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Digital-Lee Archived: An Interview with Colin Woodward

Ashley Whitehead Luskey
Gettysburg College

Roles

Assistant Director of the Civil War Institute at Gettysburg College.

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Abstract

Today we are speaking with Colin Woodward, historian and editor of the Lee Family Digital Archive at Stratford Hall. He holds a Ph.D. in History and is the author of *Marching Masters: Slavery, Race, and the Confederate Army During the Civil War*, which was published by the University of Virginia Press in 2014. He also maintains an active history and pop culture podcast entitled “Amerikan Rambler,” which is available at www.amerikanrambler.libsyn.com and on iTunes. Dr. Woodward is presently working a book called *Country Boy: The Roots of Johnny Cash*. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Colin Woodward, CWI Summer Conference, Digital History, Lee Family

Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Digital-Lee Archived: An Interview with Colin Woodward

By [Ashley Whitehead Luskey](#)

Over the course of this year, we'll be interviewing some of the speakers from the upcoming [2019 CWI Conference](#) about their talks. Today we are speaking with Colin Woodward, historian and editor of the Lee Family Digital Archive at Stratford Hall. He holds a Ph.D. in History and is the author of [Marching Masters: Slavery, Race, and the Confederate Army During the Civil War](#), which was published by the University of Virginia Press in 2014. He also maintains an active history and pop culture podcast entitled "Amerikan Rambler," which is available at www.amerikanrambler.libsyn.com and on iTunes. Dr. Woodward is presently working a book called [Country Boy: The Roots of Johnny Cash](#).



Dr. Colin Woodward (image courtesy Stratford Hall)

CWI: Can you explain, in a nutshell, the editorial process involved in a project such as the Robert E. Lee paper project? Who are the various individuals involved in this project, and what are their (and your) specific responsibilities? What are the long term goals for the project?

WOODWARD: The editorial process involves the transcription, editing, and annotating of letters, newspaper clippings, legal papers, and other documents for upload onto our website, www.leefamilyarchive.org. In three years, I have added more than 1,400 items to the website, which is free and open to the public. For most of that time, I have done all this work by myself, though in the summer I have help from interns from Gettysburg College, Simmons College, and elsewhere. The project was conceived with a broad scope, hoping to add letters and papers from all generations of the Lee family. To help manage the project, I have focused on the Civil War era, which means mostly concentrating on Robert E. Lee, his wife, and their children—three of whom fought in the Confederate army.

CWI: What challenges and opportunities has this editing project presented to you?

WOODWARD: One of the biggest challenges is the sheer volume of the project. The Lees left behind tens of thousands of documents. I could spend the rest of my life transcribing and editing all the papers of certain persons, whether it be Richard Henry Lee, Light Horse Harry Lee, or Robert E. Lee. The fact that the Lee papers are scattered is also a challenge. It seems that everybody wanted a piece of Robert E. Lee after the war. His papers live at various repositories across Virginia and the country. One of the daily challenges is reading handwriting from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. I try not to miss a single word of any document, which can be difficult to do. Most of all, I worry about mistakes slipping through, whether because I couldn't determine what a word or phrase is, or because I made an error between the transcription and uploading phase.



Documents from the Lee Family Digital Archive at Stratford Hall
(Image courtesy Stratford Hall)

CWI: How has this editing project broadened or complicated your understanding of Robert E. Lee and his family? How might this project benefit or be put to use, not only by Stratford Hall, but also by other public history sites to help interpret Lee and his legacy in a richer light?

WOODWARD: My work on the LFDA certainly has complicated my understanding of the Lees. I knew quite a bit about Robert E. Lee before starting the project. A little bit about his father Light Horse Harry, too. None of Lee's three sons died in battle. But Robert E. Lee lost a daughter to disease. His sister, who remained loyal to the Union, also died. The Lees, in many ways, lost everything. The Union seized Arlington, and the Lees never returned there. The Lees are an important and celebrated family, but also a tragic story and a cautionary tale. With this in mind, I hope people from various disciplines can find the LFDA useful. I've tried to include the voices of underrepresented groups, such as women. I wanted to feature documents that provide insight into military events as well as the home front, where people faced challenges with running their daily lives, mourning the dead, and coping with wartime shortages. It's not just about battles and leaders!