Kentucky Confederates: Secession, Civil War, and the Jackson Purchase
By Berry Craig

Kentucky Confederates: Secession, Civil War and the Jackson Purchase, is a masterpiece which chronicles the history of a region of Kentucky that has received little or no attention by historians. Berry Craig has paid significant attention to hitherto unpublished sources, and the result is a book which brings to light people and events unknown to most students of the Civil War. It is an important book because it discusses military operations in the Jackson Purchase that have long been regarded as the most significant strategic movements in the western theatre of the war. Craig’s first-ever description of the region where those movements took place makes them all the more interesting and understandable.

Craig begins with a much-needed history of the Jackson Purchase itself; he recounts its settlement and the 1818 purchase of the land bounded by the Ohio, Tennessee, and Mississippi Rivers. The stories of some of the early settlers are wonderful; the settling and naming of Paducah by William Clark is rich. The history of the political development of the Purchase is absorbing. Craig remarks in summation that the region has “always gone its own way”— politically, it split with the Commonwealth’s most famous and popular son, Henry Clay, preferring Andrew Jackson, Clay’s archenemy. Indeed, the Purchase was the “South Carolina of Kentucky.”

Craig’s discussion of the expansion of slavery in the Purchase is absorbing, as is his discussion of the presidential election of 1860 in the region. Governor Beriah Magoffin’s call for a special session of the state legislature in the winter and spring of 1861 has rarely been discussed. Craig’s treatment far exceeds in detail E. Merton Coulter’s discussion in his Civil War and Readjustment in Kentucky (1926).

Craig’s discussion of the Mayfield Convention should also be of great interest to scholars: the story is most obscure, and Craig’s treatment, like virtually all of his work, is new and very welcome. Craig may be the first historian to discuss the Mayfield Convention’s debates over whether the Purchase should secede from Kentucky and join the Confederacy. Craig also unearths the early discussions among Purchase residents of the arming of Columbus, and the attention those individuals paid to the growing Union military presence at Cairo, Illinois.

Craig’s discussion of Columbus sheds new light on General Leonidas Polk’s fateful decision to move his department from west Tennessee to that river town. As Union commanders sought their chance to seize Colum-
bus, so did General Polk. But what is interesting about Craig’s discussion is this perspective on the military situation in the Jackson Purchase before Polk’s move. The Purchase was completely pro-Confederate; Union capture was inevitable if Polk did not act. Craig also provides a new view of camp life at Columbus as well as the most complete description of the defenses at Columbus that I have ever read.

Craig recounts General Nathan Bedford Forrest’s two sorties into Kentucky, both of which ended besieging Paducah, and then ends his fine work by discussing the war’s conclusion and the fascinating “repatriation” of former Confederates. In the Purchase, prominent Confederate veterans became elected public officials in great number, an experience realized throughout the once pro-Union Commonwealth after the war ended.

Craig masterfully uses original sources throughout. Most of the manuscript is based upon period newspapers from the Jackson Purchase towns—the Columbus Crescent, Paducah Herald, Hickman Courier and the Mayfield Southern Yeoman—as well as others in Kentucky. He also uses extant diaries and memoirs, and relies upon journals of the Kentucky House and Senate to discuss the proceedings of the State Legislature. His narrative is authoritative.

Berry Craig’s manuscript is a most significant contribution to scholarship in the field of Civil War history. It is the first major work on the Civil War history of the Jackson Purchase, a distinctive region of Kentucky. Craig’s presentation is effective, and he employs a very good writing style. The manuscript has a wonderful pace and flow. Kentucky Confederates: Secession, Civil War and the Jackson Purchase will stand as the definitive work on his subject for many years.

KENT MASTERSON BROWN is a lawyer and Civil War scholar from Lexington, Kentucky. He is the author of six books on the Civil War, including Retreat from Gettysburg: Lee, Logistics and the Pennsylvania Campaign (2005). Mr. Brown is also a documentary film maker whose company, Witnessing History, LLC, has produced nine documentary films on various aspects of American and Kentucky history.