

I. INTRODUCTION

Though death and injuries took many soldiers away from their respective armies during the Civil War, others made the choice to leave their ranks through desertion. During the Civil War, desertion was a prevalent occurrence in both Confederate and Union forces, with Weitz (2012) reporting an estimated one in ten Union desertions and one in nine Confederate desertions throughout the Civil War. Though these percentages are similar, Confederate desertion proved to be a strain on the already lesser population of Confederate soldiers. For reference, according to the National Park Service (2021), the Union Army enlisted a total of 2,672,341 individuals into their armed forces whereas the Confederate Army's estimated total enlistment ranges from 750,00 to 1,227,890 individuals.

While military desertion was widespread across the entire Confederate States of America (CSA), Mississippi has an individualized history of desertion that contributes to the overall understanding of Confederate deserters. Mississippi was home to one of the most famous deserters, Newton Knight, who led a resistance group against the Confederacy called the Knight Company. Though this example has garnered a lot of attention and study, there were many different realities for deserters in Mississippi. The motives, actions, and treatment of deserters in this Deep South state varied greatly and cannot be adequately described without recognizing these complexities.

Problem Statement

Confederate Military deserters in Mississippi have often been looked at through the study of individuals like Newton Knight and his Knight Company. Likewise, deserters are often looked at in the context of resistance. However, like the broader topics of the Civil War and Reconstruction Era, the subject of deserters in Mississippi is dynamic and contains various factors that contribute to its complexities. While there are many historians and other academics who have conducted research on deserters, these complexities leave many questions left to be answered about the causes, actions, and treatment of individuals who decided to leave Confederate ranks during the Civil War.

This research seeks to provide insight into desertion of Confederate troops within Mississippi by presenting information on the causes and actions of deserters as well as the responses to desertion of Confederate troops within Mississippi by analyzing a variety of letters from Civil War and Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi (CWRGM). By adding to what is already known about Confederate military deserters in Mississippi, this group of people can be better and more comprehensively understood.

Research Questions

- R1. What were the reasons for desertion of Confederate soldiers during the Civil War in Mississippi?
- R2. What did deserters in Mississippi do after leaving Confederate troops?
- R3. What actions were and were not taken by authorities to punish deserters from Confederate troops in Mississippi?

Definitions

Cambridge Dictionary provides the following definitions for the terms below:

The Deep South

The part of the U.S. that is farthest to the south and east, including Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South and North Carolina.

Deserters

A person who leaves the armed forces without permission and with no intention of returning.

Amnesty

A decision made by government officials to free a prisoner, a fixed period of time during which people are not punished for committing a particular crime, or a decision by a government to forgive people who have committed particular illegal acts or crimes, and not to punish them.

Pardon

An act of mercy by a person in authority toward someone who has committed a crime, esp. by reducing a punishment.

CWRGM provides the following definition for the term below:

Militia

A militia is a military unit made up of civilians within a community who could be called up by local (often state) officials to serve temporary military purposes. Militias were separate from regular, or permanent, armies. Because they conducted training only periodically, and provided active military service for short periods of time, militias cost less than regular armies; and because they were manned by local residents, militias were frequently seen as less threatening to early American communities than national military units comprised of strange men born in other counties or states. When Mississippi seceded in 1861, enthusiasm for military service swept across the state. Volunteers filled the ranks of old militia units or created new companies within their communities, eager to repulse any federal attempt to coerce secessionists

back into the Union. They also took proactive efforts, securing key positions along the Gulf Coast, including reinforcing other Southern soldiers at Pensacola and Fort Pickens in Florida. Over the next few months, as the Confederate government requested more volunteers, thousands of Mississippians and entire volunteer companies from the state transferred to Confederate service and were sent north, out of state. The units that remained within Mississippi for state defense were left in a convoluted military structure, some considered state reserves (a more formal military force for state defense) and some considered state militia (the more traditional units of citizen-soldiers called up for local, emergency use). The distinctions were not well established, and during the war Mississippians describing state units not within the Confederate army used a variety of terms—such as militia, home guard, state troops—almost interchangeably.

Limitations of the Study

The following limitations of this research are acknowledged:

1. The focus of this research was limited to a subset of letters from the CWRGM database.
2. Letters were only sent by literate people or people writing on behalf of people who were illiterate.
3. Not every issue was relayed to the governor in a letter. Therefore, perspectives are left out.
4. The letters are limited to those sent and received by the governor, narrowing the scope of the information being analyzed.
5. Not every letter sent to the governor was responded to, leaving some gaps in knowledge about the actions or lack thereof following the initial letters.

Assumptions

The following assumptions were made while conducting this research:

1. It is assumed that all of the letters in the CWRGM database were read by the recipient stated within the letter.
2. It is assumed that all of the CWRGM letters were transcribed and compiled accurately.
3. It is assumed that all letters to the governors were preserved.
4. It is assumed that all letters are attributed accurately to the correct author of the letter.
5. It is assumed that all records of individuals, goods, financials, etc. are accurate.

Importance of the Study

By looking at CWRGM letters from government officials, military personnel, and other individuals, this research provides an in-depth analysis of the causes, actions, and treatments of deserters of Confederate troops in Mississippi. This study contributes to broader studies of the Civil War and Reconstruction Era by looking at an under-researched group of people that both greatly affected the outcomes of the Civil War and were greatly affected by it.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a long list of historians and other academics who have contributed to the study of Confederate desertion in the Civil War, often looking at desertion in examinations of desertion as a contributing factor to the downfall of the Confederacy. Though many of these sources contain mentions of Mississippi, desertion in the state is mostly looked at through the lens of The Free State of Jones. North Carolina, however, has been studied in-depth in relation to the topic of desertion. This literature review provides a brief look at the wide variety of scholarly sources that

use up-to-date data to analyze desertion in the Confederacy, desertion as it has been studied in North and South Carolina, and desertion as it has been looked at through The Free State of Jones.

Desertion in the Confederacy Literature

Weitz (2005) gathers from a wide variety of primary and secondary sources to give a detailed description of how desertion was detrimental to the Confederate States of America. Within his analysis of how desertion spread in various states, Mississippi is looked at through various letters and logs, some of which being to Mississippi Governor John J. Pettus (Weitz, 2005, 64-67). Though letters to Governor Pettus were analyzed, Weitz states, “No single letter coming into Pettus’s office in the second half of 1862 stands out. Collectively they show a state slipping into despair punctuated by lawlessness” (66). This chaos and lawlessness, seen through looking at letters to Governor Pettus as a whole, is what Weitz (2005) says both were caused and was the cause of desertion (66). This broad look at the 1862 letters to the Mississippi’s governor provides insights to what was concerning Mississippians at the time desertions started but do not analyze letters specific to desertion to draw its conclusions. Ultimately, Weitz (2005) determined that Confederate desertion was the result of Confederate soldiers coming to the point where they no longer trusted their government with what they cared about most, protecting their home and family (293). This conclusion is derived from analysis that includes a variety of letters and records, including some from the Governor of Mississippi. However, it utilizes them as examples and to develop a general sense of the sentiments in Mississippi rather than conducting a full study on letters pertaining to desertion from the collections of Governors in Mississippi.

Literature on Desertion in North Carolina

Using information from 3,126 men from North Carolina who fought on the side of the Confederacy during the U.S. Civil war, Bearman (1991) examines the causes of Confederate desertion. Of the 3,126 men, Bearman (1991) looked at the 2,279 men whose age and county of birth or residence were reported when enlisted to evaluate individual-level theories of desertion. To evaluate the proposed hypothesis, the 90% of the service data for all soldiers serving in companies A or B of the 39th Regiment that was linked to 1860 census data were analyzed but not included in the article's sample analysis. Based on the research conducted, Bearman (1991) states that the cause for desertion was because men's Southern identities were lost due to the rise of localism within Confederate forces (321). Rather than structural and ideological differences, such as class or status, Bearman (1991) posits that the Confederacy's downfall came from old localisms becoming the central basis for identity. Furthermore, Bearman (1991) states, "The South lost the war largely because soldiers replaced their newfound Southern identity with their old local identity and thereby discovered that they had no reason to fight." By showing a lack of correlation between desertion and all other variables like age, dependents, slave ownership and economic status, regional differences become the only variable that correlates to desertion rates (327-335). The study also determined that companies that had more variation in county of origin faced more desertions in the earlier part of the war whereas companies with more people from the same county faced more desertion in the later part of the war. Overall, this study provides a thorough look at the causes of desertion in North Carolina, but by only looking at census data, it may fail to see other determining factors for desertion that are not easily findable through census data. By only focusing on the most prevalent correlations, it also misses the stories of people that are outliers to the majority.

Literature on the Free State of Jones

Victoria E. Bynum is a historian that wrote *The Free State of Jones*, the book that served as source material for the 2016 film of the same name that popularized the story of Newton Knight. Bynum (2013) takes the varied versions of the story of Jones County, Miss. native Newton Knight and compares them with previous research from other historians and her own 2001 study to provide clarifications to the many myths and legends told about one of Mississippi's most well-recognized deserters. The known fact that the rest of Bynum's research is based on is, "Although the story of Jones County is steeped in myth and clouded by conjecture, there is no doubt that its citizens fought an internal civil war, one in which the Knight Company played a central role" (28). Knight, a farmer who owned no slaves that volunteered and then deserted from the Confederate Army, is attributed to killing Major Amos McLemore, who was on assignment with his soldiers to arrest deserters at the time of his death. The Knight Company was then formed, "vowing to fight against the Confederacy and, as they later claimed in depositions, to support the United States Government," and Newton Knight was elected as the captain (Bynum 2013, 27-28). Bynum states kinship as one of the factors in this uprising, pointing out that most of the men involved were related to Knight or his first or second lieutenants. Civil War events like the passage of the Twenty-Negro Law and the siege of Vicksburg, which Knight avoided by deserting at Snyder's Bluff, are stated as accelerators of desertion among men from Jones County (29). Examples of literature about Knight from 1886 to this paper's publication in 2013 are used to provide context into the many ways his story has been told and showcase how other historians have attempted to correct the portrayal of *The Free State of Jones*. Bynum concludes that Knight favored class revolution rather than the Union, but his life is worth studying because of the insights it provides about southern class and race relations and how they were impacted by the Civil War (36). Though this study tells a thorough

story of one band of deserters and its leader by drawing on records, census data, and recorded memories, it does not attempt to tell the larger story of desertion in Mississippi.

III. METHODOLOGIES

This study is a historical analysis that covers causes of desertion, actions of deserters, and treatment of deserters in Mississippi's Confederate troops. To conduct this study, a subset of letters pulled by their subject tags from the CWRG database was provided by the Mapping Freedom NSF-REU program. To find letters pertaining to deserters, the subject tags "Military Deserters" and "Military Procedures and Events--military desertion" were used to find letters with mentions of desertion. Of the subset of letters, 135 letters were tagged to indicate a mention of desertion. These letters were then compiled and analyzed for relevancy. 50 Letters were excluded for being too damaged or ambiguous to properly analyze, explicitly speculative, only containing hypothetical mentions of desertion, or defining desertion incorrectly. Letters that contained mentions of desertion, actions of deserters, how deserters were being dealt with, or all of the above were selected for further analysis.

After checking for relevancy and usefulness, 62 of the remaining letters contained mentions of causes of desertion, actions of deserters, and treatment of deserters by authorities in Mississippi and were chosen for categorization to determine the predominant themes within the letters. Then, locations were gathered from the 70 letters that indicated where deserters lived in Mississippi either by direct mention or where their military regiment originated. These locations were compiled with census data of slave populations and farmland values. Using Quantum Geographic Information System (QGIS), these sets of data were mapped to determine the

presence or absence of a correlation. Research was conducted from May 27, 2025, through July 17, 2025.

IV. RESULTS

Of the 62 letters chosen for categorization, 15 of the letters contained causes of desertion, 33 letters contained actions of deserters, and 27 letters contained the punishments given by authorities for desertion. Some letters fell into multiple categories because they contained some combination of causes of desertion, actions of deserters, and punishments of deserters. These letters were then further analyzed and categorized to provide the following results.

R1. What were the reasons for desertion of Confederate soldiers during the Civil War in Mississippi?

The 15 letters mentioning causes of desertion were placed into one or more of seven categories based on the causations described within the letters. Some letters were counted as more than one category due to the letter mentioning more than one cause of desertion. Table 1 shows the causes of desertion and the number of letters containing mentions of those causes.

Table 1: Causations for Desertion stated in CWRGM Letters

Causes for Desertion Described in Letters:	Number of Letters Mentioning stated Cause of Desertion
Dissatisfaction with Authority	4
Lack of Communication/Confusion regarding Expectations	3

Concern for family	3
Weakness of Authority/Repercussions	2
Lack of pay	2
Poor Conditions	1
Refusal to hunt deserters	1

As the above table shows, dissatisfaction with authority was the cause of desertion mentioned in the highest number of letters. Furthermore, all of the categories could be more broadly attributed as issues with how local, governmental, and military authorities were handling or failing to handle situations during wartime. Despite this ability to generalize all of the causations into a broader category of problems with authority, each cause is distinct, and no singular cause is mentioned in the majority of the 15 letters.

To further analyze possible causes of desertion, 109 locations were pulled from the 85 letters that indicated where deserters were from. These locations were then placed on a map according to their respective counties and overlaid with 1860 census data of the average property value per county and the slave population per county. Upon analyzing this data, no direct correlation could be found between where deserters were indicated being from and counties with higher or lower property value. Similarly, no direct correlation could be found between where deserters were indicated to be from and counties with high or low slave populations. Instead, the map shows

that the homes of deserters were scattered across Mississippi regardless of a county's property value or slave population.

Instead of trying to find one common reason for desertion like the study of Confederate desertion in North Carolina conducted by Bearman (1999), this study presents the diversity of motives for desertion in Mississippi. As evidenced by the variety of causes, desertion cannot effectively or accurately be categorized by singular causation. Furthermore, only focusing on the most prevalent causes leaves out several intriguing reasons for desertion contained within the letters of the CWRGM database. The analysis of census data and the location of letters that indicate where deserters are from further shows that desertion was widespread and affected individuals in various situations rather than a particular demographic. Overall, the letters used in this research and the locations where deserters were from show that there were a variety of causes, none of which can be used to categorize desertion, as a whole, for Confederate desertion in Mississippi during the Civil War

R2. What did deserters in Mississippi do after leaving Confederate troops?

To further explore the realities of deserters in Mississippi, the 33 letters mentioning the actions of deserters were placed into one or more categories based on the actions of deserters mentioned in them. Some letters were counted as more than one category due to the letter mentioning multiple actions taken by deserters. Table 2 shows the actions of deserters and the number of letters containing mentions of those actions.

Table 2: Actions of Deserters in CWRGM Letters

Actions of Deserters Described in Letters	Number of Letters Mentioning Stated Actions
Evading Authorities	15

Resisting/Acting Against Authorities	9
Theft	9
Raids/Attacks on Citizens	6
Destruction of Property	5
Murder	5
Threatening/Intimidation	5
Voting	2
Receiving Aid from Union Forces	2

Table 2 shows that evading authorities was the action of deserters mentioned in the highest number of letters. Being that 15 of the 33 letters mentioned evading authorities, it can be deduced that evading authorities was the most common action of deserters in Mississippi. Furthermore, excluding voting and receiving aid from Union forces, all of the actions stated within the letters harmed the Confederate forces in Mississippi in various ways.

Based on my analysis of the letters that contained mentions of actions of deserters, I deduced that deserters caused issues for Confederates in Mississippi, whether by direct or indirect means. Though receiving aid from Union forces cannot be directly correlated with direct harm or requiring the use of resources, it indicates that deserters were receiving help from

outside of the Confederacy. Voting, however, is a direct contrast to the harmful and evasive activities present in the majority of the letters. Theft, resisting and acting against authorities, raids and attacks on citizens, destruction of property, and murder all caused direct harm to different groups of people in Mississippi. These actions also caused indirect harm to Confederate forces and local authorities due to the utilization of resources and time that these actions necessitated. Likewise, though evading authorities, and threatening and intimidation did not cause direct harm, these actions still necessitated the use of time and resources from local and military authorities.

R3. What actions were and were not taken by authorities to punish deserters from Confederate troops in Mississippi?

The 27 letters containing descriptions of punishments given by authorities for desertion were categorized based on the descriptions provided within the letters. Some letters were counted as more than one description of punishment due to some letters containing multiple descriptions of punishment. Table 3 shows the descriptions of punishments and the number of letters containing those descriptions.

Table 3: Descriptions of Punishment for Desertion in CWRGM Letters

Description of Punishment Given by Authorities	Number of Letters mentioning stated Description of Treatment
Confinement/Arrest	10
Inadequate	7
No Punishment/Refusal to Punish	6

Returned to their respective Confederate Forces	4
Refusal of Pay	1
Execution	1

As Table 3 shows, there were a variety of ways that Confederate desertion was punished in Mississippi, with confinement and arrest being mentioned in the highest number of letters. These punishments ranged in severity, with one letter mentioning refusal of pay as the consequence of desertion and one mentioning execution. However, seven letters described the punishment of deserters as inadequate, and six stated that there was no punishment for desertion or refusal to punish deserters.

Overall, these letters point to a lack of consistency in Mississippi's punishment of Civil War deserters. Furthermore, when the seven letters describing punishment as inadequate are compiled with the six letters indicating no punishment or a refusal to punish, that puts roughly half of the letters mentioning punishment stating that punishment for deserters in Mississippi was either ineffective or nonexistent. There is also a loose correlation that can be made between lack of punishment and the prevalence of desertion in Mississippi. As a whole, the 27 letters that contain mentions of punishments for deserters point to an overall disunity and ineffectiveness of Mississippi's handling of Confederate desertion.

V. CONCLUSION

To summarize, the results in this paper showcase that Confederate desertion in Mississippi was not a one-size-fits-all occurrence. Desertion, instead, had various causes that were very distinct

from each other. The actions of deserters also varied, though they showcased how desertion was affecting Mississippi's ability to focus on war efforts. Similarly, punishment for desertion in Mississippi varied, but it was often described as either inadequate or not present enough to deter desertion.

This study provides a different perspective than many studies on desertion because it did not aim to find one direct cause for desertion in Confederate forces. Instead, it sought to showcase the varying stories of desertion in Mississippi. Because of this and the lack of research on desertion in Mississippi, this study is difficult to compare to others. However, if analyzed in a different way, the data within this study could add to the data in previous research on Confederate desertion and desertion in other states.

Due to time and resource constraints, this research, though valuable, could benefit from further studies. It would be beneficial to look at more letters in different archives that mention deserters and the location of their homes. It could also be beneficial to look at military records to determine if there are any demographic connections. Further analyzing the letters based on the years they were sent and policies passed could provide further insights into the story of deserters within Mississippi. Furthermore, this research could be compiled with research on other states to contribute to the overall understanding of desertion.

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