Much has been written about the vast and violent conflict that was the American Civil War, exploring every social, political, and economic aspect. And this body of literature continues to grow. Scholarship focused on the war in Missouri has appeared more often in recent decades, but much of it concerns the role of Missourians in the Bleeding Kansas conflict prior to the war or on the activities of Confederate-sympathizing guerrillas that roamed the state's countryside for much of the Civil War. While civilians enter into some of these more recent narratives as victims, participants, and supporters of guerilla violence, there is something of a historiographical gap in examining the experiences of those who remained loyal to the Union in Missouri. A collection of letters known as the John A. Mack Collection offer a valuable and seemingly rare look into the lives of a large, Unionist family in the Ozarks region of Missouri. The letters span from 1861 to 1869 and detail the experiences of various Mack family members in the Union military, as refugees following the early victories of secessionist forces in Missouri and as Radical Republicans in the postwar period. These documents provide valuable resources to analyze how a family of seemingly loyal Unionists became incredibly embittered toward Confederate sympathizers in their home state. The Mack family fought on the Union side during the war and became involved in postwar politics in order to make sure that those who were disloyal to the nation and destructive to their state, were harshly punished. In contrast to their hardline stance on former southern sympathizers, the Macks were not of the same
mind that many Radical Republican politicians were with respect to civil rights, as revealed by the obvious racism toward African-Americans in their letters.

The Mack family’s history reads similarly to others who made their way to Missouri in the years between official statehood in 1821 and the beginning of the Civil War 40 years later. According to the 1850 Federal Census, the family patriarch, John A. Mack, was born in Pittsylvania, Virginia in 1807, and his five other siblings were born in Maury County, Tennessee, from 1809–1818 (Tennessee). Records also indicate that John remained in Tennessee until at least 1850. He married in 1829, and five of his sons—Marshall, William, Robert, Rowan, and John Jr.—were born there. However, the family had moved to Greene County, Missouri, sometime between 1850 and 1860, likely settling somewhere near Springfield in the southwest part of the state (Missouri). The majority of the letters in the collection were written after 1860, once the Mack family had settled in some comfort in the Ozarks. According to data from the 1860 US Census, John Sr. listed the value of his real estate and personal property at $5,000 each, which, if taken at face value, implies the Macks were a family of some wealth, though it appears they did not own any slaves. Two of the Mack brothers—Robert and Osman—attended Christian College in Springfield up until the outbreak of war, which was rare in a time when a college education was only attainable largely by the upper classes (“Macks as Refugees”).

While Missouri decided to remain in the Union following Abraham Lincoln’s election in 1860 and the secession of several southern states, the decision was by no means a simple one. A telling example of this can be found in historian Aaron Astor’s monograph, Rebels on the Border: Civil War, Emancipation, and the Reconstruction of Kentucky and Missouri. A meeting held in one central Missouri county following the election seemed to decide “with apparent unanimity” that Lincoln’s election—in which he won no southern state in the Electoral College—was “a triumph of sectionalism” (Astor 33–34). Despite this, the meeting did not write up a resolution in favor of secession, instead recommending
remaining in the Union and keeping the status quo, which was quite clearly not holding together. A sizable majority of the delegates at the Missouri secession convention would come to the same conclusion, so it was this brand of conservative Unionism that prevailed in the state both during and after the war.

Unfortunately, there is only one letter in the collection written in 1861, and it takes place well before the Macks found themselves displaced from their home later in the year.

In the absence of documentation by the Mack family themselves, the Community & Conflict online archive fills in this gap, in part by referencing the letters of a family friend, R.P. Matthews. On August 10, 1861, the Battle of Wilson’s Creek was fought near Springfield, Missouri, as the first major engagement west of the Mississippi River during the war. It was a victory for the secessionist forces led by General Sterling Price, forcing Union troops under the command of General Nathaniel Lyon to retreat northeast to the city of Rolla, Missouri. During this retreat, many Unionist civilians feared the coming of the secessionist forces and followed the retreating army, where Matthews happened upon the Mack family and its patriarch, John A. Mack Sr. Despite the anxieties among many of the civilians—including Matthews himself—he wrote of how the eldest Mack intended to move his family from Missouri and return to enlist in the military (“Macks as Refugees”). In an amusing moment, considering the difficult circumstances, Matthews also wrote of how Mack would often say “darn ‘em they haint got men enough in the world to divide this nation, they just aint going to do it” (“Macks as Refugees”). Even in the face of an early Union defeat, John A. Mack expressed doubt about the long-term fortunes of the secessionist and larger Confederate causes, though the worst of the conflict in his home state was yet to come.

Moving forward into 1862, the letters written by the Mack family become more frequent, and a few of the most notable ones were written in the early months of that year. One such letter was written by John A. Mack, dated March 22, 1862. Written from Indianola, Iowa, a town just south of Des Moines, the letter is addressed to one of his sons, Robert B. Mack, and details the hardships faced by the
family during the trip to Iowa. He laments the “rough-ness of the roads which were frozen except one inch upon the surface” and of suffering “much from my side which became very sore and painfull when I cough” (J. Mack). At other points in the letter, John recounts to Robert—who remained in Rolla as a soldier in the Union’s 6th Missouri Cavalry—about various other health issues of the family members present, as well as beseeching Robert and his other sons who have stayed behind to “write often” (J. Mack).

A couple of weeks afterward, Robert received another letter from a brother who had made the trip with their father to Indianola, William L. “Lundy” Mack. Dated April 7, 1862, William wrote of a report that a “rebel Capt some fourteen miles northwest of this place…came into Winterset [Iowa]…accompanied by some twenty armed seamps and hurrahed for Jeff Davis and bid defiance to federal authority” (W. Mack). As a member of the 6th Missouri Cavalry as well, he had received a medical discharge the previous month to aid his family with the move, and hoped to go to Des Moines with a “Mr. Sheppard” to get an order from the “U.S. Marshall for the arrest of these men,” revealing that even when not technically on duty, his desire to prove his loyalty to the Union cause was strong. Similar to his father’s earlier letter, he also tells of the health of some family members, then expresses his desire to return to Missouri, in order to rejoin his battalion and “get some place for the family to live,” presumably referring to his own immediate family. In both of these letters, it is clear that the trip to Iowa made by John, William, and other unnamed extended family members was far from easy, with snow still on the ground and multiple family members facing health issues. Displaced from their Missouri home in the Ozarks, it appears that most of the older men and the women of the family journeyed to Iowa for safety, while at least four of John A. Mack’s sons, John Jr., Robert, Rowan, and Moreau had remained in Missouri with the Union forces. As most family members discussed in the letters concerning the trip to Iowa are not mentioned by name, it is difficult to tell exactly how many of them traveled with John and William. William is also clearly eager to return to Missouri and to hit back at the rebel
forces that displaced his family, as shown by his desire to see the alleged rebels he mentions arrested.

While a significant portion of the larger Mack family fled Missouri due to the advance of a conventional military force, his son William’s mention of alleged rebels in Iowa is a reminder of how the fear of guerilla warfare was quite real. Back in Missouri, there had been bands of secessionist guerrillas operating in the state as far back as the Bleeding Kansas conflict. By 1861, the Macks and other families would surely have been aware of their existence. 

In his monograph, *Inside War: The Guerilla Conflict in Missouri During the American Civil War*, historian Michael Fellman writes of how in bitterly divided border states like Missouri, “war often assumed a deadly guerilla nature...without formal organization, with almost no division between the civilian and the warrior” (Fellman 23). These guerillas were often indistinguishable among the civilian population, especially in the countryside areas where Union troops held less sway. Utilizing multiple forms of intimidation and violence, including partial hanging, pulling off toenails with pincers, or outright killing people in search of money, food, and other resources, these guerillas wreaked havoc on civilian populations across the state (Fellman 25). Fellman also details how many of the targets of these raids were Unionists. One such example of intimidation came in the form of a note received by twenty perceived Unionists in St. Joseph, Missouri, which threatened that they would be killed if they did not leave within three days. “You voted for Lincoln, and I don’t intend any such man to stay in this state,” the anonymous note finished. While it was impossible to verify the seriousness of this threat, the reality of guerilla attacks in Missouri provided cause for great anxiety (Fellman 27).

In the remainder of the letters written during wartime in the collection, though, guerilla activity goes nearly unmentioned. The majority of the letters were written to or by family members serving in the Union military in Missouri, often concerning family matters, occasional news about military actions, and updates on life away from home. A letter from the fall of 1863 provides some insight as to the closeness of the Mack family. John wrote to Rowan and his
brothers on October 26, 1863, expressing concern over a recent wound Rowan had incurred in battle. “We received Lundys... and Rowans letters... and were truly glad to hear from you.... Thankfull for Rowans escape from a more dangerous wound or death we will say here that while we like to hear our sons doing Their duty we think that bravery may run into rashness... and while you act with bravery act with prudence” (J. Mack). As a dedicated Unionist, John clearly felt a sense of pride in his sons serving in the military, but this letter reveals a uniquely personal sense of how military families thought realistically about what war was. The stakes were high. With his sons traveling through Missouri and Arkansas—both places with frequent guerilla activity—at various points, the elder Mack was forthright about his desire to see his sons serve honorably, but also to see them return home. Though it seems unlikely that any Macks were involved in any battles or guerilla encounters in early 1862, historian Bruce Nichols does recount one instance involving their unit, the 6th Missouri Cavalry. In *Guerilla Warfare in Civil War Missouri, 1862*, Nichols mentions some Confederate cavalry from Texas launching a surprise attack on a part of the 6th Missouri in Barry Country in southwest Missouri, capturing a number of horses and forcing a retreat further south to Cassville, near the border with Arkansas (Nichols 36). This is but one example of what was a long, personal, and bloody conflict, and a reminder of why John A. Mack’s worry for his sons’ safety was far from unfounded, even when they were serving in a state devoid of the large military engagements that defined much of the war farther east. Ultimately, it would not be Rowan or Robert who would lose their lives, but another son, Moreau, a family member mentioned infrequently in the letters of the collection who died of pneumonia in April 1862 (J. Mack).

Moving forward, many letters in the collection were written during the Reconstruction period in Missouri, with one of the most revealing written earlier, by Marshall H. Mack, dated February 25, 1862. In it, he describes his displeasure with the people in Iowa and seems to believe that free blacks in the state are “more thought of than a poor white man by a darned sight” (M. Mack). He goes on
to call the people in Iowa “the most negro worshipping set” along with a larger commentary on the Republican Party, referring to them all as “Abolitionish” (M. Mack). This kind of racial resentment can be found in other letters too and is interesting considering that the Macks would later become involved in politics after the war, which initially were based on efforts to establish basic rights for former slaves. As their harsh opinions on southern sympathizers make clear, the Macks entered the war and the political arena in order to punish those whose loyalties were not with the Union. This would have been in line with the hardline stance many Radical Republicans held, wanting to punish the South and those sympathetic to the Confederate cause. But, as the war became increasingly a war for emancipation, the Macks’ stance on that issue was clearly different, demonstrated early on in Marshall’s 1862 letter. Interestingly, the Macks’ political ambitions were evident as early as the spring of 1864, as indicated by a letter from John on March 21, 1864. Having apparently returned to Missouri by then—the top of the first page indicates Greene County, MO as the place it was sent from—John writes to Rowan about some men who he believed had stolen the family’s horses and mules. They were put on trial for treason, and John writes of serving as “Circuit Attorney” at the time, expressing his outrage at the men being found not guilty because of “Copperheads on the Jury” (J. Mack). It was John’s belief that by letting the alleged thieves off the hook, the object of these Copperheads was to “reinstate them [Copperheads or southern sympathizers] in power...by having a band of horse thieves and house burners and brush whackers if necessary to drive all the Union men out of the country or make them afraid to open their lips” (J. Mack).

Events such as the trial in spring 1864 obviously served only to deepen John and his family’s resentment toward southern sympathizers or even those—like the Copperheads—who were loyal Union men but more conservative and skeptical of the Union war effort on the whole. Following the end of the war in 1865, the Mack family would remain active in politics, carving out a role for themselves in Reconstruction Missouri. Shown by a number of
letters from 1868 and 1869, John remained in politics, serving as a judge and receiving multiple letters from a cousin, Jared E. Smith. They discussed local elections in Greene County, court cases, the influx of Carpet Baggers into the state, and an issue critical to postwar politics, suffrage for black men. A letter from Smith to John, dated September 9, 1868, was mostly about candidates for local elections. At the end, though, Smith makes a request of John, now a judge in Springfield, MO, to “speak to him on the subject for me” concerning his application to be a warden of a prison. He writes that “I think that SW Mo is entitled to some favors,” an acknowledgement of Mack’s political clout in the region and of Smith’s belief that loyal men of the region should be rewarded (Smith). Another letter from January 23, 1869, is an obvious giveaway to the real political sympathies of Smith and, presumably, John Sr. Radical Republicans are referred to as “Radical Cancers” and Smith complains that “it has come to a faulty pass that we in Missouri have got to take Carpet Baggers to fill our offices, and I think that is an insult to the Loyal men of this State” (Smith). In all likelihood, Smith is referring to members of the Democratic Party who he felt had been treated unfairly by the Carpet Baggers, who were a part of the fragile coalition that Republicans tried to assemble to keep power in the former Confederate and border states. While the Mack family and people like Jared E. Smith certainly had no sympathy for former Confederates and secessionists in Missouri, they also had an equal amount of contempt for Radical Republicans who asserted control in the earliest years following the war.

The John A. Mack Collection provides a wide-ranging look at the life of a Unionist family’s variety of experiences during and after the Civil War. Many of the letters between family members and friends make clear their strong loyalties to the Union cause and a desire to punish southern sympathizers after the war. However, other letters also show family members’ outright racism directed at African-Americans and a significant hostility toward Radical Republican governance in Missouri after 1865. As Astor writes in his monograph, “Conservative white Unionists who fought solely to preserve the ‘Union, the Constitution, and the Laws’ found
themselves in a precarious position at the war’s end,” considering the policies of Radical Republicans were not wholly in line with their own (Astor 5). Conservative, conditional Unionist families like the Macks and others fought hard to “fight the Radical tide that had taken over Missouri in 1865” in numerous ways, though always directly motivated by their shared belief in white supremacy (Astor 5). This may have been depriving African-Americans of the right to vote or any number of basic civil rights protections. Or it may have been assuring the election of Democratic Party members to overthrow Radical Republican control. Either way, the letters in the John A. Mack Collection show that, for many in Missouri, support for the Union during the war did not mean support for the radical political agenda that followed its conclusion.
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