History Faculty Publications   History

Fall 2000

The Great Valley and the Meaning of the Civil War

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AND THE MEANING OF THE CIVIL WAR

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In early 1861, it seemed that every newspaper issue published in Franklin County, Pennsylvania, and Augusta County, Virginia, offered conflicting reports, advice, and predictions about the conflicts between the North and the South. Letters from friends and family vacillated between calm assurances and horrible foreboding. Raucous meetings fueled passions. People debated hidden implications of politicians' speeches and pronouncements. Some people boasted of what they would do if the conflict came to blows while others remained quiet and apprehensive. Meanwhile, woven among the great national events, the occurrences and crises of daily life in mid-nineteenth-century America unfolded: childbirth and death, floods and fires, revivals and crime sprees, prosperity and poverty.

People gathered in Chambersburg to hear a speech much like others being delivered across the country—a speech filled with disbelief:

> Three months ago the domain of the United States extended from Maine to Florida, from the Atlantic to the Pacific; now, it stops far short of the gulf of Mexico. Three months ago "the Stars and Stripes" waved over the forts at Pensacola, over Moultrie and Pinkney in Charleston harbor, an honored ensign, a shield to its friends, but a terror to its foes. Now, that glorious banner whose stars have so often risen upon the night of humanity, as a beacon of hope to the oppressed, the world over, is lowered amid the howlings of Southern mobs, and trampled in the dust, with every mark of indignity. [The Northern states are] seized with a military frenzy. New companies are being formed and armed. The mechanic rushes from his shop, the merchant from his store and the professional man from his office to fill up the ranks. There is a growing thirst for military fame, and an impatience of restraint or delay. Washington city is full of armed men. Pennsylvania Avenue is bristling with bayonets, and the neighing of war steeds, and the rumbling of cannon wagons, drown the noise and din of the trade and business of the city. The very atmosphere about us is ladened with the noise of preparation.

In Staunton, Virginia, not far to the South, a young man agonized over such events:

> We seem to be on the very eve of Civil War—upon the very brink of destruction. It seems that the prosperity of America is about to end. Her sun seems to be setting in clouds and darkness—ruin—ruin—ruin! stares us in the face. But I have never believed that this union is to be dissolved; and I do not believe it now.

The United States was too great to die at its own hand.

> We have become the wonder and pride of the world and now shall we become a "proverb and a reproach," a scorn and a bye-word? Never! Never!

This young man echoed the sense of loss expressed in the Pennsylvania speech.

> I do not believe that Providence has raised up this nation to such greatness and glory, to throw it away.

Within months, this advocate of the Union would be fighting—and dying—for the Confederacy.

These complicated emotions played themselves out in every county, town, and city in the United States. The crisis of the Union brought struggles within people's hearts, within their homes and communities, long before it brought struggles on the battlefield. To understand the coming of the Civil War, then, we need to pick up the story before Fort Sumter and to carry it deeper than national events. We need to understand both the advocates of conflict and those who sought to avoid it regardless of the cost. We need to understand the communities people fought to defend, the institutions that held them together and that drove them apart.

Franklin and Augusta Counties, like the rest of the United States in the late 1850s and 1860s, wrestled with the meanings and repercussions of events in Kansas, Harpers Ferry, Charleston, and Washington. The people of Augusta and Franklin, like so many people in the young nation, found themselves hating

The Ruins of Chambersburg—Bank and Franklin Hotel

In response to Union raids of Virginia's Shenandoah Valley (including the important Confederate supply depot of Staunton), Confederate forces under Lieutenant General Jubal Early launched a raid into Pennsylvania and Maryland in July and August 1864. On July 30, Confederate cavalry, commanded by Brigadier General John McCausland, demanded a $100,000 ransom in gold (or $500,000 in United States currency) from the citizens of Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. When they failed to pay, McCausland ordered his troops to burn the town. Chambersburg's destruction encouraged many Northerners to support tougher war measures against the Confederacy. *Harper's Weekly,* 20 August 1864.

people who lived not far away, spoke the same language, worshipped at the same churches, and claimed the same legacy and the same founding fathers. Augusta and Franklin, like characters in a story, had their own personalities, their own struggles, and their own hopes. But, also like characters in a story, their experiences resonated with those of many other places.

Both of those counties lie in the Great Valley that stretches diagonally from Pennsylvania to Georgia. The Great Valley, formed by the congruence of the Cumberland River valley in Pennsylvania and the Shenandoah River valley in Virginia, is bounded on the west by the imposing Allegheny Mountains and on the east by the gentler Blue Ridge. For thousands of years, the Valley had been a home for various nations of American Indians, a broad avenue of rolling land, sparkling rivers, dense forests, and limitless game. Native Americans in the southern part of the valley called their land "Shenandoah" or "Daughter of the Stars."

The eighteenth century brought new kinds of people to this valley, people who displaced those who had first named the rivers and mountains. Settlers from England, Germany, Scotland, and Ireland pushed into the Valley. The land was rich, the climate healthy, the travel easy, so settlers often bypassed areas closer to the eastern coast and moved directly to the Shenan-

doah and the Cumberland. The settlers barely paused in the cities of Philadelphia and Baltimore before they came to the Valley, fanning out to the north and south. Some pushed all the way into the Carolinas and Georgia, often taking slaves with them, while others moved up into New York, looking for good land or likely places for mills and towns that had not already been taken.

Augusta and Franklin occupied key places about two hundred miles apart on the Great Valley Road. A steady stream of settlers passed through on their way to newer, rawer, and more remote communities, but thousands chose to stay in Franklin and Augusta. Those counties became prosperous farming communities, dotted by churches, mills, schools, and towns. The two counties did not nurture large cities, but rather they grew as so many American communities did, steadily and unspectacularly. Like those other places, too, both Augusta and Franklin were deceptively simple, their complexities of kin, race, gender, class, religion, generation, and party hidden from the casual observer.

By 1860, Franklin and Augusta were thriving communities. In both places, railroads had arrived in the last few years, tieing Staunton, the county seat for Augusta County, and Chambersburg, the county seat for Franklin, to a burgeoning national network of rail lines and telegraph lines. Rich farms grew grain and

livestock, small factories produced for the local market, and newspapers jostled for customers. Augusta and Franklin touched one another through marriage, trade, and circumstance, and more than a few families in each county shared names with those in the other. Franklin had considerably more people than Augusta —about 42,000 to 28,000—but Augusta County was physically larger. Franklin County, like other Pennsylvania and Northern counties, was divided into townships and peppered with villages. Augusta County, like other Virginia and Southern counties, possessed a more dispersed population, gathered on farms and plantations. Both Franklin and Augusta contained a number of smaller towns that vied with one another and with Staunton and Chambersburg for trade and pride. Both counties boasted a town named "Waynesboro," after General Anthony Wayne of the Revolution.

No two places could be entirely characteristic of either the North or the South, but these counties were by no means unusual. Farm size, property values, and population in both counties were not unlike those of hundreds of other counties in their regions, as were the number and type of manufacturing establishments, churches, and political parties. Contrary to contemporary belief, the concentration on grains and livestock rather than cotton made Augusta farms typical of much of the South. The proportion of slaves in Augusta was similar to that of most counties in the South other than those in the Tidewater of Virginia, the rice islands of South Carolina, and the cotton belt of the Deep South.

Despite the many similarities and connections between Franklin and Augusta, indeed, slavery stood as their defining difference. Although representatives from the Valley had expressed serious misgivings in the 1830s about the effect of slavery on white society, a growing number of influential farmers and townsmen in Augusta bought into slavery, literally and figuratively. The African American population of the county stabilized at about a fifth of the whole, with over five thousand slaves and nearly six hundred free blacks in 1860, their numbers growing slightly over the previous decade despite the sale of considerable numbers of slaves in the 1850s. Slaves tended wheat fields, apple orchards, and shops; they also labored side-by-side with white artisans. Several hundred free blacks lived on the boundary of slavery and freedom, sometimes buying a husband or wife from slavery, sometimes acquiring a small house or farm.

Franklin County also contained a considerable free black population, largely the product of Pennsylvania's emancipation several decades earlier. Because Virginia lay only five miles from Franklin's southern border, across a narrow stretch of Maryland, runaway slaves from the South who escaped up the Valley often came through Franklin on the Underground Railroad. Most runaways kept moving farther north, but others settled in Franklin. Churches and schools operated by and for black people appeared throughout the county. Despite these symbols of black aspiration and achievement, many whites in

The Ruins of Chambersburg—The Town-Hall

Franklin County had little use or toleration for the African Americans in their midst. One of the two local newspapers dripped with contempt for all black people and agreed with the white South that slavery was the proper place for those with dark skins, even as the other paper approvingly quoted Abraham Lincoln's attacks on slavery.

The sectional crisis of the late 1850s and early 1860s brought the divisions within each county to the surface. Augusta County had long been a stronghold of Unionism, with virtually every white man voting for delegates who opposed immediate secession. Franklin County had long contained Democrats who expressed sympathy for the white South. When the moment of crisis came, however, these divisions were quickly—if temporarily—pasted over. The men of Augusta and the men of Franklin, encouraged by their wives and daughters, went to war.

No one could foresee the carnage that lay ahead. Soldiers from the two counties would confront one another at most of the major battles of the eastern theater. Both Chambersburg and Staunton would occupy critical strategic locations in the war and see thousands of troops, repeated invasions, and widespread destruction. Both communities would serve as recruiting posts, hospital bases, and supply depots, their populations doubling during the war years. Chambersburg, only thirty miles from Gettysburg, would watch more than one hundred thousand soldiers pass through as Robert E. Lee used the town both for preparation for and escape from the crucial battle at Gettysburg. A general from Staunton would lead a seventeen-mile-long wagon train of wounded Confederates through Chambersburg on the way back to Virginia. A year later, as Union troops closed in on Staunton, Confederates retaliating for the destruction of towns in the Valley of Virginia would burn Chambersburg to the ground.

In the generations following the Civil War, historians have wrestled over virtually every facet of its origins, fighting, and outcome. For many decades, the North and the South held to their own, mutually exclusive, interpretations of the war, blaming the other side for the deaths of their brothers, fathers, and grandfathers. After World War I, leading historians began to question the wisdom and necessity of the Civil War. They established their arguments on what they saw as a professional, even scientific, basis, locating the bloodshed in the mistakes of a "blundering generation." After World War II, however, the country's most prominent historians have argued that the war's origins lay squarely in slavery and thus could not be avoided. In this interpretation, the North appeared as a modern society in fundamental conflict with the South's archaic system of slavery. Slavery seems not merely a moral affront but also an obstacle to progress.

Today, many shadings of interpretation compete with another. Some historians emphasize political parties and individual decisions while others emphasize broader forces beyond the control of individuals; some stress the abolitionists while others stress a general anti-Southern feeling in the North; some stress Southern belligerence while others stress the North's growing power and confidence. No one gains a hearing these days for a simple "economic" interpretation in which tariffs and taxes drive the conflict, and no one speaks of the "fanaticism" of the abolitionists. Historians look instead to deeper, more fundamental kinds of conflicts and struggles.

A general consensus seems to have emerged in our public culture. That consensus appears in the popularity of works such as Ken Burns's television epic *The Civil War,* best-selling novels such as Michael Shaara's *The Killer Angels,* and prize-winning and influential histories such as James McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom* and Gary Wills's *Lincoln at Gettysburg.* The consensus in those works is that serious conflict between the North and the South was bound to occur because the two societies were organized on different principles, that the North gradually awakened to the inhumanity of slavery over the course of the war, and that Abraham Lincoln both embodied and led the moral growth of the Union. By war's end in 1865, it appears from these accounts that the nation had been refounded on a more equitable and durable foundation. This is the interpretation that is written into American textbooks, that is taught in the schools even in the South.

We must remember, however, that in 1861, the horrible events that would sweep over Augusta and Franklin lay in the unknowable—indeed, unimaginable—future. People could not know the consequences of their actions in these days of intoxicating purpose and bluster. African Americans could not know that their freedom lay only a few years away. Right up to the day of secession, editors, correspondents, and citizens filled the newspapers with invective and persuasion, with doubt and fear, arguing with their neighbors as well as with faraway enemies. During the war that followed, people on both sides continually reinterpreted the causes of the conflict, forgetting or disavowing much they had said before April 1861. What appears inevitable in retrospect seemed contingent at the time. If the North had defeated the South in 1862, for example, the restoration of the Union would not have resulted in immediate abolition, and the war's origins and its meaning would be interpreted differently today. If Lincoln had lived to achieve his accommodating vision of Reconstruction, he probably would not appear the farsighted visionary that he has become for contemporary Americans and historians. A true understanding of the Civil War, then, may require that we recapture the sense of uncertainty and contingency embodied in the innumerable speeches and conversations taking place in Chambersburg, Staunton, and so many other towns in early 1861.