A story of rebellion amid the Confederacy

by: GLENN C. ALTSCHULER
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In July 1864, a band of guerrillas led by a farmer named Newton Knight announced that Jones County had seceded from the State of Mississippi "and formed a Government of their own, both military and civil."

As they burned bridges and ferries, stole cattle intended to feed the Confederate Army, bushwhacked Southern soldiers and added runaway slaves to their ranks, Newton and his men helped secure Mississippi for the bluecoats.

Journalist Sally Jenkins and John Stauffer, a professor of the History of American Civilization at Harvard University, provide a richly detailed, riveting and revealing account of this long-forgotten rebellion within a rebellion.

With its swamps, thickets, and pine trees, Jones County was "too poor to raise a fuss on." The self-reliant yeoman who lived in Jones, Jenkins and Stauffer write, "had no stake in the cotton and slavery economy and even less in the political affairs on planters. In 1860, they gave 374 votes to John Powell, the 'cooperationist' candidate, and only 24 to flame-thrower John Baylis."

When war came, Jones County farmers, including Newton Knight, were coerced or conscripted into the Confederate Army. As the conflict ground on, the rebels found themselves "commanded by 'General Starvation.'" Soldiers ate rats or made soup from boiled shoestrings; their clothes swarmed with lice. Enacted in October 1862, the "Twenty Negro Law," which exempted from military service one white man on every plantation with 20 or more slaves, the authors indicate, was the last straw for thousands of poor white soldiers. Within months, "desertion bloomed into a perpetual crisis."

Vowing that he'd rather die than rejoin the Confederate Army, Newton Knight organized about 100 fellow deserters into the Jones County Scouts. They banded together, Jenkins and Stauffer maintain, as much out of principle as self-protection. Like his father, Knight opposed the enslavement of Negroes. Moreover, he publicly accepted as his own the children he sired with his "second wife," Rachel, the slave he loved.

After the war, Knight was one of only a few white men to join the Loyal League Club of Jones, an organization dedicated to achieving political and economic rights for blacks and standing up to the Ku Klux Klan. In the 1870s Knight tried — and failed — to organize an integrated school in the county.

Jenkins and Stauffer intend to "offer an alternative history of the South" by exploding the myth that there was a consensus in the region over slavery and secession. The State of Jones
The Small Southern County That Seceded From The Confederacy
Sally Jenkins and John Stauffer
Doubleday, $27.50

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.