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Edward L. Ayers

University of Richmond, eyers@richmond.edu

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The Inevitable Future of the South

EDWARD L. AYERS

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Assignment for history for Monday: trace the origins of the contemporary South.

Note to self: I'm wearing my infoglasses, of course, scanning the archive and narrating these notes. Got some good music shaking the background. I'll give some facts, quotes, pictures, and sound that I can work into my presentation for tomorrow. The historical stuff from the late twentieth century looks funny, being in 2-D and all, but I can still make it out OK thanks to the Turner Enhancements that spruce it up.

I wouldn't say this out loud or anything, but this is kind of interesting. You know, growing up in Georgia, the capital of the Con-

solidated South, you hear this stuff all the time and kind of turn it off, but somehow it's clicking today. I guess that when you get to be sixteen you start seeing things in, like, perspective.

OK, my notes: All the footage and photos paint a pretty clear picture of things around 1950 or so. Back then the South was full of small places: small towns, small churches, small farms, small populations, small ambitions, small memories, small entertainment, small government. Some people even said they *liked* all that old stuff. I guess you can get used to anything.

But even then, now that we know what happened, you can see consolidation beginning. It all looks inevitable once you know how it turned out. In fact, I'm going to title this "The Inevitable Future of the South" because it's obvious to me that by 2000 things were pretty much lined up so that this had to happen as it did. We're always taught that 2043 is the key date, when the states surrendered most of their powers, and the Consolidation Agreement was signed, but it turns out that stuff had been going on a long time.

In some ways, the Consolidation started all the way back in the big war they had in the middle of the twentieth century, when the South was still way behind the rest of the country—behind even the ridiculously cold parts up north and the ridiculously dry parts out west. They had to build big army bases and big ships for the war, so they moved some of that to the South and paid people more than southerners had ever earned before. Cities grew real fast, and people got new cars and houses and things when the war ended, but the government and businesses kept spending.

But things were weird, because back then some people believed that people who had different skin colors were different *inside* too! Back before they could manipulate DNA so easily, they didn't realize that

people are like 99.999 percent the same all over the world, all the way down to the genes and chromosomes. Although they could see that people they called “black” and “white” were in fact all different kinds of colors, that didn’t stop them from lumping people together in two big groups. There had been all that slavery and stuff back in the ancient days and people just couldn’t let it go, I guess.

What in the world would they have made of me, with my genealogy from Scotland, Ghana, Honduras, Korea, and the Cherokee Nation! I think that everybody would have felt differently back then if they had had the machinery that traced people’s DNA twelve generations back like we do for our birth certificates. They would have seen that we’re all in this together and have been for a long time.

Anyway, the South began to change around the middle of the twentieth century. They built the interstates, which were cool even if they did waste them on those evil vehicles that actually ran on petroleum, no matter how unlikely that sounds. Some people say that the first interstates were the true roots—and routes, ha-ha—of the Great Consolidation. It was along those interstates that the first spores of the Consolidation were planted: Exxons, McDonalds, Hardees, and all those other old-fashioned places that you see in the paintings in houses that are trying to create that old-timey feel. We can see from the time-lapse maps how those spores spread wherever the interstates crossed the old-fashioned roads into towns and cities, spreading those franchises into the country.

People began to get it, the basic idea behind the Great Consolidation: it was *good* to have everything you needed, just when you needed it, in the way you wanted it, the way you knew it would be. Back before then, you had very little control over your life. You had to eat different kinds of stuff because there were still nonstandardized restaurants around, places that didn’t even belong to a franchise. You

had to watch whatever they put on TV when they put it on. You had to travel to different places to get different experiences. Boy, it was lame.

So, while all this was going on, starting slow and kind of sputtering back in the 1950s and 1960s, something really big happened. And you know what it was: the Great Freedom, the big turning point in southern history. All the great men and women of the South—Parks, King, Marshall, and the other people on our money—led the revolution that got rid of that segregation junk. It was dangerous to fight against that skin-color craziness for a long time, and people kept trying to hold on to it for decades afterward in a sort of guerrilla warfare in schools and subdivisions and the like, but things had turned a corner.

Even the most selfish people eventually came to see that the Great Freedom freed the whole South, even the selfish people themselves. Business boomed very soon thereafter, and things began to take off almost as soon as the government quit spending its energy dividing people from one another. People from the cold part and the dry part of the country began to see what they should have seen all along: the South was the best place to live.

Check out these old clippings from around 2000, when people began to understand what was going on. I should be able to work these into my paper somewhere:

“Since 1978, the population of the South has risen by more than 20 million. The region’s population growth rate—30%—is nearly double that of the rest of the nation.”¹

“Well-educated and affluent Americans are swelling the population

of the South. . . . The influx, 90 percent white, is making the region better-educated and more affluent.”²

During the 1990s, Florida, Georgia, and Texas have seen the largest influx of black professionals in the country, with North Carolina fifth. They are moving into integrated suburbs, especially in the newer cities of the South.³

“Since 1978, nearly four of every ten jobs gained in United States are in the South.”⁴

“The I-85 corridor, as it runs through upstate South Carolina, is sometimes called America’s autobahn. More than 90 international companies have located facilities in this growing metropolitan region. . . . Near the end of the 1990s, almost 2 million Southerners worked in foreign owned firms.”⁵

“A thousand Japanese companies have located in the Southeast in the last 25 years, creating 140,000 jobs. That represents \$26.5 billion investment in manufacturing.”⁶

It wasn’t just money from abroad that came to the South. A lot of companies from Germany and Japan sent workers to the South, and they decided to stay here. Also, a lot of other immigrants came to the South looking for some of the new jobs.

The South had been a pretty homogenous place for a long time, filled with people who considered themselves “white” or “black.” But when all this development came the population changed too.

With its border with Mexico, Texas had a lot of Mexican immigrants for a long time; and being close to Cuba (back when that was its own

country), Florida had a lot of Hispanic immigrants for a long time. But late in the century other places in the South got in on the act. Listen to this:

“A 1998 report shows that the top six Hispanic-growth counties are all in the South—two in the Atlanta area, two in urban North Carolina, one in the Virginia suburbs, and one in Arkansas.”⁷

People from parts of Asia also began to gather in southern cities, and the South became, over the next fifty years or so, one of the most diverse parts of the United States.

The immigrants were much younger than the natives, either black or white. Young adult white people steadily became a smaller and smaller part of the population, while older white people, especially women, became a larger and larger part.

So you had a sort of volatile situation there, we see looking back.

A lot of these people came to cities, which suddenly got a lot bigger, because “of the 17.7 million jobs that the South has gained since 1978, metro areas accounted for fully 15 million.”⁸

Four of the five cities that topped 500,000 during the 1990s were in the South: Austin, Charlotte, Nashville, and Fort Worth.⁹

That’s when the capital of the Consolidated South really took off—good old Atlanta, where I kind of live. It exploded, man! Even though there was no really good reason for Atlanta to be where it was—since it didn’t have a port or even a decent river or pretty mountains or anything like that—with its airport and highways it somehow managed to become THE place.

They built the whole darned thing around those infernal combustion cars, and the costs of that became clear pretty quickly. Here are some facts from 2000:

“Eight of the 20 cities most affected by sprawl are in the Southeast; Atlanta is first, with Washington, D.C., and Ft. Lauderdale not far behind.”¹⁰

In Atlanta, approximately five hundred acres of open space are converted into subdivisions and shopping centers each week—”arguably the fastest rate of growth of any metropolitan region in human history.”¹¹

“People in Atlanta drive more miles each year . . . and more miles per person each day (34 miles) than anywhere else in the country.” Drivers in Atlanta lost 133 million hours stuck in traffic.¹²

The only place worse than Atlanta back then was northern Virginia, the area around the old capital in Washington, D.C.

“Washington now has more folks working at information-technology companies than in the government,” a reporter wrote back in 2000. “Near Vienna, the mega-office complex of Tyson’s Corner—in the ’50s, nothing more than a general store and a gas station—has more office space than all of downtown Washington. Virginia’s Fairfax County is now the nation’s richest.”

All this grew up around Dulles Airport—built out in the middle of nowhere in the 1950s—and the conversion of the defense industry to what were called back then “computers” and the development of what they called “the Internet” back when that was a thing distinguishable from everything else.

The guy who wrote this tried to predict what would happen from this development, as if people had a clue back then what would happen. If this growth continues, he said, “It’s possible that in one hundred years students of history will regard the Civil War and today’s digital revolution as the region’s most defining moments. Robert E. Lee? Steve Case? Could be.”¹³

I don’t think so, bud. Who the heck is Steve Case? Oh, I see: he started this company called America Online. He vanished without a trace because all these changes turned out to be a lot bigger than one guy or company. There have been dozens of Steve Cases since 2000. They come and go. Only the Consolidation endures. (Though, I must say, as I look over that America Online thing in the archives, it was a real step toward consolidation itself, turning the entire Internet into a kind of franchise. A brilliant move.)

Once the Consolidation started, it was hard to stop. The cities began to blend into one another, their suburbs overlapping and interconnecting. It was like some organism growing, growing, feeding on cars and prosperity and the hunger for a nice yard. The satellite movies clearly show it happening—and darned fast.

About ten years ago, of course, people decided to quit fighting it and went ahead and incorporated the biggest city in the world: Washington, the crescent that runs from northern Virginia down to Birmingham. The spine that connects it all used to be interstate highways, where all the original consolidation grew up, but now, of course, that is all devoted to levitation corridors. I’ve not been to the whole city, but, fortunately, if you’ve seen one part of it you’ve seen a lot of it. That’s the point, really, of consolidation.

Some people worried about the effects of all this growth. As early as

1998, more southerners than nonsoutherners said they “always feel rushed for time.”¹⁴

People also noticed that “the country’s divorce rate bulges the most at the Bible Belt. From the land of family values and Baptist preachers, 8 Deep South states rank in the Top 20 when it comes to divorce.”¹⁵

A lot of the countryside was in trouble by this time. The counties up in the mountains, where they actually used to dig rocks out of the ground to burn for energy, were hit hard, but so were lots of other places that were off the interstates, that had weak schools, and that didn’t have any cities nearby. Those places got pretty desperate while other places not far away got rich.¹⁶

Some counties got in such bad shape that they actually built their economies around importing trash and toxic waste from other states. When the climate warming that people had been warning of for a long time finally began, things began to flood and rot. One scary picture from 1999 shows something hard to believe: hurricanes flooded eastern North Carolina, “washing drowned hogs by the thousands down the state’s once pristine streams.” Gross, huh?¹⁷

In fact, the countryside in general got in worse and worse shape. You can see why. Back then people lived scattered all over the place. They chopped up the countryside into tiny little lots and farms, crisscrossed with fences, walls, roads, and such. People somehow believed it was healthier, better, to live isolated like that, to use up all the land for these minuscule places and to drive back and forth to it. It’s a wonder people could feed themselves back then.

Fortunately, things began to change as the countryside got consolidated too. Almost all the good jobs appeared in the cities, and there was very little that people out in the country could do about it. Their

schools began to decline, and their political power went too. Young people didn't want to try to scratch a living out of the farms they inherited, especially when they could sell the farms to people who wanted to extend the suburbs.

A pretty amazing change took place:

“In the 1960's . . . 10 percent still worked in agriculture. During the next decade, the farm population declined by another 50 percent. . . . By the mid 1990's, farmers composed only 2 percent of the southern population.”¹⁸

This was when some very useful people came along, people who wanted to make really efficient farms, where they could produce what all those new people in the South needed to eat. They built larger and larger agricultural units, and they built better and better animals. Scientists cooked up improved cattle, pigs, turkeys, and chickens. They invented ways to grow catfish really quickly and harvest them really efficiently.

Here's what they did with chickens: They built “carefully designed confinement facilities, which housed each bird in an individual compartment, automatically delivered feed, water, and antibiotics in precisely measured amounts at optimal time intervals.” They created chickens that gained three pounds in eight weeks on less than six pounds of feed.¹⁹

We can do a lot better now, of course, with the brainless chickens, and I feel a lot better about eating something that never had a thought, but this was still a big breakthrough, you'll have to admit.

They also developed new and improved fertilizer and new kinds of plants. They got two, four, six, eight times as much crop from every

acre. Here's a quote from the '90s: "Defoliant and herbicides have sprung forward as well, nearly eliminating the need for cultivation during the growing season. It also made possible a no-till farming, allowing virtually no field preparation and, therefore, reduced its soil erosion, planting time, and labor cost. There are now virtually no crop losses from insects such as a boll weevil, corn borer, and Army worm."²⁰

Consolidation made for a much prettier countryside. I love all the endless fields of soybeans, stretching out without any interruption. I love the neat forests, where the trees are perfectly spaced and grow so fast. Those Tyson-Exxon Animalplexes that fill all the spaces between the interstate clusters can really crank out the livestock, with brains and without, and recycle the manure right into their own facilities and use it to grow bok choy, water chestnuts, pomegranates, litchi nuts, papaya, and other popular southern foods. (The big breakthrough came, in my opinion, when they figured out how to make dynamite tofucue.)

Of course, when they started building those giant ag units, and when all the jobs were in the city, something had to go. Scattered among all those inefficient little farms were places they called "towns." Basically, judging from the pictures, it looks like they were primitive interstate clusters without the convenience. They had a few stores—a lot of them not even franchises—and lots of things like antique shops, barbershops, and grocery stores. Some people are just stubborn or lazy.

Anyway, those places began to die off pretty quickly. First, they became outposts of the franchises. Some crummy franchises, those that couldn't make it along the interstates, moved into towns, or to the edge of towns, and people seemed glad to see them. They began to go there for food and groceries and hardware and stuff, kind of practicing for consolidation.

The big watershed there, of course, was Wal-to-Wal Mart, though on these old pictures it looks like it began with just one “wal.” People liked being treated just like anybody else. You could go there and buy embarrassing stuff, and nobody would know you or ask why you needed something like that. You didn’t have to stop and jaw with somebody your mother knew or whatever. And they were cheap. People always like that. (The worse thing about Wal-Mart was their goofy smiley face logo that appears all over their stuff back at the turn of the century. It’s hard to believe people fell for that. They were just simpler back then, not quite as smart as we are, I guess.)

Some people complained about there just being a few kinds of stores repeated over and over on the landscape, but I fail to see what’s so great about having to hunt for stuff you want to buy, paying different prices for it, and so on. People can be nostalgic for the darnedest things.

Fortunately, they started figuring out how to have fun back then. People began to build consolidated entertainment, though, of course, they didn’t have that word for it then.

As early as 2000, the South was filled with places to go to get real concentrated, guaranteed fun. They have a map here in the archive. There were amusement parks of one kind or another from King’s Dominion in Virginia to a sort of country-music heaven in Branson, Missouri. There was Orlando, of course, when it was just a tiny thing compared with the world center of culture it now is, with Disney University and all. And there was Spoleto in Charleston and Mardi Gras in New Orleans, and the great beaches from the Outer Banks all the way around to the Texas Gulf. (It’s hard to believe that at one time California’s beaches were considered cooler than the South’s—not to be confused with merely colder—even before the Quake of 2014.)

But my favorite old-fashioned early-consolidated fun place was in the mountains. It was called Dollywood. “Dolly” was apparently some kind of singer or something, but that doesn’t matter. Just listen to their statement of vision off what they called “websites” back then. It’s so early consolidationist!

Vision: Our stated reason for existence is to create memories worth repeating for our customers through quality entertainment and fun delivered by genuinely friendly and caring people in a wholesome family environment where American traditions are openly cherished and delivered with the heartfelt emotions so naturally projected by Dolly herself. . . .

All Unconditionally Guaranteed: Quite simply, that means that every day we stand behind every product, service and personal experience you have at Dollywood and guarantee it to your total satisfaction. Should you be dissatisfied in any way during your visit, contact any Dollywood Host or Hostess in the theme park.²¹

In some ways, we haven’t improved on that. It’s kind of like the Declaration of Independence, where they sort of nail something the first time.

A place not far from here, Stone Mountain, had some cool ideas. In a great consolidationist move, they built a place to re-create the small-town and farm South that was disappearing every day! And they did it with style. Get this: “The ‘four-dimensional’ theater will open in 2002 and will show a film about the South, the smell of cornbread filling the arena and mist falling on the audience when it rains on the screen. In 2004, a Reconstruction-era Atlanta main street will be recreated.” That was so ahead of its time. (Note to self: Do some research on what “cornbread” is. I’m guessing it was bread somehow made out of corn, but that seems unlikely.)²²

A lot of the South became a great recreation area, especially once you got rid of those little farms; they made great golf courses, with the quaint ranch houses, satellite dishes, barns, and such as interesting hazards. It was about then, I guess, that golf became the great southern sport. You can play it year-round down here. It's funny that it began with old guys in funny clothes actually driving vehicles on the courses, since today it's the very best athletes who play it. Now that the courses stretch over many miles, and you have to run from hole to hole, it's becoming what it should have been all along.

A lot of people who had left by the millions at the first chance early in the twentieth century began to come back South to see where their black ancestors had lived and where the events of the Great Freedom had been enacted. The South turned out to be great at tourism, and people flocked here from all over the world, as they still do, of course.²³

It's kind of funny, but just when this consolidation was really taking off some southern people celebrated something that had happened back in the ancient days of the 1800s, the Civil War. To some people, watching the South change so fast—with black people getting political power, and the cities spreading and all—they thought they'd better hold on to what they thought made the South the South. They didn't realize that the South had always changed and always would change and that trying to grab one part of that and call it the real South wasn't going to work.

But I guess these folks just hadn't seen enough of the Consolidation to realize how deep it was going to go, and so they made a big deal out of the Confederate flag and stuff. I never really got into ancient history that much, so I don't understand all that, like how they could want to fly the Confederate flag and the United States flag from the same flagpole, since I thought the point of the Confederacy was to

leave the United States. But I guess I missed that day in school or whatever.

For a long time people thought that the South had to be all about that part of ancient history or it wasn't about anything. A lot of their entertainment and tourism and stuff dressed itself up like ancient days. I mean you can still see that, but it's kind of like acting like everybody in England wore armor or whatever. History is happening all the time and it's a shame to waste any of it by just getting caught up in one little part of it—especially the worst part!

I guess that's why the chambers of commerce and stuff finally began to resist those white folks who always wanted to talk about the Confederates and the flags and all. Pretty soon people began to see that they lost more customers than they gained with that. They started building museums and monuments to other southern times, like the Great Freedom. They built entertainment villages that reconstructed life back in the 1960s. They have people reenacting sit-ins and marches, all in authentic outfits that some people spent a lot of time getting just right. That's hard these days, when it's tough to get blue denim anymore after people got so sick of so-called natural fabrics around the turn of the century and replaced it with the synth.

Anyway, while all this was going on during the Great Consolidation, the churches had been doing great. The churches had been really segregated for a long time, but by 1998 “about 70 percent of whites and 60 percent of blacks said they worshipped with people of other races.”²⁴

Enormous churches began to go up, bigger than Wal-to-Wal Marts. The biggest, of course, was the Southern Baptist Pentecostal Ecumenical Brotherhood, which pulled in all different sorts of people.

But you had all other kinds of combinations, too, with just about all the churches on earth setting up southern outposts.

In fact, the churches were real pioneers in consolidating the South. All those new people flooding into the South, whatever so-called race they were, went into the churches. The churches welcomed them and gave them a warm place to feel at home. The southern churches had always been built around bringing in new members, and all these newcomers were perfect for them.

Here's a quote I should use for the paper. A minister from Tennessee said that "the most innovative idea in merchandising has been the shopping center which enables the customer to park conveniently and have his complete shopping needs satisfied at one location." The church, he argued, should offer as many activities as possible—"buses to bring people to church; nurseries; Sunday school classes for all ages; radio and television programs; publications; the cassette tape ministry; and classes, programs, and counseling for singles, the elderly, the poor, the sick, the imprisoned, and the 'bereaved.'"²⁵

The churches began to take over a lot of what the government used to do. If you belonged to the church, you were taken care of. They built their own schools, where they could teach whatever they wanted to, even their own kind of science, and where people could pray at ball games and pep rallies and such as well as in class and at assembly and in between. Those schools got richer and richer, while the schools for people who didn't belong to the church got real weak.

That's when the schools became franchised. Now that the Learn-a-Lot Company competes with the Knowledge-R-Us schools, everything is a lot better. Now, kids who can pass the Standards of Learning tests (which they have to do before they can get married, of course) are turned out like hamburgers at the very best consolidated restau-

rants. (I'm really glad I'm a Learn-a-Lot kid myself. Our golf teams are a lot better, for one thing.)

The prisons were even easier than the schools to franchise. There had been some whining by dinosaur types about so-called public schools being better than the church or franchised ones, but they whined less about the prisons. Incarceration Incorporated's monthly reports showed their numbers way up, almost steadily. They got people in those prisons and kept them there where they could be improved, ready to live in a consolidated society or at least to stay out of the way.

Gaming really helped pay for what little government was left after the schools and prisons had been franchised. Every state except one or two back in 2000 had gambling in the South. My favorite was South Carolina, where they saw the way to consolidation early on. Here's something from a newspaper article from back in '99: "no state's can compare with South Carolina's video poker operation, and with about 3.8 million people, there are more than 29,600 video poker machines. . . . Video poker games can be found everywhere around the state: in mom-and-pop country stores, service stations, bowling alleys and beauty parlors, and in clusters that are called malls, parlors, palaces or game rooms."²⁶

That was so cool, because it was just like franchises: you could have gambling everywhere, all the time, and it was always the same. You didn't have to go out of your way or confront weird stuff.

But the gambling people, of course, made a big mistake. They got tangled up in politics. Or, it appears from these old news shows that I'm scanning, politics got tangled up in gambling.

It wasn't that the gamblers or the politicians were looking for trouble. They knew they had it good, and they didn't want to rock the boat.

A lot of people wanted the government to “get out of the way,” as they put it. (Note to self: Did they also want to get rid of themselves, or just other people in the government? That’s not clear from the speeches and stuff I see here.)

A lot of the people moving to the South back around ’oo were retired, back when people worked as hard as they could for their whole lives and then suddenly stopped, as unlikely as that sounds.

Those retired folks were generally pretty well off. They had savings, and they owned their own houses. But they had already raised their kids, and they didn’t much like being taxed to educate other people’s kids and take care of poor people and such. They thought the churches and franchises could do that better than the government.

So then came the biggest political event of the Consolidated South: the Gambling Alliance. Dr. John Roulette formed the party in 2034, with the backing of a lot people. His idea was simple: Abolish taxes and let the government pay for itself with the proceeds from gambling. Follow the South Carolina model and put not only video poker but every other kind of game in every nook and cranny. Keep them running all the time. Follow the Mississippi model and put up casinos in the abandoned farmland outside of cities. Get outsiders to come in and pay to play on the machines.

A lot of people loved the idea, and Roulette won the governorship of the Consolidated South. Dr. Roulette was very persuasive, especially with all those ads.

But we all know what happened. It turns out that gambling wasn’t that firm a foundation for even the little bit of government that was left. A lot of people who had gambled the most ran out of money—even the older folks lost their houses. They started hanging

around the edges of the agricultural units, and some people even tried growing their own food. Some really desperate people set up their own little “businesses,” selling stuff themselves without the approval of the franchises. Some people taught their children themselves or let them go without schooling altogether. Incarceration Incorporated had almost more work than they could handle, tracking people down and sending them off.

Governor Roulette cracked down as much as he could, but, ironically, he didn't have enough power left to get things under control. He had to turn to Wal-to-Wal Mart and Tyson-Exxon and even Knowledge-R-U's to restore order. After the Seven Bad Years they kind of got things back under control.

Some people say that we'll never get out of debt and that there are just too many Incarceration Incorporated officers everywhere, but I remain hopeful. I have my whole life in front of me. After all, I know that the South, back in the ancient days, went through hard times before. “Tomorrow is another day”—that's the motto of the Consolidated South. And tomorrow I have to turn these notes into a presentation, so I guess I'd better get to sleep. Night.

NOTES

I would like to thank Scott Matthews for his research assistance and advice for this essay.

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Contributors

EDWARD L. AYERS is the Hugh P. Kelly Professor of History and the Dean of Arts and Sciences at the University of Virginia. He is the author of *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the Nineteenth-Century American South* (1984), *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction* (1992) (a finalist for both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize), coeditor of *The Oxford Book of the American South* (1997), and coauthor of *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions* (1996). Ayers's current work is "The Valley of the Shadow: Two Communities in the American Civil War."