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The Mysteries of History and the Digital Age

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Abstract

My time as a writer for the *Gettysburg Compiler* is at an end—as is my time at Gettysburg College itself. It's during endings and moments of transitions such as this where people tend to reflect and ask themselves questions like "what did this all mean?" and "what was I trying to accomplish here?" I'm going to try and answer those questions. To do that, however, I need to start somewhere else.

[*excerpt*]

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Gettysburg College, Civil War, history, philosophy, writing

Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

Comments

This blog post originally appeared in The Gettysburg Compiler and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

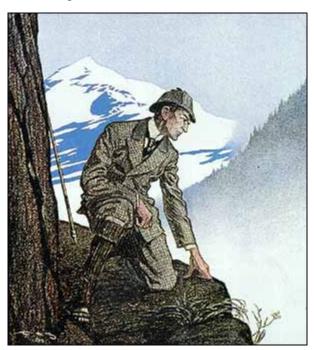## The Mysteries of History and the Digital Age

By Ryan Nadeau '16

My time as a writer for the *Gettysburg Compiler* is at an end—as is my time at Gettysburg College itself. It's during endings and moments of transitions such as this where people tend to reflect and ask themselves questions like "what did this all mean?" and "what was I trying to accomplish here?" I'm going to try and answer those questions. To do that, however, I need to start somewhere else. Over a year ago, in one of my first blog posts, I wrote that I did not consider myself a "Civil Warrior," or someone deeply passionate or involved in the study of Civil War history, a status which separated me from many other fellows at the institute then as it does now. That was not to say that I dislike the Civil War—quite the opposite, I do find it very interesting—but that my main historical interests lie elsewhere.

Now, at the end of my second year as a fellow and somewhere around twenty blog posts in, I would still make that claim, with the additional, somewhat prideful one that the work I have done here has been great work and good history. This reflection is not meant to inflate my own ego, however: I won't be sitting back and discussing how wonderful I think my work is. Rather, I want to use my own lack of expertise to try and prove a point: that anyone can do good history.

Confessing not to be a "Civil Warrior," Ryan quickly set himself up as a historical sleuth, with the goal of exploring and understanding parts of history that interested him but were outside of his area of expertise. In the post referred to below, Ryan explored the "Mysteries of Penn Hall."

In that blog post, I claimed that writing history is like solving a mystery as a detective: you have to follow a trail of clues from one point to another in order to assemble a greater picture of a past event. Like a detective, this requires maintaining an open mind. All previous notions of what you believe to be true must be discarded and reevaluated in consideration of what the evidence says. Detectives do not decide who the culprit is before they've caught them—at least, not good detectives. Rather, they consider all possibilities and dig as deeply as they can in order to ensure that what they have uncovered is as close to the truth as possible.
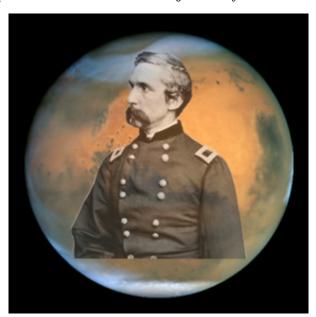

A great historian is no less a detective than the great Sherlock Holmes himself. Illustration by Frederic Door Steele, via Wikimedia Commons.

These three guiding principles—maintaining an open mind, asking questions, and digging for more information—are the basis of writing and researching history. The goal of history is, at its most basic level, to reflect the truth of what occurred: you cannot write the truth if you believe you have the answers before you even begun your research. Similarly, there is seldom such thing as a simple truth. Human history is incredibly complicated, filled with contradictions and exceptions and tiny events which compound to create a larger narrative. A good historian will thus always ask questions. Is this the complete picture? Am I reflecting the complexities of reality in a thoughtful way? Answering these questions requires digging into source material, the raw essence of history itself. These tasks are not impossible, and quite frankly, anybody can do them. It may be more difficult without a

background in a specific historical field, but that's what other historians can be used for: to help contextualize events and things in your own research.

Of course, the question that follows all of this is: why? Why does any of this really and truly matter? Answering that question here, on a blog dedicated to history, may be preaching to a choir, just as the above explanation may have been. But to those who are uncertain, allow me to try and make an argument for it. History is the background of humanity and the world around us. Like a person has memories and experiences which shape them, our society has been collectively shaped by historical events. People and societies as we know them in the present are the products of their experiences, and it's only by understanding those experiences can we fully understand where they became the way they are. I'm not going to pass the tired explanation of "those who fail to learn from the past are doomed to repeat it." Rather, I hope to say that if one wishes to truly understand why things are the way they are and how we got here, understanding history is critical. There's another, more generalized saying—that you can't run from your past. I believe this to be true of all of human society. Our collective past is who we are, and has made us what we are, regardless of whether or not we feel connected to it. If one wishes to try and improve the world, or at least change it in some way, understanding it is essential.

And more philosophical points aside, a lot of it is also just really cool. Let's be honest about that.

Ryan reported on "Chambermania" last fall—a phenomenon that now extends even to Mars.

It's actually that point that I hoped to illustrate through some of my posts here—that the past is cool. It's full of events that seem bizarre, unusual, and funny. Just as frequently, it is tragic, heartwarming, and as emotionally gripping as a great literary masterpiece. As I said, history is who we are, and thus it contains examples of humanity at its best and worst, and everything else that falls in-between. To me, the point of blogs such as this is to inspire just as much as it is to inform. If I can inspire just one

person to look into some historical event or person, and thus send them on a journey into the past of their very own, then I believe I have succeeded here.

I hope that I can help to show people that history is not an elite study which belongs only to academics and experts, and that rather than being made up of irrelevant past events, it is perhaps one of the most relevant fields we can research. There is too much history for historians to teach everything, but inspiration and curiosity are endless, and at the end of the day, anybody can be a historian.

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