



North Carolina English, 1861-1865: A Guide and Glossary

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In *North Carolina English, 1861–1865*, Michael E. Ellis offers an *Oxford English Dictionary*–like take on regional language based on more than two thousand letters and diaries composed by North Carolinians during the Civil War. These documents are part of a larger project, the Corpus of American Civil War Letters (CACWL), aimed at locating, photographing, and transcribing letters written during the period from all parts of the country. With little formal education, the correspondents were men and women who wrote “by ear,” often reproducing their spoken language through unconventional spellings and grammatical forms, as well as regional or archaic words and usages.

The core of the book is an alphabetically arranged glossary of words and expressions characteristic of mid–nineteenth century North Carolina, each containing excerpts from the letters themselves to illustrate meaning and usage. While the majority of the writers were Confederate soldiers and their family members, the collection also includes letters from slaves, former slaves, and African Americans from North Carolina serving in the Union Army. The soldiers’ letters rarely contain details about battles, except to list the names of relatives or neighbors among the killed or wounded. After a battle, a soldier might simply write, “the Like of ded men an horses I never saw before” or “we hav lost a heep of men and kild a heep of yankeys.” As Joel Howard of Lincoln County wrote home in June 1863, “I have bin in the ware and Saw the ware and heard tell of the ware till I have got tired of it. if I Could get clear of this ware I neve[r] want to Read of A nother.”

Food is perhaps the most common topic, followed by illness. Numerous terms relate to farming, clothing, religion, and the effects of the war itself, as well as entries for expressions that have long since disappeared from American English: *in the gants*, *on the goose*, and *up the spout*.

In addition to the glossary, Ellis offers an extensive overview of North Carolina English of the period, delves into the social background of the letter writers, and provides invaluable guidance to the ways in which Civil War letters should be read. A unique window into a largely neglected corner of our extraordinarily rich and regionally distinct language, this volume will prove an indispensable reference for scholars and students seeking to reconstruct the world of the common Civil War soldier.

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