

The American Civil War and the Preservation of Memory

The American Civil War, which raged from 1861 until 1865, was the United States' defining event. Anticipated for 40 years, from the time the United States Congress first limited the extension of slavery into the western territories, the war sealed the fate of the institution of slavery and ended forever the question of secession. And while the country was very different in, say 1870, than it had been a decade earlier, in some respects it had changed very little.

The war concluded with the passage of three constitutional amendments: the 13th (1865), which abolished the institution of slavery; the 14th (1868), which granted citizenship to 4 million freed slaves; and the 15th (1870), which gave them the right to vote. In 10 short years, the war had completely altered the social, political, and economic landscape of the country.

The suddenness of emancipation and the apparent reversal of African American fortunes can only be fully understood when one remembers that in 1857, a short 8 years before Congressional abolition of slavery, the Supreme Court determined in the *Dred Scott* case that African Americans, slave or free, could not attain full, or even partial, citizenship. "The unhappy black race," wrote Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, "were separated from the white by indelible marks, and laws long before established, and were never thought of or spoken of except as property....[blacks were deemed to be] beings of an

inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations; and so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect."¹

Throughout the country and among Members of Congress, North and South, there existed no political support for the termination of the institution of slavery. In early 1861, Congress, in an effort to forestall the secession movement, passed the first 13th Amendment which guaranteed African American slavery wherever it then existed against Federal interference. (It must be noted that while the amendment was ratified by three States, the ratification process was soon overtaken by the war. The amendment was quickly abandoned and replaced 4 years later with the 1865 amendment that abolished slavery.)² Moreover, had the war ended within the first 18 months after the firing on Fort Sumter, prior to the preliminary issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation, slavery would have continued throughout the United States.

When the war began in 1861, the abolition of slavery, although the dream of William Lloyd Garrison, the country's leading abolitionist, and a small minority of northerners, was not a goal of the United States Government. In 1861, President Lincoln raised large numbers of volunteer troops to preserve the Union, not rid the country of the "peculiar institution." While possessing a moral aversion to slavery, Lincoln nevertheless feared the racial consequences of wholesale emancipation and was unsure about the constitutionality of abolition. One of the wonders and truly noteworthy aspects of the war years was how steadily and relatively quickly—by January 1863—the abolition of slavery joined preserving the Union as a war aim.

As much as the country had changed during the decade of the 1860s, in some very important respects it remained the same. As noted above, the war ended forever the question of secession and constitutionally abolished the institution of slavery. Achieving political equity for

This issue of CRM follows several others that have explored the Civil War era and its echoes to the present time. "Connections: African American History and CRM" 19:2, (1996); "Altogether Fitting and Proper: Saving America's Battlefields" 20:5 (1997); "African American History and Culture" 20:2 (1997); and "Slavery and Resistance" 21:4 (1998) contain articles on slavery, the Underground Railroad, causes of the Civil War, African Americans in the Civil War, preserving battlefields, and the modern Civil Rights movement. All past issues can be located online at <<http://www.cr.nps.gov/crm>>.

the former slaves, as envisioned in the 14th and 15th Amendments, proved to be more challenging.

The institution of slavery had been built on deep and imbedded racism toward African Americans and on the concomitant presumption of white supremacy. Indeed, the Confederacy and its Constitution were founded on, as Alexander Stephens, Vice President of the Confederacy would put it, these cornerstones, these articles of faith. “Our new government is founded . . .,” he lectured in 1861, “upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery..is his natural and normal condition.” And presumptions of white supremacy could not be legislated away.

Although the Reconstruction Era, 1865 to 1877, attempted to institute political equality upon the former states of the Confederacy, whatever successes were attained, were achieved on the strength of the United States military occupation of the South. Racism remained following Reconstruction and successfully undermined the spirit and intent of the just-ratified 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution. The failure to enforce these changes to the Constitution, it must be said, was not solely a southern failure, but a failure of the United States Government in all three branches: executive, judicial, and legislative. It was a failure of the nation.

Over the next several decades, the rights of black Americans slowly eroded throughout the American South with the enactment of Jim Crow laws which segregated blacks socially and marginalized them politically and economically. Indeed, the white supremacy evident before the war was, by 1900, just as evident throughout the South. It is not a stretch to observe that black Americans for 100 years following Appomattox were systematically deprived of those Jeffersonian ideals of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

Between 1890 and 1920, three black Americans were lynched every week somewhere in the American South.³ While obligated to pay taxes, black Americans were denied even basic benefits enjoyed by white Americans. Grossly inferior public schools; segregated and, again, inferior public transportation facilities and restrooms; segregated seating in theaters; and physical intimidation characterized the black southern experience for a century following the war.

As much of the white South was turning back the clock for its former slaves, it was also

revising the memory of the war. Stunned by the devastating losses incurred during the 4-year struggle, southerners hoped to regain their equilibrium by rewriting the history of the war. The creation and defense of the Lost Cause philosophy dominated southern literary and historical production well into the 20th century. Under this interpretation, the South did not as much lose the war as it was overwhelmed by superior military might. Under this interpretation, slavery was a benign institution wherein slaves were content, even happy, and more importantly, faithful and devoted to their masters. Under this interpretation, the war had its origins not in disputes over the institution of slavery, but in the loftier ideals of States rights and constitutional authority.

So successful was this campaign to correct the memory of the war that Lost Cause ideology was endorsed not only in the South, but in many regions of the United States. A country eager to move ahead into the Industrial Age and the Progressive Era preferred to remember the glory of combat and the romance of an idealized war over an institution based on human servitude. Gaines Foster, Nina Silber, Gary Gallagher, and David Blight have all contributed brilliant insights into the development of this post-Civil War phenomenon.⁴

By the centennial of the war in 1961, the principles of the Lost Cause were so deeply ingrained in the American psyche that the 4-year celebration (emphasis on celebration!) rarely considered the role of slavery in prompting the war and rarely considered the legacy of slavery in contemporary society. Two who dared to think beyond the conventions of the deeply segregated country the United States had become by 1960 were Robert Penn Warren and Oscar Handlin.

Warren — son of the South, writer and historian — produced “The Legacy of the Civil War” in 1961 and accurately commented upon the myths, North and South, that had developed over the 100 years since the war and how those myths prevented the country from seeing the war for what it was and productively addressing the legacies of it. The psychological costs of the war, argued Warren, were more subtle, pervasive, and continuing than the economic costs. The South developed the “Great Alibi” wherein defeat was turned into victory and defects became virtues. The North, on the other hand, developed the “Treasury of Virtue” which made it the great redeemer, the savior of the nation, assigning to the North a morality and a clarity of purpose it never

possessed. “When one is happy in forgetfulness,” Warren wrote, “facts get forgotten.”⁵

Oscar Handlin, a professor of history at Harvard University, also commented upon the limitations of the Centennial celebration.

An anniversary is an occasion for retrospective reconsideration. It affords an opportunity for analysis of what happened and why and for an estimate of the consequences that extend down to the present. But it is precisely in this respect that both the scholarly and the popular treatments of the Civil War touched off by the centennial fail us most seriously....the men of the North and of the South seized upon the war as a symbol. But in doing so, they grotesquely distorted the actuality of the war as it had been. And the continued preservation of that symbol also obscures the surviving problems left by the war.⁶

In spite of dozens of recent scholarly works on the war, its causes and its consequences, popular discussions of the war rarely engage the role arguments over the institution of slavery played in prompting the war, or consider how quickly the constitutional rights of black Americans were ignored in the rush toward sectional reconciliation. Indeed, in the opinion of Columbia University scholar Eric Foner, the popular 1990 television production “The Civil War,” produced by Ken Burns, bore “more resemblance to turn-of-century romantic nationalism than to modern understandings of the war’s complex and ambiguous consequences.”⁷ The miniseries, according to

Foner, chose to remember the war as a family quarrel among white Americans and to celebrate the road to reunion “without considering the price paid for national reunification — the abandonment of the ideal of racial justice.”

Foner’s critique elaborated upon comments made a few years earlier by a prominent southern historian. At the conclusion of his analysis of the Confederacy and the development of the New South, Gaines Foster observed that,

The rapid healing of national divisions and damaged southern self-image, however, came at the cost of deriving little insight or wisdom from the past. Rather than looking at the war as a tragic failure and trying to understand it, or even condemn it, Americans, North and South, chose to view it as a glorious time to be celebrated. Most ignored the fact that the nation had failed to resolve the debate over the nature of the Union and to eliminate the contradictions between its equalitarian ideals and the institution of slavery without resort to a bloody civil war. Instead, they celebrated the war’s triumphant nationalism and martial glory.⁸

Much of the public conversation today about the Civil War and its meaning for contemporary society is shaped by structured forgetting and wishful thinking. As popular as the war is today, there is little interest — outside academic circles — in exploring the causes of the war and considering its profound legacies. Suggestions that slavery really was at the core of mid-19th-century

Almost a century after the ratification of the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, President Lyndon B. Johnson, with Martin Luther King, Jr., looking on, signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This photo is part of an online travel itinerary, “Historic Places of the Civil Rights Movement” created by the National Register of Historic Places at <www.cr.nps.gov/nr/travel/civilrights/>. Photo by Cecil Stoughton, courtesy National Archives and Records Administration.



disagreements between the Northern and Southern States are met with a charge of being “politically correct,” a charge designed to shut down conversation on the subject rather than examine the documented links between the institution of slavery, westward expansion, and the balance of power in Congress.

Recognizing the truth in Robert Penn Warren and Oscar Handlin’s assessment of the war and realizing that descriptions of battles alone do not lead to an understanding of war, the managers of the National Park Service’s Civil War battlefields have decided to add to the military history in their interpretive programs an assessment of the war’s causes and consequences. Interpreting historic sites in the context of the times in which they gained national prominence is fundamental to National Park Service educational programs. Presenting that context occurs at sites as diverse as Women’s Rights National Historical Park in Seneca Falls, NY, site of the 1848 Women’s Rights Convention; Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park in Woodstock, VT, which commemorates the conservation movement in the United States; and the USS *Arizona* Memorial in Honolulu, HI, which remembers the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. But interpreting the causes of the Civil War at battlefield sites turns out to be highly controversial. A portion of the American public is adamantly opposed to it.⁹

Some believe, and believe strongly, that only military events should be discussed at battlefield sites; others believe that a discussion about the causes of the Civil War might lead to a discussion about slavery. This group, in spite of scholarly evidence to the contrary, denies that slavery was a cause of the Civil War. In short, they argue, military history is good; any attempt to explain why these armies were at each others’ throats is bad. The editorials and letters attacking the National Park Service for its expanded interpretive programs demonstrate how emotionally Americans feel about their history, particularly the history of the Civil War. For its part, the National Park Service is being guided by the philosophy that organized killing requires an explanation; and organized killing on the scale of the American Civil War demands it. What the Service is confronting are the effects of over 100 years of many white southerners trying to find meaning, vindication, and perhaps redemption in a war that dealt them a crushing defeat, not only militarily, but also socially and economically.¹⁰

The purpose of the study of history is not to determine the heroes and the villains in the past, but to gain an understanding of how a society got from then to now, to understand what decisions and actions of the past affect current conditions, and to provide the basic tools of citizenship for more informed decisionmaking in our own time. Alexander Stille, author of “The Future of the Past,” puts it very simply, “knowing where you have come from is important in forming an idea of where you want to go.”¹¹ An understanding of the American Civil War must involve a broad view. While the shooting began in 1861, the differences between Northern and Southern States began during Jefferson’s time with the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the abolition of slavery in the North. And while the shooting stopped in 1865, the legacy of the war continues to resound throughout our society today.

As this country approaches the sesquicentennial of the Civil War in a few short years, it is the hope of the National Park Service that the 150th anniversary of that event will spark a national discussion about the meaning of the war in the 21st century. Such a discussion would logically and responsibly explore the war’s causes and consequences, look unblinkingly at the issue of slavery as the principle dividing issue in 19th-century America, and consider the legacy of racism which prevented the country from experiencing Lincoln’s “new birth of freedom” for a century following Appomattox. Such a discussion would, it is hoped, prompt a deeper and more thoughtful consideration of how the echoes of the war continue to resound throughout our society. Such a discussion could only benefit the country as it makes decisions about the kind of future it wants to create for its children and grandchildren.

Notes

- 1 Roger B. Taney, *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857). Reprinted in *The Annals of America, vol. 8, 1850-1857: The House Dividing* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1976), 440-449.
- 2 Alfred H. Kelly and Winfred A. Harbison, *The American Constitution: Its Origins and Development* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1970), 399-400.
- 3 This anguished chapter in American history is graphically and grimly portrayed in a photographic exhibit currently on display at Martin Luther King, Jr., National Historic Site in Atlanta, GA. The exhibit can also be found on the Internet at <<http://www.journale.com/withoutsanctuary>>.

- ⁴ See Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South, 1865-1913* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); and Gary W. Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan, editors, *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).
- ⁵ Robert Penn Warren, *The Legacy of the Civil War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 54, 59-60. First published in 1961.
- ⁶ Oscar Handlin, "The Civil War as Symbol and as Actuality," *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol. III (Autumn 1961): 133-143.
- ⁷ Eric Foner, "Ken Burns and the Romance of Reunion," in *Who Owns History?: Rethinking the Past in a Changing World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 190. This critique was originally published in Ken Burn's *The Civil War: Historians*

- Respond*, Robert Brent Toplin, editor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).
- ⁸ Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*, 196.
- ⁹ Following the announcement that the National Park Service was planning to expand its interpretive programs to include information on the causes of the war, the Secretary of the Interior and the National Park Service received 2,500 cards and letters from the Sons of Confederate Veterans and Civil War Round Tables protesting the decision.
- ¹⁰ For an assessment of this country's, especially the South's, preoccupation with the Civil War, see David Goldfield, *Still Fighting the Civil War: The American South and Southern History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002); and Tony Horwitz, *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War* (New York: Random House/Pantheon, 1998).
- ¹¹ Alexander Stille, *The Future of the Past* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 325.

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The Civil War in Cyberspace

There are literally thousands of Web sites that relate to America's Civil War. As with everything on the Internet, some sites are soapboxes for their authors and fans, while others provide a wealth of information for interested searchers. For classroom instruction, teachers recommend or provide hot links for students to sites that have <.edu> (education), <.gov> (government), or <.mus> (museum), domain names because information on these sites is deemed more reliable and less likely to have an agenda that the author is promoting. With that said, however, there are individual sites that provide excellent information for studying the Civil War. James F. Epperson, a math professor, maintains three such Web sites. One discusses the causes of the Civil War and includes copies of, or links to, many primary documents from the period and can be found at <<http://www.hometown.aol.com/jfepperson/civil.html>>.

One of the most important benefits of the Internet for students of history is the accessibility to primary source documents. Rather than traveling to a library or museum, researchers are able to view these documents online through the collections of the Smithsonian Institution

<<http://www.si.edu>>, the Library of Congress <<http://www.loc.gov>>, and the National Archives and Records Administration <<http://www.nara.gov>>, to name just three. An excellent study of the Civil War in the Shenandoah Valley area that includes an extensive amount of primary source material is the "Valley of the Shadow" project through the University of Virginia's Center for Digital History, authored by Dr. Edward L. Ayers <<http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/vshadow2/>>. The site is updated frequently, and educational lesson plans and a CD-ROM version are also offered.

Finally, the National Park Service Web site <www.nps.gov> provides links to each Civil War park (as well as all national parks), many of which have informational and educational materials online. In addition, the site's "Links to the Past" section <www.cr.nps.gov> has a wealth of material, including information about ongoing efforts to preserve battle sites and a searchable database of military records as well as online exhibits featuring objects from the National Park Service's museum collections.

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