
During the Civil War, there was an explosion of correspondence in America, as soldiers wrote about their experiences and family members shared news from home. *North Carolina English, 1861-1865* focuses on letters written by people with limited formal education and demonstrates the possibility of “hearing” the speech of letter-writers through variant spellings, grammatical choices, and idiomatic expressions. At its heart, it is a scholarly work that illuminates the state’s language as it was spoken in the mid-nineteenth century. However, it is also a useful tool for anyone interested in understanding original Civil War materials from the Old North State.

Author Michael Ellis has previously written articles on Appalachian English and Southern dialects. He is also the co-founder of the Corpus of American Civil War Letters (CACWL), a project that gathers and transcribes writings documenting the way American English was spoken in the mid-nineteenth century. *North Carolina English, 1861-1865* is based upon materials in the CACWL, and it is meant to fill the scholarly gap left between Norman Eliason’s *Tarheel Talk* and the *Linguistic Atlas of the Middle and South Atlantic States*. To do this, Ellis consulted over 2300 Civil War-era letters representing geographic and demographic cross-sections of North Carolina. More than half of the letter-writers were Confederate soldiers, but women, non-soldiers, African Americans, and Union soldiers were also included.

The bulk of the work is a glossary, with each entry followed by one or more real examples of the term’s use. Most of the examples are unique, but some are noticeably repeated. A number of the terms are recognizable, although their familiarity is often tempered by spelling, meaning, or grammar variations. Others will be unknown to most modern readers. The book is particularly useful for unfamiliar terms such as “see the elephant,” “candy stew,” “lagnons,” “all right on the goose,” “take a highlow,” and “the owls have caught him.” The cross-references between different spellings and related words/phrases are handy, as are references to applicable introductory sections. Unfortunately, some cross-references are unidirectional and thus of more limited utility.

In addition to the glossary, the book contains introductory sections outlining the project and the letter-writers, a guide to reading Civil War letters, and an overview of vocabulary, grammar, and spelling. Several maps are included, as well as an annotated “Gallery” of letters. These reproductions add context, but would be more useful if the phrases found in the glossary were marked on the accompanying transcriptions. The book’s concluding appendices list the letter-writers alphabetically and provide information about them from the 1860 census; another appendix listing the letter-writers by county of residence would have been a welcome addition. A final bibliography lists all archival and published sources.

Although the Civil War is a perennially popular topic, the recent sesquicentennial has sparked even more interest in the era. *North Carolina English, 1861-1865* is a valuable reference source for students and researchers at academic libraries, but it would also be useful for any public or special library that has Civil War-era manuscript materials written by North Carolinians.

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