

# ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

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## American Cities in the Civil War

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When the Civil War began America was an overwhelmingly rural society, but its growing cities mattered in ways that magnified their importance beyond basic population numbers. Cities were bases for organizing the war effort. They provided refuge for men and women displaced by the fighting. Military campaigns focused on cities as strategic objectives. Finally, because of their density and demographic diversity cities hosted notable expressions of social conflicts that roiled the homefront. In these capacities cities helped shape the course of the war. In the meantime, the Civil War altered the pattern of urban development of the pre-war era, with dramatic consequences for the South.

In the decades before 1861 American cities grew rapidly but the pattern of that growth differed because of the absence of slavery in the North and its presence in the South. In 1790, very few Americans lived in urban places.<sup>1</sup> In what became the free states of the North just under one in ten people lived in a city or town and in the slave South they constituted a meager one in twenty. By 1860 this gap had widened to one in four northerners living in an urban place versus one in ten southerners.

These different rates of urbanization related to America's capitalist expansion and the unique effects that plantation slavery had on city building within that economy. Globally, the growth of commercial agriculture stimulated consumer demand for market goods that, in turn, provided a catalyst for urbanization. Smaller market towns sprang up to serve farmers selling their products and spending the cash on imports and manufactures. These towns fed an urban system

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<sup>1</sup> Statistical discussion of urban uses the definition of places with 2,500 or more residents, as applied in Michael Ratcliffe, "A Century of Delineating a Changing Landscape: The Census Bureau's Urban And Rural Classification, 1910 To 2010," (2014) at United States Census Bureau, [https://www2.census.gov/geo/pdfs/reference/ua/Century\\_of\\_Defining\\_Urban.pdf](https://www2.census.gov/geo/pdfs/reference/ua/Century_of_Defining_Urban.pdf), accessed May 12, 2025. Unless specified, all population numbers for U.S. cities come from Joseph C. G. Kennedy, *Population of the United States in 1860* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1864); U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Population Of The 100 Largest Cities And Other Urban Places In The United States: 1790 to 1990*, comp. Campbell Gibson, *Population Division Working Paper No. 27* (Washington: Bureau of the Census, 1998); Michael R. Haines, "State Populations," in Susan B. Carter, et. al., eds., 5 Vols. *Historical Statistics of the United States: Earliest Times to the Present: Millennial Edition*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1:180-374.

dominated by the major cities that provided capital, bulk transportation, and, eventually, large-scale manufacturing for these expanding economic networks.<sup>2</sup>

In the least urbanized region of the country, the Lower South,<sup>3</sup> massive slave plantations inhibited the spread of towns which relied on small-scale consumer demand. The enslaved workforce, which made up to half of the population in the Lower South, had little access to cash and lacked the freedom to buy and sell in towns. Providing for enslaved laborers' consumption, planters usually cared more about price than quality, and preferred bulk discounts from distant merchants over pricier transactions with local retailers. Conversely, land speculators in the free states needed to attract voluntary migrants to make their investment increase in value. They therefore encouraged towns as a stimulus to settlement and often funded the schools, market, roads, and other infrastructure needed to make a given patch of land more attractive than ones isolated from these urban amenities.<sup>4</sup>

This difference in economic incentives created contrasting urban landscapes, one shaped by the predominance of free labor and the other by slavery. Not only did the North have more cities and city dwellers than the South, it also had many more small towns (concentrated settlements under 2,500 people) and a much larger share of its population lived in them compared to the states that joined the Confederacy.<sup>5</sup>

These contrasting urban systems affected the military capacity of each side. Thinking about urban settlements as places for putting big plans in motion—i.e. as the providers of the services, population, and productive capacity necessary for large-scale human activity—helps situate them in the military narrative of the conflict. The Civil War occurred in the early stages of the industrial revolution and the adoption of coal and steam power for mass production and transportation. Those changes made large cities the most efficient setting for industrial growth. Coal and steam benefitted big businesses that invested in costly machinery and profited from mass producing goods and under-selling the slower, if higher quality products of artisans working in small shops. The cost of shipping made it more profitable to build factories near the supply of coal, long-distance transportation, and cheap factory labor. Moreover, the concentration of economic activity meant that complimentary businesses, like the machine shops and chemical makers who supplied iron and textile mills, could reinforce each other's expansion.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> E. A. Wrigley, *Poverty, Progress, and Population* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 267; Allan Pred, *Urban Growth and City Systems in the United States, 1840-1860* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

<sup>3</sup> The Lower South refers to the seven states most heavily invested in plantation crops such as cotton, sugar, and rice. They had the highest percentage of enslaved African Americans in their populations and were the first to secede from the Union in 1860-1861. They were Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Texas.

<sup>4</sup> Gavin Wright, *Slavery and American Economic Development* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 66-68.

<sup>5</sup> Frank Towers, "The Southern Path to Modern Cities: Urbanization in the Slave States," in Diane Barnes, Brian Schoen, and Frank Towers, eds., *The Old South's Modern Worlds: Slavery, Region, and Nation in the Age of Progress*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 149-51.

<sup>6</sup> Douglas W. Rae, *City: Urbanism and Its End* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 1-31.

During the first months of the Civil War, The Union increased its urban advantage by securing the border slave states of Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland and Missouri. By securing the Border South, the Union added Baltimore, Louisville, and St. Louis to the already impressive list of major cities in the free states. Their inhabitants along with Wilmington, Delaware and Washington, D.C. totaled 692,279 people, or two thirds of all of the slave-state population living in places of 20,000 or more. Of the twenty-five largest cities in the country, only three (New Orleans, Charleston, and Richmond) were in the Confederacy. By the fall of 1861, the cities of the Union contained ten times as many industrial workers than the Confederacy's industrial resources.

Facing a U.S. big city population of more than three million, the Confederacy went to war with just under 340,000 people inhabiting places with the capacity to organize industry and transportation on a large scale.<sup>7</sup> One year into the conflict the Union captured New Orleans, the largest of the Confederacy's cities, its biggest banking center, and a strategic point at the mouth of the Mississippi. By the summer of 1862 five of the Confederacy's ten largest cities (Alexandria, Memphis, Nashville, New Orleans, and Norfolk) had fallen to the United States government and the federal naval blockade neutralized the port function of Charleston and Savannah, which remained in Confederate hands. Wartime Confederate industrialization was impressive, but the greater size of the Union's network of interconnected towns and cities kept its armies better staffed and supplied, making victory more likely if not inevitable.<sup>8</sup>

Although Confederate cities and towns were targets for Union attack they tended to be damaged rather than destroyed as would be the case in later wars. And only 11 out of a total of 297 Confederate cities and towns suffered destruction or severe damage. Steeped in post-Napoleonic military doctrine that emphasized close control over troops and victories over armies in the open field, leaders on both sides avoided attacking cities because their geography disrupted command communications and afforded too many advantages to defenders.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the relative light touch of the war on Southern cities, they included some of its largest and strategically significant urban centers such as Richmond, the Confederate capital; Charleston, its second largest city; Atlanta, a wartime boomtown and industrial powerhouse; Vicksburg, which became the central focus of the western theater late in the war; and Columbia, the capital of South Carolina. Moreover, the attacks on Richmond, Atlanta and Columbia occurred near the end of the war and two of them belonged to Major General William Tecumseh Sherman's drive across the Confederate interior. Even if most of the urban South escaped major conflict, because cities play a symbolic role in nationalist discourses, the devastation of some of the most

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<sup>7</sup> This figure estimates the total population of Confederate cities with 20,000 or more people. Those cities were New Orleans (168,675), Charleston, South Carolina (40,522), Richmond and Petersburg, Virginia (56,176), Mobile (29,258), Memphis (22,693), and Savannah (22,292).

<sup>8</sup> J. Matthew Gallman, "Regionalism and Urbanism as Problems in Confederate Urban History," in Andrew L. Slap and Frank Towers, eds., *Confederate Cities: The Urban South during the Civil War Era*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 35; William G. Thomas, *The Iron Way: Railroads, the Civil War, and the Making of Modern America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 26-27.

<sup>9</sup> Paul F. Paskoff, "Measures of War: A Quantitative Examination of the Civil War's Destructiveness in the Confederacy," in *Civil War History* (March 2008): 35-62; G. J. Ashworth, *War and the City* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 4, 112.

important cities in the Confederacy magnified the impression that the Yankees burned their way through town after town in their march to victory.

Behind the frontlines, cities shaped the possibilities of Civil War Americans' push for social and political change. Although the war's causes and course were bigger than America's cities, the level of urbanization achieved by mid-century made possible some of the most ambitious, and forward-looking collective movements of the period. The kind of industrial city emerging in the mid-1800s was densely populated, culturally heterogenous, and if not egalitarian, then at least a place where people on opposing sides of social hierarchies lived near each other and therefore shared common interests in urban progress. Aside from military mobilization itself, urban struggles over issues related to race, class, and gender illustrate the potential of cities for collective mobilization beyond what was possible in rural America.

In the fight for emancipation and racial equality, African Americans were often led by an urban vanguard of men and women who were free in 1860 and who gained allies after 1861 as refugees from slavery flocked to cities, especially those either in the Border South or under Union control in the Confederacy. Although these communities varied from places like Baltimore, Maryland, a large border state city with the pre-war era's largest free black population, to Mobile, Alabama, a smaller port city in the heart of slaveholders' cotton kingdom, urban conditions made some kinds of institutional development possible no matter the local power of enslavers or the political climate of the larger region.

Freedpeople arriving from the countryside crammed into scarce housing and makeshift shelters on the edges of cities where they rarely received municipal services such as fire protection and running water. Nonetheless the chance to live with more everyday liberty made city crowding preferable to rural dependency. In cities African Americans had the density of association, freedom from daily white supervision, and because of greater economic opportunities, the capital needed to build institutions such as churches, schools, mutual aid societies, and labor unions. These community anchors enabled black urbanites to lead the fight for legal rights and equal access to taxpayer funded transportation and schools.

These campaigns faced internal obstacles—most notably the divide between a comparatively privileged antebellum free-black community and recently enslaved newcomers from the countryside—as well as determined opposition from whites, especially in the Confederate states, to anything that looked like equality. That attitude informed paramilitary violence in New Orleans and Memphis in 1866. The two cases differed in context—New Orleans police killed thirty-seven delegates to a Republican Party convention and in Memphis paramilitaries killed forty-six African American living in a shantytown leveled by the mob—but both manifested white determination to enforce racial hierarchy through violence.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Justin A. Nystrom, *New Orleans After the Civil War: Race, Politics, and a New Birth of Freedom* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 66-69; Stephen V. Ash, *A Massacre in Memphis: The Race Riot that Shook the Nation One Year After the Civil War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013).

Collective action on class-based grievances sometimes overlapped with the drive for racial equality but could also run counter to it depending on the malleable political environment of the 1860s. By the second year of the war, shortages of basic goods pinched working-class family budgets on both sides. In the North, workers' wages rose by half while the cost of living doubled. Those economic grievances fed into northern workers' opposition to federal conscription, enacted on March 3, 1863. The most severe protests occurred in New York City four months later, and smaller riots broke out in other cities, such as Boston, Buffalo, and smaller Midwestern towns. Other cities, such as Chicago, circumvented a crisis by paying commutation fees out of municipal government revenue. Beginning on July 13, draft rioters unleashed five days of mob violence on New York City, resulting in approximately 120 deaths, 2,000 injuries and millions of dollars in property damage, and they remain the largest urban uprising in U.S. history. In early July, Lasting five days, The New York mob's attack on draft officers addressed grievances about conscription but their destruction of an African American orphanage and lynching of 11 black men and boys spoke to racial hatreds stoked by exaggerated reports of black strikebreaking and resentment against Union efforts on behalf of slaves. The draft riots were one of many examples of the cross-cutting fissures within urban society that prevented a more united front against inequality.

By late 1863, a shortage of skilled hands gave leverage to a surge in labor organizing that saw fifteen new national unions created. Indicative of the urban basis of this movement, the most successful were citywide trades assemblies and local city unions, both of which contributed to the push for an eight-hour day spearheaded by Ira Steward, a Boston leader of the Machinists' and Blacksmith's International Union.

Strikes brought retaliation from employers who relied on federal troops to break up picket lines. The longest and most repressive federal intervention in a labor dispute occurred in Pennsylvania's anthracite region, but troops also broke strikes at urban munitions factories, docks, and railroads. Those interventions were one of the most visible examples of wartime military policing. As part of 1863 conscription law, the U.S. Congress created the Provost Marshal General's office to oversee an expanded number of existing "provosts", i.e. police who reported to the military and had wide authority to suppress anti-war activities. In rural areas provosts usually came from the local constabulary who responded to the consensus of neighborhood opinion. However, in diverse cities with larger populations no such unanimity could be found, putting provost marshals on the frontlines of war-related protests.

In the Confederacy civil unrest over conscription and economic scarcity became a focal point for female political engagement. On April 2, 1863, hundreds of women in the Confederate capital of Richmond rioted after earlier requests for increased public relief went unanswered. That spring, bread riots occurred in Petersburg, Virginia; Salisbury, North Carolina; Mobile, Alabama; and five towns in Georgia, including Atlanta. They came after earlier female-led protests in New Orleans in 1861 and Cartersville, Georgia in 1862 and were followed by later outbreaks in Confederate towns through to 1865. Urban riots were the most visible manifestation of the politicization of white Confederate women who, as historian Stephanie McCurry has argued, used the state's claim on them as subjects to articulate a political identity as soldiers' wives able to make demands on government. Rioters tended to have male kin in Confederate service, and many

worked in government-contracted industries, like textile mills, where common grievances could be articulated. There were sharp limits to white Confederate women's demands for equality. Not only did most of these women support slavery, but also as rioters, they often attacked stores run by immigrants, many of them Jews, who made a convenient target for complaints that outsiders and speculators were exacerbating the suffering of loyal Confederates.<sup>11</sup>

In the North, female activism took several forms. Union organizing extended to women, who made up one-fourth of the industrial workforce in 1860 and whose numbers increased during wartime. In 1863, New York's female garment cutters established the Working Women's Protective Union to fight abuses and lobby for shorter hours and better wages. Branches of the union formed in Boston, St. Louis, Indianapolis, Chicago, and Philadelphia. These, mostly urban, female labor unions were an important conduit to other public roles and the quest for equal rights. Another venue for activism was the U.S. Sanitary Commission, which supplemented and monitored army medical services through branches in towns across the North. Antebellum antislavery associations also fed into the joint struggle to defeat the Confederate rebellion and advance equality, a theme taken up female advocates for the war, such as popular military recruiter and lecturer Anna Dickinson.<sup>12</sup>

Wars could lead to major demographic shifts, but only with sustained enforcement of new policies. The victorious Union government had no urban policy as such, but three political outcomes of the war indirectly affected urbanization after 1865. First, the abolition of slavery gave African Americans greater mobility and purchasing power, both of which spurred town building in the Lower South.<sup>13</sup> Change began during the war as southern cities bulged with newcomers seeking war-related employment as well as medical care and military protection. At its wartime peak, Atlanta's population more than doubled to 22,000, and Richmond skyrocketed from 38,000 in 1860 to 100,000 in 1863, and may have reached a wartime high of 150,000 in 1865. Refugees from slavery often entered cities through U.S. military run Contraband camps on their outskirts. Camps on the edges of cities such as Washington, St. Louis, New Orleans, and Memphis gave refugees access to jobs and education and less exposure to Confederate marauders.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Harvard University Press, 2012); Keith S. Bohannon, "'More Like Amazons than Starving People': Women's Urban Riots in Georgia in 1863," in Andrew L. Slap, ed., *Confederate Cities: The Urban South During the Civil War Era* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 147-68.

<sup>12</sup> Nina Silber, *Daughters of the Union: Northern Women Fight the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 44, 163; Judith Giesberg, *Army at Home: Women and the Civil War on the Northern Home Front* (Chapel Hill: University North Carolina Press, 2009), 139; J. Matthew Gallman, *America's Joan of Arc: The Life of Anna Elizabeth Dickinson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 39-42.

<sup>14</sup> Wendy Hamand Venet, *A Changing Wind: Commerce and Conflict in Civil War Atlanta* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 63-67; Mary DeCredico and Jaime Amanda Martinez, "Richmond during the Civil War," in *Encyclopaedia Virginia*, [https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Richmond\\_During\\_the\\_Civil\\_War#start\\_entry](https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Richmond_During_the_Civil_War#start_entry), accessed May 12, 2025; Chandra Manning, *Troubled Refuge: Struggling for Freedom in the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), 47-48.

When the war ended southern white refugees generally returned to homes in the countryside, but cities continued to draw African Americans who sought out new lives in the city and feared rural violence aimed at reimposing slavery or something close to it. For example, Mobile's population peaked near 41,000 in 1866 and fell to 32,000 in 1870. In the intervening four years 10,000 whites left town, but an additional 1,500 blacks moved in, making Mobile one of many southern cities to reverse a late antebellum trend of urban black population decline. Overall, the African American share of the former Confederacy's urban population rose from 23 percent in 1860 to 38 percent in 1880.

Less obvious in their impact than emancipation, the combination of federal aid to industrial expansion across the country through support for railroads, tariffs, banking, and immigration and within the South, state level commitment to the coercion of African American labor even at the expense of industrial development continued prewar trends of uneven urban development. Despite slower growth in the late antebellum era, some future Confederate cities were following the path of industrialization supported by immigrant labor that occurred in the North and Border South. That trend reversed after 1865 as immigrants went to the booming industrial cities of the Northeast and Midwest and new railroads in the southern interior opened the traditional market hinterlands of older ports like New Orleans and Charleston to new competitors such as Atlanta and Dallas and, by the end of the century, supported northern-financed industrial centers like Birmingham, Alabama, and Charlotte, North Carolina.<sup>15</sup>

In closing, cities played several important roles in the Civil War. They provided bases for organizing and supplying armies. Cities hosted the manufacturing boom in the Confederacy that struggled to compensate for the Union blockade. Confederate became targets for major campaigns and their captures marked turning points in the war. Cities also served as the site for battles over the meaning of freedom and the new social order in the postwar South.

In return, the war reshaped urban America. It accelerated the established pattern of fast-paced northern urbanization and slowed down city-building in the South. After 1865, the industrial revolution already underway before the war carried forward primarily in the northeast and Great Lakes states, increasing the number of city dwellers to more than half of the northeast's population by 1880. In the South established prewar ports declined and new cities emerged in the interior along with new railroad connections. In the urban South, African American communities, often led by the prewar free elite, forged vibrant institutions, such as churches, schools and benevolent societies that persisted into the next century. Similarly, what had been a more cosmopolitan white urban South consolidated into a white supremacist monolith under the pressure of Democratic Party proselytizing and the decline of foreign immigration. In this respect, the Civil War and Reconstruction magnified the prewar pattern of a more cosmopolitan, industrializing urban North and a more inward looking, racially divided urban South.

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<sup>15</sup> David R. Goldfield, *Cottonfields and Skyscrapers: Southern City and Region, 1607-1980* (Louisiana State University Press: Baton Rouge, 1989), 105-6, 116, 126-7; Scott Marler, *The Merchants' Capital: New Orleans and the Political Economy of the Nineteenth-Century South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), ch. 7.

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