

Academy students making a flag in the Chestnut Street building, albumen print by John Moran, 1862.



Collection of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia Archives

1902 dedication of the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument, Indianapolis, IN, during the 50th anniversary of the Civil War.



## THE CIVIL WAR SESQUICENTENNIAL:

# Seeking Common Ground

*Conversations at the 2007 Annual Meeting*

BY BETH HAGER

*"The Civil War is, for the American imagination, the great single event of our history."*<sup>1</sup> —ROBERT PENN WARREN

April 12, 2011 marks the 150th anniversary of the firing on Fort Sumter, commencing four years of hostilities between the North and South. The 2007 AASLH Annual Meeting provided timely opportunities for history and museum professionals to consider the challenges of planning the commemoration of the war's sesquicentennial with a plenary address by historian David Blight, a book discussion on Robert Penn Warren's *The Legacy of the Civil War*, and a session led by Dwight Pitcaithley on the upcoming commemoration.

## PLENARY ADDRESS AND BOOK DISCUSSION

On Friday, September 7, plenary speaker David Blight, historian from Yale University and author of the acclaimed book *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (2001), set the tone for subsequent discussions, delivering a stimulating presentation about memory and history in which he emphasized that "all memory is local" and "place is at the heart of where we see the past" (see pages 12 to 15 for excerpts of Blight's address). Blight also profiled his most recent work, *A Slave No More: Two Men Who Escaped to Freedom Including Their Own Narratives of Emancipation*, a book that introduces and analyzes two previously unpublished former slave narratives.

Immediately following his address, Blight joined former National Park Service chief historian and current New Mexico State University professor of history Dwight Pitcaithley in leading a book discussion on Robert Penn Warren's short volume *The Legacy of the Civil War*. Originally published by Random House, *Life* magazine commissioned Warren's work in 1961, in anticipation of the war's centennial. Like many scholars of the Civil War, Blight and Pitcaithley regard Warren's book as crucial to the understanding of the war and remarkable for its disparagement of both the North and the South. In it, Warren criticized his southern homeland for its "Great Alibi," an enduring excuse for the poverty and ignorance that gripped the region after the war. At the same time, he also held in contempt the North's delusional "Treasury of Virtue," in which those living above the Mason-Dixon Line felt redeemed by history as the war's victors.





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Members of Philadelphia Brigade and Pickett's Division meet for the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg, 1913.

Warren's succinct and brilliant analysis identified the key problems of the nation's Civil War commemorations over the last 150 years. He wrote that Americans "should seek to end the obscene gratifications of history, and try to learn what the contemplation of the past, conducted with psychological depth and humane breadth, can do for us." Blight and Pitcaithley noted that Warren believed Americans did not truly learn anything from the war, that the popular enthusiasm for its celebration obscured its true tragedy.<sup>2</sup>

Blight argued that Americans were so singularly determined to heal northern and southern wounds during the 50th, 75th, and 100th anniversaries of the Civil War, that they ignored slavery, the core issue of the war, in order to reconcile white northerners and white southerners. Against the backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement, the Civil War Centennial devolved into a debacle that disregarded slavery as a cause of the war. Blight proffered that an appropriate response would be to make the sesquicentennial a celebration of the 150th anniversary of emancipation instead of just the Civil War, and that that celebration needs to include stories such as the war for union, the war for emancipation, and those that have not been told before in order to make the commemoration a more meaningful event for Americans.

Blight and Pitcaithley agreed that the greatest potential threat to sesquicentennial programming would be if we were to allow people to drag the commemoration off message, to focus more on battlefield valor and noble reunions between North and South rather than the lessons the war teaches us today. If this happens, the event could easily fall into the cel-

ebratory innocence and romance that Warren deplored and perhaps run the risk of a proliferation of multiple, separate sesquicentennial celebrations—one for whites and one for blacks, one for blue and one for gray, one for the North and one for the South, and so on.

## CIVIL CONVERSATIONS

Blight and Pitcaithley's engaging book discussion served as an excellent preamble to the following morning's session, entitled "Civil Conversations: Seeking Common Ground on America's Civil War," also chaired by Pitcaithley. Taking the lead from a roundtable on planning for the upcoming sesquicentennial at the 2006 AASLH annual meeting, "Civil Conversations" was designed to discuss the need for finding common ground on this potentially divisive issue. Gordon Jones, Vice President of Exhibitions and Collections at the Atlanta History Center, co-presented the session and offered his perspective as curator of his institution's comprehensive 9,200 square-foot permanent exhibition, *Turning Point: The American Civil War*. Unique among Civil War exhibits at the time it opened in 1996, *Turning Point* uses nearly 1,400 objects to focus on personal stories of the war against a backdrop of its major events and themes. This noteworthy presentation challenges visitors to consider the causes of the conflict and its impact on American life.

To examine the difficulties faced in bringing disparate groups to the table to discuss the lessons of the Civil War and to better inform sesquicentennial planning, "Civil Conversations" was slated to feature representatives of the Southern Poverty Law Center and the Sons of Confederate Veterans. But neither was able to attend. Nevertheless, the session that transpired included insightful comments from the presenters and the audience on the intricacies of bridging gaps between disparate groups—academic historians versus public historians, public historians versus Civil War reenactors and enthusiasts, eastern versus western audiences, black versus white, etc.—followed by an introspective discussion with the audience on those very issues.

## ISSUES

Building on the themes he explored with David Blight and AASLH colleagues the previous day, Pitcaithley began by suggesting that our understanding of the mistakes and oversights of prior Civil War celebrations make for a





Black Union soldiers at Camp William Penn, Philadelphia. Lithograph by P. S. Duval & Son, Philadelphia, c. 1864.

Courtesy of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania

cautionary tale as we engage in the sesquicentennial commemoration. Referencing Robert Cook's newly published *Troubled Commemoration: The American Civil War Centennial, 1961-1965*, Pitcaithley cautioned us to choose our words carefully as someone will surely follow Cook's lead in interpreting events surrounding the Civil War Sesquicentennial. Fifty years from now, he warned, historians and museum professionals will be holding us accountable for how we handled the 150th anniversary of the Civil War, just as we are holding accountable those who coordinated events commemorating the war's centennial.

Pitcaithley, Jones, and the audience raised questions and issues that centered on how to avoid the mistakes of the war's centennial celebrations. Questions ranged from how we transform the traditional celebration and instead implement commemoration in our communities to how to bridge the gaps between the ways historians and the public understand and interpret the war. The group pondered how we assuage the fears of some interest groups who think we want to completely revise what they consider "their" history, and how we confront potential controversies that can arise.

Of note, just as the actual Civil Rights Movement coincided with the Civil War Centennial, the fiftieth anniversary of the Civil Rights Movement concurs with the upcoming Civil War Sesquicentennial. Attendees agreed that we need to ask ourselves how to ensure the story of the Civil Rights Movement is told and interpreted during the sesquicentennial as the two events are intimately linked by their respective histories. The group also recognized that an understanding of the Reconstruction era is critical to comprehending the war and its impact but acknowledged that few audience members are familiar with the era and thus grasp its impact. We must attempt to make this period pertinent and vital to the public's comprehension of the war and the long struggle for civil rights. Last, and certainly not least, the group pondered how we might engage the interest of audiences in western states by answering why they should even care about the war, most of which occurred thousands of miles from their respective communities.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The dialogue between session leaders and audience members provided a number of observations and suggestions.

*First, we should emphasize 150 years, not the 150th anniversary. (Can you even say "sesquicentennial," much less spell*

*it?)* Rather than use a term unfamiliar to the public, perhaps we should focus on the 150 years of history since 1861 and not on the sesquicentennial itself. With an emphasis shifted from the four years of war to the causes and consequences of that war, we can discuss its relevance to our various and diverse audiences today. We can ask how the war and Reconstruction defined who we were in 1911 and 1961, how they will define who we will be in 2011, and who we want to be fifty years hence.

*Second, local museums and historical organizations should make themselves available as centers for open discourse about the war and its legacy.* The AASLH membership can do much to facilitate discussions on the Civil War within their communities. Museums and historical organizations are appropriate sites for dialogue among various interest groups and diverse audiences. Our institutions have a responsibility to provide historical context in an effort to foster deeper understanding for our communities. These conversations can have a broad and meaningful impact well beyond what may be promoted by tourism efforts and traditional celebrations. In addition, this programming does not have to be contingent on what a national Civil War commission or state-level commissions may or may not be doing. Pitcaithley suggested that Warren's *The Legacy of the Civil War*—"An equal opportunity book, he blasts everyone"—is a starting point to initiate dialogue for any community in any region.

*Next, the field should make stronger efforts to provide evidence about the causes and effects of the Civil War by sharing primary sources with the public.* At a recent National Endowment for the Humanities consultation project on the sesquicentennial at the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, historian Edward Ayers urged participants to make the Civil War strange again and not to fall into the trap of seeing everything about the war as inevitable. We should remind audiences that Americans in 1861 did not know nor could they foresee what was going to result from their actions. Pitcaithley similarly challenged the group to seize opportunities to use primary documents as evidence for difficult arguments. Make the human drama of 1861 relevant by going back to the original records, newspaper accounts, and manuscript collections to read the actual debates and editorials revealing the causes of the Civil War. He urged the group to look at questions such as: What is the evidence for slavery versus states' rights as the key cause of the Civil War? What do the primary sources say about the grievances of the southern states and how northerners viewed abolition and its potential to wreck their significant economic ties to the South? How did the arguments for and against the extension of slavery affect the western states and territories?

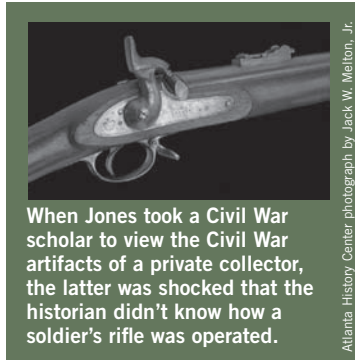
*Last, it is important to respect, bear, and engage all groups.* Gordon Jones shared a story about an incident that demonstrated the gulf between the academy and non-academic historians. When he was working on the *Turning Point* exhibition, Jones took an accomplished Civil War scholar to the home of a prolific Civil War collector to see his extensive array of artifacts. When showing the former an ordinary soldier's rifle, the collector was stunned that the historian had no knowledge of how the war's most commonly used weapon was operated. No doubt the disappointed collector probably discounted the historian's Civil War interest and expertise.

Pitcaithley cited an essay that John Coski, historian at the Museum of the Confederacy, wrote for the National Park Service, wherein he chided the academic community for the minimal respect it often affords amateur Civil War historians, reenactors, and enthusiasts. Jones and Pitcaithley agreed that their zeal should not be disparaged “because sharing passion is something we all have in common.” Intellectual mastery over the causes and impact of the war are not usually as important to non-academics and non-public historians; the *feeling* of the war is. The knowledge of holding and firing a rifle in the field or the excitement of finding an ancestor in a war record are the palpable, personal experiences that inspire the general public. If history organizations share these experiences with the public, they may open a window to exploring the larger context of the war and its aftermath.

At the same time, the group emphasized the need to ensure that the field is making every effort to be truly welcoming in its programming. For example, we must pay attention to how the African American community is engaged and included in the conception, planning, and implementation of our programs. Keeping in mind the experience of the Civil War Centennial and past exclusively white efforts at reconciliation, we must consider and include the concerns of the African American community, and how we sensitively

address and deal with those concerns. And in the case of the West, we need to examine if we are telling stories of the impact of the Civil War on Native Americans as well.

Providing a seat at the sesquicentennial table for all will be essential to making a concerted effort to avoid the mistakes of the past. Insuring that 150 years later we can actually *learn* from a new examination of the Civil War in way that is revealing and relevant to audiences today is key—and a concept that Robert Penn Warren would surely applaud. ●



When Jones took a Civil War scholar to view the Civil War artifacts of a private collector, the latter was shocked that the historian didn't know how a soldier's rifle was operated.

Atlanta history center photograph by Jack W. Melton, Jr.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Penn Warren, *The Legacy of the Civil War: Meditations on the Centennial* (New York: Random House, 1961), 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

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