

# Commentary... Rebelling against the rebellion

By Jim Cornelius  
News Editor

The Blue and the Gray. North versus South.

The American Civil War is usually portrayed as a regional conflict pitting two halves of the country against each other in a bloody conflict over slavery and states' rights. The Southern states seceded from the Union to protect and assert their sovereignty, led by a slave-owning class determined to protect the cotton economy. They formed the Confederate States of America and defied the government of Abraham Lincoln, who sought to forcibly keep the states in the Union.

That's the picture most people have of the Civil War or the War Between the States. Less well-known is the fact that several regions in the South essentially seceded from the Confederacy.

"Free State of Jones," now playing at Sisters Movie House, depicts one such rebellion against the rebellion, in Jones County, Mississippi. It was led by a fierce, shotgun-wielding backwoods badass named Newton Knight (played by Matthew McConaughey). As a story in *Smithsonian Magazine* recounts, "He was a nightmarish opponent in a

backwoods wrestling match, and one of the great unsung guerrilla fighters in American history. So many men tried so hard to kill him that perhaps his most remarkable achievement was to reach old age."

Knight had nine children by his wife, Serena, before they separated — then five more with his grandfather's former slave, Rachel, who lived afterward as his common-law wife. Knight acknowledged his mixed-race children. The whole family, including the ex-wife, lived in separate houses on his 160-acre farm in south-central Mississippi.

Knight wasn't exactly a typical figure, but the Jones County uprising he led against state and Confederate authorities was not an exceptional occurrence. Mountainous and/or backwoods regions of many Confederate states — where King Cotton never held sway — saw high levels of Unionist sentiment. East Tennessee, northern Arkansas, northern Alabama, the Hill Country of Texas, were hotbeds of Unionism that provided soldiers and scouts for the U.S. army and sometimes flared into small-scale but very nasty guerrilla warfare.

And, of course, West Virginia broke off from the

Old Dominion and became a new state that exists today.

(There were also pockets of strong pro-Confederate sentiment in Northern territories; another tale for another time.)

Few of the Southern backwoods hill-country folk owned slaves and they saw no profit in fighting on behalf of low-country slaveowners in a "rich man's war and a poor man's fight." Some who did enlist to fight for the Confederacy quickly became disillusioned and deserted.

When the Confederacy introduced conscription and started requisitioning foodstuffs and livestock, well, that hardened sentiment considerably.

Confederate authorities were hard-pressed to deal with flaring insurrections deep within their own territory. Their resources were stretched trying to stave off the invasion of Union armies. Some counties and regions became virtual no-go zones.

And, as is the nature with guerrilla warfare, conflict often degenerated into banditry, with rival armed gangs sparring with each other and looting and robbing non-combatant civilians.

There was nothing gentlemanly about this aspect of the

Civil War.

The anti-Confederate insurrections across the South were written out of history in the aftermath of the war and Reconstruction. The Lost Cause myth had no room for such tales. The modern Civil Rights movement of the 1960s created tremendous anxiety and backlash across the South and hardened racial attitudes even in areas that had defied the Old South's stand.

Ironically, the Confederate Battle Flag became a frequent sight in many of the areas that rejected the Confederacy in the 1860s.

For decades, Newton Knight was regarded with scorn in his own home county — because he was a race-mixer. But that is swiftly changing.

The *Smithsonian Magazine* quotes Jones County native and professor Wyatt Moulds:

"Blacks and whites date each other in high school now,



PHOTO PUBLIC DOMAIN

Newton Knight.

and they don't think it's a big deal. That's a huge change. Some of the young guys are really identifying with Newton now, as a symbol of Jones County pride. It doesn't hurt that he was such a badass."

The unusual racial politics of the Jones County insurrection — along with the vividly charismatic qualities of its leader — make "Free State of Jones" a compelling subject for a movie for our time. And it casts a light on a hidden history of the great conflict that shaped modern America.

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