



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

DIVISION OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS

Narrative Section of a Successful Application

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The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

The application format has been changed since this application was submitted. You must follow the guidelines in the currently posted Notice of Funding Opportunity (see above links).

Project Title: *Civil Wars and Civil Beings: Societal Construction, Reconstruction, and Post-Reconstruction in Perry County, Alabama, 1860-1875*

Institution: Alabama State University

Project Director: Bertis D. English

Grant Program: Awards for Faculty at Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Civil Wars and Civil Beings: Societal Construction, Reconstruction, and Post-Reconstruction in Perry County, Alabama, 1860-1875

Bertis D. English

In *The Oxford Book of the American South*, historian Edward Ayers and political consultant Bradley Mittendorf recall how “much Southern writing . . . is about memory, about imagining and reimagining the past.” My project, a scholarly book manuscript titled *Civil Wars and Civil Beings*, is not an attempt to imagine or reimagine the past of Perry County, Alabama, a predominantly African-American locality nestled in the heart of the state’s black belt subregion. Instead, I seek to flesh out what Peter Kolchin, William Rogers Jr., Jonathan Weiner, and other historians have written about Perry during the Civil War era, especially Reconstruction. Unlike their investigations, which are state or regional, my work is a local study with broader sectional applications. I, moreover, explore this decisive time in American history mainly from the perspectives of blacks—the persons, I believe, who were affected most significantly by the revolutionary changes associated with Union victory.¹

Research and Contribution

Even though *Civil Wars and Civil Beings* is a detailed narrative crafted essentially from blacks’ viewpoints, whites are not neglected. They dominated society in Perry County when the war ended officially and the chains of legal slavery were broken. Unlike neighboring places in the Alabama Black Belt, one of the South’s most violent subregions (based on comparisons with other states in the region), Perry County experienced few major economic, political, or racial clashes following Confederate defeat. Nostalgic whites threatened several activist blacks and white Republicans in Perry, but only a handful of individuals were hanged, maimed, shot, whipped, or killed in the county due to prejudice. Elsewhere in the area, upset whites murdered in excess of 400 black persons in the year 1866 alone. Reasons varied, of course, but former slaves’ common desire for universal equality and their erstwhile masters’ stubborn resistance to it caused much unrest. Tension was steadfast through the remainder of Reconstruction, which ended with a bloody gubernatorial race in 1874, but whites and blacks in Perry usually developed the types of relationships and institutions that helped African Americans enjoy citizenship.

There is no single explanation for the relatively high levels of biracial cooperation, mutual uplift, and civility that characterized Perry County during Reconstruction. However, the locality’s tremendous concentration of white academic and religious institutions and its large, somewhat refined, and politically engaged black population were principal factors in this occurrence, whose roots were planted long before the Civil War. For decades the county seat at Marion was the white educational and Baptist capital of the state. In addition to hosting the Howard English and Classical School (later renamed Howard College and headed by Jabez L. M. Curry), the Judson Institute, and the Marion Female Seminary, the town had numerous private academies for whites and two of Alabama’s oldest predominantly white Baptist churches, Ocmulgee and Siloam. The Southern Baptist Convention located its domestic mission board in Marion, and the convention’s official newspaper was founded there. Alabama’s secession governor, Andrew B. Moore Sr., and a number of other prominent state politicians lived in Marion, which had secured a formal bid to become Alabama’s capital in 1846. For the next fifteen years wealthy planters in the town depended on skilled free and unfree laborers to build stately mansions kept by black and mulatto servants. White businesspersons simultaneously relied on marginally learned bondspersons to assist white clientele. White church leaders counted on black parishioners to expand their congregations. From these dealings emerged several genuine friendships and numerous pragmatic agricultural, commercial, and political relationships that grew during Reconstruction and weathered Redemption.

Overall conditions in Perry County from 1860 to the early 1870s, or the core years of my study, underline the importance of scholars avoiding making sweeping generalizations about the entire lower South being a terror zone during Reconstruction. Perry was not utopian, and I do not seek to romanticize

¹ Edward L. Ayers and Bradley C. Mittendorf, eds., *The Book of the American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), x.

the county, but the vast majority of its citizens were able to overcome the misunderstandings, stereotypes, and irreverent secular and religious divides that the era created, perpetuated, or exacerbated. Whereas hundreds of contemporary scholarly articles and tomes have been published about individual southern municipalities, counties, and states during Reconstruction, no reliable countywide investigation of the period reveals the level of politeness and teamwork displayed in Perry. This accomplishment continues to have value. Some individuals now tout a postracial or colorblind America, but several recent atrocities are visible reminders of this untruth. The ability of Perry County's residents to live and labor alongside each other in relative peace during the aftermath of the Civil War—one of the most chaotic periods in American history—is a clear indication that skin color, frequent debates about state versus federal authority, and related societal matters do not have to inhibit shared governance or quell collective progress.

Competencies, Skills, Access, and Work Plan

Civil Wars and Civil Beings is based on my 2006 dissertation of the same title. One essay drawn from the dissertation, called "How Holy a Cause? Revisiting Slavery and the Secession Debate in Alabama, 1860-1861," was named best article to appear in a 2008 issue of the *Griot: The Journal of African American Studies*. A second essay, "'Baptized in Fire': James G. Hudson and the Uniontown Canebrake Rifle Guards," was selected lead article for the special Civil War sesquicentennial edition of the *Alabama Review* in April 2011. Each one of these pieces employed as research materials a number of unused documents kept in private hands or stored in local repositories, such as the Lincoln Museum in Marion. Other sources were housed in larger places. The Alabama Department of Archives and History, Duke University, Emory University, the Levi Watkins Learning Center at Alabama State University (ASU), Rice University, the University of Alabama, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), the University of Maryland at College Park (UMCP), and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill were foremost among these sites.

A part-time award for twelve months, \$25,200.00, from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) will fund travel to, among other places, the University of Virginia, at which the Tayloe family's papers are located. A few male members were wealthy absentee planters in Perry County during the Civil War era. Their records, at which I have glanced but have not yet perused, are immense. Entries cover agricultural concerns, politics, race relations, and virtually all other aspects of life in Perry County. The requested award also will help finance my return to UMCP and to NARA. I want to revisit pertinent Freedmen's Bureau records to, among other things, ensure that quotations and data from materials unavailable digitally are reproduced accurately. Each research trip will last one week. Funding from NEH will be used to cover transportation, hotel, photocopying, and legitimate incidental costs. The NEH award likewise will afford me the opportunity to forgo instructing courses in summer 2016. Instead, I will complete all editing tasks before submitting the final draft of the manuscript to a university press. Presently the manuscript numbers approximately 600 pages and needs to be cut tremendously. (The dissertation ran upwards of 700.) Colleagues and other professionals who agreed to serve as preliminary readers have indicated that supporting evidence, contextual illustrations, and explanatory footnotes are relevant but excessive for a microhistory. References to national and international events can be peripheral and fleeting rather than center and often, though a few existing comparisons to adjacent states and the national scene should remain. Streamlining the manuscript in these ways, which I have begun to do, will distinguish it from the dissertation and lessen production costs for the book. Already a university press has expressed interest. I will tender a formal proposal in January 2016.

Chapter Outlines and Methodologies

Each chapter in *Civil Wars and Civil Beings* will utilize a combined chronological and topical arrangement. Chapter one reaffirms racial slavery as the principal factor in southern secession and the formation of the Confederacy. Perry County was of utmost importance to Alabama's role in these occurrences. The chapter likewise examines the major expectations, motivations, and deeds of those living in Perry following the Emancipation Proclamation, furthering wartime Reconstruction. Chapter two

focuses on black attempts to form a new culture in Alabama during the first years of postwar Reconstruction, the period to which their general optimism and ultimate discontent can be traced. Chapter three clarifies Perry County's anomalous character during Reconstruction. The chapter specifically explores the local political order and the relatively limited amount of ethnic conflict in the Perry by comparison with surrounding counties. Tens of blacks in Perry were leading decision lawmakers on municipal and county levels. One black man was the most respected black delegate at the state's 1867 constitutional convention. A second black was the only African American to preside over the Alabama Senate during the nineteenth century. Chapter four deals with education and religion in Perry, emphasizing the Lincoln School in Marion from its 1867 founding as a black missionary school through its 1873-1874 development into an authentic university for blacks. Unbeknownst to many people at the time, and to most people since then, the Alabama State Lincoln Normal School and University was the first publicly sponsored coeducational center of higher learning in the United States to offer significant liberal arts coursework to blacks. Today Lincoln is known as Alabama State University, where I am employed. My new work will benefit ASU and its students by complementing existing studies about the institution. Its Marion predecessors, for example, graduated more black students who went on to earn terminal degrees before *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) than did any other historically black college or university in Alabama, including Talladega College and Tuskegee Institute. In the wake of *Brown*, ASU (then named Alabama State College and located in Montgomery) was the only college or university in the country to have students, employees, or graduates—among them, Ralph Abernathy, Fred Gray, Lawrence Reddick, Jo Ann Robinson, and Fred Shuttlesworth—who participated in every major campaign of the civil rights movement. Jimmy Lee Jackson was a 1959 graduate of Lincoln High School in Marion. His February 1965 shooting death motivated Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other freedom fighters to carry out a protest march from Selma to Montgomery. King's wife Coretta was Lincoln's valedictorian in 1945. Jean Childs, who married Andrew Young in 1954, was a Lincoln alumna whose grandfather helped incorporate the original school in 1867. *Civil Wars and Civil Beings* will highlight these and numerous other little-known facts about ASU and its institutional forebears, demonstrating a continuous line of activism in Perry from First to Second Reconstruction (the civil rights movement).

White nostalgia, particularly Old South mythology and partisan attempts to revitalize Alabama's Democratic and Conservative party on the local and state levels, are the focuses of chapter five. Chapters six and seven survey the culmination of these events, Alabama's first Redemption in 1870, and the Republican interim of 1872-1874. Chapter eight discusses agricultural and industrial reform, civil rights, black unionism, and white supremacy during the early 1870s. The chapter concludes with an examination of the historic 1874 political campaign that commenced Alabama's second and final Redemption. Chapter nine chronicles Perry at the outset of this equally chaotic period in the state and the country's histories. Chapter ten aims to summarize the contribution of *Civil Wars and Civil Beings* to existing reconstruction scholarship and to buttress a cogent, though sometimes ignored, argument made by historian Armstead Robinson in 1981 about the continuity of American history. He believed that scholars had an obligation to integrate objective findings regarding the causes, consequences, and lessons of the Civil War era into studies about the political and sociocultural revolutions of the middle twentieth century. If scholars did not heed this advice, he warned, one would never comprehend fully how crucial nineteenth-century Reconstruction was to the country's transformation from a predominantly rural society dominated by elite white agrarians to an urban, industrial, and pluralistic society where governance was shared among various ancestry groups. His overall argument definitely is applicable to Perry County.

Final Product and Dissemination

Civil Wars and Civil Beings will break new ground in reconstruction historiography while responding to NEH's *Bridging Cultures*, *Common Good*, and *Standing Together* initiatives. When the finished product is released, it will appeal to professional historians as well as to undergraduate and graduate students. These three groups constitute my intended audience, though the content and delivery of the volume will be accessible to general readers who are interested in southern history or African-American studies.

Bertis D. English
NEH Faculty Awards — *Civil Wars and Civil Beings* Bibliography

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