

Speaker 1: Major funding for BackStory is provided by an anonymous donor, The National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Robert and Joseph Cornell Memorial Foundation.

Nathan Connolly: From Virginia Humanities, this is BackStory. Welcome to BackStory, the show that explains the history behind today's headlines. I'm Nathan Connolly.

Joanne Freeman: I'm Joanne Freeman.

Ed Ayers: I'm Ed Ayers.

Joanne Freeman: If you're new to the podcast, we're historians, and each week along with our cohost Brian Balogh, we explore the history of a topic that's been in the news.

Ed Ayers: Normally this is when we take you back to a moment in history, but this week we're talking about something that's happening right now. On May 4th, the brand new American Civil War Museum in Richmond, Virginia, opens to the public. For full disclosure, I should add that I'm the founding chairman of the museum's board.

Nathan Connolly: A merger of several historic sites including the former Museum of the Confederacy, the American Civil War Museum is hoping to present a new narrative of the conflict that's diverse, inclusive, and balanced.

Cathy Wright: This painting is known as, The Last Meeting of Lee and Jackson.

Nathan Connolly: That's Cathy Wright. She's a curator at the American Civil War Museum and a former curator at the Museum of the Confederacy. She spoke to BackStory producer, Melissa Gismondi, at the museum.

Cathy Wright: What we're seeing are Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson, two of the most revered confederate military commanders on horseback, meeting before the Battle of Chancellorsville. This is the battle of which Jackson would be mortally wounded. Prints of this painting were made and were owned by many white Southerners in the Post-war period. This is a very recognizable image to many people.

Nathan Connolly: Cathy says the painting, which is 12 feet high and eight feet wide, is one of the largest items in the museum's collection, which can make it hard to curate.

Cathy Wright: It sort of dominates the space, and we wanted to provide some balance to that.

Nathan Connolly: The museum aim to do that by displaying the painting alongside texts of the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments of the Constitution. They also chose to display it alongside a carefully curated image.

- Cathy Wright: On the wall immediately facing the painting, is a very large colorized photograph of African American legislators from Virginia in 1870s. These men are shown larger than life size. It's a group of eight men and it's really striking to see that photo in color at that scale and I think really helps to bring together a lot of the themes which we're trying to cover in this space.
- Nathan Connolly: You'll hear more from Melissa's tour of the museum's exhibits with Cathy later in the show.
- Joanne Freeman: Although the Civil War ended more than 150 years ago, it's iconography, history and message are invoked almost daily. Events like the 2015 massacre at the historic Emmanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, and the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville have sparked a debate about how the war should be represented in public spaces.
- Ed Ayers: On this episode, we're giving you an exclusive behind the scenes look at the American Civil War Museum in Richmond. We'll bring you a feature conversation I had with Christy Coleman, the museum's director. She is no stranger to controversy and she believes that museums have the power to change the world.
- Joanne Freeman: We'll look at the gift shop and ask, "How does the museum negotiate the politics of Civil War memorabilia?"
- Ed Ayers: Christy Coleman is one of the most extraordinary museum curators in the country. As an African American woman tasked with creating a new museum of the Civil War, she needs vision and diplomatic skills aplenty.
- She told me she had a very early, very visceral immersion in Southern history.
- At Colonial Williamsburg [crosstalk 00:04:19]?
- Christy Coleman: It was at Colonial Williamsburg, yeah. As a summer job, as a character interpreter is what they were called, and it was portraying a person of the past.
- Her name was Rebecca. She was an enslaved young woman about my age. They had to create, they had to find somebody for me. She was the property of John Blair. The premise behind her story was that he was sick and dying and it was creating anxiety because young Rebecca didn't know what was going to happen to her if he died.
- Ed Ayers: Wow. That's pretty heavy debut as an acting role.

Christy Coleman: It was. It was. I did the summers, went away, worked at another museum, came back to Colonial Williamsburg and eventually became director of African American Interpretations and Presentations.

One of the first actions in that role was the decision to reenact an estate sale, which included the sale of slaves.

Ed Ayers: Wow.

Christy Coleman: That's the first time I was thrust into the public, and the public relations and media spotlight. Colonial Williamsburg decided that I should be the face of this thing.

Ed Ayers: That was very controversial at the outset, but it seemed that in some ways you brought people along to understand why this would be a helpful scene.

Christy Coleman: Absolutely. It was an extraordinarily important moment, even though there was so much anxiety going into it, lots of controversy. People felt, "This isn't appropriate to do in a museum setting and particular at Colonial Williamsburg," or whatever, but what it did in the post days of that is that I received letters from academics around the nation, around the world, really.

Other museum colleagues, particularly those at historic houses and plantation sites contacted me and said, "If they can do that, we at least need to have an honest conversation about the enslaved populations at our sites." That began what I think was sort of the birth of us finally knowing the stories about Hemings and the other 300 plus people that were in Monticello, and then learning about the 300 plus people that were in Mount Vernon, and so forth and so on.

That was the moment because -

Ed Ayers: When was that moment?

Christy Coleman: 1994 which is ridiculous, 25 years ago, but that was the moment.

Ed Ayers: There aren't many topics in American history that are still as contentious as the Civil War. What were the issues that Christy and her staff faced creating this new institution?

Christy Coleman: We had to completely reimagine the meaning of the war. We had to start there. And then from that it's like, "Okay, well if you're imagining the meaning of it, why it matters in contemporary life, then that means you really have to examine it the way that people lived it." We started saying, "Okay, well how did they live it?" And then it was like, "Well, they lived in constant chaos. There was always

changing choices. There was never knowing what was going to happen around the next corner. There was this period for some of, is this my moment? Is Freedom coming? For others there was just the basic question of, where should my allegiance lie?"

We also quickly realized that this conflict impacted native nations. While it wasn't a global crisis, it had global impact because of the trades. We acknowledged that, if we're thinking about this as constant chaos and death and destruction at a scale that had never been seen before, that you're also dealing with trauma, it is a high emotion thing. How do you tell that story in an impactful way? And so it meant to me that it could no longer be a story that was just fixated on the military or the political. It had to intertwine again, the way that people lived it.

That meant there was this constant flow of impact. Something that's happening in the society is going to affect a military action. Something that the politicians do is going to end up impacting what happens on the battlefield. What the community is rallying against or rallying for is going to impact political action. All of these factors are constantly in play, and people are changing their minds constantly about their support for the war or its aims and so forth.

Creating that kind of fractious environment actually became sort of a visual vernacular for us.

Ed Ayers: In many ways, what you're trying to do is tell the story both on a global and a personal scale at the same time?

Christy Coleman: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Ed Ayers: It's not that we're not telling the stories of military history and political history, but we're weaving them together into the stories of abandonment, and of death on a battlefield, and of homesickness, and of political conflict. How is a museum the place that that story can be told in a way it can't be told anywhere else?

Christy Coleman: Well, every time Pew Research Center does a study on trusted institutions, museums always rank number two behind libraries, which means that's a tremendous amount of power and importance to help communities navigate.

Ed Ayers: Yeah.

Christy Coleman: I tell people all the time, history has never ever been for the dead, it is about our lived experience, it is about our environment. Museums have the capacity through its collections, through its storytelling, strength to help people make sense of the past and make that usable because we use a variety of learning techniques, whether it is the text on the wall that can never be too much,

whether it's the visual image that has an emotional impact, whether it is the artifact, there's something about the real thing that people really relate to -

Ed Ayers: [crosstalk 00:10:34] -

Christy Coleman: And we have a ton of the real thing that when they see it, it brings even more truth. I think that those ... sort of that center, that vision, that understanding, is what helps us be successful and has enabled us to really re-examine every single program and event that we've done through that lens.

Ed Ayers: What's this new building like? What were its priorities?

Christy Coleman: Well, the priority certainly was be mindful of the historic fabric of the site. There were original buildings here and there were industrial artifacts buried in the ground. We have tunnels and canals and all kinds of things that dot this nine acre site.

Ed Ayers: Yeah. This was one of the largest industrial sites in the United States at the time.

Christy Coleman: Absolutely. We were also concerned what we would find when we started digging.

Ed Ayers: You've invested so much in this for so long now you're waiting just days until the world shows up. What do you want them to take away from this experience?

Christy Coleman: I want them to be odd and inspired. You look, this thing is beautiful. It's beautiful, it's impactful. From the moment you walk through the doors of the new building you know you're in some place different because immediately you see the honoring of the past. Because we built this building around a ruin of the original foundry here.

Ed Ayers: What if you're a relatively recent arrival to America, you don't really feel any investment in this stroke, why in the world would you come to the American Civil War Museum?

Christy Coleman: Because as soon as you walk through the door, not only would you potentially see people of your ancestral ethnic group but you would also immediately begin to understand just how much this particular conflict and its aftermath impacts American life. You will begin to recognize whether it's ideologies, whether it is the way, sort of American culture, particularly political and social culture evolves, you will see it. It will be very apparent to you.

Anyone that wants to understand America and who and what she is, will get a glimpse of that because of this conflict. Let's not forget the American Civil War

was an attempt at a birth of a new freedom, but it is the saving of a republic, it is the saving of an idea and that I think is inescapable.

Ed Ayers: I was talking with Christy Coleman, the chief executive officer of the American Civil War Museum in Richmond, which opens its doors to the public this week.

As Christy said there, the new museum drew on the collections of two previous institutions. The selection of artifacts in the context they were put in was a vital part of telling the story.

Curator Cathy Wright, showed BackStory producer, Melissa Gismondi, around the exhibition some of which was still being unpacked as you may here.

Melissa G.: You're saying we're standing in the main gallery?

Cathy Wright: Yeah, we've just entered the main gallery and we're standing in what's essentially the beginning of the war. This particular area really is trying to get visitors a sense of the creation of the Confederacy, and both the United States and the Confederacy ramping up for a war, and the first battles of the war.

We have a large artifact display case on one side that explores real people, and decisions that they made about which side to support and how they did that. We've really tried to choose people who are both for the Union and for the Confederacy, and the way that the outbreak of war really impacted their lives. For instance, we have a southern woman and a northern man who were engaged in 1860, and the outbreak of war prevented them getting married for a number of years.

She eventually takes a boat of Truce and travels up to New York City during the war and is finally able to marry him, but it took several years to coordinate that.

Melissa G.: Do we know was it kind of a torturous decision for both of them?

Cathy Wright: It was a difficult decision in that, they seem to have been very much in love and they wanted to get married and she wanted her family to be present. She was from Virginia and they wrote letters to each other back and forth, which then had to be delivered through a boat of Truce. She finally made the decision and was able to leave from Norfolk, Virginia, with her mother and travel up to New York in 1863, and that's when they were finally married.

We have a large portrait of her and we're going to exhibit some reproductions of the letters as well as their marriage certificate.

Melissa G.: Is their story one that's new to the museum or if I had been ... say at the Museum of the Confederacy, would I have heard their story there too?

Cathy Wright: You would not have heard their story before. We had her portrait on display in what was essentially a meeting room, which was only used for various public meetings and programs and things of that sort. But there was no real explanation of who she was, or their lengthy drawn out romance and separation.

We're looking at the second of the media pieces, which is going to be presented to visitors. This is another approximately three minute long audio and video presentation. What we really wanted to show within this space is the way that African Americans had been sort of taking their own steps even before the war began to free themselves, and the way that sort of the evolution of Emancipation and things like the Emancipation Proclamation, influenced their decision about whether to flee to Union Lines or whether to stay where they were. We have selected a number of stories and quotations from real people to highlight the variety of decisions that people made.

We start out with a story that was told by a former slave, of a young African American girl being punished and then sold.

Speaker 8: Once Missus was sick and a slave girl named Alice brought her some water and something to eat, Missus got sick to her stomach and she said Alice was trying to poison her. She got out of bed, strips that girl to her waist, and whips her with the cowhide. Alice was chained down by the arms and legs until she got well, then she was carried off to Richmond in chains, and sold.

Cathy Wright: We start out with sort of the worst things which could have happened to a slave, and then we move forward into the story of a man who chose to run away. He was in Louisiana. He hid in the swamps from slave hunters for several months and finally made it to Union Lines where he enlisted as a Union soldier and served for the duration of the war.

Speaker 9: One morning the bell was rung for us to go to work so early that I could not see, and I lay still. For this, the overseer was going to have me whipped.

I ran away to the woods where I remained for a year and a half. Are they after me? Can I stay free? What's going to happen to my family? I had to steal my food, I took turkeys, chicken and pigs. We slept on logs and burnt cypress leaves to make a smoke and keep away mosquitoes.

Eugene [Giardot 00:19:04], master of hounds hunted us for three months. One day, 20 hounds came after me, we killed eight. The dogs followed us into the bayou, and the alligators caught six of them.

We escaped to Union Lines where I joined the Company C, 15th Regiment Corps du Freak.

Cathy Wright: We conclude with a quotation from a letter that was written by an African American woman in Maryland, which had slaves but as part of the Union, they were not freed as the result of the Emancipation Proclamation. She wrote a letter to Abraham Lincoln.

Speaker 10: Mr President, it is my desire to be free, to go to see my people. You will please let me know if we are free?

Cathy Wright: There's no record of any response to her letter, and she's writing during the war. We know that the answer to that was that, no, she was not free and therefore had to wait for the 13th amendment to be passed in 1865.

Melissa G.: Do we know what happened to that woman in the years after the war?

Cathy Wright: We do not know what happened to her.

Melissa G.: Is that story ... Now, I'm thinking about what this media installation ... it's also next to ... there's a giant colorized photo of two enslaved people picking cotton in a field. How is this different from how the issue of slavery would have been represented at the Museum of the Confederacy?

Cathy Wright: One of the things which we really wanted to do in this new exhibition, which we'd not had the opportunity to do before, was to focus on the African American experience throughout the exhibition, and to really incorporate it and weave it throughout the overall narrative in a way that I think most other exhibitions including our own previously, will talk about African Americans almost as a sideline and you'll get occasional little mentions of them, but they're not the main characters. We wanted to make them one of the main characters and put their story and the story of the evolution of Emancipation throughout the war, at the core of all of this.

We have lots of flags at our collection, and this is one of my favorites because of the story behind it. I think a lot of people when they see a confederate flag, they have really strong feelings one way or another about it. But this one I think challenges a lot of those preconceptions. It is just a standard Army of Northern Virginia battle flag. It's a very recognizable red background with white stars on a blue cross. This particular flag was carried, we think based on a research, by the 49th North Carolina Infantry.

It was carried during the Petersburg campaign, which was in Petersburg, Virginia, in 1864, at the Battle of the Crater. Also it's famously where Union and Confederate troops had sort of been in a standoff in Siege Warfare. Union troops had hit upon a plan to dig a tunnel underneath the Confederate Line of Fortifications and to detonate a large amount of black powder. Basically blow a hole in the Confederate Lines and then send in Union troops.

This happened ... I think it was July 30th, 1864, when this is finally detonated and the resulting crater became known as the Battle of the Crater. African American US colored troops were the first ones sent in, and this really became just a complete scene of chaos and destruction for both sides. You had Confederate soldiers who were trapped in a lot of the dirt and the various debris from the explosion, you had Union troops that are going into that, and a lot of really fierce hand-to-hand combat.

The flag of the 49th North Carolina was captured by US colored troops in this battle. Capturing the flag was an enormous honor for any soldier. As far as I know, this is the only flag that is recorded as being captured by the US colored troops. The US army kept very careful records of who captured a flag because they were eligible for a Medal of Honor.

This particular flag we have had conserved and we're really very excited to be able to put it on display and present it with the history of its association with the crater and with the colored troops. It's an artifact that really bridges both sides of the story and it sort of shows how the military situation had changed so dramatically by 1864, that you have black men in uniform who were able to go in and perform actions that make them eligible to receive medals of honor.

Melissa G.: Was this flag on display at the Museum of the Confederacy?

Cathy Wright: It was on display, but it was kind of in a downstairs gallery that wasn't part of a cohesive exhibition. It was just sort of a standalone item. But it was one that we'd been really excited to get conserved and now I'm really pleased to see it more integrated and interwoven into the overall story of the war.

One of the challenges with any exhibition on the Civil War is you have to get the war started and you also have to end it. The very final gallery of the exhibition focuses on the Post-war period and we're not defining this and limiting it with any particular year, but we do want to anchor the space with the three amendments to the US Constitution which immediately followed the war.

These were tremendous steps forward in the United States, and are all amendments which continue to be discussed and debated and relevant today as we talk about things like voting rights and citizenship. As these rights were given to African Americans, there were also a lot of white supremacists who were looking for ways to reassert their authority. This is an aspect that we also want to not lose sight of as we talk about some of the progress that was made.

There's also this pushback. We do talk about some terror organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan, which were established to reassert control by instilling fear in African Americans, as well as more legal and political means which were put forth to discourage African Americans from voting. Things like the poll tax,

which was soon adopted in many states, that basically made it financially impossible for the average poor person, white or black, to go to the polls.

Melissa G.: How do you illustrate that with items? What sorts of items will be on displaying that?

Cathy Wright: We're going to be exhibiting a poll tax receipt. Anyone who paid a poll tax was given a receipt. We have a reproduction of one of those which will be used to help talk about voting rights. A document that we're using to illustrate African American civil rights, is a marriage certificate.

The ability for black couples to be able to formally get married and have a legally recognized partnership was hugely important to many people. The marriage certificate which we're exhibiting, was issued to a couple who had already been together as a couple for I think about 12 years. They had several children together and they were enormously excited to be able to formally get married and have this document which named them as man and wife.

Melissa G.: Then you talked about, the official war ends, but the violence doesn't stop for many African Americans. How is your job as a curator ... how do you convey that in a way where it sounds like it's a delicate balance? You need to recognize the progress that's made, but then as a curator also address the fact that in some cases, in some towns, African Americans are still in danger in many cases.

Cathy Wright: It's challenging sort of personally and professionally to realize that in many ways some of the lessons of the worst still haven't been learned today, and that we're still dealing with some of this. My hope for history and the study of history and coming to museums is that ... in learning about the past that we can hope to learn from it and make better choices in the future and not go back and repeat past mistakes.

I hope that it teaches people to be more careful thinkers, not only about things that happened in the past, but in looking at issues today. Very upsetting just to see in the news in the past week or so that there are still black churches being targeted and burned. Clearly there are still lessons which we haven't learned collectively, but I hope that we can see the humanity in people and the enormous struggles that people have made in the past, particularly African Americans.

Many of them coming from slavery and having almost nothing and giving up in many cases what very little that they had, in order to become free for themselves, for their children. That this still encourages us to continue to struggle and fight for what is right today.

Nathan Connolly: That's Cathy Wright, curator at the American Civil War Museum. To see images of some of the items Cathy discussed, head to our website, backstoryradio.org.

Joanne Freeman: In 2015, the National Park Service issued a statement asking shops at its sites across the nation to stop selling the Confederate battle flag. The decision came in the weeks after the shooting of nine worshipers at the historic Emmanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

The shooter had posted photos online of himself posing with a Confederate flag in front of Confederate landmarks. The statement sparked a broader discussion of whether gift shops should sell any Confederate memorabilia.

To find out how the gift shop at the new American Civil War Museum navigates the politics of these issues, Melissa went to the gift shop and spoke with Stephanie Arduini, Director of Education and Programming at the museum.

Stephanie A.: It's really interesting about gift shops in museums is that they are a tool for extending a visitor's experience with us. We do think a lot about not only the business aspect of, what can people buy? What are they looking for? How much are they willing to spend? But also how the products that we have in that shop relate to how we're telling our stories. That either represent the stories that we're telling in our exhibits and our programs, or help to extend that learning experience.

One thing that speaks to me that's very different but representative of our new institution is, a shirt that we're standing right next to, with a picture of Frederick Douglass on it. But instead of just being a picture of Frederick Douglass, it comes in a layered stylized set of colors that looks very contemporary with the way that it's designed. That's something that I am really excited about as a young adult because I would buy this and wear it.

It looks cool, it looks hip, it also has a picture of a person whose stories people might not be as familiar with, but we definitely wanted to make sure we're well represented in the new institution.

Melissa G.: Tell me a little bit about the Confederate imagery that will or will not be visible at the gift shop.

Stephanie A.: We stopped carrying the Army of Tennessee Confederate battle flag shortly after the events related to Charleston and Charlottesville over that year. We pulled it pretty quickly and stop selling it in the shop and on our website. We still carry some flags related to specific units, but that traditional battle flag that's often seen tied to people who use it as a symbol of white supremacy, we've had long institutional conversations about what that means and balancing our ability to tell the story of the Confederacy because you can't tell the story of the Civil War without the Confederacy, with also that idea of feeling like people should be able to honor their ancestors if that's what they want to, but we don't want the things that we're selling to be misappropriated as impulsive hate.

For the large flag of the Army of Tennessee battle flag, we pulled that pretty quickly.

Melissa G.: That's the one that people ... when I say the Confederate flag in 2019, it's the Army of Tennessee?

Stephanie A.: Yeah. The one with the red field and the blue cross or X on that, that you see often associated with the rally in Charlottesville. We also use that moment to think about, where else is that flag on our products? How could this be misappropriated for something hateful? And have thought very carefully about that. Especially when it comes to items that are cheap that kids buy on souvenir field trips, where they're not really thinking about the full ramifications of what they purchase, they're just really excited to have five or \$10 from mom to spend in a gift shop somewhere on a field trip.

We pulled small items that they might have had those battle flags on them and instead tried to find some other products that kids would find interesting and useful and still fit that amount that they could take with them on the field trip, so that they could have that souvenir to take home but wouldn't risk having a really messy history attached to that.

Melissa G.: What kind of products did you have to pull in addition to just the flag?

Stephanie A.: We pulled some small souvenir items like key chains, shot glasses, even small items of jewelry that had a Confederate battle flag on it. That felt that lacked the context and nuance that we want to convey to people when they come and visit our sites. If something had a Confederate battle flag on it, but it was also contextualized with phrases about the Civil War and an American flag or canons and things like that, that is harder to misappropriate.

But for something that might have been a necklace or a bracelet that had a charm on it, or just a key chain of that same kind of Army of Tennessee battle flag on it, we pulled those because that was just ... it was too risky for us. We'd rather have something that somebody could have a more nuanced conversation or representation with.

Melissa G.: Can you give me an example? Is there an item here that kind of displays both in that way that you're talking about?

Stephanie A.: That's a good question. Let's go look.

We're standing in front of a wall of shelves with coffee mugs and shot glasses, and there's a coffee mug here that looks like something you would expect to find at a Civil War gift shop. It's got a Confederate soldier on a horse holding a Confederate battle flag and a US soldier next to a canon with the US flag. It says, "The Civil War in Virginia." It's got the flag. It's contextualized by being with

soldiers on a battlefield. It's going to be harder for this to be something that you have on a desk and feel like, "Mmh, this guy might have more nefarious intent or hateful intent. This is something that says, "History of the Civil War," and so we were okay with that.

Melissa G.: That's on some shot glasses too?

Stephanie A.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Melissa G.: And there's mugs with Abraham Lincoln. I'm assuming at the Museum of the Confederacy gift shop, I would have been able to buy a mug with Jefferson Davis on it?

Stephanie A.: We had some that had Jefferson Davis's face on it, here and there. But honestly most people when they were buying a person, an individual, from the ... representing the Confederacy, the person people most buy is Robert E. Lee, probably followed by Stonewall Jackson. But you could find Jefferson Davis on some things, but that's not what most people bought.

Melissa G.: When you were making these decisions and kind of talking about these things, was it very much with the understanding that you wanted the message of the museum to carry through in the gift shop?

Stephanie A.: Yes, it's absolutely true. We wanted to make sure that folks could explore this new or different interpretation of the Civil War and then have something to take home with them.

Melissa G.: Tell me a little bit about how you guys have tried to use even the purchase of what flags someone's going to buy as an opportunity to learn more about the history.

Stephanie A.: We have one of the largest collections of Civil War flags in the country, and we know a lot of really rich stories that go with those and the diversity of flags that are out there, especially when it came to individual units, flags and those personal touches that they put on.

We were excited to bring some of those flags to the public for sale. What we find really interesting is that sometimes we've had people come in and they say, "My ancestor fought for the Confederacy," for example, and they'd like, "I want to buy a flag to honor my ancestor." Our staff have been trained to ask questions about, "Well, great, who was your ancestor? Which unit did he fight in?" And start to narrow it down. Instead of coming for just a Confederate battle flag, having a more nuanced conversation about the history itself and often connecting our visitors to a more historically accurate flag, that also could be less offensive to some people who might see that as a symbol of oppression.

- Joanne Freeman: That's Stephanie Arduini with producer Melissa Gismondi, at the American Civil War Museum gift shop in Richmond, Virginia.
- Nathan Connolly: Ed, Joanne, you all have the benefit of working on some of the most contentious fields in American history. I got to ask you from your vantage point as basically people living in the 21st century, why are people still debating the Civil War so much?
- Joanne Freeman: Well, one point, and it's a minor one but I think it's a worthwhile one is, as historians, I think any time that we're confronting the past, there's a component of it that feels real and vibrant that we have to reckon with. But I think in a larger way for the public, you have the sort of ancient seeming wars like the Revolution and the War of 1812, which I think that people are very, very far away.
- Then you have what probably seem to many people like far more recent wars that seem modern, even World War I, but certainly World War II that people have some way of reckoning with. The Civil War sits at a kind of middle point that is the past and yet is grounded in so many issues that are fundamentally still being reckoned with in the present, that I think it's a tangled subject for people to deal with.
- Ed Ayers: Yeah. It's precisely because of that tangle, that contentiousness, that I felt drawn to it like a moth to a flame. I resisted it for a long time because the Civil War is associated with sort of kitsch and also with the kind of vibrant buffdom, that seems sometimes to repel scholarly understanding.
- But I came to believe that if we're going to understand the United States, we had to sort of walk into the teeth of this and try to see if we could figure it out for ourselves in ways that we could explain to other people. That's the big challenge. Often I point out that there's been a book a week written about the Civil War, since the Civil War.
- Nathan Connolly: Oh my gosh.
- Ed Ayers: Yes, over 54,000 books.
- Joanne Freeman: Wow.
- Nathan Connolly: I got some reading to do, my goodness. That's why I devoted part of my life to writing one more. This is such a savvy thing to do.
- Ed Ayers: But how can it be that we can know so much and understand so little? For me, that's been the interesting challenge about ... think about the Civil War for the last couple of decades. It seems that everybody has an opinion about it, but

those opinions don't really seem to align with evidence or with what other people think.

It's the place where the rubber really hits the road, I think, in historic understanding of this nation.

Nathan Connolly: Ed, the debate of those 54,000 volumes, I'm sure has some bearing on military history. But the big questions, I'm sure not about whether or not say Robert E. Lee should have tried to take an uphill position over two days at Gettysburg. What seems to be maybe the big arching debate as far as you can see it?

Ed Ayers: What's discouraging is that the issues of debate today are the same as they've been for generation after generation which is, what caused the Civil War? The most recent polls, the most recent polls I've seen show ... say that, state's rights is what caused the Civil War. That is sort of blameless that people were fighting for what they thought was right and they were fighting for their rights, but then people say, "Well, it was states' rights. But then below that it was also what people call economics."

This is somehow ... got encoded in our thinking in the early 20th century and refuses to go away, which is that the Civil War was a conflict between an industrial north and an agrarian south. I hear this every time I go out and speak. People just sort of say, "Well, that's all it really was." It's like, what's agrarian mean.

Joanne Freeman: Right.

Ed Ayers: It means if you're producing the single most valuable commodity in the world with perpetual bondage, I guess that's agrarian. It doesn't really sound like a family farm, which is the way that it often comes out. The north is not really industrial this time. Most of the soldiers fighting each other in the Civil War were farmers on both sides of this. And then the question is, why in the world would an industrial nation dependent upon it's agrarian half go to war to destroy it?

There's so many evasions and illusions and just sort of willful refusal to look at the evidence because people simply don't want to acknowledge that slavery was this serpent at the heart of the nation. They'd like to find something that they imagine let's everybody off the hook.

Joanne Freeman: It makes it so stark in a literal kind of away, bloodless. "Oh, it's a political conflict. Oh no, it's an economic conflict. No, it's a human conflict and it's about humanity on so many different levels." Those other sort of cold blooded ways of looking at it, really remove the essence of the conflict itself.

Ed Ayers: Yeah. It strikes me, it's like a museum exhibit where they've roped off all the dangerous parts of the exhibit. "No, don't go in there. Don't go into the slavery room," because that's just too scary to think about.

I've wondered why it can be that ... and this is not simply divided Northerners and Southerners disagreeing, there's not really much difference in this 40% of people who think it's the state's rights cause between the north and the south. Westerners are pretty certain that it's slavery, but Northerners and Southerners today ... and young people believe it as much as older people. It's not that we're making progress and explaining to people how this is.

I've tried to figure this out. One thing that occurs to me is that people who are cynical about the north, from looking at it today, find it hard to imagine that there was ever a time when there was enough moral purpose in the United States to go to war to end slavery, and -

Nathan Connolly: That's interesting.

Ed Ayers: Of course they're right in that sense. Joanne, I'd be curious when you're out on the hustings and you're talking about a book about, *The Coming of the Civil War*, how do you avoid going into these cul-de-sacs of explanation where doesn't seem to be any way out of them?

Joanne Freeman: Well, speaking as an early national historian who sort of got sucked into the Civil War vortex, a lot of what I'm talking about is the deeper roots of that later period. A lot of what I'm talking about is, it really does go back to the founding. It really does go back to the writing into the constitution of slavery, and the way in which the nation had to reckon with that, and the many reasons why in the 1830s that becomes more of an issue.

It isn't ... I think the Revolution and the Civil War, speaking as someone who's written about the Revolution, people see them I think often, as these little isolated bubble moments. Of course their meaning is wrapped up in the very fact that they aren't those kinds of moments.

I think for me in talking about the Civil War, I'm always looking back deeper and deeper into the roots of where that comes from, and as a political historian, I'm interested in seeing how that gets sort of institutionalized. How does it become so difficult to dig up those roots?

Ed Ayers: That's the tricky thing. Those roots are deep and real, and yet people on the very cusp of the war didn't believe that it could happen. You have this kind of unpredictable events leading to the very concrete series of sort of coincidences and events that bring on the war at the same time that we know that the origins lie deep in American past.

The trick is not to have it be all sort of industrial and agrarian, those roots are there, on the other hand not to be, "Well, if they hadn't tried to resupply Fort Sumter, there wouldn't have been a Civil War." This is sort of thing that I hear all the time.

To your question, Nathan, as a historical problem, it really does combine sort of the intrinsic challenges of our discipline in a really concrete and unavoidable way. I guess I have a question for you.

Looking at it from the imperial distance of the 20th and 21st centuries, what does it seem to matter to you as you try to wrestle with the problems of your own period? What does it matter that we get right about the Civil War?

Nathan Connolly: I think there are extraordinarily powerful iconic objects and images and themes that come out of the 19th century. As a 20th century person, a specialist in that century, you're almost in a way beholden to, deferring to, the 19th century people as like the real US historians. And by extension, the landscape of that memory around the 19th century is almost as too powerful to ignore and not have a certain kind of deference to.

What I mean by that is, when I was coming up as a student in middle school and high school, watching ... say the Ken Burns documentary on the Civil War, that was an aesthetically beautiful rendering of the past regardless of what you might think about its historical content or the narration or the music, that there was something about that particular image of the past that was so romantic.

I remember plagiarizing lines from love letters to my girlfriend at the time, try to make it seem like I was especially poetic. No, it's terrible. It's absolutely terrible. But combine that with the power of monuments around the country, combine that with the kind of lure of objects, say a Sabre behind the glass, or even say the Confederate battle flag in an image of massive resisters pushing back against school desegregation in the south.

Regardless of the politics, the image itself is aesthetically powerful. As a 20th century person, I feel part of my burden or challenge or unique obligation frankly, is being able to wrestle with that afterlife of the Civil War and figure out to what extent there are fictions or facts kind of mired in the way that we're supposed to frame the events that are unfolding in the Civil War shadow.

Joanne Freeman: The emotion and the other ways in which contemporary meanings get invested in that event, speaking as a woman, the Civil War was not on my radar screen in any way. It felt to me like a male thing even before I was a historian. It was a place where guys talked about battles. It was a place ... it was a male thing. I don't think I had any perception that it was more than soldiers fighting and men talking about soldiers fighting. It didn't even as a younger person, make it onto

my sort of my radar of my understanding of American history. It was just the violent middle part that I somehow didn't feel like I was a part of.

Ed Ayers: I shouldn't admit this, but growing up as a white Southerner, I couldn't have cared less about the Civil War. Partly because we were raised on TV shows and movies about World War II, and so your Ken Burns, Nathan, was in many ways my battlefield, my World War II show.

Then I go to graduate school in the wake of Vietnam in which, Joanne, what you're talking about is that not only was it gendered, but it was also generation. No, we don't really talk about that military history stuff. I rejected it for a long time, but it's the very thing that Nathan's talking about just recognizing the gravitational pull it exerts on everything else that happened before and after, really, that made me decide that you had to go face it.

You talked about the artifacts, Nathan, I think that's one reason the museum isn't especially volatile, dangerous and important place to have these things. If you read surveys Americans say ... and this kind of hurts our feelings a little bit, that they trust museums more than any other institutions to explain the past. It's something about the reality of the artifact, you can't argue. Yup?

Nathan Connolly: Right.

Ed Ayers: Those are the spurs. As Christy and our friends have crafted the American Civil War Museum ... and they do have the largest collection of Civil War artifacts in private hands in the world, coming from the Museum of the Confederacy, so we have the things like Lee's Tint, things that are very palpable.

How do you orchestrate those to tell a story that is both compelling because if it's concrete manifestations but also has some of the gravitas? That's not just the stuff on the battlefield, not just one more sword, but how do you make it tell a story that swept up the entire nation?

Joanne Freeman: The thing about artifacts too is, depending on the artifact, they can have such a palpable power that ... just as you're suggesting Ed, you don't always need words for that story to be told. For example, I was just working on something and we were reckoning with, how to talk about slavery in early America and actually in the Caribbean in the late 18th century, and we decided that we would get shackles to put ... one of the first things you'll confront would be these shackles, adult shackles and child shackles.

There was a debate about how to present them. One person was talking about possibly, what kind of label, what kind of words could explain them? And we ultimately decided there would be no words, because there's nothing more powerful than walking in and being standing in front of that, particularly these

little shackles for a child, you don't need words to tell that story, that's going to smack you in the face when you see it.

But there's such a power. This is part of what for me has always been the fun about working with museums. There's such a power in things that sometimes can grab you at a level that is almost beyond words.

Ed Ayers: Yeah. It was interesting the struggles we had going over all the labels for this museum and knowing we can have no more than 150 words to describe anything and realizing the power of every single word to try to get it right, at the same time recognizing that the average amount of time that someone spends in front of a museum exhibit is 20 seconds -

Nathan Connolly: Right.

Ed Ayers: How do you have this visceral power and yet it has to be sort of orchestrated into an emotional journey? This museum, the American Civil War Museum, is very consciously laid out to strike different emotions at different times, and recognizing that you basically can't feel that strongest emotion all the time.

How do you look at the exhibit about the Treatment of the Wounded, and then about The Moment of Emancipation, and about The Tactics on the Battlefield, how do you weave those together in a way that makes sense. I'm glad we had museum professionals who have a lot better idea of how to do this than just somebody who deals with words knows.

Joanne Freeman: That's all for us today, but please keep the conversation going online. Let us know what you thought of the episode or ask us your questions about history. We're at backstoryradio.org. Or send an email to, backstory@virginia.edu. You can also find us on Facebook and Twitter at BackStory Radio.

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