himself explained that he had no choice but to "abide by the action of his State." William F. McKesson wrote that when the state convention passed the ordinance of secession, it became his "duty…to aid her…whether she was in the right or in the wrong." For these men, state loyalty trumped national loyalty.

The Neutral or Noncommittal

Roughly 40 percent offered no clear political allegiance. Many justified their Confederate service as a means of supporting their families or preventing outsiders from taking local offices. Jeremiah Greene explained that he accepted a Confederate post only "**to oblige his neighbors**." Their loyalties were intensely local—family, neighborhood, and community—without reference to state, section, or nation.

Broader Conclusions

The amnesty letters reveal that western North Carolina's loyalties were layered, fragmented, and deeply local. Only a minority expressed wholehearted Confederate nationalism. Many others supported the Confederacy only because their state did; others resisted it quietly; still others tried to avoid choosing sides altogether.

Yet despite this ideological diversity, most correspondents performed their civil duties until the war's end, and few claimed to have abandoned the Confederacy as it collapsed. Their actions, McKinney notes, mattered more than their professed beliefs.

Finally, the letters show a striking eagerness to return to the United States. Many "rejoiced" that the fighting had ended and pledged to support the restored Union. The absence of bitterness is notable. As McKinney concludes, Vance was right: most western North Carolinians in civil office did not owe their primary loyalty to the Confederacy. Their allegiance lay elsewhere—nation, state, or community—and when the Confederacy fell, they accepted the verdict without hesitation.

Summary

Kevin Oshnock

"The Isolation Factor: Differing Loyalties of Watauga and Buncombe Counties During the Civil War," *North Carolina Historical Review*, Vol. 90, no. 4 (Oct. 2013), pp. 385-413.

The story Kevin Oshnock tells about Watauga and Buncombe counties begins with a single, plaintive voice from the mountains. In the spring of 1861, William J. Brown, living on the fringes of Buncombe County, mourned the collapse of "the once happy & prosperous, but now broken Union" and lamented that Southerners had "dropt the glorious old Eagle." His sorrow captures the emotional turbulence of the moment, but Oshnock shows that the deeper forces shaping loyalty in Appalachian North Carolina were structural—rooted in geography, class, and the uneven reach of the slave economy.

In these mountains, elevation was destiny. Oshnock demonstrates that "the higher the elevation at which people lived, the more likely they were to be Unionists." Watauga County, perched on isolated ridges and hollows, was a place where Boone remained "in many ways a backwoods frontier town." Its people lived far from markets, political centers, and the ideological currents of the Deep South. Buncombe County, by contrast, lay in broad, fertile valleys connected to Charleston, Georgia, and the Piedmont by the French Broad Turnpike. These connections brought wealth, commerce, and—most importantly—slavery. While Watauga counted only "31 slave owners and 104 slaves," Buncombe held "1,923 slaves," a disparity that shaped nearly every aspect of wartime allegiance.

Economic self-interest followed these contours. In Buncombe, the arrival of wealthy planters who summered in Asheville "roughly doubled the slave population," reinforcing a worldview aligned with the Confederacy. In Watauga, where slavery barely touched daily life, residents "saw little need to change the status quo and secede from the Union." Oshnock's data makes the point unmistakable: Confederate soldiers were wealthier and far more likely to come from slaveholding families. In Watauga, the average wealth of a Union soldier was $1,071—less than half that of a Confederate at $2,547. In Buncombe, the gap widened dramatically: Union soldiers averaged $1,775, while Confederate soldiers averaged $10,870. Slaveholding followed the same pattern. In Watauga, nearly 15 percent of Confederate enlistees owned slaves; only 8 percent of Union soldiers did, and three of those four came from the same family. In Buncombe, one-fourth of Confederate soldiers owned slaves, while only a single Union soldier did. As Oshnock puts it with stark clarity, "Where there was no slavery, there was no rebellion."

These economic and geographic realities shaped political behavior long before the first shots were fired. In the 1860 presidential election, Watauga voters overwhelmingly backed the moderate Unionist John Bell, giving him 69 percent of the vote, while Buncombe—though divided—leaned more toward the pro-slavery Southern Democrat John Breckinridge. When North Carolina voted on whether to hold a secession convention in February 1861, Buncombe supported it by 76 percent, while Watauga opposed it by 88 percent, the second-highest Unionist vote in the state. Even before war came, the mountains were already splitting along lines of isolation and class.

Once the conflict began, these divisions hardened into lived experience. Buncombe quickly raised multiple Confederate companies—some even before North Carolina seceded—and sent "well over one thousand" men into Confederate service. Support for the Confederacy was broad and evenly distributed across the county's districts, especially in the prosperous lowlands around Asheville. Watauga told a different story. Only 214 men enlisted before conscription, less than one-fourth of the county's military-aged population. Many districts—Mountain Home, Laurel Creek, Beech Mountain, Elk Knob—sent almost no Confederate volunteers. Unionism, by contrast, was widespread and deeply rooted. Escaped Union soldiers traveling through the region consistently reported that "friends…were everywhere," and that the mountains were "to the full as loyal as West Virginia."

Oshnock reinforces this with evidence from the Southern Claims Commission, which shows Unionists "spread across the county," each supported by multiple loyalist witnesses. In Buncombe, by contrast, only four claims were approved, nearly all from the remote northern fringes near the Madison County line—further proof that Unionism there was geographically and economically marginal.

In the end, Oshnock's narrative reveals a mountain South far more complex than the old stereotypes of Confederate Appalachia. Loyalty was not a matter of culture alone but a product of the land itself—its ridges, valleys, and the unequal distribution of wealth and opportunity across them. Watauga's isolation, poverty, and minimal investment in slavery produced a population that clung to the Union. Buncombe's prosperity, slaveholding households, and commercial ties bound it to the Confederacy. The Civil War in these mountains, Oshnock shows, was not simply a clash of ideologies but a conflict shaped by geography and economics—by who had something to lose, and who did not.

Summary

With specific focus on Vance and his constituents, drawn from this article.

Richard E. Yates

Zebulon B. Vance as War Governor of North Carolina, 1862-1865, *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Feb 1937), pp. 43-75

Zebulon B. Vance's wartime career closely tracked the emotional and political arc of the people he governed. Like many North Carolinians—especially in the mountains—Vance entered the secession crisis as a committed Unionist. He had been, in his own words, a "regular built, old fashioned Whig," and through the winter of 1860–61 he stood with the majority who believed compromise could still protect Southern rights. The people, the legislature, and Vance himself resisted secession until the firing on Fort Sumter and Lincoln's call for troops "vanquished" Unionist hopes. In that moment, Vance and his constituents made the same pivot: they rallied not out of Confederate nationalism but out of a belief that the fight had come home and that loyalty to North Carolina required action.

This shared beginning shaped Vance's appeal in 1862. As the war's early enthusiasm collapsed under military defeats, shortages, and the burdens of conscription, ordinary North Carolinians grew disillusioned with Richmond. Vance felt the same pressures. He criticized Confederate neglect of the state, protested abuses in conscription, and demanded that North Carolina's needs be respected. His supporters cast him as the man "in the face of the foe, with his sword drawn," a figure who embodied the frustrations and aspirations of a people who felt overtaxed, under-protected, and increasingly alienated from Confederate authority.

Once in office, Vance's struggles mirrored those of his constituents. He fought to defend the state from Federal raids, just as local communities scrambled to protect their homes. He enforced conscription vigorously—North Carolina sent "21,348 conscripts… about 7000 more than any other state"—yet he also battled Richmond over broken promises and arbitrary assignments, reflecting the same resentment that fueled desertion in the countryside. As desertion spread and armed bands formed in the hills, Vance confronted the same breakdown of order that ordinary families faced, and his clashes with judges and militia over deserter arrests echoed the broader conflict between civil authority, military necessity, and local survival.

By 1864, both Vance and the people of North Carolina were exhausted, skeptical of Confederate leadership, and focused increasingly on protecting what remained of their

communities. His governorship became a balancing act between supporting the Confederacy and defending the state—precisely the tension felt by the citizens who had once rallied with “amazing unanimity” but now questioned the cost of a war that had taken so much.

In this way, Vance’s wartime trajectory—Unionist turned reluctant Confederate, enthusiastic volunteer turned embattled critic of Richmond, defender of the state caught between competing loyalties—paralleled the experience of North Carolinians themselves. His political evolution was not separate from theirs; it was a reflection of it.

Supplemental Reading:

Summary

Ora Blackmun

Western North Carolina: Its Mountains and Its People, Chapter 20, "War Comes to the Hills," Appalachian State University, 1977, pp. 343-355.

By the middle of 1863, the Civil War had reached deep into the mountains of western North Carolina—not through great battles, but through scarcity, fear, and the slow unraveling of civil order. Ora Blackmun opens her chapter with a stark picture: the region was "getting desperate." Goods were scarce, money was worthless, and taxes "reached into every avenue of life." The Confederate government, hungry for revenue, taxed everything from flour and corn to salaries and dry goods. But the tax that cut deepest in the mountains was the tax in kind, which required farmers to deliver ten percent of their produce to the nearest railroad depot—often Morganton, North Carolina or Greenville, South Carolina. For mountain women, who had taken over nearly all farm labor, these journeys were "difficult at best and sometimes almost impossible."

By 1864, even that burden was overshadowed by something worse: raiding troops and bands of outliers who "were taking not only the surplus but much of the food raised for families." War in the hills was not a clash of armies—it was a slow, grinding assault on daily life.

Home Guards, Deserters, and the Collapse of Order

Each county had begun the war with its own militia, but by 1863 these units were replaced by the Home Guard, composed of all men aged eighteen to fifty not already in Confederate service. Brigadier General John W. McElroy commanded the western district from Burnsville. Their duties were broad: defend the counties, suppress internal enemies, and "round up deserters and renegades."

But the Guards quickly became ineffective. By late 1863 they consisted mostly of "young boys and old men," and in the border counties they were "unable to cope with the spreading lawlessness." Lieutenant Colonel William Stringfield, responsible for the far western counties, had only 300 Home Guards to cover the vast stretch from Asheville to Murphy.

Desertion became a defining feature of wartime mountain life. North Carolina produced more deserters than any other Confederate state—"about 23,000 soldiers and 423 officers"—though many later returned. Some deserters slipped home to work their farms; others, unwelcome or fearful, became "outliers," hiding in the coves and hollows and living off the land.

Shelton Laurel: A Community Torn Apart

One of the most infamous episodes occurred in Shelton Laurel, a Unionist stronghold in Madison County. In January 1863, about fifty armed men raided the town of Marshall, seizing salt and supplies. Confederate authorities responded with brutal force. Lieutenant Colonel James A. Keith captured thirteen suspected raiders—some guilty, some not—and despite Governor Zebulon Vance's order that they be turned over for trial, Keith had all thirteen shot and buried in a common grave.

Two were children: "thirteen-year David Shelton and fourteen-year-old Aronnota Shelton." Another, James Shelton, was over fifty and exempt from conscription. Vance was horrified, calling Keith "a disgrace to the service and to North Carolina." Keith was removed from command but never tried.

Bread Riots, Burnsville, and the Strain of Survival

Desperation bred unrest. In April 1864, seventy-five Union sympathizers in Burnsville broke into the ammunition magazine, seizing weapons and destroying the rest. The day before, a group of angry women—wives of Union men—stormed a storehouse and carried off "bushels of government wheat and other food items," protesting that Confederate families were fed while theirs starved.

General McElroy admitted he could not control the situation. With only a hundred men and constant raids by Unionist guerrillas, he wrote that "it was impossible…to prevent such incidents."

Vance vs. the Confederacy

Governor Vance emerges in Blackmun's narrative as a defender of civil liberties in a collapsing world. He fiercely opposed the Confederate suspension of habeas corpus, which allowed the military to arrest citizens without trial. When men in Cherokee County were seized and forced into the army—two beyond draft age—Vance protested that the right to trial was sacred. He even ordered the state militia to resist Confederate arrests.

He also condemned Confederate impressment of food, horses, and even the pasturing of "broken-down cavalry horses" on civilian land, which placed an intolerable burden on mountain families already near starvation.

Raids, Guerrillas, and the Breakdown of Society

By 1864–65, western North Carolina had become a battleground of raids, reprisals, and guerrilla warfare. Deserters, draft evaders, and outlaws roamed the hills, "swoop[ing] down on valley farms," stealing livestock and grain, and sometimes settling old grudges with violence.

Transylvania and Henderson counties suffered heavily. Outlaws murdered officials, including Sheriff Robert Thomas and General Baylus Edney. In Flat Rock, raiders killed Andrew Johnston of the Beaumont Estate. In Macon County, William West was beaten and left for dead.

The northern border counties—Madison, Yancey, Mitchell, Watauga, Ashe, and Alleghany—were hit hardest. Officials warned that morale was collapsing and that calling up more men would leave the counties defenseless.

Kirk's Raiders and the Union Strategy of Demoralization

The most feared figure in the mountains was Colonel George W. Kirk, commander of the Third North Carolina and Tennessee Federal Volunteers. His mission was to bring the war "directly to the people" to break Confederate morale. Confederate sympathizers saw him as a brigand; Union commanders saw him as an effective guerrilla leader.

Kirk's men burned courthouses, destroyed records, seized horses and food, and raided across the border counties. In 1863 they burned the Cherokee County courthouse. In 1865 they raided Waynesville, burned the jail, and set fire to the home of Colonel Robert Love.

Stoneman's Raid: The Final Blow

The most devastating Union action came in spring 1865 with General George Stoneman's raid, a fast-moving cavalry strike designed to cripple Confederate infrastructure. His men reached Boone on March 28, burning the courthouse and records. They swept across the Blue Ridge to Wilkesboro, then into Virginia, destroying railroads, bridges, mills, and supply depots.

At Salisbury they burned the prison, cotton mills, and government warehouses, and tore up fifteen miles of railroad track. In Statesville they destroyed the office of the *Iredell Express*. Stoneman's men then turned south toward Asheville.

Asheville had been spared major destruction until then. When Brigadier General Alvan Gillem's cavalry arrived on April 25, they burned the gun factory and seized the town's defenses. Colonel Kirk's Volunteers followed, though looting was limited.

A Region in Ruins

By the war's end, western North Carolina was exhausted. Civil authority had collapsed; families were scattered; farms were stripped; and communities were scarred by years of internal conflict. Blackmun's closing portrait is stark: the mountains had endured "a system of cruelty at which humanity shudders."

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