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Complicating the Civil War Narrative: The Lincoln Lyceum Lecture

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Abstract

On October 3rd, the 2018 Lincoln Prize-winning author and historian, Edward Ayers, gave a talk on his most recent book, *The Thin Light of Freedom: The Civil War and Emancipation in the Heart of America*. Ayers began the process of writing this book in 1991 while driving through the Shenandoah Valley and wondering how places so naturally beautiful could go to war with each other so quickly. In his book, he attempts to answer that question by looking at how the Civil War was experienced on the ground by normal, everyday people. He does this by following two communities from 1863 to the immediate post-war years: Augusta County, VA and Franklin County, PA. He began following these two counties in his previous book, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies*, and *The Thin Light of Freedom* serves as a follow-up to that book. [excerpt]

Keywords

Edward Ayers, Lincoln Lyceum, Memory

Disciplines

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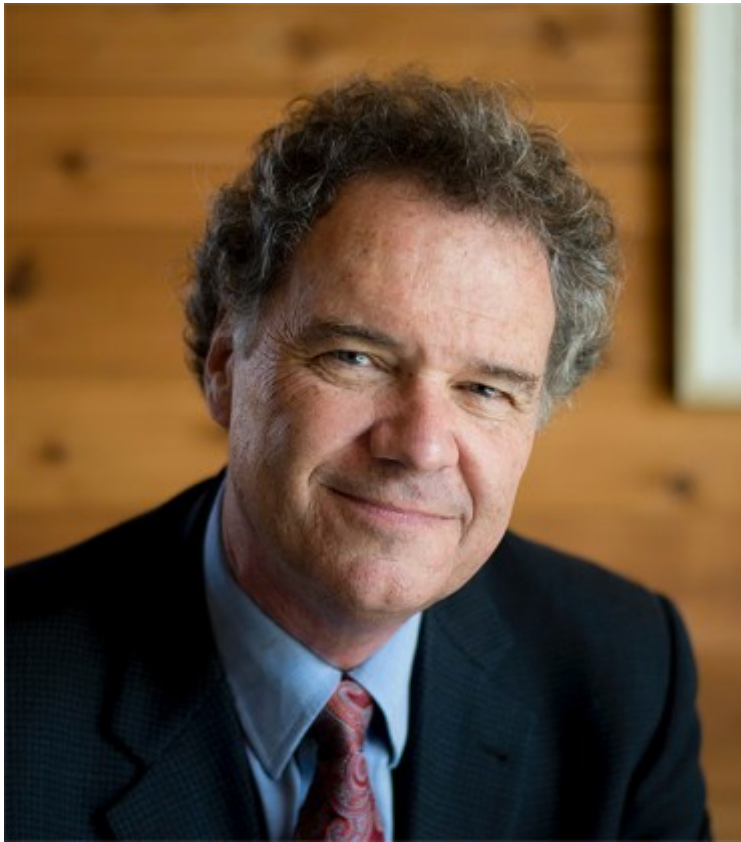
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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Complicating the Civil War Narrative: The Lincoln Lyceum Lecture

By [Savannah Labbe '19](#)



Edward Ayers

On October 3rd, the 2018 Lincoln Prize-winning author and historian, Edward Ayers, gave a talk on his most recent book, *The Thin Light of Freedom: The Civil War and Emancipation in the Heart of America*. Ayers began the process of writing this book in 1991 while driving through the Shenandoah Valley and wondering how places so naturally beautiful could go to war with each other so quickly. In his book, he attempts to answer that question by looking at how the Civil War was experienced on the ground by normal, everyday people. He does this by following two communities from 1863 to the immediate post-war years: Augusta County, VA and Franklin County, PA. He began following these two counties in his previous book, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies*, and *The Thin Light of Freedom* serves as a follow-up to that book. Ayers chose these counties because, on the surface, they seemed to be very similar. Both counties had

similar soil and geographic features and they are relatively close in proximity. They also both initially supported the Union. However, despite their similarities, their inhabitants still went to war with each other and had very different opinions about the war. Augusta County ultimately sided with the Confederacy when Virginia seceded, which radically changed the lives of the county's inhabitants, both black and white. By examining the war's impact on both whites and blacks in these two communities, Ayers provides a fuller picture of the complex racial, social, economic, and cultural fabric of these societies. Ayers sees these counties as a sort of microcosm of the Civil War itself, in that they provide specific examples and concrete evidence for the larger, intangible legacies of the war, such as the fight over historical memory.

Ayers began his lecture by arguing that the Civil War was marked by boundaries of all kinds, not just regional ones. The war changed the boundaries that marked who was considered a human being and who was considered property. Time also made its mark on the lives of soldiers in that soldiers would often look back upon battles and see them as landmarks, or turning points, in their lives. Battles such as Gettysburg, where Ayers begins his book, had this effect. A man from Franklin County was at Gettysburg, and after the great victory near his home, he was able to sneak off to see his wife. His wife back home could hear the roar of battle but could not see it. After his visit, though, she was able to feel secure in the knowledge that her husband had survived the battle. For the soldier, his visit home after the great carnage at Gettysburg served not only as a much-needed break from the battlefield's death and destruction, but also was a celebratory moment and a happy memory from which he could derive hope and purpose. However, on the Confederate side, the scene was very different. Confederates were not able to return home and celebrate their victory with their wives. Instead, they watched as wounded and mutilated men were dragged down the road by wagons, some of whom had not even seen a doctor yet. In contrast to the more hopeful Union soldier, the Confederates looked back upon the Battle of Gettysburg as a moment of immense and unmitigated suffering and loss.

Though the Confederates lost at Gettysburg, they were able to come back in 1864 and capture another Pennsylvania town: Chambersburg. In addition, the Union forces also occupied Staunton, the largest town in Augusta County, in June of 1864. When the Confederates took Chambersburg, the residents of Franklin County despaired over its loss. However, the Confederates relished in the terror of Chambersburg's citizens and hoped that the county would never again be under Union control. An African American soldier defending the town wrote about how bravely his regiment had fought. The raid was particularly dangerous for this black soldier not only because he risked his life in battle, but also because he risked being captured and sold into slavery by the Confederates. However, he was determined to fight to gain the rights of black people to be acknowledged as human beings, to be free, and to vote, or die trying. Ayers used the experiences of town citizens, Confederates, and the black soldier to portray the range of emotions involved when the Confederates captured Chambersburg. Ayers showed this range of emotions and opinions in order to provide insight into what was at stake for each of these groups of people.

The citizens of these counties had differing opinions and feelings about many political and social issues, including the election of 1864. During the campaign season, northern Democrats vilified Abraham Lincoln. The Republicans and African Americans, on the other hand, believed Lincoln was correct in issuing the Emancipation Proclamation and making the war not only about the preservation of the Union but also about ending slavery. Though he only gained 1% of the northern Democratic vote, Lincoln won in a landslide vote in the electoral college, ultimately ensuring the demise of the Confederacy. However, white Augusta residents vowed to never give up, and even offered to send their slaves to fight for the Confederacy. They had already lost so much, since much of the war was fought on their land, and were willing to sacrifice even their most prized “possessions”—their slaves—in order to preserve southern independence. In proposing to send their slaves to fight for the Confederacy, Augusta residents defied many other southern slaveowners who believed that slavery provided both the physical labor and the socio-political backbone that kept the Confederacy on its feet. The actions of southerners like the Augusta residents helped shape the Lost Cause narrative and southern memory of the war. For example, the idea that southerners would never give up influenced the Lost Cause idea that the southerners never did give up but were, instead, simply overrun by overwhelming numbers. Augusta residents’ willingness to give up their slaves also shaped the Lost Cause narrative, as southerners used such evidence to try to argue that the war was not about slavery, but rather about southern independence.

White southerners, such as those of Augusta County, entered the post-war world believing they were in the right and that God had been on their side, and they fought tenaciously to preserve such a narrative for posterity in their attempts to control the historical memory of the war. Immediately after the guns of war fell silent, the whites of Augusta County set out to decorate the graves of the Confederate fallen. In doing so, they sought to promote the notion that the Confederate dead were the only war dead that deserved to be honored, as they had fought for the only noble cause. The next day, the African Americans of Augusta County went out to decorate the graves of Union dead. With this action, they fought back against the white residents’ attempt to control historical memory of the war by arguing that the Union dead were more deserving of having their graves decorated because they had fought for the more righteous cause of freeing the slaves.

Due to African American resistance to the Lost Cause narrative, southerners did everything they could, both legally and illegally, to prevent African Americans from gaining suffrage and fully participating in American society. In this way, Ayers believes, the South committed its own suicide: If southerners had not fought so hard to deny blacks their rights, then the drastic reforms of the Radical Republicans in Congress that forever changed the fabric of southern society would not have been necessary. Ayers believes that the Radicals’ most important reform was the public-school system, which allowed African Americans to become educated. Southerners did not want blacks to have access to education because then they would become a threat to southerners’ visions of “proper” political and social order. Through public education, blacks would gain the knowledge and intelligence necessary to fight for suffrage and to stop

discrimination. African Americans would then realize that they could achieve everything white people could, thus making them the equals of the white man. Such realizations would challenge the claim that white people were inherently superior and would ultimately undermine whites' discrimination methods, such as segregation.

Ayers's lecture provided an in-depth look at two counties which, on the surface, seem very similar but were actually radically different. His close analysis of Augusta and Franklin Counties offers a compelling window into the lived realities of the war for two specific communities, while unpacking some of the critical regional complexities that shaped those communities' differing experiences of and reactions to the war. Additionally, his examination both of the long fight for historical memory and of the differing worldviews and experiences of all those involved in the conflict shows that a multi-faceted view of the war is necessary to fully understand the conflict and its legacies.