



A Union Woman in Civil War Kentucky: The Diary of Frances Peter

Frances Peter

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Frances Peter was one of the eleven children of Dr. Robert Peter, a surgeon for the Union army. The Peter family lived on Gratz Park near downtown Lexington, where nineteen-year-old Frances began recording her impressions of the Civil War. Because of illness, she did not often venture outside her home but was able to gather a remarkable amount of information from friends, neighbors, and newspapers. Peter's candid diary chronicles Kentucky's invasion by Confederates under Gen. Braxton Bragg in 1862, Lexington's month-long occupation by Gen. Edmund Kirby Smith, and changes in attitude among the slave population following the Emancipation Proclamation. As troops from both North and South took turns holding the city, she repeatedly emphasized the rightness of the Union cause and minced no words in expressing her disdain for the hated ""secesh."" Her writings articulate many concerns common to Kentucky Unionists. Though she was an ardent supporter of the war against the Confederacy, Peter also worried that Lincoln's use of authority exceeded his constitutional rights. Her own attitudes towards blacks were ambiguous, as was the case with many people in that time. Peter's descriptions of daily events in an occupied city provide valuable insights and a unique feminine perspective on an underappreciated aspect of the war. Until her death by epileptic seizure in August 1864, Peter conscientiously recorded the position and deportment of both Union and Confederate soldiers, incidents at the military hospitals, and stories from the countryside. Her account of a torn and divided region is a window to the war through the gaze of a young woman of intelligence and substance.

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