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Robert Fortenbaugh: Understanding a Man Through His Scholarship

Description

On the second floor of Weidensall Hall at Gettysburg College hangs a picture of Dr. Robert Fortenbaugh. This portrait is hidden in plain sight, and countless people pass by it everyday on their way to an office, a classroom, or elsewhere. However, when one begins to notice the picture's presence, the question begs to be asked, who was Robert Fortenbaugh? Why is his picture hanging in Weidensall Hall? What impact did he have on the history of Gettysburg College that makes him worthy of being remembered? The answer to those questions include many answers. Most formidable among these, however, was Robert Fortenbaugh's mark on the study of history at Gettysburg College, which can be understood through three of his major texts.

Course Information:

- Course Title: *HIST 300: Historical Method*
- Academic Term: Spring 2006
- Course Instructor: Dr. Michael J. Birkner '72

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Keywords

Gettysburg College, Weidensall Hall, Robert Fortenbaugh, Lutheran Theological Seminary

Disciplines

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Campus Location

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Hidden in Plain Sight:

Robert Fortenbaugh: Understanding a Man Through His Scholarship

History 300

Historical Methods

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By

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Spring 2006

On the second floor of Weidensall Hall at Gettysburg College hangs a picture of Dr. Robert Fortenbaugh. This portrait is hidden in plain sight, and countless people pass by it everyday on their way to an office, a classroom, or elsewhere. However, when one begins to notice the picture's presence, the question begs to be asked, who was Robert Fortenbaugh? Why is his picture hanging in Weidensall Hall? What impact did he have on the history of Gettysburg College that makes him worthy of being remembered? The answer to those questions include many answers. Most formidable among these, however, was Robert Fortenbaugh's mark on the study of history at Gettysburg College, which can be understood through three of his major texts.

By all evidence, Robert Fortenbaugh devoted his life to enhancing knowledge about his home of Adams County and about American history at large. He earned his first degree from Gettysburg College in 1913 and then went on to the Lutheran Seminary in Gettysburg where he earned his Bachelor's in Divinity. In 1920 he earned a masters at Syracuse University in history. In 1926, he graduated with a Ph.D. in history from the University of Pennsylvania. Clearly, this was a man who valued education, who strove to always learn more. Following his graduation from seminary, Fortenbaugh served as pastor of the Lutheran Church of the Atonement in Syracuse, New York. From 1920 to 1923, he taught both history and sociology at Syracuse. From 1923 until his death in 1959 he taught history at his alma mater, Gettysburg College. His resume suggests not only a preoccupation with gaining knowledge himself but a desire to transmit it to others.

However, Fortenbaugh's educational accomplishments don't accurately provide a portrait of what he accomplished. In order to understand the nature of his impact on the college one must go beyond his numerous degrees and dig into his scholarship. Pouring

over Dr. Fortenbaugh's work, one is struck with how meticulous he was as an historian. He approaches history with great tenacity; he is meticulous in citing sources and his work is both well researched and well written. His passion for the discipline is evident in his scholarship. Perhaps the best place to begin exploring Dr. Fortenbaugh's work is with his doctoral dissertation, written in 1926, about the development of what he calls the "synodical polity" of the Lutheran Church in America to 1829.

Dr. Fortenbaugh's dissertation is his first major piece of scholarly work, and in it he develops an overall style and methodology that can be seen in all of his published work. Most notably, he structures his work well. He starts by explaining the development of the church in its early stages, in England, Germany, Holland, and Sweden. He then goes on to describe the early beginnings of the church in America up until 1781, which is to say, prior to the formation of the republic. He delineates district synodical organization and subsequent reorganization and development throughout America. He writes of the first general synodical organization and concludes with the principles underlying development of the synodical polity of the Lutheran Church in America to 1829. He takes a look at individual ministeriums and synods with an impressive array of primary sources which serve as the backbone of his claims. His dissertation is impressive not only in its breadth and length, but with the tenacious research that is so evident in its end product. However, the question begs to be asked, why would Fortenbaugh choose to write about the synodical polity of the Lutheran Church in early America? It seems like a rather esoteric topic, to put it nicely.

Aside from the fact that Fortenbaugh was a Lutheran pastor himself, and obviously felt a great sense of identity in the church, he provides his own reason. "There

has not been accorded to the history of religion in America such exhaustive study, in so careful and scientific a manner, as has been accorded to other phases of the national life,”¹ he writes. He goes on to say that the quality of scholarship in the realm of religious history pales in comparison to that of say, political history. A desire to redeem a sphere of the historical endeavor, and to shed light on the church that shaped so much of his life, provides adequate reason for why he would take this on as an enterprise. Furthermore, the dissertation and the area of study in general sheds light on Fortenbaugh as a man who would want to increase understanding in two realms that were evidently personally important to him: that of the religious and that of the historical.

In **Lincoln and Gettysburg**, Dr. Fortenbaugh solidifies the value he places on history. His perspective as a local Gettysburgian in writing this volume provides a different way of looking at things, making his scholarship a credible and valuable source of information in a world where so much has been written about Lincoln and Gettysburg. He takes a lofty topic – that of Lincoln’s fateful address on November 19, 1863 – and makes it both easily accessible and packed with meaning. He is uncomplicated in his prose and straightforward about the history he wishes to present. He relies heavily if not exclusively on primary sources in this volume, including correspondences between President Lincoln, orator Edward Everett, Edwin Stanton of the War Department, town elder David Wills, and other key players in the events that led up to the Gettysburg Address. He pursues his subjects with intensity, accuracy, and a simple passion for getting it right.

¹ Robert Fortenbaugh, “The Development of the synodical polity of the Lutheran Church in America, to 1829” (Ph.D. diss., The University of Pennsylvania, 1926), p. 5.

Fortenbaugh's publisher, N.A. Meligakes, writes a preface to **Lincoln and Gettysburg** which highlights the need for Fortenbaugh's scholarship. He reflects that although visitors to Gettysburg generally have some vague notion of the importance of the events that transpired there during the Civil War, they need a full account of all the circumstances that led to important historical events that would impact not only the nation, but the world. "There is therefore need," writes Meligakes, "for an accurate, but brief, description of the background and events revolving around November 18 and 19, 1863 . . . the following narrative is offered to fill that need. It was written by Dr. Robert Fortenbaugh who has been Adeline Sager Professor of History at Gettysburg College for more than thirty years."² Meligakes is right. Fortenbaugh fills the void in Lincoln scholarship, and he fills it admirably. His writing is engaging and although the volume is intended to be small he doesn't leave anything important out. He goes as far as to describe the minutiae of the story, even noting where the mercury stood on the thermostat on that November day (incidentally, 52 degrees Fahrenheit). As Meligakes points out about the different parts of Fortenbaugh's book, "the first is a running account of the *Story*; the second is a collection of *Documents* illustrating the *Story*."³ Indeed, this the way most of Fortenbaugh's scholarship is carried out, even outside of **Lincoln and Gettysburg**. He goes first by explaining the storyline -- giving the lay of the land, so to speak, and then fills in the gaps by providing primary sources and other first hand accounts of what occurred. Such is the sign of a capable historian, and Fortenbaugh certainly fits the bill.

² N.A. Meligakes, "Preface," in *Lincoln and Gettysburg* (Gettysburg, PA: Bookmart, 1949), p. 3.

³ *Ibid.*

Another of Fortenbaugh's noteworthy works is **Notes on the History of Adams County**, which provides an entirely different glimpse into Dr. Fortenbaugh's motivations as an historian. In it, Fortenbaugh displays a keen interest in explaining and preserving local history. While he obviously was interested in telling the larger national story, his writings about Adams County portray a desire to inform both outsiders and county residents about the area. The volume traces the political, religious, economic, educational, and industrial developments in the county from its very inception to the time Dr. Fortenbaugh was writing, in 1949. What is particularly interesting about this volume is that it is an historical text in its rudimentary form. He writes, "the following notes are offered without apology. They should be considered indeed as notes, and the whole compilation should be considered as a "trial run." This is the first extensive treatment, in any form, of the whole of the History of the county."⁴ What is inspiring about Fortenbaugh's text is that he is attempting to blaze a trail regarding an area of scholarship that has never been attempted before. Materials regarding the history of the county have been scattered, he writes, and so he has begun the endeavor of writing a complete history of the area. What is perhaps even more inspiring is that Fortenbaugh has a personal stake in the enterprise. Adams County is his home. It is where his family resides. It is where generations after him will desire to know about their area. He is attempting to fill that need, in his characteristic fashion of meticulous research and engaging writing.

Fortenbaugh makes great strides in delineating the history of the county. He begins by writing of the time before the white man set foot on the soil of the county to the time when he was writing, in 1949, after it had been widely settled and established.

⁴ Robert Fortenbaugh, "Notes on the History of Adams County, Pennsylvania" (Gettysburg College Special Collections, 1949), p.1.

In chapter fourteen, which details the condition in the county at the time of the Civil War, a refreshing and different perspective is taken through Dr. Fortenbaugh's work. He writes, "In the days of controversy over the question of slavery, sentiment was divided in Adams Co. While the great majority of the people did not favor slavery as institution, the greater number of these did not feel that it was a matter on which they should express themselves, much less commit acts hostile to it."⁵ This account of life in Adams County during the Civil War is remarkable because it is honest. Rather than writing of how inhabitants of the area were fighting on the righteous side of anti-slavery, rather than making grandiose statements about the glory of Gettysburg and brave and courageous men who fought for the cause of equality and freedom, Dr. Fortenbaugh is realistic in his assessment of what actually happened. He is straightforward and no nonsense, but still writes compellingly and in such a manner that the reader feels impelled to read on. Dr. Fortenbaugh concludes his notes by writing, "a study of the history of Adams County reveals that here has been demonstrated, in the more than 200 years of settled life in the present limits of the county, all the important features of the development of the nation. In fact, here one may see THE UNITED STATES IN MINIATURE."⁶ He writes with great passion and aplomb, and in fact, it would seem Fortenbaugh is moving towards the notion of Adams County as a microcosm of America at large, an interesting thesis which he never fully explores.

Throughout Dr. Fortenbaugh's works, his passion for history is evident. But the process of uncovering the man behind the scholarship involves more than making a broad

⁵ Fortenbaugh, "History of Adams County," p. 20.

⁶ Fortenbaugh, "History of Adams County," p. 27.

statement about his involvement in his profession. Robert Fortenbaugh was able to use a passion for history to serve his community. His teaching career, which spanned almost forty years, and his formidable body of scholarship, provide evidence of his service. His presence can be found throughout campus, whether it is in Weidensall Hall, where he helped to develop the history department, or in the library where his scholarship is housed. The annual Fortenbaugh Lecture, which is sponsored by the Civil War Institute at Gettysburg College every November 19th in remembrance of Lincoln's Address, also pays a debt of gratitude to Dr. Fortenbaugh's role in furthering the interests of American history, and especially his desire to increase understanding about Lincoln's momentous address and the role of the Civil War in Adams County. He is remembered around Gettysburg for his enormous contributions to the history department. Fortenbaugh developed the history department at the college with great care. In his time, the department was quite small, with only three or four professors comprising it. He gradually oversaw and expanded the department, in great part due to his successful career. As a result, the reputation of the department grew.

Ultimately, one cannot know everything about a man simply by reviewing his scholarship and attempting to gain insight into his focus, style, and aims as an historian. But it can help to shed some light on what he valued and what he was interested in. Certainly, Dr. Fortenbaugh's influence on the history department at Gettysburg College was enormous. He towered over the department when he headed it, and in many ways he still does today. Indeed, Dr. Fortenbaugh's portrait hangs in Weidensall Hall for a reason. Through his passion for the discipline of history and through his work in the history department in general, he has made an indelible mark on Gettysburg College.