

The State of Jones: The Small Southern County that Seceded from the Confederacy

By Sally Jenkins, John Stauffer

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Covering the same ground as the major motion picture *The Free State of Jones*, starring Matthew McConaughey, this is the extraordinary true story of the anti-slavery Southern farmer who brought together poor whites, army deserters and runaway slaves to fight the Confederacy in deepest Mississippi. "Moving and powerful." -- *The Washington Post*.

In 1863, after surviving the devastating Battle of Corinth, Newton Knight, a poor farmer from Mississippi, deserted the Confederate Army and began a guerrilla battle against it. 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.

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- Sales Rank: #215487 in Books
- Published on: 2010-05-04
- Released on: 2010-05-04
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.00" h x .90" w x 5.20" l, .88 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 432 pages

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Editorial Review

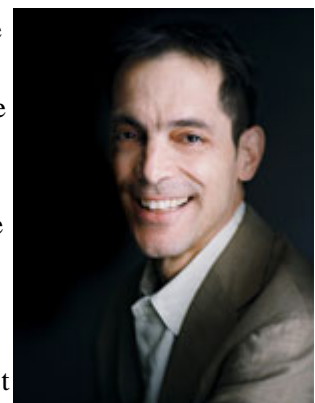
Amazon.com Review

Amazon Best of the Month, July 2009: Make room in your understanding of the Civil War for Jones County, Mississippi, where a maverick small farmer named Newton Knight made a local legend of himself by leading a civil war of his own against the Confederate authorities. Anti-planter, anti-slavery, and anti-conscription, Knight and thousands of fellow poor whites, army deserters, and runaway slaves waged a guerrilla insurrection against the secession that at its peak could claim the lower third of Mississippi as pro-Union territory. Knight, who survived well beyond the war (and fathered more than a dozen children by two mothers who lived alongside each other, one white and one black), has long been a notorious, half-forgotten figure, and in *The State of Jones* journalist Sally Jenkins and Harvard historian John Stauffer combine to tell his story with grace and passion. Using court transcripts, family memories, and other sources--and filling the remaining gaps with stylish evocations of crucial moments in the wider war--Jenkins and Stauffer connect Knight's unruly crusade to a South that, at its moment of crisis, was anything but solid. --Tom Nissley

Sally Jenkins and John Stauffer on *State of Jones*



Newton Knight is the most famous Civil War hero you've never heard of, because according to Mississippi legend he betrayed not only the Confederacy but his race as well. In 1863 Knight, a poor farmer from Jones County Mississippi, deserted the Confederate Army—and began fighting for the Union—after the battle of Vicksburg. It was rumored he even started a separate Unionist government, The Free State of Jones, and for two years he battled the Confederacy with a vengeance that solidified his legend. During his life Knight was hardly regarded as a proper soldier by either side, and after his death his Mississippi backwoods grave went unstrewn with flowers. Many southerners would have preferred to spit on it, and most northerners never recognized that such loyalty to the United States could exist in Dixie. But in truth, this lost patriot was a vital actor in helping to preserve the Union.



The recovery of the life of a Mississippi farmer who fought for his country is an important story. The fact that southern Unionists existed, and in very large numbers, is largely unknown to many Americans, who grew up with textbooks that perpetuated the myth of the Confederacy as a heroic Lost Cause, with its romanticized vision of the antebellum South. Some historians have even palpably sympathized with

Confederate cavaliers while minimizing—and robbing of credit—the actions of southerners who remained loyal to the Union at desperate cost.

One would never know that the majority of white Southerners had opposed secession, and that many Southern whites fought for the Union. In Tennessee, for example, somewhere around 31,000 white men joined the Union army. In Arkansas more than 8,000 men eventually served in Union regiments. And in Mississippi, Newton Knight and his band of guerillas launched a virtual insurrection against the Confederacy in Jefferson Davis' own home state.

“There's lots of ways I'd rather die than being scared to death,” Knight said, and it was a defining statement. At almost every stage of his life this yeoman from the hill country of Jones County, Miss., took courageous stands. The grandson of a slave owner who never owned slaves, he voted against secession, deserted from the Confederate Army into which he was unwillingly impressed, and formed a band called the Jones County Scouts devoted to undermining the Rebel cause locally. Working with runaway slaves and fellow Unionists and Federal soldiers caught behind enemy lines, Knight conducted such an effective running gun battle that at the height of the war he and his allies controlled the entire lower third of the state. This “southern Yankee,” as one Rebel general termed him, remained unconquered until the end of the war. His resistance hampered the Confederate Army's ability to operate, forced it to conduct a third-front war at home, and eroded its morale and will to fight.

Knight also burst free of racial barriers and forged bonds of alliance with blacks that were unmatched even by Northern abolitionists. He fought as ardently as any man for racial equality during the War, and after, during the terrifying days of Reconstruction, when his life was, if anything, even more in danger. He lived with an ex-slave named Rachel, fathering several children with her (but he never divorced his Caucasian wife, Serena), and worked on behalf of U.S. Grant's Republican administration and against the nascent Ku Klux Klan, and envisioned a world that would only begin to be implemented a century later. Moreover, he operated in an inverted moral landscape in which fealty to country was labeled traitorous, and kinship with blacks was considered morally repugnant. He survived only because he could reload a shotgun before the smoke cleared.

As an Alabama Unionist told a Congressional committee in 1866 in testifying about the little appreciated service of southern loyalists, “You have no idea of the strength of principle and devotion these people exhibited towards the national government.” —*Sally Jenkins and John Stauffer*

(John Stauffer photo © Greg Martin; Sally Jenkins photo © Nicole Bengiveno)

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. The grandson of a wealthy Mississippi slave-owner, Newton Knight was an abolitionist and two-time rebel deserter who actively fought against the Confederacy, and bore a large family with a former slave. His home, Jones County, Miss., saw great hardship during the Civil War; Confederate taxes “pushed small farm families, who provided the rank and file foot soldiers, to the brink of destitution.” Jenkins (*The Real All Americans: The Team That Changed a Game, a People, a Nation*) and Stauffer (*Giants: The Parallel Lives of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln*) employ painstaking research into Knight and Jones County, resulting in an engaging and original portrait of life inside the Confederacy. Knight's Scouts, formed after Vicksburg set off a wave of rebel desertions, carried out their own justice in Jones County, using clever techniques for communication, intimidation and warfare against the home team (“the sorts of exploits” that Sherman would appreciate). Knight's post-war efforts for equality included building an integrated school; when residents objected to his own mixed-race children attending, however, Knight burned it to the ground. Spanning more than 100 years, this family story brings home the lasting effects of hate and fear, love and acceptance, as well as the strides that have brought us to where we are.

Review

“A little known but fascinating slice of American history. . . . Well written, well read, and well researched. The true South is revealed.”

—*The Boston Globe*

“Lively. . . . Jenkins and Stauffer bring historical contexts to life and offer provocative interpretations.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“Moving and powerful. . . . An important story that personalizes what remains abstract and counterintuitive in much of our received history of the Civil War, even as we approach its 150th anniversary.”

—*The Washington Post*

“Informed. . . . Impressive. . . . The saga is related in fascinating detail.”

—*The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

“Just when you thought you had heard it all about the Civil War, along comes this astonishing tale of rebellion within the heart of rebel territory. This is a riveting and memorable read about resistance, courage, love and, most of all, the long trail of justice and injustice in the American South. I couldn’t put it down.”

—Tom Brokaw

“Jenkins and Stauffer have brought fresh attention to a little-known and interesting sidebar of Civil War history.”

—*Wall Street Journal*

“Fascinating. . . . The book fittingly combines crisp narrative with exhaustive historical context. . . . Jenkins and Stauffer succeed in telling the complex history of the Civil War, and its disastrous Reconstruction aftermath, through the steely eyes of this crusty old man.”

—*Minneapolis Star-Tribune*

“A richly detailed, riveting and revealing account of this long-forgotten rebellion within a rebellion.”

—*Tulsa World*

“History at its finest and most captivating. The documentation is meticulous, yet this gem of a book reads like a novel, with a revelation at every turn. Jenkins and Stauffer have proved once again that the real history of this country is far more complex and fascinating than the prevailing mythology.”

—David Maraniss, author of *They Marched Into Sunlight* and *When Pride Still Mattered*

“Exceedingly readable and informative.”

—*Denver Post*

“Jenkins and Stauffer dug deep into state and military records to spin this fascinating yarn, and their bibliography is augmented by extensive (and intriguing) notes. . . . *The State of Jones* is a treasure. It’s a window into an obscure corner of Mississippi’s history and an account that further challenges myths of a South unified behind a ‘glorious’ cause.”

—*The Virginian-Pilot*

“Jenkins and Stauffer tell the fascinating tale of an unforgettable figure. . . . They follow the Knight family’s extraordinary lives over the course of six decades and in the process open a window onto a forgotten corner of the American landscape.”

—Philip B. Kunhardt III, co-author of *Looking for Lincoln*

“Here is the Civil War as it really was. You can’t fully know America’s epic until you’ve read this powerful book.”

—David Von Drehle, author of *Triangle: The Fire That Changed America*

“Highly recommended to Civil War aficionados. . . . The story is quite intriguing and will keep the reader looking forward to the next page.”

—*The Oklahoman*

“Jones and Stauffer tell this story with verve and insight, providing a richly detailed, dramatic narrative that is a valuable contribution to the historical literature.”

—James Simon, author of *Lincoln and Chief Justice Taney*

“An entertaining, informative book about a courageous group of Southerners clearly ahead of their time. It offers a refreshing look at the issues surrounding the Civil War, and some delightful surprises for even the most knowledgeable history buff.”

—*BookPage*

“Gripping. . . . Lively. . . . [Knight’s] story is sad but fascinating, a little known chapter in the history of the Deep South. Jenkins and Stauffer tell it well.”

—*The Advocate* (Baton Rouge)

“A marvelous story of loyalty and treason, race and blood, war and peace. *The State of Jones* is as compelling as it is unlikely, a tale of insurrection that illuminates the larger insurrection of our Civil War.”

—Rick Atkinson, author of *An Army at Dawn*

“In *The State of Jones*, Jenkins and Stauffer locate the real Civil War—and the story of our greatest national trial—in all of its specificity and moral complexity. . . . Their intuition about why history of this kind matters is unfailing.”

—Steve Coll, author of *Ghost Wars*

Users Review

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