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Contents

List of Tables vii
Acknowledgments ix

1 Rethinking the Social Role of the Militia 1
2 The Hunters of Kentucky 9
3 Public Gatherings and Social Order 20
4 Stability and Security in a Time of Transition 48
5 Proponents of Democracy and Partisanship 66
6 A Refuge of Manhood 98
7 Fighters, Protectors, and Men 128
Conclusion: Citizens More than Soldiers 144

Appendix 147
Notes 155
Bibliography 199
Index 211

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1

RETHINKING THE SOCIAL ROLE OF THE MILITIA

In *Requiem for a Nun,* William Faulkner introduces the fictional town of Jefferson, Mississippi, located in the equally fictitious Yoknapatawpha County. Central to his story, set in the 1830s, is the capture of a gang of ruffians: "A gang—three or four—of Natchez Trace bandits . . . [was] captured by chance by an incidental band of civilian more-or-less militia and brought in to the Jefferson jail because it was the nearest one, the militia band being part of a general muster at Jefferson two days before for a Fourth-of-July barbecue, which by the second day had been refined by hardy elimination into one drunken brawling which rendered even the hardiest survivors vulnerable residents."[1] The story continues as Jefferson's residents struggle to find a suitable place to secure the "bandits," but of greater historical significance is the brief appearance of the local militia. Faulkner's portrayal of the volunteer soldiers conforms to popular perceptions of the early national militia. Incompetent at best, dangerous at worst, militiamen are usually depicted as drunken buffoons who stumbled into a crooked line, poked each other with cornstalk weapons, and inevitably shot their commander in the backside with a rusty, antiquated musket. Caricatures of the over-accoutered captain and his clownish part-time charges are familiar to even casual scholars of the new republic.

Yet even in Faulkner's amusingly inept company of Yoknapatawpha "more-or-less" citizen-soldiers, there are hints of something more at work. His militia had mustered in preparation for the upcoming July Fourth celebration, an occasion that typically included men in uniform. Militiamen frequently organized the day's activities, made patriotic speeches at the afternoon barbecue, and concluded the day with a long series of toasts. The Jefferson militia company had also deemed it necessary to curtail further celebration to capture the wandering felons, car-

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rying out another responsibility generally ascribed to citizen-soldiers —the maintenance of civil order.

The militiamen's appearance in Faulkner's tale bears one additional similarity to the traditional understanding of the American militia's place in the early nineteenth century: it is peripheral and fleeting. Beyond stereotypes, little is known about the ways the militia affected communities in the early republic. In his study of the trans-Appalachian frontier, Malcolm J. Rohrbough hints that historians have underestimated the social influence of the militia, noting that musters were "the largest gathering of people" communities witnessed, where "men would gather in small groups to play at politics, swap horses, engage in rough and tumble, debate the leading questions of the day (the price of land and crops), or simply exchange news."[2] A reassessment demonstrates that scholars have indeed erred by ignoring or discounting the militia's significance in early nineteenth-century American society.

In the years between the ratification of the U.S. Constitution and the rising sectional conflict of the 1850s, American society underwent a rapid transition, if not in fact a revolution. Frontier outposts exploded into cities in which social, political, and economic competition was daily fare. The Revolutionaries' belief in an organic society led by a natural aristocracy gave way to the Jacksonians' faith in the common man, while an aversion to factionalism was overcome by the competitive spirit of the second party system. The simple and intimate practice of bartering among neighbors surrendered to the impersonal complexity of a market economy. And more subtly, concepts of masculinity that honored a man's independence and self-sacrifice lost out to the competitiveness and self-interest of capitalism. The militia's involvement in these transformations has eluded both military and social historians. What role did the militia play in creating and reinforcing the complex processes that created a community out of disparate individuals? How did the militia's activities confirm the stability of long-established social and economic hierarchies while fostering the aspirations of the common man? How significant was its part in the rejection of the elites' political hegemony? How did it influence men's self-identity, particularly their conception of masculinity and appropriate male behavior?

The militia remained an active and influential civil institution throughout the great transitions of the early nineteenth century. Evidence of its influence is found in the public sphere—the arena in which individu-

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als within local communities engage in a rational discourse over issues of broad interest and produce a community identity and collective consciousness. Such social intercourse is rarely receptive to the voice of a single individual expressing personal concern. To compensate for this limitation, individuals join civil institutions that serve as intermediaries between the private and public spheres.[3] Historian John L. Brooke, in his study of voluntary societies, especially fraternal orders in the early republic, argues that such groups "stood at the epicenter of efforts to define and redefine the public arena." The militia, which was found in nearly every town and village and had a far more inclusive membership than the fraternal orders did, functioned in just such a manner. Moreover, given the militia's geographic pervasiveness, widespread participation, and longevity, its impact on local communities and American society as a whole exceeded that of any fraternal institution. In fact, the militia was more influential than any other formal community organization in the transformation of early nineteenth-century American society.[4]

Evidence of the militia's impact falls into three topical categories: the militia and community, the militia and politics, and the militia and masculinity. The creation of a community is a complex and often paradoxical process. In the early nineteenth century, men and women, rich and poor, and white and black shared the public arena at events like Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha July Fourth celebration. Men and women with diverse social, political, racial, and economic backgrounds gathered in the melting pot of a shared, collective community experience. Such events reinforced bonds of commonality as neighbors shared food and drink, ideas and emotions. These public gatherings, like the sides of a ladder joining individual rungs into a unified whole, bound disparate individuals into a singular community. But like a ladder's rungs, each person had his or her place—some higher, some lower—constrained by social hierarchies. Reinforcement of the hierarchical ladders of race, class, and gender characterized Fourth of July celebrations as well as other militia-sponsored community activities. Order and deference were as much a part of militia events as uniforms and muskets.

Despite the popularity of community merrymaking, citizen-soldiers were more than celebration soldiers. Companies turned out to commemorate the deaths of public figures and war dead, to welcome and escort visiting dignitaries, and to mark occasions such as the construction of a

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new railroad or the Louisiana Purchase. Until the formation of professional police forces, they also bore the responsibility for maintaining community order and putting down civil insurrections. Furthermore, citizen-soldiers facilitated economic diversification by providing security for the nascent industries that dotted the frontier and by creating a demand for goods and services in established communities.

Beyond these community activities, the militia was instrumental in the democratization of the electorate, the acceptance of party politics, and the divisiveness of the second party system. From late eighteenth-century politics to the intensity of Jacksonian partisanship, the militia frequently and intentionally stepped into the political arena. In the days before the advent of Whigs and Democrats, an organizational structure that theoretically included every white male of voting age made the enrolled militia a convenient and accessible vehicle for political activism—in other words, a proto-political organization. Membership in a company provided a readily accessible pathway for those who desired to participate in the political process, especially men of lesser economic and social standing, thereby advancing the process of democratization. In the 1830s and 1840s, when the second party system developed into a two-party war, volunteer companies became adjunct political organizations associated with the burgeoning Whig and Democratic parties. By functioning as auxiliaries to the larger partisan organizations, militia units made a further contribution to the democratization of American politics. The spectacle of parades, colorful uniforms, and discharging muskets and cannons helped attract large crowds to rallies and barbecues. In a dramatic way, the crackle and thunder of weapons put the countryside on notice that a partisan storm was brewing. The party faithful and the just plain curious turned out to receive—along with fellowship, food, and drink—a helping of speeches, toasts, and political principles. Militia officers and town elders spoke of political ideologies, the nation's heroes, and the importance of patriotic fervor. Ultimately, while the specific message of each event varied with time, place, speaker, and party, the process drew Americans into an expanding and increasingly democratic and partisan political process.

The militia's influence reached past public ceremonies and political rallies into the private sphere of self-identities. Social historian E. Anthony Rotundo argues that during the first half of the nineteenth century American males faced a confusing and conflicted world as con-

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cepts of masculinity were undergoing significant change. The traditional markers of manhood, founded upon land-owning independence and a commitment to community through self-sacrifice, were withering under the intense competition of the market economy. Aggressiveness and a competitive spirit seemingly overwhelmed self-denial and a sense of responsibility to the commonweal. Rotundo's conclusions are sound but limited. He has little to say about what part, if any, citizen-soldiers had in this social transformation.[5]

The volunteer militia in the post–War of 1812 era in fact played a significant role as its martial ethos and culture maintained traditionally recognized and accepted norms of white male behavior. The relationship between masculinity and a martial culture has been a long-term affair, stretching back to the ancients of Greece and Rome. From time immemorial, men had demonstrated their claims to manhood through warmaking and participation in a military culture. In this respect, men in the early nineteenth century had changed little from their ancient progenitors; they maintained the association between maleness and militarism. As volunteer militia members, they adopted a specific vocabulary, an affinity for uniforms, and a weapons culture that reinforced centuries-old traditions and defined appropriate male behavior. Participation in a volunteer company, especially one that mustered to battle treacherous British or villainous Mexicans, offered a refuge of manhood in a time of social uncertainty. Marching off to defend community and country, citizen-soldiers demonstrated to family, to friends, and perhaps most importantly, to themselves that they were indeed worthy of the legacy inherited from their Revolutionary forefathers.[6]

Historians are just beginning to undertake in-depth examinations of militia organizations to determine their social significance in the early republic. The existing scholarship has focused on battles and military campaigns or has included citizen-soldiers as interesting but irrelevant curiosities in broader analyses of nineteenth-century society.[7] Even important works by historians John Shy, Don Higginbotham, and John Hope Franklin suffer from such limitations. Shy was one of the first historians to examine the militia's contribution to society as something other than an auxiliary to the regular army, arguing that the colonial militia was not the static, homogeneous organization described by earlier historians. His analysis broke new ground, but he remained firmly fixed on the martial exercises of the colonial militia.[8] Higginbotham

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brought to light some of the civil activities citizen-soldiers performed during the Revolutionary War. When permitted to fulfill the roles for which they were intended—as a police force, as partisans to suppress loyalist activity, as participants in a guerrilla war, or as a quasi-government between the fall of the royal administrations and the implementation of the state governments—the militia usually acted competently. By recognizing the militia's proper role during the war and evaluating its performance based on those criteria, Higginbotham maintains that citizen-soldiers made a contribution to the war's outcome that historians had not recognized previously. His analysis, like Shy's, centered on the militia's contribution to the war effort.[9] In *The Militant South,* John Hope Franklin briefly examines the southern militia as a social institution, focusing on the volunteer units that proliferated during the antebellum years. He suggests that they reinforced the social hierarchy, promoted patriotism and community pride, offered a means of social and political advancement, and provided opportunities for social interaction through their muster days and military balls.[10]

The work of these early historians laid a foundation for a deeper analysis of the militia, and a few historians have attempted to expand on these tentative beginnings. Mary Ellen Rowe examines the antebellum militia in the West and describes their social and political contributions to frontier society. George Vourlojianis's study of the Cleveland Grays, a nineteenth-century volunteer militia company, is an entertaining account of the Grays' history, but his greatest contribution is revealing the company's social role in its community. In addition to the standard holiday parades, the Grays appeared at inaugurations and dignitaries' funerals, represented Cleveland at World's Fairs and Mardi Gras celebrations, contributed to the local economy through an extensive building program, and advanced members' political and financial careers. Through these activities the Grays contributed to Cleveland's development for more than eighty years. Similarly, G. Ward Hubbs traces the experiences of the Greensboro Guards, an Alabama volunteer company that organized in the 1830s, fought in the Civil War, and survived into the late nineteenth century. Like the Grays, the Guards served their community both as defenders and as an essential element of its social, political, and economic evolution.[11]

While these works each focus on a single militia company, this book takes a broader perspective through a statewide study of the Kentucky

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militia. Never fitting comfortably into either the North or the South, the Bluegrass State has historically exhibited characteristics of both regions while avoiding the most extreme polemics of its northern and southern neighbors. The state's ambiguous regional personality carries over into its internal identity, where geographic diversity dictates cultural diversity. The mountainous east slopes down to the rolling hills of the central Bluegrass Region, which gives way to the commercial and river culture of the west.

Most significant, however, is the timing of Kentucky's settlement and subsequent growth. Explored and settled in the 1770s and 1780s, the former Virginia county became a state in 1792 and entered the nineteenth century as one of the union's newest members. In the span of one generation, isolated outposts like Fort Boonesborough and Bryant's Station gave way to burgeoning cities: Louisville pulled river trade off the Ohio, and Lexington became known as the Athens of the West, a center of social, political, and economic activity. No other state experienced a more rapid transformation from unforgiving wilderness to relatively comfortable urbanity. This pattern of progress allows the examination of Kentucky's development from a scattering of frontier settlements to a mature network of thriving communities just sixty years later.

The compression of Kentucky's development makes manageable the most significant challenge in undertaking a social study of the militia—the nature of the evidence itself. Rarely mentioned in summaries, abstracts, or annotations, and almost never indexed, evidence of the militia's social activities appears in the most obscure and unexpected of places. The author of a four-column newspaper political tract might make a passing reference to a speech delivered at the local militia company's annual squirrel hunt and barbecue. An entrepreneur's lengthy letter bemoaning his financial trials could conclude with his hopes of collecting a few debts at the upcoming militia muster. Each bit of evidence is the proverbial needle in a haystack, but Kentucky's brief journey from frontier to social maturity creates a manageable haystack.

The focus on a single state also allows the depth of understanding necessary to make a valid assessment of the relationships between citizen-soldiers and their communities.[12] This approach exposes the intimacies of social interaction that must be understood in order to determine the militia's contribution to a nation in transition at a time when most Americans maintained a provincial orientation. Local insti-

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tutions, administered by local citizens, carried out the activities and responsibilities that ensured the continuity of daily life. The average farmer or shopkeeper rarely encountered a state official, let alone a public figure of national office or reputation. Perspectives remained local or regional—rarely, if ever, national. This book establishes the relationship between the militia and the progression of Kentucky society by pressing beyond the traditional boundaries of militia history and revealing the citizen-soldiers' influence on the transformation of frontier settlements into nineteenth-century communities. More than a dysfunctional military reserve, the militia established community identities and social structure, participated in politics, kept the public peace, encouraged economic activity, and defined what it meant to be a man. What follows is not a traditional military history of bullets and battles but the story of citizen-soldiers and their contribution to the transformation of the United States.