

Book Review

Edited by Tom Costa

In the Presence of Mine Enemies: War in the Heart of America, 1859-1863 by Edward L. Ayers (W. W. Norton & Company, 2004. Pp. xxi, 472. \$15.95 paper)

In this complex but engaging study, Professor Edward Ayers of the University of Virginia explores the experiences of the people of Augusta County, Virginia, and Franklin County, Pennsylvania, as they stumbled into the Civil War. His story does not brim with “national affirmation” reflecting an emphasis on “a national redemption brought by the war’s trials and sacrifice,” so often the theme of sweeping histories and films of the war. Instead, he argues that we need to understand how ordinary people, however incompletely and inaccurately, viewed the issues and events surrounding them. He stresses the “deep contingency” of history, the “dense and intricate connections in which lives and events are embedded.” Dismissing any “easy correlation between individual attributes and political behavior,” he chooses “to emphasize the interaction between relatively stable local identities and a swirling context at the state and national levels.” As he claims,

Only a dynamic model that pays close attention to language as well as voters’ and counties’ material characteristics, to interaction over time, to institutional boundaries and pressures, and to events and passions can account for the political behavior that brought on the Civil War.

Indeed, he “dwells on facts that have poised significant challenges to our understanding of the Civil War,” facts that emerge in part from his insightful investigation into these two communities sitting in the same Great Valley.

Augusta and Franklin Counties in 1860 were similar to each other and to many other counties near the eastern sectional border. Both were predominantly agricultural. Franklin farmers grew more wheat to meet rapidly expanding urban markets, and Augusta husbandmen

produced more corn to feed themselves, their slaves, and a sizable distilling industry. Both counties enjoyed rail transportation and rising farm values, and both had invested in local manufactories, although Augusta's industries were more rudimentary than Franklin's. Spatially, Augusta was the larger county of the two, but had improved only about half its farm land; Franklin had about two-thirds of its acreage under till. On average, Augusta was only half as densely settled as Franklin. In 1860, census takers counted more than 42,000 individuals, including about 1,800 African Americans in Franklin, and more than 21,000 whites, about 600 free people of color, and roughly 5,500 slaves in Augusta. Just over one in five white Augusta families held slaves, a proportion close to the rest of the South. Although more people, more farms, more schools, more towns and villages, and no slavery distinguished Franklin from Augusta, most residents in both counties in 1860 shared strong support for the Union, and a belief in a common Christian God.

Professor Ayers uses the sacred scripture of the two counties for the title and subtitles of his study. The book is divided into four sections, each portion headed with a phrase from the twenty-third Psalm. In "Green Pastures and Still Waters" he describes the counties and the emerging crises wrought by John Brown's Raid, the earliest phase of which was staged in Franklin, and the contest over the presidential election of 1860. Lincoln won 56% of the vote in Franklin; Bell carried Augusta nearly two to one over Douglas and ten to one over Breckinridge. Lincoln was a "son of the border," and won the votes of former Whigs in Franklin, while Bell also enjoyed border support and appealed to Augusta's old Whigs. Loyalties towards the Union remained strong through 1860.

"Paths of Righteousness" traces the transition over the winter and through the spring of 1860 from Unionism to secession in Augusta and the response to the secession crisis in Franklin. Both sides felt sure of God's will. "The Shadow of Death" recounts the military actions that involved enlistees from the two counties between the summers of 1861 and 1862. White men in Augusta responded to calls for troops in far greater numbers and proportions than did their counterparts in Franklin. This response partly changed over the next year, the period covered in "The Presence of Mine Enemies." By the beginning of 1863 Franklin recruits outnumbered Augusta's but still lagged

in proportion to the county's population. Women in Augusta nursed the wounded, sewed uniforms and cooked, and proved just "as blood-thirsty" as the men. Stuart's raid of Chambersburg brought the fighting directly to Franklin County, and Lee's troops moved through it towards Gettysburg. War transformed both counties. Ayers ends his story on the eve of the battle, leaving the reader anxiously awaiting the next installment of this tantalizing tale.

Ayers weaves several different levels of evidence and analysis through the book. He deftly moves back and forth between the two counties, measuring their response to regional and national issues and events. He offers italicized commentaries, a device he likens to "voice-overs in a film." In these he summarizes and contextualizes the comparisons and contrasts drawn between the two locales and their place in the momentous events of these years, and comments on interpretive issues. Illustrating his sense of contingency, he speculates in one of these "voice-overs" that if Confederate military actions had failed before Lincoln's Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation in the fall of 1862, slavery might have lived on in a restored Union. In fact, slavery as an issue and African Americans as important actors in both locales figure prominently in his interpretation. As he ends the book, Ayers notes how black Americans, North and South, would be needed to save the Union.

The book demonstrates the value and importance of local history when it is done well. Ayers humanizes the experiences of these two counties through biographical threads woven through each section. John Imboden, county clerk and military partisan; Joseph Waddell, newspaper publisher and Unionist; Jed Hotchkiss, school principal and Stonewall Jackson's map maker; and Alansa Rounds, Hotchkiss' niece and a schoolteacher also from New York, are among the faces made familiar from Augusta. Alexander McClure – lawyer, publisher and Lincoln supporter – serves the same purpose for Franklin. Through their letters and diaries, augmented by shorter and more fragmentary records of dozens of others, Ayers links together local activities and observations and ties them to the events occurring on the larger regional and national stage. Indeed, the national crisis and the war shape the narrative structure of the book. There is no "so what" question to be raised here.

An additional virtue of the book that will prove valuable for teachers and students of the Civil War, historical methodology, local history, and genealogy is its link to the Valley of the Shadow Project headed by Ayers, part of the Virginia Center for Digital History. At <http://valley.vcdh.virginia.edu>, readers can find just about every primary source cited in the book. Want to read John Imboden's argument for secession cited on page 105, footnote 21? Go to and enter the web site, choose the section on the Eve of War, click on "site map" and look for Using the Valley project. Move to *In the Presence of Mine Enemies*, and click on part 2, Paths of Righteousness. Scroll down to footnote 21 and click. An Adobe Acrobat image will appear of the newspaper page cited by Ayers that can be manipulated for easier reading. One can also explore a whole bevy of letters and diaries, many in typescript, tables, graphs, maps and images, and judge how Professor Ayers has used them to produce this award-winning book. And one might even "read ahead" in the sources that will undergird the next volume of the history of Augusta and Franklin Counties in the midst of the Civil War. I did, and I hope it appears soon.

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