

She saves a reputation, plus a mansion

“Lincoln’s Advocate, The Life of Judge Joseph Holt,” by Susan B. Dyer, 251 pages, Acclaim Press, 2009, \$24.95.

Reviewed by Ed Ford Bugle Editor

(EDITOR’S NOTE: Susan B. Dyer is a former Language Arts teacher who lives in Breckinridge County. She has a bachelor’s and master’s degree from Western Kentucky University and holds a Rank I in Education.)

It’s seldom that an author has accomplished so much.

Susan Dyer has changed the image of Judge Joseph Holt and, in the process, also has saved his historic mansion in Breckinridge County.

In her biography of America’s first Judge Advocate General, Dyer has unearthed a treasure trove of information about a native Kentuckian who has been much maligned in his handling of the prosecution of President Abraham Lincoln’s assassins.

The native of Breckinridge County supposedly failed to inform President Andrew Johnson that some trial commissioners had called for leniency in the death sentence handed down for conspirator Mary Surratt. Johnson signed her death warrant and Holt spent his remaining years defending his methods of dispensing decisive judgment.



Joseph Holt

Although five members of the conspiracy trial commission signed a recommendation for a lighter sentence for Surratt, Johnson – through friends and others – charged that Holt had withheld from him the petition for Surratt’s clemency. As a result, Johnson allegedly had signed the death warrant without knowledge of the petition.

Dyer points out that after eight years of humiliation, Holt finally was vindicated of the President’s accusations by Gen. R.D. Mussey, Johnson’s confidential secretary.

The author, who spent 12 years researching her subject, paints a portrait of a just and honorable man who had a long career in the national spotlight and was a renowned lawyer and orator in Kentucky and Mississippi.

Holt served as Secretary of War under President James Buchanan and, after returning to Kentucky when Lincoln was inaugurated, was named the initial U.S. judge advocate general in September 1862. Prior to that, he was highly respected as a superlative Commissioner of Patents and Postmaster General during the Buchanan administration.

After joining the Union Army as a colonel, Holt was promoted to major general when he accepted his 1862 appointment. As such, he also became the first judge advocate general to hold general’s rank.

Dyer's account of the history and heritage of a long-overlooked, but prominent Kentuckian, has changed and will continue to change attitudes about a man who stood for that which is right.

Ironically, Dyer's book and her efforts to save the Holt House began when she drove by the Breckinridge County mansion that was quickly falling to ruin. She explained that the house seemed to call out to her and she began her journey of tireless research that led to publication of the book and her gargantuan efforts to save and restore Holt's boyhood home.

The original portion of the house was built in the 1850s and the structure is now listed in the National Register of Historic Places and is noted for its significance in the areas of national history, politics and architecture.

Readers will be in awe of Dyer's tenacity in tracking down the story of a worthy Kentuckian that history seemed to have forgotten. The only negative where "Lincoln's Advocate" is concerned are the typos that appear early in the book. Despite that, this biography of Judge Joseph Holt is well worth a reader's time.

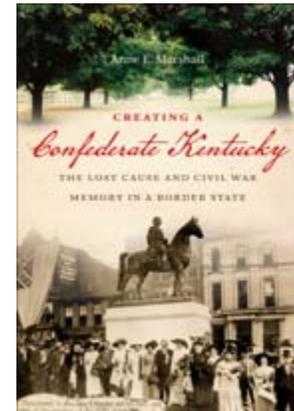
I whole-heartedly recommend it.

About the authors



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Dr. Anne E. Marshall is assistant professor of history at Mississippi State University. She received her bachelor's degree in history from Centre College where she was Phi Beta Kappa, cum laude.



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