

“It Is Useless to Conceal the Truth Any Longer”: Desertion of Virginia Soldiers
From the Confederate Army

Jack Lawrence Atkins

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James I. Robertson, Jr., Chair

William C. Davis

Daniel B. Thorp

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(Abstract)

This study of Virginia desertion differs from other desertion studies in several respects. The statistical analysis of the patterns of desertion within the army is one of the most unique characteristics of this study. Several other scholars have attempted to track desertion across the Confederacy, but limited sources restricted their studies. By compiling data from compiled service records, this thesis attempts a comprehensive study of all Virginia's Confederate soldiers.

The first chapter examines the patterns of desertion both across the state and in Virginia's infantry, cavalry, and artillery regiments. This chapter has three specific aims. First, calculates how many soldiers deserted from Virginia's Confederate units during the Civil War. Uncovering when these men left the army, and the parts the state from which they hailed, will lay the foundation for a careful evaluation of what caused desertion and its consequences for the army.

The second chapter examines the causes of desertion among Virginia troops. No single reason was responsible for such desertion. Owing to the risks deserting carried, when a soldier left the army he did so for varied and intensely personal reasons. This chapter examines how conscription, concerns about home and family, morale and disaffection, and an ineffective policy for punishment, all combined to increase desertion from Virginia units.

The conclusions look at the effects of desertion on the Confederate military's ability to wage an effective war against the Union and how desertion affected the civilians behind the lines. Obviously, desertion drained the army of manpower it could not afford to lose. In what other ways did its effects manifest themselves? Central to this aspect of the thesis will be the opinions of Confederate military leaders. What impact did they believe desertion was having on the army? By answering these questions, we can begin to learn desertion's impact on the Confederacy.