

Brief Proposal for an Undergraduate focused Civil War Era Research Center at Washington and Lee University (January 2016)

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Proposal for Civil War Research Center

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1. Brief Overview:

Washington and Lee is home to some of the most important cultural and historical resources related to the mid-nineteenth century. National Historic Landmarks, priceless cultural artifacts, rare material culture, and peerless archival holdings are only the tip of the partially submerged historical iceberg that the university is currently underutilizing. Surprisingly, W&L with its enormous resources and rich historical legacy has never positioned itself as a scholarly leader in interpreting the period on the national stage. As the leading national liberal arts school in the American South, W&L is the ideal home for an undergraduate Civil War Research Center (CWRC). A CWRC would enable W&L to capitalize on existing programs with the Alumni College, Lee Chapel and Museum, lecture series, and Special Collections to offer a coherent, organized, and synergized public face for W&L's Civil War programming. The principle goal of the center would be to contribute to the umbrella initiative of *promoting undergraduate research* across disciplines at W&L. This is consistent with the goals of the National Council for Undergraduate Research, which promotes better student learning through exposure to research techniques and methods.

In the end, this center could be one constituent part of a new, larger Humanities Research Center building, which could house a new Special Collections facility and History Museum on our campus to engage the larger story of Washington & Lee's place in American history. Both are logical fits for future growth at our school and would help move our interpretation of history forward and demonstrate W&L's continued commitment to the Humanities on campus in the 20th century. Many of the current strategic planning initiatives could also be housed at this same site.

2. Repositioning and Rebranding:

Presently, there is only one other selective national liberal arts college on the Oberlin Group website <http://www.oberlingroup.org> that have active Public History and Civil War Studies minors housed in their History Department. That school, Gettysburg College, also

runs a Civil War Institute for teaching and research in the field in conjunction with the minor program and a program house for students living on campus. Gettysburg, a school that was part of a Civil War battlefield, is a logical place for such a program and center. Yet, no school in the Southern Consortium of Liberal Arts Colleges, the Associated Colleges of the South, has a program minor or center. Finally, none of the current top-25 national liberal arts schools that W&L considers peers have embarked on the development of an undergraduate-focused research center of this type. W&L is perfectly poised to be that school. After righting our professional house in historical interpretation in summer 2014, it is now time to take the next leadership step in interpreting the Civil War era in a scholarly way for the students and public. W&L and the City of Lexington will continue to face challenges to their public historical interpretation of the war, but that is yet another strong argument for scholarly, intellectual leadership in this area. Creating intellectual dialogue, analysis, and discourse in place of heritage creation and hagiography should be the next step to deal with these ongoing challenges. What a center would do is enable a public image rebranding or pivot on these issues to coincide with the remarks in several of President Ruscio's addresses to the community over the preceding few years.

W&L can offer superior programming and infrastructure in this area. Much of W&L's current programming is diffuse with very little overall organizational synergy. Speakers come to campus with little oversight of the content or quality of their work largely because this has been outsourced to staff who are not professionally trained academic or public historians.

3. W&L Existing Resources:

While a careful enumeration of the resources related to Civil War social, military, political, and culture history available on our campus would take many pages, it is not necessary to demonstrate the obvious strength on campus of these existing resources. Other areas including the Digital Humanities Initiative, Library staff, Special Collections archivists, University Collections staff, are areas for partnership and synergy that could be harnessed by the rebranding of W&L's history activities around a center. Scholars in European, Latin American, Global, and African history would all benefit from the establishment of a nationally regarded center for the study of the Civil War era. This has been the case at places like Penn State, University of Mississippi, and University of Virginia where graduate level centers have been established. As our center would focus on the undergraduate liberal arts student, it would be different in scope and purpose from these places that emphasize other issues.

4. Scope and Programming:

Below are outlined a number of areas for new programming, partnerships, and project that a center would promote and execute.

Public History Fellows Program

The establishment of close relationships with a wide range of historical sites, national park service administered sites, museums, house sites, and other public history programs would lead to a broad range of internship opportunities for students on campus. The funding of these internships would be undergirded by a new program that the center would establish. Public History fellowships attached to specific internships in the working world. These relationships would grow as they were nurtured around the country and would range far beyond just internships at American Civil War sites. *This program could coincide with the History Department adopting a Public History Minor program on campus. This was a topic of current discussion during our department self-study.*

Research Fellowship Program:

Similar to the Public Fellowship internship, research fellows would work on campus during the summer on a variety of research projects relating to Special Collections, History Department scholars, and other professors working in adjacent periods and disciplines on campus. *One early project of this program should be related to African American history on campus, establishing a dedicated student researcher to this topic each summer. Another could continue research on the material culture holdings in University Collections that have been under-explored.*

Lecture/Speaker Series:

Frequently W&L invites scholars to campus related to the American Civil War that do not reflect the highest standards of scholarly rigor. A lecture series that moved away from focus on one individual to one focused on the broader period of the Civil War era would enable a range of other scholars to be brought onto campus focused on the period. One could envision the opportunity to invite scholars talking about global issues related to civil wars in place of a narrow series focused on a single individual.

*Over time it would be prudent to establish a Postdoctoral Fellowship/Visiting Assistant Professorship in History to research the fate of the enslaved people Washington College held in bondage during the antebellum and colonial periods as an adjacent program to keep this area a core of the curriculum regardless of the current composition of the faculty. A similar national search for a postdoc (dedicated full time to this issue) was completed at UVA several years ago leading to a fuller understanding of the story on that campus. It also might be the best avenue toward the possibility of tracing descendants.

Summer Civil War Institute (Travel/Tours):

As the Center grew, it could branch out into other projects like a biennial battlefield and historic sites tour. This would not necessarily be limited to alumni, but it might be opened via a fee system to the general public and to current students. The recruitment of professional public historians and academics to lead these events would be an area for the center to build. In some ways, this would operate as a continuing education program.

Existing Courses and Curriculum:

In many ways, the center would serve as a very positive public rebranding of existing courses being taught already on campus. The signature “Art of Command during the Civil War” public history (which already includes a public Facebook page that interacts with students and individuals around the globe in 13 countries at last count), spring term travel course would serve as a model, but many existing courses on the catalogue across departments already enable W&L to state that it is actively engaged in teaching, research, and interpreting the period. This is about repositioning ourselves as a leader in this area, not starting something that is completely new in terms of classes being taught. The eventual construction of a Public History minor housed in the History Department would be a strong support for the center’s operations and would also involve numerous faculty and staff on campus.

Civil War/Public History Program House:

A living space for students engaged with the center and its activities and research projects might be developed to promote history activities on campus.

A Continued and Expanded Emphasis on Undergraduate Research:

The expansion of the number of students engaging in Honors Thesis projects should follow this national trend toward emphasis on undergraduate students performing real research mentored individually by faculty. A commensurate reduction in conventional classroom teaching to emphasis this individual mentorship would be essential. Numerous models at other national liberal arts schools for how to do this exist already.

Student Administered Civil War Blog:

The establishment of a blog publishing short, student research projects could be administered by the center. This would provide a showcase of high quality writing projects done by our students on campus.

5. Logistical Items/Some First Steps:

The establishment and coordination of this center would be an enormous but important charge for a Founding Director. The necessity of a course-load reduction along the model of the current Minor programs (Latin American and Caribbean, Medieval and Renaissance, East Asian, etc.) would be a necessity for the center to run efficiently. A staff member would also be important for handling travel and other logistical matters related to the center. The Development office would need to be closely involved with the Director and planning of the center’s programming and the discussion of raising the funds necessary to name the center, name the programs/initiatives, and eventually raise funds for an endowed chair for the Civil War Studies Director. While the center would be housed in the History Department because of the tenure line of the director, the director would be responsible to the President of the University in the case of consultation, advice, and response to internal and external historical matters.

6. Other Partners:

Jack Miller Center (JMC):

JMC would be a good contact for this, and they have shown strong interest in partnering with nationally respected Higher Education Institutions to develop centers and institutes promoting American history and politics. Dr. Barton Myers served as the first Jack Miller Center Postdoctoral Fellow in Military History at Cornell and has an existing relationship with the center, which has funded dozens of projects and centers around the country at Ivy League and elite national liberal arts institutions.

Hertog Foundation:

Another place that might be interested in partnering for internships, seminars, and other projects of a Civil War Research Center that is undergraduate focused is Hertog Foundation. Dr. Myers has placed students in their summer Institute for the Study of War seminar program, which exposes students to think-tank and military leaders for the scholar study of armed conflict. Both ISW and Hertog may be open to supporting the center's students.

National Park Service, Virginia Historical Society, American Civil War Museum in Richmond:

Existing relationships with National Park Service staff and Museum staff in Virginia will enable the initial public fellows program.

Mellon Foundation:

The Mellon Foundation's existing interest in promoting our campus with the "History in the Public Sphere" program is another spring board for establishing this center and offers the possibility of future support. Indeed, this center could be a very positive by product of the Mellon fostered discussion on this campus.