



2023

Featured Piece: 1619, 1776, 2023

Timothy J. Shannon

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Abstract

This year's featured piece was written by Timothy Shannon, a professor in the History department. Professor Shannon teaches early American, Native American, and British history at Gettysburg College and serves as the faculty adviser for the *Gettysburg Historical Journal*. His research focuses on Native American-European relations in eighteenth-century North America.

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1619, 1776, 2023

Timothy Shannon, Professor of History, Gettysburg College

It is an honor to be asked to write an opening essay for the 2023 edition of the *Gettysburg Historical Journal*. As faculty adviser for the journal for the past several years, I have been consistently impressed by the caliber and range of essays published in it every year and by the care with which the editors-in-chief and editorial board conduct their work. This year's edition follows in that tradition, with authors from both within and beyond Gettysburg College.

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Over the past year, the media has been telling us that these are tough times for the humanities. Enrollments in undergraduate History courses have been trending downward nationally, as has

the number of undergraduate History majors and minors. The same news applies at the graduate level, with declining applications to Ph.D. programs and fewer entry-level jobs advertised in the field. These circumstances suggest a self-perpetuating cycle that could be fatal to the academic discipline: fewer undergraduate enrollments means fewer jobs in teaching, which means budget reductions for graduate programs, which means fewer professional historians . . . and so on until the whole industry gets farmed out to AI chat bots and would-be historians instead become the shabby figures muttering to themselves in the back corners of coffee shops (okay, yes, some of us are already there).

Is it really all that bad? Are the groves of academe turning into the graves of academe? I like to tell students who are interested in graduate school that there may be fewer jobs out there in coming years, but as long as there are colleges and universities, there will be History Departments. Meanwhile, out in the real world, History remains a popular endeavor. People still enjoy visiting museums and historic sites, and historical tourism is big business among domestic and international audiences. Publishers still churn out History books, and biographies of historical figures occasionally become bestsellers (and maybe even a Broadway hit). Genealogy, once the pastime of WASPy retirees in local historical societies, has democratized with the advent of Ancestry.com and

similar online research services. History, in short, remains in high demand, regardless of the struggles within higher education.

Even more comforting, History has become downright controversial. While Americans have always fought over how they interpret the past, rarely have they been as attuned to how it is taught as they are now, thanks to the emergence of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in our public discourse. Developed by legal scholars during the 1970s as a way of analyzing how racism is embedded in social institutions, CRT became a focal point of right-wing criticism of K-12 education in the early 2020s. Suddenly, people who nodded off during their own History classes back in middle and high school took a keen interest in the curricula and textbooks of their children, convinced that teachers were using the past as cover for brainwashing the rising generation with left-wing ideology.

This controversy, like so much of our contemporary politics, has sparked more heat than light, but it has thus far had some very real consequences for teachers and students. Personally, I have enjoyed the pro-History memes making the rounds on social media, such as “If studying history doesn’t make you uncomfortable, you’re not doing it right” and “If I can indoctrinate students, why can’t I get them to use an apostrophe the right way?” But when teachers strike content from their lesson plans about slavery or the Civil Rights movement because of mandates about avoiding divisive topics or unpatriotic material, the

costs of such meddling becomes obvious. History without conflict—be it political debates, protests, or war—is inherently less interesting than History with all the nasty stuff left in.

In my field of early American history, the throw down over CRT has played out in the controversy surrounding the 1619 Project, an initiative by the *New York Times* to influence how our schools teach about slavery and racism in American History courses. Published in 2019 to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first Africans in Jamestown, the 1619 Project immediately drew criticism about its historical accuracy and focus, but its defenders have remained committed to their interpretation of America’s origins and have expanded their work into a book and television series. In 2020, conservatives responded with the 1776 Commission, sponsored by the Trump administration to promote a more traditional History curriculum based on the veneration of the Founders and American liberty. President Biden dissolved the 1776 Commission shortly after his inauguration, and its work faded quickly thereafter. However, the ideas embodied by its proposals remain central to right-wing criticisms of our educational institutions and the historical profession. The appropriation of Revolutionary War symbols such as the Gadsden flag (“Don’t Tread on Me”) by the January 6th insurrectionists and others on the far right is one example of how our current political polarization has reshaped the meaning of our shared past.

So where does that leave us in 2023? The teaching of History in America has never been more politicized and is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. Students in higher education are studying History less, but everyone else seems to want more of it. Perhaps this is a good sign. Controversy sparks interest much more effectively than consensus, and for that reason, our current over 1619 v. 1776 may help revitalize the study of History in our colleges and universities. Students of all ages do not like being told what to think, and the brightest ones learn early on to question the knowledge imparted by their parents, teachers, and elders. Properly taught, History should encourage skepticism, not subservience, and that is a social good in its own right.