

2004

# Borders, Boundaries, and Edges: A Southern Autobiography

Edward L. Ayers

*University of Richmond*, [eayers@richmond.edu](mailto:eayers@richmond.edu)Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/history-faculty-publications>Part of the [Public History Commons](#)

## Recommended Citation

Ayers, Edward L. "Borders, Boundaries, and Edges." In *Shapers of Southern History: Autobiographical Reflections*, edited by John B. Boles, 311-331. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the History at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact [scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu](mailto:scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu).

# Borders, Boundaries, and Edges

## *A Southern Autobiography*

EDWARD L. AYERS

I should be a better southerner than I am. I have the credentials of family and birthplace, of formative experiences and education, of residence and childrearing, of commitment in scholarship and teaching. And yet, like many in the academy, I stand at some distance from the white southern majority in everything from politics and religion to taste in music and food. Despite my southern background, I have to work to imagine the perspectives of all kinds of southerners in the past and in the present. All the history I have written grows from that effort.

I was born in the mountains of North Carolina of parents who were textile-mill operatives at the time. My father, Tommy Ayers, and my mother, Billie Lou Buckner, had known their days of working tobacco and hooking rugs. My father, although only twenty-one when I was born, was a veteran of the fighting in Korea. The first year of my life we lived on a farm in Micaville, North Carolina, where the red-clay driveway grew so slippery that my mother feared sliding into the ditch every time it rained.

When I was three, in 1956, we moved about an hour and a half north, over Iron Mountain, to Kingsport, Tennessee. There, both my parents worked at the Kingsport Press, one of several industrial enterprises in the booming little city. The town had been designed from the ground up about forty years before by a number of northern-based corporations eager to take advantage of the nearby resources, including the "Anglo-Saxon" labor force. The city fathers hired a leading city planner from Massachusetts, adopted a city-manager form of government, boosted themselves to the press and investors, and prospered. Kingsport called itself "The Model City" and believed it. In the 1950s this Appalachian outpost was a humming, thriving place, with broad streets, a busy downtown, and high hopes. It looked to be a good place to raise a family, and so my parents came.

My parents always worked very hard. One of my first memories was riding at night in the car between shift changes — probably at eleven at night, the beginning of the graveyard shift — sitting in the backseat while mom came in to work and dad took me back home. My mother worked at a linotype machine, my father at a printing press. I recall taking a tour and proudly watching my dad, handsome, wiry, young, and smiling, working a machine that picked up large sheets of paper and swept them high in the air. The press published complicated projects such as the *World Book Encyclopedia*, and I spent many hours poring over the set we bought on discount, virtually memorizing the sections on “Automobiles” and admiring the layered plastic overlays that revealed complexity otherwise invisible.

When it came time to go to school, I caught the bus to Andrew Johnson Elementary. We didn’t talk much about what Andrew Johnson actually did, but we knew he was a president of the United States and that he had grown up not far away from Kingsport, about thirty miles down the highway in Greeneville. I loved school and everything about it. In the second grade I had a beautiful young teacher who led us in singing every morning. One song had acting that went along with it: “Stoop down, bend down, pick a bale of cotton.” No cotton grew in East Tennessee, and I had never seen cotton plants, but the song and this teacher made it sound like fun.

This teacher liked me, for we shared a high energy level and a certain dramatic inclination. She chose me to appear with the sixth-graders’ glee club, putting on a big show for parents. For this show, she covered my face in burnt cork, gave me a tambourine, and made me a tall hat of white cardboard. My job, and that of Eddie Anderson at the other end of the stage, was to beat our tambourine along with the songs of the South performed by the bigger kids. At one point, under the hot lights and between songs, I took off my hat for a moment and was surprised — but pleased, I discovered — by a wave of good-natured laughter from the audience. The burnt cork stopped in a straight line across the middle of my forehead, where the hat had covered.

That would have been about 1960. So far as I know, no one at Andrew Johnson Elementary, segregated as it was, had any problems with a minstrel show. The Civil Rights movement must have seemed pretty far away from the white people of Kingsport at that point. The little city was about 5 percent black, the population carefully segregated. I saw black kids only rarely, though I do recall the marching band of Frederick Douglass High during the Fourth of July parade downtown.

Though we lived in a Republican district in Appalachia and in a quite modern young city, the culture of white supremacy thoroughly saturated us. People I knew did not hesitate to identify bright colors as “nigger colors” and big sedans as “nigger cars.” It was not uncommon to see signs that caricatured black men enjoying watermelon. Downtown, signs identified the colored entrance to the Strand and the State Theaters around to the side, leading to the balcony. When we white boys fought, we charged that two on one was nigger fun; when we had to decide the last one chosen for ball, eenie meenie minee moe ended with a nigger’s toe. When we wanted to frighten our younger siblings, we told them a big nigger was coming to get them.

We were Southern Baptists and I liked church. An early photograph shows me smiling in front of a portrait of Jesus, sitting at a table with an open Bible before me, white shirt, black jacket, and black bowtie, hair neatly combed with a gentle wave on top. I was saved when I was eleven and baptized at Litz Manor Baptist Church. I joined the Royal Ambassadors and studied my Sunday school lessons. I loved the Cub Scouts and then the Boy Scouts, also based at church. The idea of a clearly defined hierarchy of effort and accomplishment, marked by merit badges and insignia, appealed to me. I became senior patrol leader and was elected to the Order of the Arrow, an honor society that required a truly challenging “ordeal” of initiation, far off in the mountains. (I would write more of the rigors we faced, but I am pledged on my Scout’s honor not to reveal any details.)

Much of this, except the minstrel show, could have happened anywhere in America in the late 1950s and early 1960s. But we had a sense of being different. We all knew that despite our extreme coolness, with our surfer shorts, Maltese cross necklaces, and whatever other fad came and went, we were hillbillies in the eyes of the world. The “Beverly Hillbillies” were the stars of television then, and we recognized that the show made fun of us. Even though the show had to arrange for Jed and his clan to come from Texas so that an accidental oil discovery could set the ridiculous plots in motion, the characters talked a lot about Tennessee and had kin from there. And they talked in caricatures of our accents; we knew people who said “see-ment,” just like Granny did when she talked about the “cement pond,” the swimming pool. We saw that people made jokes about us — right on television — just like we made jokes about black people. Friends came back from vacations up north or in Florida and reported that people outside the mountains wondered if we wore shoes and had indoor plumbing.

While I was quite young my mother went to college in Johnson City and became a fifth-grade teacher. By all accounts, she was a wonderful teacher for the next thirty years. Kids who ran into us at the store were star-struck; parents thanked her profusely; former students recalled her warmly decades after they left Sullivan Elementary or Rock Springs. She went back to teaching quickly after my brother and sister were born.

My father continued to work at the Kingsport Press until a strike came in the mid-1960s. A union member, Dad walked the picket line from midnight until eight in the morning and stuck with his friends as long as he could. But the fifty-dollar-a-week strike benefits didn't go far with three kids. Rather than scab, he just left the press altogether. Fortunately, he had a good idea of something else he could do.

Dad became a car salesman. He could talk better than anyone I ever knew, with jokes and cussing and logic deployed in just the right measure for his audience. He specialized in used cars, which carried more profit; his business card reminded people that "Everybody Drives a Used Car," since a car became "used" as soon as it left the lot, losing much of its value. Dad worked on commission, which meant that some days he might walk the freezing or blazing lot from eight in the morning till six and not make anything; but other days he might sell three cars and would be a lot of fun at dinnertime. He and Mom moved from the tract house where we'd lived throughout my years at elementary school and into a subdivision named, for some reason, Colonial Heights.

Dad and Mom loved fast cars and always drove as new, and as hot, a car as they could afford. NASCAR racing was the only sport in which my father was interested, and racing formed a great bond between us; we both admired Richard Petty and saw him several times at the little track outside of Asheville, North Carolina, and then at the new steeply banked half-mile track in Bristol. On a vacation trip to Myrtle Beach, we stopped at Darlington and I climbed up into the starter's box and imagined that I waved the checkered flag over the electric-blue car #43. (I liked Fireball Roberts and Rex White quite a bit, too, but they drove a Ford and a Chevy, respectively, and we were Mopar guys, hemi guys. Dad, after all, worked at the Plymouth dealership, and we understood loyalty.)

After growing up absorbed in Scouts, Sunday school, and cars, I was hit hard by rock music in the 1960s. It was not that some slumbering talent suddenly awakened, for I could neither play nor sing; every effort at both revealed to me

that my love of performance would not be satisfied by becoming the next Hendrix or Morrison. Instead, improbably enough, rock music opened to me a kind of proto-scholarship. I virtually memorized every issue of *Rolling Stone* when it came out (it seemed a lot more subversive then, printed on newsprint and boasting four-letter words and ads for drug paraphernalia), and I spent hours with my best friend poring over album covers and lyrics. That friend, Mike Harris, precociously sophisticated, taught me not to laugh at things I didn't understand. He told me about Captain Beefheart and Frank Zappa, Miles Davis and John Coltrane, music we didn't hear on the radio.

When, in English class, we were told to write a report about a poet, I immediately chose Dylan Thomas because I'd read that Bob Dylan had named himself after him. I went to the public library and found not only Thomas's difficult poetry but also books that told me about Thomas's exciting life of drink and fallibility, and that explained the poetry. I loved this — the context, the explanation, the adding of layers of meaning. I wrote a better paper than I really needed to.

My father would not countenance long hair — I knew through desperate and prolonged debate on the subject — and so, to my disappointment, I looked quite neat for the late 1960s. To complete the image, I edited the student newspaper, played the role of a stuffy professor type in *Up the Down Staircase*, and was a student-council leader. Underneath, however, I knew myself to be a rebel in some way I had not yet learned to express or embody. I sympathized with, identified with, those who struggled for civil rights on television and those who resisted the war in Vietnam. But those struggles seemed far away from Colonial Heights and Sullivan Central High School. I switched to a friend's church, where a young pastor led honest and interesting discussions about the issues of the time, but the debates only led me farther away from religion.

History did not interest me. It was just a boring textbook and a dull coach, a wasted hour. I lived four miles from the great Warriors' Path of the American Indians, five miles from a TVA dam, ten miles from a place where Daniel Boone had hunted, and within easy driving distance of the Cumberland Gap, the coal fields, the haunts of Parson Brownlow, the center of southern abolitionism, and all the other wonders of my fascinating part of the country. I was oblivious to it all. I cared nothing about, and knew nothing of, the Civil War. We had no statues and no memories of that conflict, divided as we had been among ourselves during the Civil War years.

Though I loved to hike and camp in the mountains, my friends and I laughed at country music and had no idea that we went to high school fifteen miles from the birthplace of that music. We liked it when the Byrds or Dylan did country, but the real stuff we saw on Saturday afternoon television — Porter Wagoner with Dolly Parton in shiny outfits and bouffant hair — struck us as everything we wanted to leave behind. We were children of the Age of Aquarius, citizens of the world, open to sitars and African drums, distrustful and disdainful of the politics, style, and accents of the culture all around us. Some kids we went to school with belonged to that culture in ways we did not. I remember one friend, a quiet tow-headed boy, singing “Wildwood Flower” one day at recess, pronouncing “hair” just like Mother Maybelle Carter did. He was amazed that I’d never heard of the song.

Despite my obtuseness, I had long been unintentionally preparing for what would become my life’s calling. The most memorable place of my childhood was the home of my paternal grandparents, Fred and Dell Ayers. They lived in Yancey County, North Carolina, where my parents had grown up, high in the mountains. They had long enjoyed running water and an indoor bathroom, but they heated the house with a coal stove that my grandmother had to keep filled one bucket at a time from the woodshed. They did not have a telephone until I was fifteen. The road out front was dirt and, to my grandmother’s persistent annoyance, supplied a never-ending cloud of dust that settled over the porch at the side of the house and worked its way through the screen door.

My grandmother had been born in that house (built during the Civil War, I was told) back in 1897, and then she and my grandfather had moved there in the late 1920s after a brief time in West Virginia. My grandfather (“Paw,” I called him for some reason) used to joke about how run-down the place had been when they moved in; the briars had grown so thick, he said, that the rabbits had to wear leather jackets. Fred Ayers was funny and sly, a carpenter and a rounder. He was gone from home for months at a time, working on big building projects up in Washington, D.C. When he returned home, he chafed at the limitations of the farm. He gambled and drank hard and would come home late, loud, and mean. I hid his liquor because I hated him when he was drunk and tormented my grandmother. When he was sober I loved him.

Dell Ayers — “Grandmaw” — was about five feet tall but tough. She could bully cows through gates and snap the heads off chickens. I loved her deeply, and we spent a lot of time together while my grandfather was gone. I would stay

at her house for weeks at a time in the summer. She spoiled me, letting me sleep late and then watch cartoons and the Three Stooges on the one channel they received on their black-and-white television. She made my favorite apple pies and biscuits. She would walk with me all over the steep hills of the farm, going to the blackberry patch, showing me the origins of the spring, climbing high to look down on Cane River.

At night, after watching whatever was on ABC (it was strange to see “The Jetsons” in such a setting), we would read the Bible together. It seemed that she especially loved the Book of Revelation, which scared the dickens out of me with its images of the apocalypse and retribution for sins large and small. We’d go to bed early and I would lie there imagining Jesus descending through the moonlit clouds and the dead arising from the family cemetery up on top of the hill. I worried about the Matchbox car I had taken from one of my friends. And I worried whether Paw would get to go to Heaven with us when the Day of Judgment came.

On Sunday Grandmaw and I went to Riverside Baptist Church. She couldn’t drive, so we would have to hope a neighbor would stop by. One time Paw took us. He got up, shaved, put on his nice blue double-breasted suit, parked his truck in front of the church, and then leaned conspicuously against the front fender, reading the Asheville paper while others walked by into church.

The church was something very different from what I saw back in Colonial Heights. At home, everything was decorous and organized. At Riverside, people sometimes cried and talked in tongues. In the singing, I joined in with the other males on the echoing lines in the hymns, imagining that I was hitting profound bass notes. And I remember shaking hands with one of Grandmaw’s friends and her comment when she noticed no calluses; “You aren’t a farm boy, are you?” she asked kindly.

I was not. Whenever I visited Grandmaw and Paw I felt a deep connection to the place. I knew every stretch of the creek, every corner of the barn, smokehouse, and corncrib. I handled every old tool in the woodshed and every object and scrap of paper in the cabinets around the house. I fooled around in the fields, picking a few worms off the tobacco and stacking a few tobacco sticks. I went fox hunting with my grandfather, sitting around the fire listening to the dogs chase across the ridges as they bayed in excitement and anticipation.

But I was not a farmer. I did not really belong in Burnsville. Living with an elderly lady, I imagined that the whole county was like that, behind the times.



I had a wonderful aunt and uncle who lived in town, and they had a boy just one year younger than me. He played Little League and had several channels on his television and visited Asheville. But he did talk a little different from me and didn't live in Kingsport, where we had a McDonald's and several theaters and factories. I pictured us as farther apart than we really were. And I suspect that he played up the difference, too, amusing himself with his cousin who knew so little about country life.

To me, Burnsville stood for my family's past. It was close enough to visit and yet far enough away to embody things abandoned. In this, it was no different from the grandparents' farms of many of my generation of southerners. It showed us how far we had come, how quickly things had changed. But that farm did not feel like "history." It was associated with no events, no public acknowledgment. It was just there, fading before our eyes, a lost America. I didn't know what to do with it, and so I just held it close to my heart but away from any future I imagined for myself.

That future, I thought in some vague way, might involve writing. I got a job in a local bookstore when I was sixteen, working for \$1.80 an hour. Straightening up the paperbacks and taking them with me to lunch or even home in the evenings, not bending the covers, I learned of Norman Mailer and Philip Roth, of Saul Bellow and Tom Wolfe, of the *Whole Earth Catalog* and the *I Ching*, of Kurt Vonnegut and William Brautigan. I also found, in the classics section, William Faulkner and Thomas Wolfe. I read at every chance and couldn't wait for college.

The University of Tennessee lay about ninety minutes away in Knoxville. I, along with all my friends, intended to go there. The university had open admissions and was virtually free, so there was really no great suspense or deliberation. I applied nowhere else. UT was big and had whatever I would need, I felt sure. I spoke to a reporter at the local newspaper, and he steered me away from journalism school. He told me that I could learn to write in lots of majors, that I should instead study a subject so that I would have something to say. I decided that American Studies would do the trick, since it was basically a disciplined version of what I was studying anyway in *Rolling Stone* and on record jackets and in the borrowed paperbacks. I wanted to be Tom Wolfe, offering hip commentary on the America around me. And the back of *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* told me he had a Ph.D. in American Studies.

The University of Tennessee in 1971 was hazy with pot smoke, loud music,

and too many kids loose for the first time in big concrete dorms. I loved it. And in my very first quarter I found my calling. I somehow ended up taking Honors Western Civilization with a famous young professor on campus, Richard Marius. Marius blew me away. He had grown up in East Tennessee and had gone to UT before attending Yale Divinity School (later declaring himself an atheist) and then graduate school at Yale in history. He knew everything in every language and in every time, it seemed. He wrote learned biographies of Martin Luther and Thomas More, but he had also just published a novel set in our very own East Tennessee in the nineteenth century. The book was out in paperback and looked just like those of Bellow and Mailer and Roth and Wolfe, with glowing reviews on the back. To make it all even better, Marius wrote a weekly editorial for the student newspaper in which he attacked the war in Vietnam and silly university policies.

I couldn't believe Richard Marius's life. People got paid to read books and talk? And he was funny and lighthearted as well as profound. I craved whatever it was that Richard Marius possessed, whatever spark that fired him. Over the next three years I pursued the alluring if vague goal of being a professor, a professor of American Studies. I took mainly literature and confined my United States history to the twentieth century. I was more interested in sociology, philosophy, art history, and economics than history.

And it never occurred to me to study the South. The South, certainly of the nineteenth century, possessed none of the things that had drawn me to academic life in the first place, the rich cultural stew of books, ideas, and music. The South seemed to me to be defined by poverty and injustice, by its very lack of history. I did find James Agee fascinating, for he had lived on my very street in Knoxville and he had written fiction, journalism, and film criticism before dying young. But as for the earlier stuff of the South, what was there to study? In the meantime, while I was a freshman and barely eighteen, my number came up high for the last draft for Vietnam. History had passed me by again, just as it had with civil rights and the summer of love. I seemed a few years late for everything interesting.

In the summer between my second and third years at UT, I worked for a carnival. I lived in my car for an entire summer and worked on the Sky Wheel, a double Ferris wheel. I carried a box of paperback novels with me and felt pretty sure that I was living as Jack Kerouac would have lived. I had never been north of the Tennessee line, and this carnival took me through Delaware, Maryland, New York, and Pennsylvania. The work was hard, but I enjoyed running the

ride with loud 8-tracks of Steppenwolf and the Doobie Brothers blasting from enormous speakers twelve hours a day as I “bucked tubs”—loaded riders.

I worked every day but two for the entire summer, when a new friend of mine, Clyde, a young black guy from Flint, Michigan, and I played hooky from the fair in Buffalo to go see Niagara Falls. The docked pay was worth it. Clyde and I got pulled over for no particular reason, and the policeman, looking at my Tennessee driver’s license, commented that I would not be riding around with a black boy back home, now would I? Clyde became my best friend in the carnival, and he introduced me to the music of Al Green, who soon started singing from the big speakers on the Sky Wheel, giving it a lot more class.

On the way home from the carnival I went out of my way to visit New Haven and Yale University. A professor at UT had told me it was the best place for American Studies and, just as important, Tom Wolfe’s Ph.D. in American Studies came from Yale. And, of course, Richard Marius had gone there.

Yale appeared to be everything I thought it would be. I was unabashed when a couple of students walking their Irish setter in their blazers informed me, after a few minutes of conversation in which I told them that I hoping to talk with the head of the American Studies program the next day, that I might want to clean up my act a bit beforehand, that I looked like Huckleberry Finn. I’m sure I did. I had a Carlos Santana halo of hair, uncut all summer, and Neil Young sideburns. I had a dark tan and had been living in a car. I was probably pretty rough looking, even if I did blow enough money to stay at the Holiday Inn that evening.

The next morning I sat nervously waiting for the chairman of the American Studies program. The Hall of Graduate Studies looked just like *The Paper Chase*, a recent movie about Harvard Law School starring a young actor to whom I imagined I bore a resemblance. The walls were covered with dark oak, and the windows looked like those in a cathedral (I assumed, never having seen one); copies of *American Quarterly* were stacked next to the chair where I waited. I was pretty sure I didn’t belong in such a place.

When Professor Sidney E. Ahlstrom arrived, I was a little surprised. He had recently won the National Book Award for his *Religious History of the American People* (1972), but he didn’t look much like what I had expected. No pipe, no elbow patches. Instead, he was about five and a half feet tall, with a crew cut, plaid shorts, sandals with socks, and a plastic daisy on his briefcase. Professor Ahlstrom was kind but said about all he could say to a guy who showed up from Tennessee with wild hair, no prior warning, and no record to present: do very

well in your courses and get good letters of recommendation and get a good GRE (whatever that was) and we'll be happy to look at your file.

Back at UT, I met my future wife, Abby Brown. Quiet and calm, lovely and self-possessed, the daughter of a pediatrician and homemaker in Kingsport, training to become a teacher, Abby brought to me things missing in myself, a grace I did not possess. When I graduated from UT the next summer, Abby and I married within weeks of finishing my courses. She was going to get her master's degree in Johnson City, at East Tennessee State, where my mother had gone for her degree. For our honeymoon we drove to New York and camped in Maine. Freshly armed, in the middle of a bruising recession, with a B.A. in American Studies, twenty-one and looking even younger than that, I wasn't counting on much of a job in Johnson City. Sure enough, I worked in the credit department of a local tire store and in a factory putting electric heaters in boxes.

But I lucked out and got a position I applied for at the state employment agency: the director of the Johnson City Youth Center. My job was to recruit "problem youth" to the center (a concrete-block shell of a building) and then steer them to job training (which never appeared). I did the first part very well. All it took was free food collected from a local bakery, free pool, free ping pong, free basketball, and free music. Abby helped me paint the place, and I had a poster printed: "No Hassle, No Bull, Just a Place to Be." We soon had a regular group of kids: black and white, male and female. I spent most of my time hanging out with them, learning more about crime, neglect, dysfunction, and broken self-image than I wanted to know. Two kids who had just gotten married, neither of them yet eighteen and both afraid to go home, came to the Youth Center as the best place they could think of to celebrate. And yet I also learned that such kids could be smart, funny, hopeful, and willing to work hard. Labels didn't seem to fit very well.

In the meantime, I sent in my applications to graduate school in American Studies (not history) and read everything I thought might be useful, from Edgar Allan Poe to Daniel Boorstin to Thomas Pynchon. I systematically worked my way through decades of *American Quarterly*, a profoundly disorienting experience that left me sure that I knew absolutely nothing. Despite my ignorance, Yale took me and even offered a fellowship. I was thrilled, of course, not realizing just how unlikely it was that they admitted me.

Abby finished her degree that spring of 1975, and we loaded up a U-Haul and drove to New Haven. My father helped drive up the interstate, and his first words after we found our way to the married student housing complex near the

abandoned Olin plant were these: "I wouldn't live here for a million dollars. I'll drive the truck if you want to head back home." We didn't, and we soon began to settle in.

Overnight, Abby and I became southerners. People continually commented on our accents, and some professed not to be able to understand us. When Abby ordered a lemonade our first day in New Haven, the man behind the counter, puzzled, said "ham and eggs?" When an Israeli couple across the hall had us over for dinner along with a couple from Ohio, the Ohio folks asked the Israelis if they could hear any difference in our accents. In all friendliness, the Israelis acknowledged that they could indeed because "We watch *Hee-Haw* all the time." We smiled weakly. Abby and I came to think of ourselves not only as hillbillies but also as southerners. It was easy to traffic in imagined exoticism at dinners with our friends and, I must admit, I did, telling every colorful story I could conjure. Many of them were largely true.

But I still did not want to study the South. I studied European intellectual history (using the Russian I had tortured myself with at Tennessee), American religious history with Professor Ahlstrom, and American literature. I did not take C. Vann Woodward's class or the class on the colonial era taught by Edmund Morgan. Instead, I studied with two brand-new professors who arrived the same year I did: Richard Fox and Paul Johnson. Fox was brilliant, iconoclastic, and political; Johnson, by contrast, was quiet, funny, and sarcastic. He allowed Elliott Gorn and me, taking an independent study with him in the new field of American social history, to read his manuscript, what would become *A Shopkeeper's Millennium*, about the Second Great Awakening in Rochester, New York.<sup>1</sup> It blew me away. I had not known that one could do history like this, history of people who left few records, people who lived through profound social change without knowing it.

I began to think that that this was what I wanted to do, this new social history. I suddenly learned of a burgeoning field of which I had been unaware, of "the history of the inarticulate" and of "quantitative methods." And I began to think that it would be exciting to apply these techniques to people and places I had known. In the meantime, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*; *American Slavery, American Freedom*; and *Time on the Cross* appeared to adulation and intense discussion, making southern history the center of action.<sup>2</sup>

Though my interest had been sparked, it took months to unfold, and I still did not take Professor Woodward's class on the antebellum South the fall of my second year, my last year of course work. I noted that the students ahead of me

whom I most admired, especially Jackson Lears, were advisees of David Brion Davis. They were doing the sort of cultural history I had come to Yale to do. Professor Davis had been on leave my first year, and I had heard over and over again of his brilliance. He had come to Yale not long before, and his overwhelming *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* had just been published.<sup>3</sup> My classmates and I, along with everyone else who read the book, were in awe. Though relatively young, self-effacing, and exceedingly kind, David Davis had a full dark beard and seemed as imposing as any intellectual I could imagine. We could find no label to define him. He stood above American history, even above European history. I determined that I had to work with him, whatever my dissertation might be about.

Though Davis wrote of the South, among so many other things, he was not a southernist. And when I took my first class with Davis, I wrote a paper on William James, whom I had admired since my undergraduate days. The more I read of James the more I felt an affinity for him. He hated closed systems, hated certainty, hated arrogance; he loved process, possibility, and humility in the face of others' experience. Though our backgrounds could not have been any more different, with his origins in the New England elite and his training throughout Europe, I imagined myself a related spirit to James.

In the meantime, C. Vann Woodward was retiring, and I signed up for his class on the New South, the last class he would teach. I knew almost nothing of southern history, and most of the other students in the class had already worked together for a semester on the Old South. Woodward was reserved, weary of the battles of academic life, it seemed, and grieving for a son lost to cancer at the age of twenty-one, but the books he assigned crackled with life. And none burned with more energy than his own *Origins of the New South*, written twenty-five years earlier.<sup>4</sup> I could not believe how great the book was — for my money, better even than our Bible of social history, E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*.<sup>5</sup> Woodward wrote in a way that took my breath away. There was no need to study fiction to read literature, I decided; this was history *as* literature. Professor Woodward was kind to me but took no special interest in this kid from Tennessee. He had seen generations of southern white boys come through Yale, imagining that they were the first to reckon with regional difference.

Visiting my grandparents during graduate school, full of a new self-awareness of the history all around me, I was stunned when my grandfather referred to an ancient apple tree on the place as "Kizzie's tree." *Roots* had been

the rage on television in 1977, but surely he had not watched it. In *Roots*, Kizzie was the daughter of Kunta Kinte, the lead character, a first-generation African American. I asked Paw why he called the tree by that name. He told me that “back in slave time, a nigger woman named Kizzie took apples from this tree and hid them in the straw in the barn for her children.”

I couldn't believe it. Slaves had lived here, on this mountain farm, a place I had learned the semester before to imagine as the locus of “herrenvolk democracy”? “Well, of course,” Paw laughed at his over-educated oldest grandchild. “Who do you think cleared all this land? Your grandmaw's people were big slaveholders.” The pieces did not fit. What was slavery doing here, in the highest Appalachians? I had imagined that my family had lived above the worst of southern history, or at least outside it. I took pride in their rugged self-reliance and what I assumed to be their Unionist sympathies. Now, like some bad Faulkner character, I discovered complicity in the great sin of the South.

During that same trip to Burnsville, some of the so-called “Florida People,” who were building small houses in the mountains for the summers, came to visit. Paw liked working for them. One family of Floridians drove up the dirt road in a huge RV, and as soon as they got out I could see they had come on an anthropological mission. The father had told his wife and children about this colorful old mountain man who was building their vacation house for them. The kids, teenagers, made no effort to hide their amusement at everything they saw around them: the unpainted and rusty tin roof, the old pictures on the walls, the accents and vocabulary of my grandparents. The visitors patronized their elderly hosts shamelessly. Sitting in the living room, they ignored me for a while, but the mother eventually turned to me and asked where I lived. “New Haven, Connecticut,” I answered, in a modulated version of the same accent as my grandparents'. Surprised, and with the other family members suddenly listening, she asked what I was doing there. “Studying at Yale,” I said.

I took cynical pleasure in the moment. I had ruined their illusion, spoiled the expedition. These hillbillies lived in time, after all, and their progeny did not always drool on the front porch over a banjo. I was furious at the visitors' casual and undeserved arrogance, their disdain for a culture I understood even if I did not fully share, and of my own similarities to the visitors. I did not reflect on what it said about me that I cared about what these strangers thought of me or that I was so proud to have “transcended” what I claimed to love. But I did now know what I had come to expect: I would have to write about the South.

Back in New Haven, David Davis kindly agreed to advise my dissertation and asked what I was thinking of writing about. I told him that I wanted to do southern prisons. Prisons were a hot subject in those days of "social control." After noticing a brief discussion of the convict lease system in *Origins of the New South*, I had done a little research and it turned out that there were penitentiaries in almost all the southern states before the Civil War. This discovery cut against everything we were being told by Michel Foucault and others about the origins of penitentiaries in modernity and capitalism. Plus, prisons were related to crime. That subject was hot, too, thanks to the English social historians of the 1970s. Everyone had heard of southern dueling, lynching, moonshining, and the like; I could explain this topic to my parents and they might see why somebody would want to write about that. David Davis had written his first book on homicide and found crime interesting; he thought this subject might fly and told me to explore it.

I composed a proposal based largely on a few fugitive references and letters of encouragement from historians Harold Woodman and Eugene Genovese, whom I wrote out of the blue and who kindly responded. When I picked up my proposal from the departmental secretary, she informed me that it had been approved but that the committee doubted that I would find any of the sources on crime that I was looking for. That was alarming, for Abby had decided to take the summer off from her teaching job at the Gessell Institute Nursery School, a job that was sustaining us, and travel with me to archives across the South in a youthful adventure. We bought a tent and a propane grill from Sears and were preparing to live in Kampgrounds of America (KOA, we soon decided, stood for Kamping on Asphalt) at five dollars a night in Jackson, Montgomery, and Nashville. While in Atlanta we would sponge off Abby's sister and brother-in-law, wonderful people who had been two of our best friends. We hoped the friendship would endure weeks of eating their food and getting in their way.

After many dramas of weather and poverty and heat as well as of archival discovery, I began to learn where to look to find the sort of material I was looking for. I researched for another year, returning to Atlanta for weeks. I taught myself statistics from a textbook and videotapes. I taught myself how to use the imposing mainframe computer. I wrote furiously on the typewriter (one of the last graduate students to do so, in all likelihood) and barely filled enough paper to apply for jobs in the fall of 1979.

I suddenly realized that writing about the South had turned me into a south-



ern historian, as far as the job market was concerned, whether I wanted to be one or not. I could not claim to be a cultural or intellectual historian, by the logic of the profession, because I studied the South. I had defined myself as a southern historian even though I knew so profoundly little about the region, only what I had learned in one course and in writing my dissertation. And as it turned out, there was only one job in southern history that year on the job market, at the University of Virginia. Calculating the odds, I worried that I'd be back to stapling boxes for electric heaters or working up credit reports.

Remarkably, I was lucky enough to get a conference interview with Virginia, amazed that they would consider someone with only two chapters of his dissertation done in that buyer's market. I was amazed, too, when they invited me to fly down to Charlottesville for an on-campus visit. (I did not tell them that this would be my first airplane flight and that I had to buy my first jacket or tie.) As soon as I saw the University of Virginia, I loved the place. It seemed to me to combine Tennessee and Yale, public and private, southern and cosmopolitan. I felt right at home on the hilly Piedmont landscape, the Blue Ridge hovering in the distance. Kingsport and our families lay only four hours away down I-81. I got the job at UVA and raced to finish my dissertation before the teaching began. I mailed the manuscript to New Haven on the first day of classes in September 1980.

That dissertation combined social history with cultural history. I had come across the concept of "honor" in my directed reading with Paul Johnson, and that concept became a major theme of my dissertation. At my first professional conference the next spring, where I gave a paper on crime in the South, I met Bertram Wyatt-Brown, who had the page proofs for his book, *Southern Honor*, upstairs in his hotel room.<sup>6</sup> My professional life passed before my eyes as I learned that this senior scholar was about to publish a book with "my" discovery as its very title. He kindly sent me the galleys of his book, and I discovered that we took quite different approaches to the subject even though we agreed on much. Fortunately, I also talked about things other than honor so that the book from my dissertation was not completely overshadowed by Wyatt-Brown.

That book, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the Nineteenth-Century American South* (1984), revealed certain habits in my way of thinking. It combined quite disparate elements, insisted on the geographic diversity of the South, tried to get close to the experience of daily life, and combined numbers with so-called "literary" evidence. It offered both an indictment of the

white South and an attempt to explain things that had seemed to most observers to require explanations based only on cultural dysfunction and innate patterns of injustice, disturbing phenomena such as high rates of homicide, the convict lease system, and even lynching.

Hired to teach southern history (and my new colleague Paul M. Gaston was happy for me to teach not only the Old South but also the second half of the nineteenth century, a topic in which he had lost interest despite his remarkable book on the era), I had no choice but to grow into a southern historian. Fortunately, I loved teaching, which seemed to combine the inherited traits of my conscientious mother and my fast-talking father. And, fortunately, too, I developed a deep and abiding fascination with all parts of southern history, things that had never interested me before and that I had never studied, much less taught. Teaching the history of the South to descendants of the southern aristocracy and descendants of slaves and descendants of hillbillies as well as to the many northerners and non-Americans at UVA revealed to me the power of southern history. That history speaks, I learned, to all of American history, to world history. I have never grown weary of teaching it.

The idea for my next book grew from my research on lynching that I had done for my first book, *Vengeance and Justice*. Searching through pages of microfilmed newspapers, I kept seeing discordant images. On the very pages where brutal murders were chronicled in terrible detail, articles about football games and Coca-Cola and the latest best-sellers and revival meetings hovered. I determined to embrace all of those aspects of life rather than purging them from the story as not really "southern." My work, I determined, would be characterized by listening with respect to everyone, by including as many kinds of people as I could, by showing that everyone, even poor southerners, lived in history.

I decided to see if I could write a history that included politics, religion, music, economic life, literature, popular culture, and daily life. I longed for a story that included as many kinds of southerners as I could fit into the story. *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction* (1992) was the result of that longing, the same longing for connection across fields that had sent me into American Studies years before. Tackling the same subject as Woodward's *Origins of the New South*, the book that had changed my life, was in part homage, I am sure, as well as faintly patricidal and regicidal. Woodward had published his book before I was born. Surely the new social history, the new

cultural history, the new African American history, and the new women's history would provide me with something to add to *Origins*.

With a small fellowship, I drove twelve thousand miles in a \$400 car, a vast 1974 Plymouth Satellite with a butterscotch-colored vinyl roof and a bashed-in side I crudely covered with Bondo and a can of spray paint. I moved from one Motel 6 to another as I covered the southern archives, reading everything I could find about the South during the Gilded Age.

*Promise* was in a way, I suppose, a sublimated autobiography. It translated my own discovery and embrace of the South into a story I could share with others. I came to believe that the categories historians used to analyze the South did its people a disservice, freezing them in time and subjecting them to stereotype. Just as my parents and grandparents were far more complicated and interesting than people from outside could know, so did I believe that the entire southern past held secrets it had not yielded to our analyses.

In the meantime, I was fortunate to work with wonderful graduate students and colleagues at Virginia who continually pushed me to see things in new ways. With John Willis, I edited *The Edge of the South: Life in Nineteenth-Century Virginia* (1991), a collection of essays by graduate students I had advised who dwelled on the perplexing place of Virginia in the South, a place both central and marginal. With my good friend Peter Onuf, I wrote and edited *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions* (1996), a series of essays that tried to throw into doubt easy assumptions about regions. With Bradley C. Mittendorf, I edited the *Oxford Book of the American South* (1997), an anthology of "testimony, memory, and fiction" that brought together rich and diverse voices of the southern past from the eighteenth century to the present, all in conversation with one another across generations and divides of race and gender. And I had the good fortune to teach about the South in the Netherlands and in Italy, where I saw my country through different eyes and where my interest in region only grew deeper.

While I was working on these books, my father died a slow death from emphysema and cancer. Long a heavy smoker, for his last years he breathed from an oxygen tank and died far too early. My grandparents died in those years as well, and I felt my connection to the mountains broken.

Yet the cycle began again: Nate and Hannah were born to Abby and me, and we decided that we would live in the country outside of Charlottesville, at the base of Dudley Mountain, where we have cleared a few acres of abandoned

farmland with chainsaws and brush cutters. The old road to Lynchburg runs in front of our house, a road where enslaved people and Confederates, farm wagons and hot rods have traveled. Across that road is a plantation house from 1823; down the road is a trailer park, next to farmhouses built in the time of *Promise of the New South* and red-brick ranchers built when I was a child.

As I did the research for *Promise* I found myself almost alone in my enduring interest in computers. While I knew I would hide the numbers in the notes, I held to the belief that it was still necessary to know proportions, timing, and correlations, the patterns on the ground, if we were to write compelling social and cultural history. I worked to master new techniques, including computerized mapping, in the early 1990s, when almost no one I knew in history was interested in such relics of the 1970s. As a result of that interest, I happened to be involved in the creation of the Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities at UVA and become an unwitting pioneer in what we came to call “digital history.”

Because I had been underfoot for so long in the computer lab in the engineering school working on *Promise*, in 1991 I was asked to serve on a university-wide computing committee. At only the second meeting of that committee we were told that IBM was interested in working with the university if we could think of something interesting to propose. After some discussion, I pointed out that the history and English faculty at UVA did not have computers on their desks; maybe we should see what humanists could do with powerful networked computers. Other committee members were dubious, but the chair of the committee, William Wulf, now president of the National Academy of Engineering, saw merit in the idea and asked what sort of thing I had in mind.

I had nothing in mind other than the merest sketch of a book on the Civil War, but it did not take long for me to combine the idea of that book with the notion of a large digital archive that would permit nonhistorians to have access to all the materials on which a professional historian would write a book. I had long sent my UVA students into the rich primary sources in our library, and I wanted to share that experience with students elsewhere who did not have access to such materials.

I pursued the idea of digital history across ten years, during which the World Wide Web emerged and then boomed. The idea for a digital history project and my next book grew alongside one another. I wanted to get closer to a smaller cast of historical actors, and I wanted to tell a more sustained narrative

than I had in my earlier books. I had experimented in *Promise* with some techniques to create the feel of narrative history in what was basically an analytical history. I built that book around quotes and evocative details, trying to recreate the feel of the place I had spent so much time trying to imagine. But I longed for a more unified narrative in my new project.

I also decided that if I was going to live much of my working life in the nineteenth century, that I had to confront its central event. I had resisted the Civil War for as long as I could, put off by the kitsch, fantasy, and politics that surrounded it. But I grew to think that I had to deal with the war. Living among the battlefields and monuments of Virginia year after year, confronting students who knew far more than I did about the history-defining battles that had occurred right under our feet, coming to understand that the Civil War offered the richest opportunity imaginable for American social history, I turned to the war with trepidation.

As I looked for an angle of vision on the war, I was struck by the incongruity between the astonishing beauty of the Shenandoah Valley, just over the Blue Ridge from our home in Charlottesville, and the ferocity of the battles and burning that took place there. I was also struck by the fact that the Mason-Dixon Line cut across the Valley, dividing the same geographic structure into places with sharply differing histories. Influenced by evocative histories of communities such as Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou*, I decided that I would write the twinned stories of two communities, one in the North and one in the South, both in the Valley.<sup>7</sup> Once I knew I was writing about the Valley and about the death and suffering war brought, my years of study in Sunday school immediately led me to my title: "The Valley of the Shadow."

The Valley Project proved to be enormous, as hundreds of thousands of newspaper articles, diaries, letters, census entries, tax records, and military reports accumulated. Effective allies and good friends made it possible to sustain such an enterprise across one year after another. Foremost among them were Anne Rubin and Will Thomas, people of remarkable energy and patience. The project we built proved exciting and satisfying, all the more so for being collaborative. Reaching out to high schools and community colleges, to other countries and continents, offered a kind of immediate connection impossible only a few years before.

As I write this brief intellectual autobiography, the book based on "The Valley of the Shadow" Web site is in proofs. That book, called *In the Presence of*

*Mine Enemies: War in the Heart of America, 1859–1863*, is the culmination of the personal story I have just related. That book returns to my fascination with places that straddle boundaries and cross borders, places like Kingsport and Burnsville and Charlottesville. It dwells on history that has been simplified too much. It cuts against the grain of the reassuring and self-congratulatory history of the Civil War that has become to seem like common sense, even as it also cuts against explanations of the war that blame the South's involvement on anything other than slavery. It tries to put different parts of history—military, social, political, and cultural—into conversation and tries to include many kinds of people.

This new book, like the others I have written, dwells on surprise, uncertainty, and instability, on borders, boundaries, and edges. It focuses on those things not out of some fashionable philosophy but out of something less articulate, something ineffable but real in the South I have known. My work draws from a desire to build bridges and connections between people who might otherwise misunderstand one another, a longing that drives my teaching and my service as dean as well. If I get a chance to write another book, I imagine that it will tell, in one form or another, the same story. It is perhaps the only story I really know.

### Notes

1. Paul Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815–1837* (New York, 1978).
2. Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974); Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York, 1975); and Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (Boston, 1974).
3. David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1975).
4. C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877–1913* (Baton Rouge, 1951).
5. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1964).
6. Soon published as *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York, 1982).
7. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York, 1979).