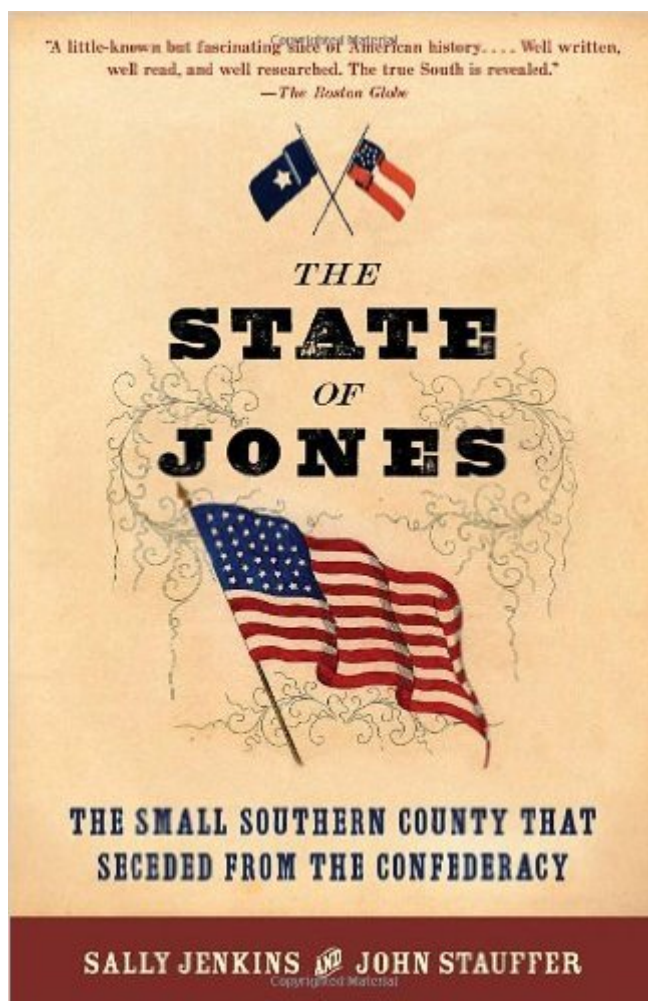


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The State Of Jones: The Small Southern County That Seceded From The Confederacy



Synopsis

No man better exemplified the complexities of Civil-War era Southern society than Newton Knight, whose incredible story is now the subject of a major motion picture starring Matthew McConaughey. In 1863, after surviving the devastating Battle of Corinth, Knight, a poor farmer from Mississippi, deserted the Confederate Army and began a guerrilla battle against the Confederacy. A pro-Union sympathizer in the deep South who refused to fight a rich man's war for slavery and cotton, for two years he and other residents of Jones County engaged in an insurrection that would have repercussions far beyond the scope of the Civil War. In this dramatic account of an almost forgotten chapter of American history, Sally Jenkins and John Stauffer upend the traditional myth of the Confederacy as a heroic and unified Lost Cause, revealing the fractures within the South.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Rating as Historical Fact: *Rating as Historical Novel: ****"State of Jones" purports to deal with the events surrounding an insurrection against Confederate authority that took place in 1863-4 in Jones County, Mississippi. Prior to the outbreak of the war, the Piney Woods area in which Jones County is situated had relatively few slaves and an economy based on livestock rather than cotton. Hence many of its men were reluctant participants in the war and, when Union forces clearly established the upper hand with the fall of Vicksburg in July 1863, they deserted and returned to their farms. Their numbers and their effective control of the area alarmed Confederate officials who sent in troops. There were several small scale engagements and about a dozen of the deserters (and a few unfortunate kinsmen) were hanged. Whether the Piney Woods renegades were simply deserters

and bushwhackers or were true Unionist--and to what degree they were truly an effective military force--has been debated ever since. Adding to the debate is its central character: Newton Knight. Knight was the leader of the most prominent band of deserters. Following the Civil War he capped his lifetime of independent action by maintaining a second family with a mulatto woman, Rachel Knight--a former slave who had assisted him during the war. The book under review has received a fairly substantial promotional push by its publisher perhaps owing to the fact that, as the authors note in their acknowledgement, it developed out of a screenplay for a proposed movie project by Gary Ross (Seabiscuit).

The authors have done an extraordinary job of finding, and telling, a story of resistance to the Confederacy, both during and after the Civil War. I've read, and researched, considerable Civil War history and find that the authors have been meticulous in their research. Certainly the War Department's Official Records kept enough angry Confederate reports of a loyal Unionist revolt in southeastern Mississippi, but there's signs that their research went much further. Indeed, the story puts the revolt in the greater context - many of the Jones County fighters were men who had been drafted into the rebel army and had survived the terrible battles at Corinth and Vicksburg. These were piney-woods farmers who had had enough of fighting a slaveholders' war. And, as we're told in this book, the war between Confederate government and Unionist rebels was without mercy. The Confederate army had been ruthless, we find, in expropriating the meager crops and livestock of the local farms, from farm women and children whose men had been dragged off to war, and now the revenge would be harsh, and not at all prompted by the distant Union Army forces in the north and west of the state. It would be a war of summary hangings and ambush that would not be recorded in the official, romanticized histories written later. Hardly mentioned, at least, till now. Above all, it's the story of one of the most extraordinary figures of the period, Newton Knight. He would not only lead the revolt but establish, and maintain, two families, one white and one biracial - the latter a cardinal sin in the society that would emerge after the war.

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