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## Lisa Wolfinger, Executive Producer of PBS's Mercy Street, Talks History and Memory

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# Lisa Wolfinger, Executive Producer of PBS's Mercy Street, Talks History and Memory

## **Abstract**

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Recently, I had the opportunity to interview **Lisa Wolfinger**, the executive producer and co-creator of *Mercy Street*. She kindly agreed to be interviewed by the *Gettysburg Compiler* about her work on the series. Wolfinger also participated in a recent conversation on local public radio station WITF's Smart Talk program alongside the CWI's Jill Titus and Ian Isherwood. You can hear their discussion online at WITF's website. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

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## **Disciplines**

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## **Comments**

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# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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### Lisa Wolfinger, Executive Producer of PBS's Mercy Street, Talks History and Memory

February 1, 2016

By Kevin Lavery '16

*This winter, the Gettysburg Compiler will be releasing weekly posts as part of a Mercy Monday feature that will cover issues of medical history, gender and race relations, historical memory, and other themes depicted in the new PBS series Mercy Street.*

Recently, I had the opportunity to interview **Lisa Wolfinger**, the executive producer and co-creator of *Mercy Street*. She kindly agreed to be interviewed by the *Gettysburg Compiler* about her work on the series. Wolfinger also participated in a recent conversation on local public radio station WITF's Smart Talk program alongside the CWI's Jill Titus and Ian Isherwood. You can hear their discussion [online at WITF's website](#).



**Lavery:** What got you interested in working on a historical drama like *Mercy Street*?

**Wolfinger:** I majored in European History at Sussex University in England and have always been passionate about history. Fact is often more dramatic than anything we could invent. Early in my filmmaking career I was given the opportunity by History Channel to produce documentary specials about early American history and had little to no visual material to work with. So I had to find a new way to tell these stories within the confines of a documentary format and fell back on what I knew and that was drama. (I was very involved in theater in college.)

With *Conquest of America*, *Witch Hunt* and *Desperate Crossing*, *the Untold Story of the Mayflower*, I worked from primary source material to develop story, character arcs and dramatize scenes, the same process that goes into writing a dramatic screenplay. I created a genre that was somewhat unique in that it was basically scripted with minimal narration and occasional talking heads. The historians on camera were used to give context and comment on the story; the dramatic scenes drove the action. The new approach did very well for History Channel. The *Mayflower* special was their highest rated special in 2006. From docudrama to full-blown drama was a logical next step. *Mercy Street* was a natural progression.

**Lavery:** In historical drama, it is important to be true to the historical setting while recognizing that considerations have to be made for what content will actually keep an audience engaged. How did you seek a balance between historical authenticity and modern relevance?

**Wolfinger:** I have a high standard for historical accuracy that is shared by PBS. We were careful not to “event shift,” meaning we stayed true to the historical timeline. We also worked closely with a panel of historical and technical advisors and conducted our own in-depth research in an effort to create an authentic period world. Having said that, we chose to take some liberties with our main characters. Though many are based on real people, none are iconic historical figures. That gave us the freedom to fill in the blanks in the historical record and weave characters together who might not have actually interacted to better serve the story. For instance, Emma Green is based on a real character but did not, as far as we know, work in her father’s hotel/hospital during the war. But by placing her in the hospital world and giving her a valid reason to be there, we were able to intersect our southern family saga with our Union medical drama.



**Lavery:** When people think of the Civil War in popular culture, most of the first works that come to mind are heavily inspired by military history, like the movies *Gettysburg* and *Gods and Generals*. *Mercy Street*, however, deals much more closely with the intersection of military and civilian experiences in hospitals far from the front. How does this setting lend itself to a very different story about the Civil War?

**Wolfinger:** The medical caregivers on both sides of the conflict are in many ways the unsung heroes of the Civil War. When I went searching for a new lens to tell an old story I realized that their story had been largely forgotten. So, as you can imagine, the story of Mansion House, a Union General Hospital in a southern occupied city not far from the front lines, offered a cauldron of conflicting voices and politics. It was too good to resist. As a filmmaker I'm always looking for rich worlds that offer plenty of conflict and complexity. I found the stories of the doctors, female volunteer nurses, soldier patients, southern civilians, and escaped slaves far more compelling and relevant than standard military fare about troop movements and casualty numbers. I hope viewers agree!

**Lavery:** Many people feared that the end of the sesquicentennial commemoration of the Civil War would precipitate a decline of the war in America's popular consciousness, yet the first episode of *Mercy Street* attracted some 3.3 million viewers. Why do you think the Civil War has such an enduring appeal?

**Wolfinger:** I think we were well served by the sesquicentennial commemoration. It has heightened America's interest in Civil War history and made people hungry for more. It is also a sad reality that many of the larger issues we deal with in our series, race, gender, polarizing politics, are still very relevant today. Civil War history has never been more relevant frankly, given the current conversations about Black Lives Matter, the Confederate flag and more. The war was a defining moment in our history; it turned us from a loose federation of states to a somewhat united nation. But in the process it also exposed a deep well of hypocrisy and prejudice and ripped us apart socially. In many ways we are still rebuilding and finessing this "United States of America."

**Lavery:** How has working on *Mercy Street* impacted your own understanding of the Civil War?

**Wolfinger:** The research work on *Mercy Street* gave me a window into 19<sup>th</sup> century America that I never had before. I barely knew anything about the Civil War. I grew up in Europe and so never actually studied American history. I had to play catch up with all my docudramas about early American history. The interesting thing for me was that, as a filmmaker, I was slowly working my way up the American historical timeline. I had reached as far as the Revolution when I started on the Civil War. I approached the subject with no prejudices or preconceptions and worked through it chronologically with no real understanding of what was to come. I found that approach very beneficial. After 4 years of research, I walk away now with a keener understanding of the sweep of 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century American history and how it led to the Civil War. It did not explode out of nowhere—it was an eruption born of decades of turmoil and debate that can be traced back to the very first white settlers on these shores. And, of course, we are still feeling its repercussions today.



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