

Civil War Site: A blogger's increasingly successful effort to open new fronts in the historical profession



In the spring of 2009, the New York publishing firm Doubleday sent me galleys of Sally Jenkins's and John Stauffer's book, *The State of Jones*, for review on my blog, [Civil War Memory](#). I decided to review it, given the topic as well as the involvement of Prof. Stauffer, whose work I know and respect.

While reading through the book I accumulated a growing list of questions and problems. I also came across [a thorough critique by Victoria Bynum](#), author of an excellent study of Jones County, *The Free State of Jones* (2002) at her own blog, *Renegade South*. Bynum reinforced my concerns, and I decided to link to it. [A response to Bynum's review by Jenkins and Stauffer](#) received a great deal of attention from my readers, including Civil War historian Brooks Simpson, as well as Bynum herself. The heated debate between the three eventually spilled onto the pages of the *New York Times* and *Chronicle of Higher Education*.



I begin with this anecdote not to reopen old wounds, but to highlight the ways in which online communication, including blogs, have shaped academic discourse and its potential to bridge boundaries between different audiences. Bynum, a respected scholar, has fully embraced blogging as a way to share her scholarly interests and engage a wide range of fellow historians and Civil War enthusiasts. Without a blog, Prof. Bynum would have had to resort to writing a critical notice for an academic journal to be read by relatively few. Instead, her professional critique, as well as the inadequate responses by Stauffer and Jenkins, were made available for all to see and, in doing so, opened up a discussion that brought together participants from both inside the historical profession and far beyond.

I started *Civil War Memory* five years ago. In doing so, I was strongly influenced by Mark Grimsley's award-winning [Blog Them Out of the Stone Age](#), which remains one of the most popular military history blogs. I knew of Mark's scholarship, specifically *The Hard Hand of War* (1997) but what impressed me most was the application of the blogging format by a seasoned Civil War historian as a form of outreach. Grimsley's blog addresses complex issue in an intellectually stimulating and entertaining manner. I set out to do the same thing with *Civil War Memory*.

As the title suggests, *Civil War Memory* addresses subjects at the intersection of public history, memory, historiography, and what I call Civil War culture, which includes topics related to living history as well as ongoing controversies surrounding the display of Confederate images and the battle over public spaces. Over the past five years I've managed to engage readers from all walks of life, including professional historians, history educators, archivists, and National Park Service personnel as well as a wide range of Civil War enthusiasts. My regular readers come from every state and as far away as Italy, India, Australia, Japan, and Poland.

I occupy an unusual and perhaps unique position within the Civil War community. While my credentials include an M.A. in history and while I am employed as a full time high school history teacher, my interests mirror those of academic

historians. I spend most of my time wrestling with questions more closely rooted within the academy and over the past few years have even managed to contribute to this growing body of scholarship. Still, since I identify myself first as a high school teacher, I tend to see myself as an outsider. It is this perspective that drives my blogging. My primary goal for my blog from the outset was, and continues to be, to introduce and discuss questions that typically find more of a home within academic circles to as wide an audience as possible. This involves introducing a wide range of studies, mainly published by university presses, to an audience whose primary interests rarely extend beyond the battlefield. In addition to historical memory, such topics include gender and cultural studies as well as new approaches to the study of battles and campaigns—the so-called “New Military History.” I do my best to direct my readers to the most talented and respected historians in the field based on the conviction that only by reading reliable secondary sources do we come to a sophisticated understanding of the past. Some of those historians, such as Prof. Peter Carmichael and John Hennessy of the National Park Service, have authored guest posts related to their own ongoing research projects. I fervently believe that Civil War enthusiasts are willing and eager to embrace non-traditional subjects if approached carefully.

After I talked to Mark Snell, director of Shepherd University’s Civil War Center and a regular reader of my blog, about the success of *Civil War Memory*, he decided to devote one of the institute’s summer seminars to the study of historical memory instead of focusing on more popular topics centered on local battlefields and campaigns. It was a risk given that most of the participants are interested in tours of battlefields and other military sites. For three days in June 2007, I, along with John Coski, Kurt Piehler, William Blair, and Tom Clemens, lectured on aspects of memory and toured the Antietam battlefield and Washington, D.C., with a focus on how public spaces have been used to remember the past. The response was overwhelming. Participants approached me at one point or another during the seminar to thank us for introducing these ideas or for pointing out that it was the first time they had thought about the war as a reflection of competing memories. Blogging has also put me in touch with high school history teachers from all over the country through the Teaching American History Grant Program. This has given me the opportunity to introduce history teachers to ways they can introduce the study of memory in their classrooms.

The questions and subjects that bring professional historians together at academic conferences deserve to be discussed in wider circles. After three years of blogging I no longer think only in terms of a strict dichotomy between the interests of academics and the general public. I move freely, for example, between discussing Stephen Sears’s explanation of the outcome at Antietam, to Edward Linenthal’s analysis of the distinction between sacred and secular space at our Civil War battlefields, to debates about Confederate nationalism between historians such as Gary Gallagher and William Freehling. *Civil War Memory* has also become an integral part of my own writing and research. The blog functions as a place where I can preview my own thoughts and interpretations about what I

am reading and researching. Much of what is included in my most recent book-length manuscript on the battle of the Crater and historical memory was introduced first on the blog.

More importantly, *Civil War Memory* is a place where you can find information on the most popular and pervasive Lost Cause myths that continue to resonate in certain communities. No subject has received more attention on my site than the myth of the black Confederate soldier. The subject functions as the perfect case study for a blog devoted to how Americans have chosen to remember their Civil War. Much of my attention has been devoted to challenging the Lost Cause-inspired literature, the organizations that perpetuate these stories and why, as well as introducing the latest scholarship by such historians as Bruce Levine. Peter Carmichael recently shared a conference paper on the subject, which garnered [an impressive number of reader comments](#). My approach has been not so much to dismiss these stories, but to bring to bear a sharper analytical focus for those readers who are willing to step back and proceed with care. I am convinced that the discussion which ensued in the comments section in response to this particular post is hands down the most sophisticated dialogue on the subject to be found on the Web.

The real benefit, however, is the potential for long-term influence as students and Civil War enthusiasts alike spend more time gathering information through keyword searches on the many Web browsers now available. Given the popularity of the subject within the Confederate heritage community, it is not surprising to learn that a Google search for "black Confederates" will send you immediately to a list of their own Websites, many of which are hosted by individual chapters of the Sons of Confederate Veterans who are this subject's most vocal advocates. Just a few years ago, you would have been hard pressed to find one of my posts ranked within the top 10 Google pages, but that has gradually changed with a larger audience as well as links from other Websites and blogs. Do a Google search for "Civil War Memory" or "Civil War Sesquicentennial," or search for a prominent historian in the field, and more than likely your list will include a post from my site. The point is that high traffic and links from external sites can turn a blog into a useful site within a ranking algorithm that does not judge content based on quality or credentials.

Attention to sensitive topics such as black Confederates does come with its share of challenges and frustrations. The decision to engage the general public in discussions about the Lost Cause and other topics is a walk on the slippery rocks. For some the simple act of asking questions or engaging in interpretation about the evolution of certain narratives is perceived as a threat to the identity and understanding of specific demographics, especially those with a regional affiliation or historical connection to the South. For a blog devoted to how Americans have chosen to remember the past and the political implications of those choices, this often leads to heated exchanges. I've been the target of just about every insult in the book that could be applied to a carpetbagger from New Jersey who dares to write about Robert E.

Lee, Stonewall Jackson and the rest of the Confederate pantheon. At the same time, blogging has helped to clarify the language and generalizations that I wielded too easily in the early life of this site. I've become much more sensitive to the fault lines within our Civil War community and have refrained from employing the "neo-Confederate" label, for instance, to dismiss or minimize those who approach the past from a different perspective and set of motives. As much as I would like to think that I've persuaded readers to question certain Lost Cause dogmas, I must admit that my readers have forced me to acknowledge my own biases and assumptions about the past as well.

Surprisingly, the most common insult hurled in my direction is to accuse me of being an academic. Regardless of how many times I remind my readers that I am a high school teacher and not a college professor, I am continually identified as a liberal-socialist-northern revisionist, who is both anti-religion and anti-South. This constant refrain, while worth a few laughs, ought to concern all of us, because it reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of the historical profession as well as the research process and the dissemination of that research through various types of publications. Many Civil War enthusiasts simply do not understand what is involved in the writing and research of critical or analytical history. Although some of this suspicion of academia is a product of the politicization of history that has taken place over the past few years, much of it can be attributed to too few professional historians engaging the general public online. This problem is especially acute within the Civil War community, where the mistrust of professional historians has been fueled by Confederate ideologues who have succeeded in mobilizing public opinion through misinformation. As long as they monopolize the Internet, they will continue to exercise a great deal of influence on how the general public conceptualizes the central issues of the war.

I am not suggesting that the solution is to start your own blog. Blogging takes time, patience, and even a certain psychological profile. What I will suggest is that it matters that Brian Dirck is blogging about Lincoln at [A. Lincoln Blog](#), and that Mark Grimsley, Brooks Simpson, and Ethan Rafuse blog together at [Civil Warriors](#). I like to think that as a group we are not only raising the level of public discourse and introducing the general public to subjects each of us can claim some expertise in, but that we are redefining the idea of what it means to be historians and teachers. Constructive dialogue is always desirable. With the Civil War sesquicentennial right around the corner, it is crucial that state commissions, professional organizations, and historians think critically and imaginatively about how to use the Internet to educate the general public. The numbers of Americans who will attend a conference, museum exhibit or read a book between 2011 and 2015 will pale in comparison with the reach of various Websites. I believe we have the opportunity and responsibility to contribute to and shape that content.

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