

# Graduate Review

---

Volume 1  
Issue 1 *Issue 1*

Article 7

---

2021

## The Ever-Evolving Historiography of the American Civil War

Brandon M. Eldridge

*University of Nebraska at Kearney*, [eldridgeb@lopers.unk.edu](mailto:eldridgeb@lopers.unk.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://openspaces.unk.edu/grad-review>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Eldridge, Brandon M. (2021) "The Ever-Evolving Historiography of the American Civil War," *Graduate Review*. Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <https://openspaces.unk.edu/grad-review/vol1/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by OpenSPACES@UNK: Scholarship, Preservation, and Creative Endeavors. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Review by an authorized editor of OpenSPACES@UNK: Scholarship, Preservation, and Creative Endeavors. For more information, please contact [weissell@unk.edu](mailto:weissell@unk.edu).

## THE EVER-EVOLVING HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

**BRANDON M. ELDRIDGE**

Department of History, University of Nebraska at Kearney

Mentors: **DR. CHRISTOPHER STEINKE, DR. VERNON VOLPE**

Historiography plays a vital factor in the collective memory of events throughout history. Classrooms across America discuss multiple factors surrounding the antebellum period, military conflict, and the post-war debate over rebuilding and re-entering southern states. The scholarship of historical events surrounding the Civil War creates a dialogue for future generations to analyze the portrayal of historical events. The American Civil War documentation is no different in how it created a memory of the events from 1861-1865. Much of the Civil War's historiography focuses on the causes of the Civil War and the effectiveness of Reconstruction. Historians have analyzed and critiqued this event for its political, social, religious, legal, cultural, medical, and military influence in the field of history. Interest in the Civil War has not lost its luster throughout history, and the field is continually expanding with new and exciting archival research interests for all historians in this much-documented field.

Two major publishers have presented articles on the historiography of the Civil War. The *Journal of American History* (JAH) and the *American Historical Review* (AHR) presents articles from historians that consider many aspects that create new analysis on one of the most discussed periods in American history. The articles that are presented between the two publishers focus on three significant points of the war. First, historians have analyzed the lead-up to the Civil War during the antebellum period. The analysis is surrounding this period from the post-Mexican-American war (1846-1848) to the attack at Fort Sumter. Historians focus on the reasons for the outbreak of war. The causes of the war are based in part on significant events and actions that created the necessity felt by southern politicians throughout the Deep South to secede from the Union. Second, historians have focused on the varying points of interest within the war itself. With roughly 620,000 Americans dying in combat, historians, researchers, students, teachers, and others have read through thousands of journal articles, book reviews, historiography, and analysis. The historical analysis is independent in aspects, including political, social, economic, religious, and many other subcategories to create wider historiography. Finally, the Reconstruction period's historicization post-war has been a highly contentious debate among many historians in the field of Civil War history. Much of the debate surrounds the effectiveness of Reconstruction. With the military occupation of southern states and millions of dollars spent rebuilding these states, supporters, and critics of Reconstruction present multiple interpretations toward the historiography. This ever-changing historiography has been analyzed, reanalyzed. It is continually changing, including finding new ways to rethink the historiography and archival research methods for the events leading to the war, the war itself, and the aftereffects of this deadly conflict.

Early historiography of the Civil War dates back to 1917 with James Ford Rhodes's book, *History of the Civil War, 1861-1865*. The early historiography focused on the inevitability of the impending war and the causal links purported within the text of the book. These early historians of the crisis presented an argument that the war was certain to happen, an unavoidable event that was certain to occur, and presented an "inevitability thesis." The sectional crisis created significant strife among regions within the United States. This historiography focuses on the idea that the war could not have been avoided, and nothing could have prevented hundreds of thousands of deaths that would occur. The inevitability theory "was an uncompromisable moral issue that made war between the sections inevitable."<sup>1</sup> With the number of casualties that the war caused, historians and others were latching on to the difficult historiography and understanding of such a devastating event. This interpretation of the causes of the Civil War would last for roughly a decade.

During the early twentieth century, historiography evolved into a new ideology. The change focused on an economic theory rather than the traditional theory involving the institution of slavery. Charles A. and Mary Beard were two historians who analyzed economic interests in politics and implemented those ideas to the Civil War. The Beards wrote extensively on the economics of other significant historical events, including the growth of the American empire and imperialism surrounding the Spanish-American War. In their work, "The Rise of American Civilization" (1927), the Beards "questioned the commonly accepted belief that the institution of slavery was chiefly responsible for the clash between the sections."<sup>2</sup> The new ideology focused on the differing economic systems between the pro-manufacturing north and the pro-agrarian south as staples of embedded economics that regions were not willing to compromise in changing. According to Charles and Mary Beard, the war's impending crisis was focused more on the economic benefits of the newly acquired territory after the Mexican-American War, including modern-day Arizona, New Mexico, and California. The consensus among the Beards and other historians that espoused this interpretation was that there were economic benefits to the institution of slavery. To erase this institution would dramatically affect the south's economic standing to create a significant economic crisis affecting American industries.

In the evolution of the historiography of the Civil War, historians from the 1930s to the 1950s would attempt to nullify the notion of the "inevitability thesis" of the Civil War. Their analysis provided that the conflict was due to several characteristics and not merely an "inevitable" issue. First, the historians provided that extreme abolitionists ignited the sectional crisis and inflamed issues dealing with the impending crisis. This group believed that one major problem was that these abolitionists were troublemakers inciting regional violence due to their anti-slavery stances. They contended that the problems revolving around the causes of the Civil War were due to inept politicians that were either weak leaders, unwilling to compromise, or held the belief that issues surrounding the impending war had been exacerbated and would subside. This historiography takes a pro-southern stance, and that northern states were aggressors in a growing conflict. In 1930, Frank Owsley, southern historian, and professor at Vanderbilt University in

---

<sup>1</sup>Stuart McConnell. "The Civil War and Historical Memory: A Historiographical Survey." *OAH Magazine of History* 8, no. 1 (October 1, 1993): 3-4.

<sup>2</sup> Charles W. Ramsdell. "The Changing Interpretation of the Civil War." *The Journal of Southern History* 3, no. 1 (February 1, 1937): 4-6. doi:10.2307/2192113.

Nashville, Tennessee, wrote extensively about this nullification of the inevitability of the Civil War. Owsley believed that the South had been under siege and was against the notion that there was one cause of the Civil War. "Owsley was typical of many Southerners whose defense of the southern way of life was shaped more by their visions of northern designs on the South than by any immutable traits of southern society."<sup>3</sup> Owsley also believed, as the Beards did, that the economic interests affected the political realm. In Owsley's landmark work, "An Irrepressible Conflict", he believed that the Civil War occurred due to the North's "recognition that the South was a barrier to the growth of northern industry and business because of her opposition to protective tariffs, subsidies to shipping interests, banking legislation favorable to the North, and federal aid for internal improvements."<sup>4</sup>

After the 1960s, the historiography of the Civil War and the approaches to the scholarship would dramatically change again. The influence of the tumultuous 1960s and the civil rights movement created new historiography that would evolve into a new wave of scholarship. Historians would reinvigorate abolitionists' historical perception and the Radical Republicans as positive contributors fighting for equality and social justice for the enslaved population. This new wave would historicize these groups as virtuous opponents to the "peculiar institution" of slavery, unlike Owsley's push to demonize anti-slavery advocates in the name of southern identity. Another aspect that civil rights era historians evaluated the Civil War was in regard to the Reconstruction period. Before this era, many historians described this era as an error in American domestic policy as a waste of taxpayer funds and an oppressive military occupation. Historians from post-Civil War up to the 1960s felt that Reconstruction was the work of "hypocritical politicians who for partisan purposes wreaked vengeance upon a brave and defenseless foe."<sup>5</sup> There was also the belief that the intimidation and fear that southern citizens enacted on its citizens of color during the age of Reconstruction was justified. The rise of hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan had been seen as warriors protecting the southern identity. The civil rights push of the 1960s would combat this group as oppressors to the equality of freed slaves. The belief that these actions were historically justified due to the overt aggression of the federal government.

In the past forty years, the historiography of the Civil War has taken a dramatic shift in the ways that historians rethink the time of 1861-1865. The *Journal of American History (JAR)* has published multiple articles on the new approaches to historiography as an evolving field of history. In Nina Silber's "Reunion and Reconciliation, Reviewed and Reconsidered" essay from 2016, she focuses on the approach to remembering the Civil War. According to the article, historians "documented the late nineteenth-century triumph of reconciliationist sentiments but with a far less benign view of reconciliation's costs."<sup>6</sup> From the end of the Civil War until now, historians that

---

<sup>3</sup> Edward S. Shapiro. "Frank L. Owsley and the Defense of Southern Identity." *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (1977): 77. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42623771>.

<sup>4</sup> Shapiro, "Frank L. Owsley and the Defense of Southern Identity.", 81

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin B. Kendrick. "The Carpet-Bag Era." *Nation* 135, no. 3498 (July 20, 1932): 61-62. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eue&AN=13513966&site=eds-live>.

<sup>6</sup> Silber, Nina. "Reunion and Reconciliation, Reviewed and Reconsidered." *Journal of American History* 103, no. 1 (June 2016): 59-60. doi:10.1093/jahist/jaw008.

focus on this “reunion and reconciliation” argument contend that it allowed for the United States to embrace the notions of white supremacy during the era of Jim Crow and black codes during Reconstruction. Historians of this belief, according to Silber, the problematic nature of this particular historiography downplays the sectional crisis and the tensions among northerners and southerners post-Civil War. The archival research and methods provided by Silber present multiple authors, including David Blight, Edward J. Blum, and Caroline Janney. All who have written extensively on the “reunion and reconciliation” historiography and provide details further the scholarship. Another integral aspect of Silber’s essay is that she surmises that the reconciliation post-Civil War scholarship is “underdeveloped.” Silber’s research focuses much on this notion of reunion and that there are new areas of scholarship that can be advanced in the field of Civil War historiography. She believes, “the complicated racial politics of organizations such as the WCTU, or the Populist party, or the Knights of Labor ... warrants closer analysis.”<sup>7</sup> This term of reconciliation is not new to the Civil War era’s historiography but has gained intrigue in the possibility of extending future archival research. The ever-changing historiography of the Civil War keeps developing into a more specific field in critical categories of scholarship surrounding the Civil War.

One critical field of the traditional historiography of the Civil War tends to have a laser focus on the administration of Abraham Lincoln. The sixteenth President of the United States is always, and will always, be a part of the historiography of the Civil War due to the nature of his presidency and the significant steps Lincoln took in preserving the Union. New historiography develops creative techniques and concepts around Lincoln’s ideology surrounding the institution of slavery that would eventually develop his statements during the antebellum period and as President. In “Lincoln, Slavery, and the Nation,” Mark E. Neely, Jr. analyzes Lincoln’s multiple aspects and the historiographical development of significant events of the Civil War. Neely states, “The importance of developments in the study of slavery and race makes the best introduction to the idea, but there are also major developments in several other fields with which to contend.”<sup>8</sup> This article shows the growth and possible archival research opportunities of the historiography dealing with the field of the Civil War. One example that Neely presents is the advancement of the military history of the conflict. According to Neely, the military ideas of “total war” and the historical memory of Lincoln’s genius as a military commander challenges traditions in the scholarship. Neely also poses an important question regarding the historiography and new perceptions of Lincoln’s nationalism. “Lincoln was America’s most important nationalist, but what does his career mean when measured by these new ideas?”<sup>9</sup> Queries such as the one that Neely poses throughout the article are the types of questions all historians should ask in their archival research. It allows for a better understanding of all histories within the scholarship surrounding the study of the Civil War.

The more recent developments toward the scholarship of the Civil War takes an international relations analysis focus. Most of the historiography of the war creates a United States-

---

<sup>7</sup> Silber, “Reunion and Reconciliation, Reviewed and Reconsidered”, 77

<sup>8</sup> Mark E. Neely, Jr., “Lincoln, Slavery, and the Nation.” *Journal of American History* 96, no. 2 (September 2009): 457. doi:10.1093/jahist/96.2.456.

<sup>9</sup> Neely, “Lincoln, Slavery, and the Nation.”, 458

only approach to the conflict, but new archival research historicizes aspects of international reactions that occurred or possibly could have occurred during the war. In the December 2015 issue of the *American Historical Review*, William A. Blair presents the possibility of a third-party intervention from foreign countries. "Had other nations intervened in the U.S. Civil War, they quickly would have realized that the conflict had opened thorny issues that extended beyond a cease-fire."<sup>10</sup> In "Finding the Ending of America's Civil War," Blair contends that the Civil War did not officially end until the constitutional questions regarding African-American issues with equality and rights were left without closure. The expansion of Jim Crow laws and black codes would not make that possible for a century, and institutional racism would be embedded within the legal system, especially in the "New South" created post-war.

Another aspect of the historiography is developing new methods and tactics in rethinking the archival research associated with the Civil War. As historians continue to develop a given field, such as the Civil War, it is essential to develop microhistories within subsets of the more extensive scholarship. In the June 2020 edition of the *American Historical Review*, there was a book review published on Paul D. Escott's book "Rethinking the Civil War Era: Directions for Research". The author of the review, Jonathan W. White of Christopher Newport University, evaluates Escott's work and the importance of rethinking the archival research behind the Civil War. One major excerpt from the book that White presents, "It is time to modify the long-held and determinedly positive perspective on the Civil War, for celebration of the war's results has been exaggerated."<sup>11</sup> One of the most eye-opening analysis points that White presents in the review is Escott's belief that in order to expand the historiography there must be new approaches to archival research and what to research within the archives. Escott believes that scholars should use more non-traditional, underutilized sources "such as the one hundred thousand pension files of black Union soldiers."<sup>12</sup> Using sources that are not traditional would allow historians to focus on new stories of struggle. These pension files would give a great insight to post-emancipation troops. Future archival research could go into the pay differential between white and black Union troops to analyze the treatment of these new freedmen.

One significant historical interpretation of the Civil War that has been mostly forgotten has been the war's social aspects. Historians all too often focus on the military, economic, and political points offered when analyzing the conflict. In the past thirty years, the scholarship has presented new explanatory concepts to examine other nuances of the war that have been traditionally left out of the historiography. In the June 1989 edition of the *Journal of American History*, Maris A. Vinovskis presents an essay titled "Have Social Historians Lost the Civil War? Some Preliminary Demographic Speculations." In this article, Vinovskis analyses issues surrounding the social history of the Civil War. There is not much scholarship on the day-to-day lives of Americans during the period from 1861-1865. "Almost none of the numerous community studies covering

---

<sup>10</sup> William A. Blair, "Finding the Ending of America's Civil War." *American Historical Review* 120, no. 5 (December 2015): 1754. doi:10.1093/ahr/120.5.1753.

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan W. White, "Paul D. Escott. Rethinking the Civil War Era: Directions for Research." *American Historical Review* 125, no. 3 (June 2020): 1028. doi:10.1093/ahr/rhaa274.

<sup>12</sup> White, "Paul D. Escott. Rethinking the Civil War Era", 1028

the years from 1850 to 1880 discuss, or even mention, the Civil War.”<sup>13</sup> This lack of historiography is troublesome. The American Civil War, 1861-1865, is one of the most written about events in all of American history. With such a large pool of scholarship on one major event and not have a dedicated section of social history, new research should be called for among the *Journal of American History* (JAH) and the *American Historical Review* (AHR). With this lack of scholarship, researchers and historians of the Civil War would be remiss not to historicize the “history from below,” where stories of non-military officials during this period could be analyzed.

With the lack of scholarship on the social history of the Civil War, Vinovskis also presents the lack of research and literature on Union veterans of the Civil War. Any military conflict or service has presented the notion of pensions. This money would be supplied by the federal government to incentivize and reward veterans for the United States' service. Pensions would create a more stable life for veterans. With the high mortality and injuries sustained in combat numbers, these pensions could open better insight into the soldiers' social history and their families after the conflict had ended. “It (pensions) provided for monthly payments to men totally disabled and to the widows of those killed during service.”<sup>14</sup> When Union pensions began in 1862, the economic help that the federal government provided allowed for not only medical assistance, but to help in taking care of homes. Thousands of soldiers' lives were dramatically changed due to amputations and deformations because of the nature of medicine at the time, but also the devastation of the war.

The American Civil War, 1861-1865, will be remembered as one of the most documented events in the history of the United States. The historiography has seen notable shifts in public memory from the “inevitability thesis” to economic issues that look to explain causal links in why this event took place. The institution of slavery will continually be analyzed as another significant link to the conflict as the war was heating up in the antebellum period. Pro-confederate historians, researchers, and authors have gone so far as to purport the infamous “Lost Cause” myth to justify the southern cause of the war. Historical methods and archival research are continually being presented as new evidence is presented. With the growing conflict today of Confederate monuments, the historiography of the war will continually be challenged, and groups will present new evidence trying to explain this controversial event in history. The historiography of the Civil War is a part of the entire historiography of American history and will continue to do so as more archival research is developed.

---

<sup>13</sup> Maris A. Vinovskis “Have Social Historians Lost the Civil War? Some Preliminary Demographic Speculations.” *Journal of American History* 76, no. 1 (June 1989): 35. doi:10.2307/1908343.

<sup>14</sup> Vinovskis “Have Social Historians Lost the Civil War?”, 51

**REFERENCES**

- William A. Blair, "Finding the Ending of America's Civil War." *American Historical Review* 120, no. 5 (December 2015): 1754. doi:10.1093/ahr/120.5.1753.
- Benjamin B. Kendrick. "The Carpet-Bag Era." *Nation* 135, no. 3498 (July 20, 1932): 61–62. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eue&AN=13513966&site=eds-live>.
- Stuart McConnell. "The Civil War and Historical Memory: A Historiographical Survey." *OAH Magazine of History* 8, no. 1 (October 1, 1993): 3–4. <http://search.ebscohost.com.unk.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsjsr&AN=edsjsr.25162917&site=eds-live>.
- Mark E. Neely, Jr., "Lincoln, Slavery, and the Nation." *Journal of American History* 96, no. 2 (September 2009): 457. doi:10.1093/jahist/96.2.456.
- Charles W. Ramsdell. "The Changing Interpretation of the Civil War." *The Journal of Southern History* 3, no. 1 (February 1, 1937): 4-6. doi:10.2307/2192113.
- Nina Silber. "Reunion and Reconciliation, Reviewed and Reconsidered." *Journal of American History* 103, no. 1 (June 2016): 59-60. doi:10.1093/jahist/jaw008.
- Edward S. Shapiro. "Frank L. Owsley and the Defense of Southern Identity." *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (1977): 77. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42623771>.
- Maris A. Vinovskis "Have Social Historians Lost the Civil War? Some Preliminary Demographic Speculations." *Journal of American History* 76, no. 1 (June 1989): 35. doi:10.2307/1908343.
- Jonathan W. White, "Paul D. Escott. Rethinking the Civil War Era: Directions for Research." *American Historical Review* 125, no. 3 (June 2020): 1028. doi:10.1093/ahr/rhaa274.