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## "Momentous Events in Small Places": The Coming of the Civil War in Two American Communities

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✎ EDWARD L. AYERS ✎

# "Momentous Events in Small Places"


The Coming of the Civil War in Two  
American Communities

✎ Edward L. Ayers rode into Milwaukee in 1997 on the crest of the Internet revolution. After receiving his Ph.D. from Yale University and beginning his career at the University of Virginia in 1980, Ayers had rapidly earned a reputation for intellectual rigor, good humor, and graceful prose in two award-winning books: *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the Nineteenth-Century American South* (1984) and *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction* (1992). He pursued his interest in regionalism as a historical construct by helping to edit *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions* (1996).

Although he did not consider himself a Civil War historian, Ayers turned to the conflict to further explore the idea of regional identity. His plan to write a book about the everyday experiences of residents in a northern and a southern community developed into perhaps the most-used educational resource on the Internet, applauded by professional historians, social studies teachers, and Civil War buffs alike: the Valley of the Shadow Project. Founded in 1991, the project grew slowly with support from IBM and from the University of Virginia's Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities. With help from a team of enthusiastic graduate students, by 1996 the first phase (covering the years just before the war) was online and the project had won support from the National Endowment

for the Humanities. Soon after, the Valley Project became the poster-child for the World Wide Web's potential to bring meaningful archival experiences into the lives of anyone with a computer and a modem.

In his Klement Lecture, Ayers blended a discussion of the opportunities and challenges posed by the digital revolution with a demonstration of how the intense examination of every single available source on two different communities could lead to some startling conclusions. Augusta County, Virginia, and Franklin County, Pennsylvania, he suggested, were more alike than different, despite their solidly Confederate and Union loyalties. Ayers developed these and other themes in *In the Presence of Mine Enemies: War in the Heart of America, 1859–1863* (2003).

For several years after his lecture, Ayers continued to serve as Hugh P. Kelly professor of history at the University of Virginia, where he later became dean of the College and Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. He is now president of the University of Richmond. Researchers continue to tweak the site—parts of which were published as a CD-ROM with a companion book—and it remains an inspiration to historians, teachers, and students seeking reliable and imaginative approaches to history on the Internet. 

ABRAHAM LINCOLN HAD A DIFFICULT time explaining the Civil War. In his remarkable Second Inaugural Address of March 1865, Lincoln tried to make sense of the conflict that had consumed him and the country over the past four years. No one wanted war and yet the war “came.” Although “all dreaded it—all sought to avert it,” the war arrived like an outside force, beyond the control of any person. Neither the North nor the South “expected for the war, the magnitude, or the duration, which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease with, or even before, the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding.” Lincoln, killed only a few weeks after his brief speech, never had the opportunity to make more sense of the war. But Americans ever since have puzzled over the same sense of mystery, how it was that the war seemed both inevitable and surprising, easily explainable and yet somehow incomprehensible.<sup>1</sup>

It is easy to see why the Civil War is so perplexing. It grew out of an enormous democratic process involving millions of local decisions. The war came through hot elections, public debates, personal agonizing, and family arguments in communities scattered across a vast continent. It came through

exulting enlistments and skulking resistance, through rousing speeches and editorials full of doubt. It came through elaborate interaction among families, neighborhoods, counties, states, and nation. It came through intention and through accident. It came through prominent events and through private soul-searching. To understand the coming of the Civil War, we need to understand the motivations and calculations that led millions into a war that shattered the lives of so many.

In order to gain a deeper sense of why the Civil War engulfed the United States, ironically, we may have to give up some of our sense of mastery, setting aside, at least temporarily, familiar generalizations and narrative devices. We might learn something essential by taking as our own the foreshortened knowledge of the people making decisions at the time. We might glimpse the mystery of the war's transformation and expansion by looking through the eyes of those navigating through the confusion. We might better understand familiar national events by seeing the many ways in which they were interpreted and reinterpreted by the people who had no choice but to act in response.

The idea of approaching large events through local study is, of course, hardly new. Historians, professional and otherwise, have written thousands of regimental histories, county histories, and town histories of the Civil War years. These studies make the coming of the war concrete and compelling. Inspired by such accounts, it seemed to me that two local portrayals could be even better than one, that exploring communities on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line as they each confronted the events from the late fifties to the late sixties might make both sides more comprehensible. Even better, I thought, would be to present these dual histories in some way that allowed them to be compared at every level and virtually day by day. How to comprehend so much detail without being overwhelmed by it, however, was another question altogether.<sup>2</sup>

To make a long (and unfinished) story short, I decided that the new digital technologies emerging around us with so much fanfare and anxiety might be a way that the World Wide Web, CD-ROMs, and their successors might allow a history both capacious and subtle. To test the possibilities of the new media, I have worked with a group of dedicated people and good friends at the University of Virginia over the last few years to create a large digital archive devoted to understanding the Civil War years. We call this archive the Valley of the Shadow Project. Researchers painstakingly transcribed and indexed hundreds of pages of newspapers so those pages can be searched

instantly for any individual or subject. They have entered tens of thousands of names from census records and have copied records of rich and poor, black and white alike. They have gathered wills, diaries, letters, and church records and created detailed maps of farms, hamlets, and towns.<sup>3</sup>

All these sources put the stubborn individuality of people on display and reveal the patterns of the past in beautiful complexity. The harder we look, the more complexity we see, the more circles within circles, the more individuals with their own faces and histories. The project welcomes visitors to its Web site and CD, inviting them to explore the evidence for themselves, to weigh and value and interrelate pieces of the past, to test their own understanding of why the Civil War came. The professional historian becomes a fellow explorer as well as a guide to the past.

The archive gains coherence from its "plot," as a northern county and a southern county that share many characteristics struggle with the decisions of the sectional crisis. The archive moves forward in time as well as across social space. Plots touch, connect, diverge. The war comes. Yet that plot shapes only a portion of the archive. Many of the stories in the Valley Project are about families, neighborhoods, and churches, about everyday life when people did not know a war loomed. Many of the questions raised about class, ethnicity, or gender, about economy, culture, and power, can stand on their own, independent of questions about the causation of the war. The archive is full of possibilities.

Merely because something is newly possible, of course, does not mean that it is worthwhile. Judging from press and television accounts, the new digital media promise to transform the classroom and the home into places of active democratic learning if those media do not drown us in pornography, cults, and terrorism first. It is far too early to know how the story of the new media will turn out; we are still in the crystal radio, nickelodeon, kinescope era of the technology. However, historians have the entire record of human experience and many unresolved questions to explore in new ways.<sup>4</sup>

It is obvious that no two places typified regions as vast and as varied as the American South and the American North. We might have chosen places far apart, say, pitting New England against the Deep South. There would have been nothing wrong with that (I hope someone will do such a study), and it would certainly fit the current understanding of the war more conveniently. Yet the fact is that much of the United States found itself arrayed along an uncertain border between the North and South in 1860. The

states that supplied the critical votes (and the most troops and the most battlefields during the war) rested on that border. Those states faced the hardest decisions and those decisions largely determined the outcome of conflict between the North and South. By looking carefully at two places that went into the war only after great struggle—and then with great initial enthusiasm—we glimpse the experiences of a large portion of the American people.

The Valley Project follows Augusta County, Virginia, and Franklin County, Pennsylvania, resting about two hundred miles apart in the Great Valley of the Shenandoah and the Cumberland. The farmers who dominated both counties shared a common climate and raised the same crops. Both places turned around small towns—Staunton and Chambersburg—that served as the county seats, both of which in turn published two newspapers and anchored two political parties. Both counties contained rich and poor, black and white, immigrant and native. Both harbored many Protestant churches. Both divided among themselves on all the great questions of the day, right up through the election of 1860 and the firing on Fort Sumter. They both marched united into the war when it came, their men enlisting in enormous numbers at the first opportunity and dying for the next four years, its women sustaining the cause in every way open to them.

The individuality and personality of the people in Augusta and Franklin come through in every part of the archive. Distinct voices speak in their diaries and letters and newspapers. Yet there is a paradox: these two communities, so full of internal complexity and struggle, end up making the same decisions as thousands of other communities. Though we see the difference personality made—or class or marriage or neighborhood—when all the struggles were finished, the people of Augusta and Franklin subordinated their individuality into mass political decisions and died in numbers difficult for us to comprehend.

Augusta and Franklin typify many counties, in fact, by the speed with which they closed ranks in 1861. Despite the hard words they threw at one another, the citizens of these two places drew together at the crisis. Their deliberation transformed into determination almost overnight. The Virginia county of 21,000 white people, after voting heavily against secession early on, sent 6,000 men to war; the Pennsylvania county of 41,000, full of Democrats and southern sympathizers, sent over 10,000. Southern men who had denounced disunion for years died in the service of the Confederacy. Northern

men who had defended slavery died in the service of the Union. The story of the coming of the Civil War is the transformation of indecision and the drift into resolve and death.

As the detail available in the Valley archive makes clear, far too much happened in Augusta and Franklin between 1859 and 1861 to convey in a single lecture, perhaps even in a book. What follows, therefore, is not a history of the coming of the war in Augusta and Franklin. Instead, what follows is a meditation on how this experiment might lead us to see the coming of the Civil War in a different way. It tries to see both the story and the medium at a distance, in perspective, with none of the individuals or individual stories the archive celebrates.

Let's talk first of the comparison between the North and the South. The view dominant since the 1970s looks something like this: the North nurtured a dynamic, entrepreneurial society while the slave South sustained a relatively static society that created wealth for a few. Free labor generated cities, immigration, class division, and a sense of moral superiority. Slave labor, by contrast, generated plantations, ethnic homogeneity, race division, and a sense of moral defensiveness. The society of the North bred reform organizations, possibilities for women, and an identification of economic growth with expanding freedom. The society of the South bred an antagonism to reform, narrow roles for women, and an identification of the growth of factories and cities with expanding tyranny. In this vision, the North and the South become steadily more distinct over time, their social and labor systems generating ideological differences that lead to political conflict that lead to war. This explanation ties everything together, interpreting the war as the clash of societies opposed top to bottom. Marxists, liberals, and conservatives all accept versions of this portrayal.<sup>5</sup>

The Augusta and Franklin archive shows both the strengths and weaknesses of this explanation. Reading the newspapers of the two places, it is often difficult to tell whether one is in the North or the South. The Democratic paper of Franklin County dripped with a contempt for African Americans displayed by neither of the newspapers in the slaveholding county. The papers of the Virginia county are filled with enthusiasm for railroads, business, and economic development of every sort, enthusiasm usually thought characteristic of Yankees. People in both places worried about the same social problems: delinquent youngsters, crime in the back alleys, flirtatious beaux, unscrupulous politicians, drinking, fires and floods, and moral decay brought on by prosperity. The papers reported the same

international news and both viewed the American West with a mixture of admiration and anxiety. They argued among themselves and against their enemies in the same political language, and they both appealed to the same Protestant God for sustenance and vindication.

Yet Augusta, despite its proximity to the Mason-Dixon Line, despite its location outside the plantation districts of the South, despite its embrace of the modern life of the 1850s, was very much a slave society. Compared to Franklin and the North in general, this Virginia county had a low population density and relatively few towns. Slaves made up about a fifth of the county's population, a proportion typical of many counties in the slave states as a whole and a proportion of significant consequence. Virtually all of the wealthy and powerful white families of the county possessed slaves, often in large numbers.

Here, in a county that grew mainly grains and livestock, more than eight hundred white families owned slaves. Dozens of slaveholders owned ten or twenty people, and a few owned more than forty, placing them among the top few percent of slaveholders in the entire South. Just as important, more than six hundred slaveholders owned one or two slaves, showing the eagerness with which white people of average means bought into the institution even in nonplantation areas. Slaves worked in a wide array of jobs, stacking wheat and picking apples, building railroads and laboring in shops. An Augusta newspaper bragged that the number of slaves in the county had increased in the 1850s despite the relentless pull of the slave trade to the new lands of the Southwest.

The leaders of Augusta were determined to stay abreast of the North and to hold tightly to bondage at the same time. The men who claimed to speak for Augusta, like most white southerners, did not stress differences, and certainly not deficiencies, caused by slavery. Rather, they argued that slavery was essential to the continued growth of the county, the state, and the region. They spent little time defending the virtues of slavery but much time revealing what they saw as the hypocrisy of the North on matters of race.

Slavery existed in Augusta not because of any compelling need to produce a staple crop, and yet slavery was central to the economy and society of Augusta. The institution was not dying out there, but rather winding into the economic machinery of the New Age. Ideals of democracy, of Christianity, and of progress accommodated themselves to slavery, wrapped it in the language of the current day. Slavery was structurally central to Augusta, but the white people of the county remained largely silent on the institution



in their newspapers as well as in their diaries and letters. Slavery shaped everything in the South, but white people learned to wall off slavery from much of their thinking and actions. They defended slavery at a remove, in sincere language about rights and the Constitution, translating it into elevated words and concerns they embraced all the more fervently for the words' refinement and elevation.

While Augusta remained resolutely quiet on slavery, Franklin was loud on slavery and all its implications. The southern border of Franklin County lay only five miles away from the northernmost border of Virginia, a narrow strip of Maryland intervening. Slaves escaped through and to Franklin using networks of black freedom fighters and white allies. Frederick Douglass visited the county in the late 1850s, attracting a large and largely black audience and some grudging respect from the white newspapers. (He also, unbeknownst to the papers, met with John Brown, who was living in Chambersburg under an assumed name and planning his attack on Harpers Ferry, but that is another story.) Antislavery opinion grew in Franklin County because people could see slavery firsthand.

Yet proslavery opinion flourished there as well, with anti-abolitionists sneering at black people and any whites who sympathized with them. The free blacks of Franklin were no better off than the free blacks of Augusta. The Pennsylvania African Americans, like their counterparts throughout the North, owned less property and were even more physically segregated than their southern counterparts, who were relegated to places such as the Toads Island slum of Chambersburg. Anything the free blacks of Franklin County had they created for themselves. Animosity among Franklin whites toward southern slaveholders did not bring sympathy for southern slaves; even less frequently did it bring sympathy and support for the black people among whom northern whites lived.

Franklin County, like most of the North, was devoted to farming. Fields dominated the landscape of the North just as they did the South. Economic differences alone created little animosity between the North and South, little direct competition over resources, labor, or markets. Contrary to many Americans' persistent belief today, the war did not come because an "industrial" North sought to extract tariffs and bounties from the South, or because a decrepit slave economy lashed out in its death throes against modernity. Slavery and free labor, when kept in distinct territories, actually complemented one another economically. The South's enormously profitable cotton plantations benefited everyone in the nation except the African

American people who worked on those plantations. Influential people on both sides said so repeatedly.<sup>6</sup>

Despite these well-known aspects of antebellum history, historians of the coming of the Civil War focus, naturally enough, on the inherent conflict between North and South. The North, we believe, embodied much of what we think of as "modern." It seems to be an individualistic society, politically democratic, geared to the market, and increasingly dependent upon technology. The South is often portrayed, in contrast, as wedded to the past, to organic and hierarchical ideals, to all manner of old-fashioned ways of doing things. The North seems to be the evolutionary branch that leads to an idealized America of today—free and prosperous and diverse—while the South is an evolutionary dead end. When the regions become adequately unified, it appears, when the boundaries are filled in, when southern nationalism reaches critical mass, the Civil War arrives. Each crisis from 1820 on seems to be a step in this process. When enough steps have been taken, the war comes. Modernity and resistance reach a breaking point.<sup>7</sup>

The Valley Project suggests, by contrast, that the Civil War might be seen instead as the clash of two modernizing societies. Augusta County, from an international perspective, contained much that appears modern ideologically, politically, culturally, and technologically. Like other white southerners, the white residents of Augusta identified themselves with the western world, its traditions and its bright future. They prided themselves on their schools and hospitals, their gas lights and waterworks. They saw slavery as a necessity of racial relations like that of other English-descended people living among people of dark skins, not as the basis for a contrary civilization. Modernity and progress were more flexible notions than we often acknowledge today, perhaps more flexible than we would like to acknowledge.<sup>8</sup>

Consider the role of print. Modern nations, we are beginning to see, took shape around the printed and disseminated word. Print permits people to cast their imaginations and loyalties beyond the boundaries of their localities, to identify with people they have never met, to see themselves in abstract causes. Societies built on print breed both a sense of interrelatedness and difference. People learn to imagine consequences of actions; people live in the future in the way they do not in an oral culture.<sup>9</sup>

Print shaped everything we associate with the coming of the Civil War. Although Bleeding Kansas was far removed from the East and John Brown's raid freed no slaves, these events gained critical significance because they were amplified and distorted by newspapers. The papers did not merely

report the news but made the news, gave it shape and meaning. Without the papers, many events we now see as decisive would have passed without wide consequence. With the papers, however, events large and small stirred the American people every day. The press nurtured anticipation and grievance. Americans of the 1850s grew self-conscious, deeply aware of who they were and who others said they were. The Confederacy in particular was an alliance of strangers, of people marching off to war who had no common experience as a nation. The Confederacy existed through print before it existed through blood. The Civil War was brought on by extrapolation, people imaginatively constructing chains of action and reaction beyond the boundaries of their own time and space.<sup>10</sup>

Augusta and Franklin paid great attention to print. Every week two local newspapers came before the three thousand people of Staunton and two came before the five thousand people of Chambersburg. The papers (fortunately for the Valley Project) covered every small public occurrence in their counties, translating church meetings, pranks, minor disputes, and rumors into matters of public record and discussion. The papers, like the hundreds of other papers in each state, also printed news from all over the country. The newspapers traced the complex networks in which the people of Augusta and Franklin lived, webs of commerce, migration, the slave trade, churches, travel, and, especially, politics.

The political system gave the technology of print a reason to press forward so aggressively. It was highly mobilized political parties—another manifestation of modern societies—that created the competing newspapers in Augusta and Franklin, that generated most of their news, and that gave them their sense of identity. The papers did not merely reflect systemic social differences but, rather, refracted them, deflected them, amplified them. The newspapers reprinted insults from across town, across political boundaries, across the Mason-Dixon Line, telling their readers exactly what their enemies thought of them. Indeed, the newspapers exaggerated difference and created animosity where it would not have flourished otherwise.

The political system joined print in teaching Americans to think of themselves as connected to places beyond their communities. Long before an integrated national economy evolved, political parties welded American places together. The Democrats, Whigs, and Republicans gave Americans common cause with people who lived thousands of miles away while dividing them against their neighbors and relatives. The political system existed for such connections, for coordination and cooperation. The system created

policy to help feed the machinery, created controversy to attract the undecided, created positions to reward the faithful. The system was the end as well as the means.<sup>11</sup>

In both Augusta and Franklin, wealthy men and poorer men appeared in both parties. Large slaveholders argued fervently both for secession and for Union; northern capitalists argued strongly for both resistance and accommodation. Political identity did not merely reflect other, deeper identities but in itself conveyed a man's sense of himself. Augusta huddled close to the middle of the political road, voting for the Democrat Stephen Douglas and the Constitutional Union candidate John Bell. Franklin split sharply, the Republican Abraham Lincoln winning but the strong southern-rights candidate John Breckinridge attracting thousands of votes. Proximity to the border, in other words, bred compromise, concession, and defiance simultaneously and among the same population.<sup>12</sup>

By understanding the matrices of identity more fully, by seeing how people were, at the same time, members of households, churches, parties, lineages, neighborhoods, counties, and states, we can better see how they acted as they did. Apparently irrational actions—such as the eager enlistment of nonslaveholders in the Confederacy or the willingness of northern men to die for union with slaveholders—make more sense when we take more networks of identity into account.

Seeing the matrices of action and identity also permits us to write a history more integrated by gender. Women played important, often central, roles in all the institutions that gave shape to both northern and southern society. Understanding the power and pervasiveness of print, for example, lets us see how women could be influential members of the polity despite their position on the sidelines of political rallies and in the balconies of legislative chambers. They read the papers as avidly as their husbands, fathers, and sons, but in private. They could know as much about current events as men, have opinions as fully informed and inflamed. Households thus served as crucibles of decision making. Homages and toasts to the ladies as the locus of real power were more than empty sexist gestures.<sup>13</sup>

Given the economic, ideological, geopolitical, and partisan identities people had to balance in hundreds of communities such as Augusta and Franklin, it is hardly surprising that people were confused then and now about the causes of the war. When viewed week by week and through the perspective of two fixed places, the war seems to arrive through sudden seismic shocks rather than the slowly and inexorably gathering storm historians

often envision. One unexpected event after another—from John Brown's raid to failed compromises to the amount of supplies in Fort Sumter—jerked people from lines they expected to follow. The war came precisely because people kept expecting something to deflect the conflict into another channel, another course of human events. The entire process was full of potentialities that never materialized. The war descended on American communities as if from an outside force even though each of those communities was implicated in bringing on the crisis.

At the same time the political system extended people's vision and reach, it simplified the complexities of American life into a series of binary opposites. American political elections were winner take all; no parliamentary representation reflected the complexity of opinion. Men in power in 1860 repeatedly used the language of contests, struggles, fights, and victories. Party leaders, with much cheering and heckling from the sidelines, determined which candidates would confront one another. Voters had to choose one and only one. The forced simplicities of politics smothered the complexities of local life. State and national politics acted as filters of interest and identity, reducing complicated choices into simple ones. The narrow channeling of political opinion into a few candidacies constrained choice and silenced debate.<sup>14</sup>

The events of the late 1850s and early 1860s were accelerated and exaggerated by party and print. In distinctly modern ways, people anticipated the contingencies of events, made warnings and threats, imagined their responses, imagined the responses of others. People played out the game in their minds before they played it out with one another, entertaining and debating the possibilities they could imagine, extending the chain of action and reaction. This is one reason the Civil War seems to have "come," why it seems inadequately caused. People on both sides were playing out future scenarios even as they responded to immediate threats. When the political system broke down under its own weight, the rules of the game suddenly changed. Four candidates appeared in 1860 instead of two, explicitly sectional candidates instead of avowedly national ones. When the political system collapsed regional identity rushed in to fill the space.<sup>15</sup>

Secession and its response were discontinuous and unpredictable at every level. The several networks among which people lived pulled them in different directions. Slaveholding in the Upper South or Lower could lead to secession or to Unionism. Living in a northern city could breed identity with the Union or sympathy with white southerners with whom one did business. Strong antislavery feelings might lead to engagement in political

parties or to estrangement from that system altogether. Church membership could foster identity with the denomination or a faction within it. Northern acquaintance with slavery might lead to sympathy for the slave or with the slaveholder. Everything was about alignment of system and circumstance.

Little was sheer accident; everything was connected to everything else. They were connected in patterned ways, as distinct systems with their own rules and dynamics. Economic motives, cultural motives, and political motives often clashed within the same community or even within the same person. Things were contingent—not in the sense of the word as “chance occurrence or accident,” but rather in another of its meanings: “dependent for its existence on something else.”<sup>16</sup>

We have seen how many characteristics Augusta and Franklin shared and the border lands stretching from Maryland to Illinois witnessed similar contestation and uncertainty. They were places where a wide range of possibilities were obvious to everyone deep into 1861. These places bred uncertainty within their borders and were themselves objects of uncertainty for the nation. The hybrid economic systems, the competing loyalties, the contentious politics all generated instability.<sup>17</sup>

The political system was by far the most contingent of the systems among which people lived. It was there that the decisions of one man could trump far broader and deeper structures. Due to politics, the options of 1859 narrowed for states, counties, and individuals until the spring of 1861, when they were reduced to bleak pairs: secede or not, fight or not. Some people embraced the starkness, glorying in the clarity, as some always will. Others accepted the stark decision with resignation. Some tried to avoid the decision but could not.

The coming, fighting, and aftermath of the Civil War should not be thought of as a single linear story. Rather, it was often discontinuous, with sharp breaks in the sets of choices and lack of choices it presented. The history of this era is often presented to us as the clashing of blocks, as large areas of textbook maps in collision. We might think instead of multiple, interlocking systems, sometimes congruent, sometimes in conflict. Some of the networks ran north and south, others operated only within regions, others stretched across the Atlantic. Some pushed the North and the South towards war while others pulled them away.<sup>18</sup>

War was not merely politics in a separate guise. The coming of the war and the war itself were driven by different imperatives, different calculations. The purposes of the war changed for both sides and then changed again at

war's end. For those in the uniforms of enlisted men, sheer luck often superseded decision and choice. Those in officers' uniforms confronted choices whose results became known almost immediately and with consequences of life and death. For those on the home front, the usual uncertainties of life were compounded and accelerated by wartime.

If the Civil War was so complicated at every level, it would be difficult to comprehend and convey. For many people, that is reason enough to simplify the story. But perhaps the new technologies I've mentioned can offer us another way. Digital media allows us to see systems in suspension. It allows us to crystallize patterns in a historical source even as we maintain that source in its original form and entirety, to maintain particularity even as we draw generalizations. We can take the pieces apart and put them back together. We can shift from economic to ideological perspectives, from local to state to national, from public to private. The Valley Project is designed to let us trace as many connections as possible in as many directions and dimensions as possible.

The digital archive reveals the element of play, of guesswork and puzzle solving that underlies all historical research. More than this, the computer uses relentlessly linear and literal machinery to remind us that much of our connection to and understanding of the past is empathetic and intuitive. The computer reveals things we might not have seen otherwise, but it also reveals blank spaces and silences. It announces the limitations of our knowledge, the distance of the past. Its capacity lets us see that things we expected to connect did not necessarily do so, or at least not in the ways we expected. The connections among slavery, modernity, power, and regional identity, especially, turn out to be more oblique than we had anticipated.

The Valley Project makes exploring the records of the past easier while demonstrating how difficult it is to construct compelling historical narratives and analysis. It reminds us, though, that generalizations are models that leave out most of the evidence. It reminds us that narrative history cannot help but arrange messy things into neater story lines. Stories work by leaving out more than they tell, by dramatizing some contingencies while ignoring others. And yet we must tell stories.

It is not yet clear what the written history of Augusta and Franklin that grows out of our online archive will look like. Perhaps it will be a narrative like narratives based on conventional archives, for those have shown their power and usefulness for generations. Perhaps it will be more like a novel, floating detached from the evidence while permitting the archive to do the

work of substantiation. Perhaps the written history will link itself even more tightly than footnotes permit, allowing readers to explore entire sources rather than mere references.

Many questions present themselves, including questions about the interpretive pressure created by the digital medium itself. The very nature of that medium emphasizes interrelation, complexity, and multiplicity. Does that suggest that the technology itself is imposing its characteristics on the way we see the past, pushing aside more obvious answers to our questions? Does the possibility of handling so much detail lead us to make a fetish of subtlety? Does the archive fragment and undermine what we need most—a connection to a coherent past? Or is the Valley of the Shadow Project like a microscope, showing us the complex structures we must understand if we are to understand the substance itself? Only time will tell, of course, and time brings surprises.

## NOTES

Edward L. Ayers delivered his Klement Lecture in 1997.

1. Second Inaugural Address, Mar. 4, 1865, in *The Portable Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Andrew Delbanco (New York: Penguin, 1992), 320–21.

2. Recent examples include Stephen V. Ash, *When the Yankees Came: Conflict and Chaos in the Occupied South, 1861–1865* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1995); Wayne K. Durrill, *War of Another Kind: A Southern Community in the Great Rebellion* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990); Daniel E. Sutherland, *Seasons of War: The Ordeal of a Confederate Community, 1861–1865* (New York: Free Press, 1995); Warren Wilkinson, *Mother, May You Never See the Sights I Have Seen: The Fifty-seventh Massachusetts Veteran Volunteers in the Army of the Potomac, 1864–1865* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990); Kenneth W. Noe and Shannon H. Wilson, eds., *The Civil War in Appalachia: Collected Essays* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1997).

3. One form of the archive may be found online at <http://valley.vcdh.virginia.edu>. It was published by Norton in 2000 as *The Valley of the Shadow: Two Communities in the American Civil War—The Eve of War*. The CD-ROM version of the project, coauthored with Anne S. Rubin, contains much more material, especially images, maps, and sound, and is accompanied by a book. For a helpful overview of the current situation, see Michael O'Malley and Roy Rosenzweig, "Brave New World or Blind Alley? American History on the World Wide Web," *Journal of American History* 84 (June 1997): 132–55.

4. For a fascinating overview of the place of the new media in other narrative forms, see Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (New York: Free Press, 1997).

5. For examples, see Eric Foner, "The Causes of the American Civil War: Recent Interpretations and New Directions," *Civil War History* 20 (Sept. 1974): 197–214; James M. McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: Knopf, 1982); Jeffrey Rogers Hummel, *Emancipating Slaves, Enslaving Free Men: A History of the American Civil War* (Chicago: Open Court, 1996).



6. The classic account of the reductionist "economic" perspective is Charles and Mary Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization* (New York: Macmillan, 1927). For the centrality of slavery to the American economy, the key book is Douglass C. North, *The Economic Growth of the United States, 1790–1860* (New York: Norton, 1966). A subtle and informed overview is Robert William Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery* (New York: Norton, 1989).

7. Modernity is the basic organizing theme of McPherson's *Ordeal by Fire* and is invoked as a major reason for Union success in George Fredrickson, "Blue Over Gray: Sources of Success and Failure in the Civil War," *A Nation Divided: Problems and Issues of the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Minneapolis: Burgess, 1975). A recent book that offers "everything you need to know about America's greatest conflict but never learned" boils things down this way: "The America of the Union states was racing toward the twentieth century, with banks, booming factories, railroads, canals, and steamship lines. . . . The southern states of the Confederacy were, in many respects, standing still in time." Kenneth C. Davis, *Don't Know Much About the Civil War: Everything You Need to Know About America's Greatest Conflict but Never Learned* (New York: Morrow, 1996), 151–52.

8. Richard Graham, "Economics or Culture? The Development of the U.S. South and Brazil in the Days of Slavery," in Kees Gispens, ed., *What Made the South Different?* (Oxford: Univ. of Mississippi Press, 1990). For insightful portrayals of "modern" influences in the South, see J. Mills Thornton III, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800–1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1978); Eugene D. Genovese, *The Slaveholders' Dilemma: Freedom and Progress in Southern Conservative Thought, 1820–1860* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1992); and Kenneth W. Noe, *Southwest Virginia's Railroad: Modernization and the Sectional Crisis* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1994).

9. This is the argument of one of the most influential books to appear in recent years in the social sciences: Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991).

10. A stimulating and innovative account that emphasizes the modernity of the Confederacy is Drew Gilpin Faust, *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism: Ideology and Identity in the Civil War South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1989). A useful Web site, headed by Professor Lloyd Benson of Furman University, that shows the possibilities of newspapers for understanding the coming of the Civil War can be found at <http://history.furman.edu/~benenson/docs/>. On the projection of boundaries in time, see Peter S. Onuf, "Federalism, Republicanism, and the Origins of American Sectionalism," in Edward L. Ayers, Patricia Nelson Limerick, Stephen Nissenbaum, and Peter S. Onuf, eds., *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1996).

11. Important books that emphasize the dynamics of the political system itself in bringing on the Civil War include Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: Wiley, 1978); *Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1992); William E. Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852–1856* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986); William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: The Secessionists at Bay* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990); and *The Reintegration of American History: Slavery and the Civil War* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994).

12. The local bases of politics in Virginia have been brilliantly portrayed in Daniel W. Crofts, *Old Southampton: Politics and Society in a Virginia County, 1834–1869* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1992); the complexities of its state-level politics appear in William G. Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion: Virginia and the Second Party System, 1824–1861* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1996).

13. The high degree of engagement of women with political issues at the beginning of the war has been demonstrated in Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1996). Elizabeth Varon, in "'We Mean to Be Counted': White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1993), shows that the involvement of women did not begin with the secession crisis but had long been nourished (and resisted) in the party system.

14. On the dictates of the political system, see Peter H. Argersinger, *Structure, Process, and Party: Essays in American Political History* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1992).

15. See especially Holt, *Political Crisis of the 1850s*.

16. James McPherson stresses contingency, though with a somewhat different emphasis, in *The Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988), 857–58.

17. On Maryland, for example, see Jean H. Baker, *The Politics of Continuity: Maryland Political Parties from 1858 to 1870* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1973); William J. Evitts, *A Matter of Allegiances: Maryland from 1850 to 1861* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1974); and Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland During the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1985).

18. For a fascinating account of the various networks in which the people of one Virginia city lived, see Gregg David Kimball, "Place and Perception: Richmond in Late Antebellum America" (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 1997).