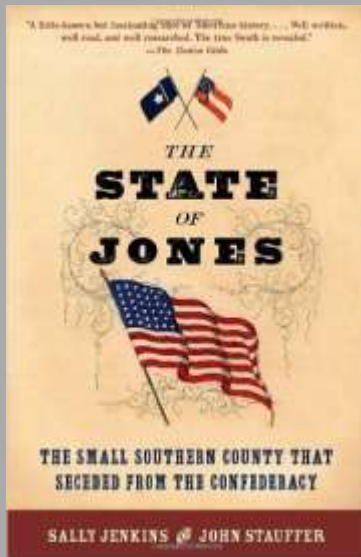


## Book Review

### *The State of Jones: The Small Southern County That Seceded from the Confederacy*

by Sally Jenkins and John Stauffer

Doubleday (2009)



Recently I saw a TV commercial touting a yet-to-be released movie titled *The State of Jones*, apparently based in part upon the book by the same name. Hollywood movies and TV commercials being what they are, there were quick cuts of violence and mayhem, with suggestions of salacious episodes. Remarkably enough, these are actually reflective of the book, which in turn is a documented factual account.

Contrary to what many adherents of the Myth of the Lost Cause would have us believe, the Confederacy was not and never was completely and harmoniously united. Instead there were several fault lines among its populations. At the risk of oversimplification, the planter, slave owner elites led the South into secession, a revolt to which many in the South were either indifferent or even resistant. Generally speaking, secession was most popular in the low lands where large plantations needed bonded labor to become and remain profitable. Contrarily secession was more unpopular in areas where the topography and/or the climate would not support plantation economies. There were several pockets of resistance to the Confederacy in the mountainous areas and indeed one entire region detached itself from a seceding state to form West Virginia. East Tennessee was another region that might have split off from its mother state but the Federal military could never quite gain enough territorial control to facilitate the creation of the state of East Tennessee.

The friction between the Confederacy and its recalcitrant factions has been dramatically told in the 1997 best selling novel *Cold Mountain*, written by Charles Frazier, made into a movie by the same name. *Cold Mountain* tells the story of a wounded Confederate soldier who deserts from a Confederate hospital and tries to escape to his home in the mountains of North Carolina.

In contrast to other pockets of resistance found in Southern mountains and foothills, Jones County is located in swampy, piney low country. Its 2010 census shows a population of 68,000 with a recent unemployment rate of less than 5%. But at the beginning of the Civil War

slaves comprised about 12% of the population, the lowest of any Mississippi county. Along with Covington County to the west, it soon became a haven for Confederate deserters as well as a refuge for escaped slaves.

Jones County had no particular strategic value except that its resistance was a thorn in the side of local and state authorities. The ensuing conflict never developed as organized warfare but instead featured guerilla attacks by insurgent bands of no more than 100 locals, deserters and runaway slaves. The successes of their hit-and-run attacks were enhanced by networks of local sympathizers coupled by terrain that afforded ample hiding places to thwart pursuits or searches.

*Jones* focuses upon an individual, named Newton Knight, who was conscripted into the Confederate army before turning his back upon the Southern army and returning to his native land, Jones County. Newton had been a yeoman who had not owned any slaves; he, and others like him, felt no attachment to the terrible war that was leaving his native county in tatters. He was further incensed by laws passed to exempt owners of twenty or more slaves from military service while imposing burdensome taxes upon the crops and other goods of the soldiers' impoverished families. To these simple folk, the Rebellion was nothing more than a rich man's war but a poor man's fight.

Although some of Newton's exotic character together with his struggles against authority might, and has, led to comparisons with Robin Hood, he was not universally admired, even within his own community. Some saw him as nothing more than a traitor and/or a scoundrel who deserved to be hanged. Nor was he a model of moral rectitude, being married to two wives, one White and one Black by whom he managed to raise several children, leaving hundreds of still living descendants. Nevertheless he left a legacy that endured well past the Civil War.

*The State of Jones* is co-authored by Sally Jenkins and John Stauffer; Ms Jenkins is an award-winning journalist while Stauffer is a historian with Harvard University, also being an award-winning author in his own right. Although their book is thoroughly researched with an extensive bibliography it is also an easy, swiftly moving read. Although this review does not presume to pass judgment upon the forthcoming movie, it should be well-worth the price of admission and a box of popcorn if it reflects and approaches the book's authenticity and dramatics.

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