

First to Last to Pay the Price: Brownsburg's Civil War Story

Brownsburg Museum Exhibit Catalogue (2014, 64 pages)

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Published by the Brownsburg Museum in 2014, First and Last to Pay the Price is a model enterprise in Local History, translating the collaborative work of a community museum into a memorable and elegant volume. Set against the sweep of the Civil War, the grand narratives of America's pivotal crisis are woven throughout the exhibit and book. But where this account succeeds more than most is in its carefully curated commitment to center on a small, coherent community: Brownsburg, VA, Rockbridge County, in the heart of the Shenandoah Valley.

At once native and national in its footprints, First and Last trains a meaningful, neighborly eye on the felt particulars of everyday life. And with that keen, intimate focus, the larger motivations and momentum of the Civil War takes shape through the sharp lens of local experience.

The volume's three authors do a fine job in tracing some of the more conventional storylines of secession and the roads to Manassas and Appomattox. Even more distinctively, however, their strong foregrounding of Rockbridge's Scots-Irish heritage adds cultural color and authenticity, complemented by some well-detailed sections devoted to the local politics and material culture of slavery. Over the course of its 60 illustrated pages, First to Last tracks the domestic homefront through tedium and worry alike; it witnesses the sudden arrival of front lines to Brownsburg; and it honors the burial plots and farmplots that would re-make this Rockbridge community once the flags and guns were laid down.

In adapting a museum exhibit into a book, the authors have cleverly and clearly organized their community's material into three interwoven sections of local and national Narratives; evocative, characteristic Vignettes; and arrestingly annotated Artifacts. Though the text enjoys a strong narrative throughline charting the paths to and through the War, its thematic structure also affords a welcome variety of inroads into the material. Among those three cues, the reader can move fluidly or lingeringly through the book, navigating among the artful touchstones that anchor those broader contexts of War, and of everyday life in Virginia.

The catalogue boasts an impressive and colorful array of letters and artifacts to illustrate and punctuate its story. Its professionally photographed, high quality color-reproductions range broadly from a homespun slave dress, to a Confederate cavalry sabre, to a delicate hair pin; haunting period photographs of the community's soldiers, with letters from their families; diary entries chronicling the arrival of Union Forces, who decamped in Brownsburg shortly before occupying Lexington and burning VMI. Just as these small objects work evoke the lives of the larger community, so does the small community of Brownsburg shine new light on the Civil War, and 19th century Virginia, more broadly.

This is not only a book for Civil War enthusiasts. Beyond Virginia and the South, even, First and Last will reward anyone who admires the art of stitching together the lives of a specific locality, into the larger families, flags, and philosophies of its era.