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## Ashley Luskey, Assistant Director of the Civil War Institute

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Ashley Whitehead Luskey  
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## Ashley Luskey, Assistant Director of the Civil War Institute

### **Abstract**

In this first Next Page column of the new academic year, Ashley Luskey, Assistant Director of the Civil War Institute, shares which weathered volume she reads each October, her favorite book from her 9th grade English class, and explains her long-time fascination with Varina Davis, wife of Confederate president Jefferson Davis.

### **Keywords**

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### **Disciplines**

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## Ashley Luskey, Assistant Director of the Civil War Institute

In this first *Next Page* column of the 2019-20 academic year, Ashley Luskey, Assistant Director of the Civil War Institute, shares which weathered volume she reads each October, her favorite book from her 9th grade English class, and explains her long-time fascination with Varina Davis, wife of Confederate president Jefferson Davis.

### What are you reading now (or have read recently) that you would recommend?



Ashley Luskey, Assistant Director of the Civil War Institute

Charles Frazier’s latest novel, *Varina*. From a purely “linguistic” perspective, *Varina* (like Frazier’s most well-known novel, *Cold Mountain*) is a piece of beautiful writing from start to finish. It paints such a vivid picture of the social and cultural milieu of the time period and geographic settings in which it takes place—from mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century Mississippi, Washington, D.C., and Richmond up to early 20<sup>th</sup> century New York City.

Varina Davis, wife of Confederate president Jefferson Davis, has long fascinated me, due to the complexities and contradictions that defined both her life journey and her own inner world, and the way she tried to process the whirlwind of events in which she became swept up throughout the antebellum, Civil War, and postbellum periods.

### Do you have a favorite writer or writers?

I love Edith Wharton; her prose is so well crafted. She also was able to perfectly capture the rich cultural fabric of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century society in America and parts of Europe, exposing the angst, hypocrisy, and troubling social realities and human relationships behind wealthy “high-society” individuals who controlled the social hierarchy and social politics of the time. *The Age of Innocence*, *The House of Mirth*, and *Twilight Sleep* are three of my very favorite Wharton novels. They stand out for their detailed portrait of the complexities and contradictions of high society during the “long Victorian era.”

William Faulkner is another favorite. Few authors have been able to so perfectly capture the deep social and cultural complexities of the post-war South that defined that region’s identity for so long. Faulkner masterfully created an imaginary Yoknapatawpha County with vibrant characters. Their sentiments of reverence and repulsion for the southern past with which Faulkner and his characters struggle, speak to critical elements of the South’s postbellum effort to redefine its regional identity. Though nearly all of his books speak to this same general theme, *Absalom! Absalom!* and *Light in August* stand out, to me, as particular examples of Faulkner’s literary genius.

Toni Morrison's writing simultaneously "sings and bites" in the way that it captures the bittersweet elements of certain aspects of African American culture and historical memory. I especially love her books, *Beloved* and *Jazz*. This list also would not be complete without a mention of Tony Hillerman, who has written some truly first-rate mysteries based on the Navajo reservation in Arizona.

## **I understand you are finishing a book manuscript about elite women in Civil War Richmond. What books would you recommend if we wanted to know more about women and the Civil War?**

There are so many terrific books that have come out on women and the Civil War since the "new social history" of the 1960s: Stephanie McCurry's *Confederate Reckoning*, Drew Gilpin Faust's *Mothers of Invention*, Nina Silber's *Daughters of the Union*, Caroline Janney's *Burying the Dead But Not the Past*, Thavolia Glymph's *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household*, Judith Giesberg's *Army at Home*, Catherine Clinton's and Nina Silber's *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War*, and of course, Joan Cashin's *First Lady of the Confederacy: Varina Davis's Civil War*.

## **Is there a book or books that inspired you to take some sort of action or had a big impact on you?**

John Knowles's *A Separate Peace* remains probably my favorite and most influential book. For high school, I attended a rigorous prep school in Massachusetts called Phillips Academy Andover, and this was the very first book we read during my freshman English class, which was a class dedicated to "coming-of-age" novels. As for many individuals, high school was a challenging and introspective time for me.

*A Separate Peace* chronicles two young boys' experiences at a fictional prep school that is actually based upon Phillips Exeter Academy, Andover's rival school, located in New Hampshire. The protagonist's own intellectual, social, and emotional battles with himself and his angst-filled expectations about his personal and professional future while coming of age at his own prep school resonated with me in an uncanny way. I found the book comfortingly familiar and relevant on many levels. *A Separate Peace* helped me process so many unique aspects of my entire four years at Andover, and provided a framework for understanding and working through the challenges of that first year, in particular.

We read so many impactful books in that freshman English class that re-shaped the way I thought about literature, and still rank among my all-time favorites. Among them are Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, as well as some of my all-time favorite plays, including Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, and both *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*.

Scholarly speaking, Karen Halttunen's book, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, about the cultural fabric and rituals of mid-upper class Americans during the 19<sup>th</sup> century has played a significant role in shaping the kinds of research questions I have pursued in my own work on the socio-cultural worlds of elite Confederate women in Richmond.

Rhys Isaac's *Transformation of Virginia* also will always be a foundational book for the way that I think about the symbolism of physical landscapes and public spaces, as well as the significant but often silent power of ritual and specific traditions within society, and the "social geography" of particular landscapes, both urban and rural.

I would be remiss if I also did not again mention the enormous role that Joan Cashin's *First Lady of the Confederacy: Varina Davis's Civil War* has played in my development as an historian. It was Cashin's deep research into the fascinating complexities of Varina's personal and professional life, before, during and after the Civil War, that launched my own scholarly interest in the cultural rituals in which women like Varina engaged on a regular basis during the war in order to help preserve the socio-political foundations of the Confederate regime.

## **What is your favorite book to give as a gift?**

I usually try to tailor my book gifts to the recipient's specific content interests. However, I have recently recommended, as a general reading gift, David Wroblewski's *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle*, which I first read a few years ago. It is a truly beautiful and heart-wrenching story that highlights the poignant bond between humans and dogs.

## **Which books might we be surprised to find on your shelves?**

I really enjoyed Lauren Graham's *Talking as Fast as I Can!* Growing up, I absolutely adored (and still do!) the TV show, *Gilmore Girls*, and was fascinated by the sharp, quick wit of Lauren Graham. I loved reading her autobiography about the strange, challenging, circuitous journey she took to becoming a TV star and how similar her own personality, wit, and intellect was to Lorelai Gilmore.

It might also surprise some people to hear that I own several Kate Middleton biographies of varying length and quality. (Yes, I woke up at 4 am to watch her royal wedding back in 2011!) I so admire her class and composure while under a public spotlight, as well as her charitable work.

Finally, my bookshelves also contain several works about life on the New England coast, and specifically, within small fishing and lobstering communities. Growing up just outside Boston, and spending every summer as a child on the Maine coast, I became fascinated by the unique identity of my region and the social dynamics in these fishing hamlets.

As I have grown older and moved away from New England, I find myself returning to both popular and scholarly books about the history of this region and the romance and realities of life along the rugged New England coast. To that end, I just finished reading Colin Woodard's *The Lobster Coast* this winter. I also have Sebastian Junger's *The Perfect Storm* and several books by female swordboat captain, Linda Greenlaw on my shelves.

## **You have been a battlefield tour guide and battlefield interpreter. Are there any books that you read to prepare your for those positions that others might enjoy?**

Depending on which tour I am giving, at which battlefield or historic site, I read different books to prepare—both primary sources and secondary scholarship. When I worked as a Park Ranger in Richmond, I read a wide variety of military histories, official reports on the battles that took place in that area, social and cultural histories (and primary accounts) of Richmond women and civilians who lived in the city and on its outskirts during the Civil War, political and economic histories about Richmond's leaders and industrial workers and industries, books about slaves and slavery in Virginia and the South as a whole, books about Civil War medicine and the various hospitals in the city.

When I give tours of Gettysburg, I try to balance military histories of the battle as a whole with some more specific regimental histories, official reports, civilians' accounts, speeches and correspondence from monument dedications, etc.

Freeman Tilden's classic, *Interpreting Our Heritage* remains a foundational text for me in thinking about effective interpretation but I also have learned much about the public's evolving interactions with and expectations of public history sites from Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen's *The Presence of the Past*, Ed Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt's provocative *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*, and Ed Linenthal's *Sacred Ground: Americans and Their Battlefields*.

I also have benefited from reading an array of books and articles about Civil War memory, monumentation, and southern history and regional identity, such as John Coski's *The Confederate Battle Flag: America's Most Embattled Emblem*, Robert Cook's *Troubled Commemoration: The American Civil War Centennial*, C. Vann Woodward's *The Burden of Southern History*, David Blight's *Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory, and the*

*American Civil War*, James and Lois Horton's *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory*, and Fitzhugh Brundage's *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity*.

## **Do you have a favorite book or literary character from your childhood? What did you like to read as a child?**

As a child I tended to gravitate toward historical fiction, which I guess is no surprise now! The “Dear America” series of historical fiction was just coming out as I was growing up, and I loved reading the original stories about Felicity, Addy, Kirsten, Samantha, and Molly that raised so many interesting questions for me about the various historical time periods in which each character grew up.

I particularly loved the Felicity stories, which were centered in Revolution-era Williamsburg. I also really enjoyed the young adult books, *Johnny Tremain*, *Tituba of Salem Village*, *Across Five Aprils*, *Little House on the Prairie*, and Ann Rinaldi's books such as *A Stitch in Time*—all of which were historical fiction.

I definitely enjoyed other books too, though, such as *The Boxcar Children* series, *The Phantom Tollbooth*, *The Westing Game*, and various other series about young girls in horseback riding and figure skating clubs (the names of which escape me now).

As a young child, I loved books that took place in New England, such as *Make Way for Ducklings*, *Blueberries for Sal*, and *One Morning in Maine*, but as I got a little older was also really fascinated by books about the South, such as *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *Cold Sassy Tree*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In fourth grade, I also read Michael Shaara's *The Killer Angels* (on which the movie “Gettysburg” was based) and was enthralled (this sparked our family's first trip to Gettysburg!) I also really enjoyed the mini-abridged versions of some of the classics, such as *Moby Dick* and *David Copperfield*.

## **Are there any books do you find yourself returning to again and again?**

Every winter, I find myself returning to Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, one of her darker books that takes place during a dreary Massachusetts winter.

I also return to Washington Irving's *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* every October; my mom instilled an appreciation and fascination of this tale from a young age. These past few years, I have been reading from a weathered, 19<sup>th</sup>-century, hard-bound edition of the book, complete with brown crusty pages with gold-lined edges, original engraved prints, and my grandfather's uncle's name inscribed in the front cover in his own handwriting.