

# The Civil War on the North Carolina Home Front

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The Civil War became a war North Carolinians had not expected. Its length, toll in lives, and cost to the people at home quickly overwhelmed hopes for swift victory by the Confederacy and happy independence from the United States. Secession, or separation from the United States, united most white North Carolinians and their government in an effort to provide men for the army and to produce uniforms, weapons, and equipment to fight the Federals. But the war resulted in dwindling stocks of food, clothing, and medicine. And day-to-day survival often cast neighbor against neighbor. North Carolinians, black and white, withstood extreme poverty. White families grieved the deaths of husbands, sons, and friends on distant battlefields. The war changed everyone it touched.

When the Confederacy attacked Fort Sumter at Charleston, South Carolina, on April 12, 1861, North Carolina was still part of the United States. President Abraham Lincoln called for volunteers to suppress the rebellion. Lincoln's call broke the trust North Carolinians had in the Federal government and in the Constitution, and Tar Heels reluctantly agreed to join the new Confederacy.

Once committed to the Confederate cause, North Carolina supported the Confederacy with all its resources. It produced weapons at the Fayetteville arsenal. Its women banded together to raise money and make uniforms for their soldiers in the field. Governor Zebulon B. Vance made great efforts to keep North Carolina fighting for the Confederacy.

White North Carolinians went to war to defend what they considered the greatest society on earth. Based on slavery, their culture depended on strictly ordered distinctions between blacks and whites, men and women, and rich and poor.

The war put great stress on North Carolina's well-ordered society. The Union army invaded and occupied the eastern third of the state. Food became scarce, and the government used all available cloth for uniforms. Combat continually took the lives of Tar Heel soldiers. And a growing peace movement encouraged disloyalty to the Confederacy. In eastern North Carolina, blacks escaped slavery and explored freedom under the shelter of the Federal army. North Carolinians had gone to war to preserve their society, but the war itself destroyed that society. Some lost interest in Confederate victory, most remained loyal to the cause, but all wished for an end to the war.

Sadly, the home front is seldom discussed in favor of stories of dashing leaders and desperate battles. Yet secession and war had unintended results that played out silently, but no less painfully, among the women and children at home.

*\*At the time of this article's publication, Christopher A. Graham worked as an assistant curator at the North Carolina Museum of History.*