

[Author Interview--Roseann Bacha-Garza \(Editor\), Christopher L. Miller \(Editor\), Russell K. Skowronek \(Editor\) \(The Civil War on the Rio Grande, 1846-1876\) 2/2](#)

Discussion published by Patrick Kelly on Thursday, May 9, 2019

Today we continue the interview with the editors of *The Civil War on the Rio Grande*, Roseann Bacha-Garza (Editor), Christopher L. Miller (Editor), Russell K. Skowronek.

Does the Civil War on the Rio Grande fit into some of the scholarship of the Civil War in the West? I'm thinking especially of the Kelman book on the Sand Creek Massacre, and the Masich book that examines the Civil War in Arizona and New Mexico.

*RBG, CLM, RKS: Of course, the key difference between this study and those of Kelman and Masich is that neither of those studies touch upon Texas at all. That said, however, there are rhymes within these works that can be appreciated. As Masich notes, the story of the Civil War in the greater Southwest was about a much more complex set of social, racial, and institutional relationships than most standard Civil War treatments deal with. This was certainly the case in the Texas borderland, as this volume makes clear. And like Kelman's treatment of the Sand Creek "Massacre," ours is an effort, though not as focused as Kelman's, to reflect on how memorialization and public memory work. This is especially true of our Civil War Trail work, though it is addressed in this volume as well. More centrally, we see our effort to be more in line with Elliott West's reconceptualization in *The Last Indian War*, placing the Civil War as a much more extensive chronological and geographical process than traditional accounts consider. Like his "Greater Reconstruction," we see the war in Texas as part of the story of continental empire building that would help to set the contours of the modern United States. It is only with the Civil War, and especially with the establishment of the military posts manned by the USCT, that the Rio Grande became meaningful as a border. The story of the Civil War in the Rio Grande Valley is thus the first chapter in the drama over "border security" which is currently haunting the nation.*

The complex mix of races and ethnicities that we find in the Rio Grande during the three decades between 1846 and 1876 is key to this story. What would you point to as the key historical features of this fascinating mix of peoples?

RBG, CLM, RKS: Race and ethnicity played an important and pivotal role with regard to community development along the Rio Grande during the three decades between 1846-1876. The population in this region had evolved for one hundred years prior with the mixture of white European Spaniards and regional indigenous cultures, thus

the identity of the borderland population emerged; first as Spanish colonial settlers, then as Mexican Texans or Tejanos. Before and after the international border was established between the US and Mexico in 1848, more settlers arrived in this region from various European countries and East Coast states to establish themselves as businessmen and entrepreneurs and were categorized as "Anglos". Later, in the 1850s mixed-race families consisting of white husbands, black wives who were emancipated slaves, and their mulatto offspring added another dimension to the population mix. They ventured to the newly established international border, not only from other parts of Texas but from states as far away as Alabama, searching of a safe place to raise their families without prejudice. They found an area that not only facilitated quick river crossings into Mexico, but opportunities to prosper, live and worship in peace. These families, known as the Webbers, Jacksons, Rutledges, Singleterrys, etc., purchased land, built ranching communities, served as elected officials in Hidalgo County political structure, and completely acculturated into the Hispanic culture community found along the international border. Several of these mixed-race enclave residents such as Abraham Rutledge, Jasper Bidby and Samuel Singleterry mustered in to the Confederacy, we believe to keep an eye on Confederate activity, protect their land and possessions and make sure their emancipated slaves were safe from ambitious slave catchers. With the arrival of these black and mulatto folks, the addition new racial structure of future generations of Rio Grande Valley citizens surfaced. However, the identity that the descendants of these families hold firm to is that they are Hispanic, or Mexican Americans, and often come from families where Spanish is still the first language spoken at home.

Can you talk briefly about the partnership behind Rio Grande Valley Civil War Trail and how it influenced the creation of this fine book of essays. Could this association offer a model for other academic institutions?

RBG, CLM, RKS: Let us address the last of these questions first. Absolutely! The CHAPS (Community Historical Archaeology Project with Schools) Program at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley is predicated on three fundamental principles which we believe could (and should) be at the heart of all academic institutions: broad interdisciplinary collaboration, focus on place as a comprehensive field of study, and emphasis on dissemination to both the scholarly and the general public.

The Rio Grande Valley Civil War Trail was born during the sesquicentennial observation of the American Civil War. It was noted that while States from Pennsylvania and Maryland to Missouri and south had their own "Civil War trails" Texas did not. Given its mission and its operating principles, the CHAPS Program was

a natural place for such an effort to start.

When creating the "Trail" scholars (some local) on various aspects of the trail were invited by the CHAPS team to participate. These include local scholars: Garza and Murphy from Palo Alto Battlefield National Historic Park who worked on that site and Palmito Ranch; Mary Margaret McAllen (Witte Museum and UT San Antonio) who has written on the McAllen family and Maximillian; Karen and Thomas Fort, longtime museum curators and historians of nineteenth century South Texas provided an intimate picture of life during the "Cotton Times;" Irving Levinson, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) historian of 19th century Mexico; Roseann Bacha-Garza UTRGV historian and CHAPS Program team member who studied the mixed race families; Christopher Miller UTRGV historian and CHAPS Program team member who contextualized the region's place in history from 1750-1850; Russell Skowronek, UTRGV anthropologist/archaeologist and historian, and Program team member who discussed how varied lines of enquiry provide a more nuanced picture of the past; and Jerry Thompson from Texas A&M International in Laredo, the leading scholar of the Civil War in Texas and the greater southwest. Completing the scholarly team were W. Stephen McBride (KY), and James Leiker (Kansas) who have studied the African-American troops who served in the Rio Grande region.

We worked with museum curators from the 200 miles spanning Laredo to Brownsville. Slowly, in cooperation with the TXDOT we are marking and so branding the trail with highway signs. Everyone participated by sharing information which in-turn was used to create a bi-lingual trail guide, bi-lingual podcasts, bi-lingual web page; and most recently a bi-lingual traveling exhibit titled, "War and Peace on the Rio Grande." This is a team effort and the results have been fabulous. The exhibit will travel from Edinburg, Texas (UTRGV campus) to the Port Isabel Museum, Zapata County Historical Museum, Brownsville (UTRGV campus), Laredo (Webb County Historical Society), and Texas A&M International (Laredo) campus between now and June of 2020. Other venues are pending.

In addition to the traveling exhibit we have developed 56 lesson plans for 4th, 7th, 8th, and 11th grade AP; traveling trunks; two eight-minute films ("The Cotton Times," and "A Letter from Roma, African-American Troops on the Rio Grande"); an hour-long documentary on the mixed race families, "Just a Ferry Ride to Freedom." This along with the two Texas A&M Press books and an in-house popular publication (see below). Thus we have developed a complete package.

Thank you for taking the time to talk with us about your book.

Authors's Suggested Readings

[The Civil War on the Rio Grande, 1846-1876](#)

[Blue and Gray on the Border: The Rio Grande Valley Civil War Trail](#)

[The Civil War Era and the Lower Rio Grande Valley: A Brief History](#)

[Rio Grande Valley Civil War Trail: 56 Lesson Plans](#)