

Ohio Civil War 150

Interpretive Framework



Introduction

An interpretive framework organizes diverse information and perspectives on a topic in history, culture or nature. It organizes these materials into an integrated, meaningful and useful instrument for the development of engaging and relevant public programs that are firmly rooted in high quality, contemporary scholarship.

This Interpretive Framework for Ohio Civil War 150 consists of an Overarching Statement and three Primary Themes. Embedded within the Overarching Statement and the Primary Themes are several exemplary storylines. The specific stories identified within the Interpretive Framework are included to provide readers with sample stories that can bring to life the broader, more abstract ideas presented here. In other words, these illustrative storylines are included in part to fuel the imagination and suggest a range of possibilities. If this approach succeeds, individuals and groups interested in the Civil War will be inspired to use this framework for programs, research, writing and more, and they will add their own layers of meaning and analysis to it.

While this document draws on the contributions of some of Ohio's finest historians, all of us are committed to telling well-constructed stories that speak to a modern-day audience. We are not engaged in the pursuit of history for history's sake alone. Rather we are firm in our resolve to discover a past that will shed light on the present, that will place contemporary issues and concerns in a larger, historical context. At root we are asking some fundamental questions: what does the experience of the Civil War generation have to tell us today? What can we learn from the quest, struggles and achievements of that time? How did this formative event in American history impact who we are as a culture? How can new perspectives on this historic event help us to gain new perspective on ourselves today? In attempting to answer these questions, we believe that the past—in this instance, the Civil War—can serve as a distant mirror, reflecting and illuminating contemporary aspirations and enterprises.

Like the Civil War generation, we too live during a time of immense change and substantial turmoil, a time when democracy, the role of government, the rights of the individual, racial and gender relations, and memory itself are being debated and reworked. We hope that this Interpretive Framework and the public programs that spring from it will serve to raise questions, inspire exploration, prompt discussion, and enrich our understanding of the past and present in Ohio and our nation.

Overarching Statement

The American Civil War was the most important *collective public event* in the history of Ohio, if not in the nation. Virtually everyone alive in the state between April 1861 and April

1865 partook in a common experience, no matter which side they supported. The fact that there was little fighting within the borders of Ohio did not alleviate the constant worry about invasion. Most knew someone killed or wounded on battlefields in distant, previously unknown places, such as Shiloh, Tennessee; Kenesaw Mountain, Georgia; and Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

Close to 320,000 Ohioans—roughly sixty percent of males between 18 and 45—served in the Union Army; more than 35,000 died in battle or as a result of wounds, infection, or illness. Thousands of Ohioans also fought and died for the Confederacy. These divisions reflected serious political conflicts about slavery and the role of the federal government.

By the time Ohio natives Ulysses S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman led the Grand Review of the triumphant Union Armies through the streets of Washington D.C. in May 1865, few remembered exactly how and why the war had begun. But they knew that so personal and so profound a sacrifice of blood, sweat, and treasure demanded explanation. Those Ohioans who survived the Civil War spent much of their lives trying to give it meaning. They decorated graves, erected statues, debated the rights—or lack thereof—of African Americans and women, wrote histories, planned public ceremonies, and sought reconciliation with southern comrades. And they continued to disagree with each other about the war's causes and consequences. As the citizens of Ohio became prominent Americans in the century after the Civil War, they often claimed that their subsequent achievements were a direct consequence of their continued devotion to the values and institutions that they believed had led the North to victory in 1865.

Today, the Civil War seems remote to most Ohioans, familiar only through clouds of romance and sentiment. We aim to change this. Between 2011 and 2015, we will remind ourselves of the war's importance in our history and reflect upon its enduring legacy in our lives. We will celebrate the abolition of chattel slavery and the promise of equality before the law for all citizens of the United States. To talk about the Civil War is to talk about Ohio's future as well as its past, to address its failures as well as its successes. That is the spirit with which we begin the commemoration of the sesquicentennial anniversary.

Primary Theme #1

Democracy: Visions, Challenges, Breakdown and Expansion

The American experiment in democracy has long been a challenging and unpredictable endeavor, and the tumultuous events of the Civil War era provide a case in point. Though the Founders sought to restrict suffrage, the Revolution unleashed social and political forces that transformed the United States into an increasingly democratic country by the late 1820s. During the time of the early republic, however, the vast majority of Americans understood democracy to mean universal white male suffrage only. Women and African Americans did not have the right to vote and this was as true for Ohio and Massachusetts as it was for South Carolina and Virginia.

Similarly, though the Founders believed that a spirit of “faction” was disruptive and destructive, robust political parties with strongly contrasting views on government

surfaced early on, and they successfully mobilized large voter turnouts. It was common for elections to attract 80% of the electorate. These parties flattered the common (white) man and argued, in effect, that the common (white) man possessed the civic virtue necessary for a successful democratic polity precisely because he *was* common.

For the enfranchised, this system seemed to work initially. The two major parties—the Whigs and Democrats—were equally matched and enjoyed support in all parts of the country. Keenly aware that the issue of slavery could split the country along sectional lines, Whigs and Democrats managed to exclude it from national political discourse for two decades.

The War with Mexico (1846-1848) changed the political dynamics of the era and raised an immensely divisive issue: whether to permit slavery in the territories that the United States had acquired as a result of its victory over Mexico. From then on, the issue of slavery was at the heart of the national political dialogue, and by 1854 a major new party—the Republicans—emerged, largely on the basis of its opposition to slavery in the western territories. At stake was a fundamental question about the nature of the United States. Was it a *free* republic with pockets of slavery or a *slaveholding* republic with pockets of freedom?

After the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, African Americans and their political allies waged a prolonged struggle that included militant self-defense in the face of slave catchers who tried to capture and re-enslave them, even though they thought they had found safety in free states like Ohio. Indeed, Ohio's historical record is replete with memorials, petitions, and other evidence that African Americans tried to expand their political rights and protections during this tumultuous period.

In Ohio, African Americans fought for political rights and guarantees through a movement for a state black convention and through the Ohio Equal Rights League at a time when the North as a whole was deeply divided on the issues of slavery and black equality. African Americans in Northern states faced a precarious situation prior to the Civil War: Abraham Lincoln denied any intent to abolish slavery, candidly regarded African Americans as inferior to whites, and thought the racial problem could best be solved by sending the African American population to colonies in Africa or the Caribbean.

Notwithstanding these publicly espoused convictions in the years prior to Lincoln's inauguration, the Deep South regarded his election as a mortal threat. During the winter of 1860-1861 seven states seceded from the Union rather than accept the verdict of a fairly conducted election whose winner was never in dispute. Last minute efforts at a compromise solution went nowhere, and when Lincoln, early in his administration, attempted to "hold, occupy, and possess" federal installations in the seceded states, the newly created Confederacy fired upon the U.S. garrison at Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor rather than accept lawful authority. Lincoln's call for 75,000 militia troops to suppress the rebellion led four states of the Upper South to join the Confederacy.

With the outbreak of war, African Americans seized the opportunity to prove their citizenship, defend their integrity and advance their rights. In Ohio and other northern states, substantial numbers of African Americans volunteered for military service, only to be met with rebuffs, denials and claims that they were not citizens. Despite this widespread insistence that African Americans were not citizens, in Cincinnati during the early years of the war free black men were hunted down, rounded up, and pressed into military service.

Although these black recruits served with honor and were later formally organized as the Black Brigade, Ohio's Black Brigade was not a combat unit. Rather, African American men in the military were only allowed to perform menial duties like building fortifications and digging ditches. Those who wanted to fight in battle had to leave the state and volunteer their services elsewhere, for example the Massachusetts 54th. Eventually, Ohio formed its own African American regiment.

As a consequence of the Civil War, the nation redefined itself anew in regard to democracy and racial relations. On the battlefield and at the ballot box, Americans of that generation reworked and amended the political arrangements that the Founders had embedded in the Constitution. It took four years, ten thousand military engagements, and 620,000 dead to resolve through violence an issue that the democratic process had utterly failed to resolve peacefully. It was a great triumph that came at the cost of terrible carnage. It marked a breakdown in the American democratic process as well as its expansion and renewal.

Primary Theme #2

The Transformation of Ohio and America

Well before the outbreak of war in 1861, the United States and Ohio were in the midst of enormous social, political and economic changes. The events and the demands of the Civil War let loose, accelerated and compounded a whole host of transformations that restructured everyday life in America. Although there were elements of deep-seated continuity during this era, pronounced changes during a time of already existing rapid change recast both the state and the nation.

During the war, thousands of ordinary Ohio residents—people who tended farms, worked in factories, fought in the trenches, cared for the wounded and transported supplies—contributed to this multitude of related changes in concrete and specific ways. A microcosm of the nation at that time, Ohio was a complicated blend of rural and urban, eastern and western, northern and southern, and its population consisted of transplants from all sections of the country. In addition, immigrants from many other lands settled in the state. As a result, successful leaders, inventions, products, procedures and ideas that first emerged and then flourished in Ohio proved subsequently to be popular and effective in other parts of the nation as well. Changes in Ohio were part of the larger transformation of American life during that era.

While the arenas and consequences of change were diverse and innumerable, certain aspects of the transformation were more prevalent and apparent than others. The following dimensions are rich with possibilities for exploration and public programming.

Racial Views

The Civil War was a watershed moment in race relations not only in the nation at large but also within Ohio itself. The 13th, 14th and 15th amendments to the Constitution are among the most striking manifestations of the dramatic changes in racial relations, but there were also many others, some subtle and some palpable. For example, military families from Ohio had a large stake in this issue because of their sacrifices during the war years. There are documented cases of white Union soldiers from Ohio who entered the war believing that African Americans should never have political rights or equality but who, as a consequence of firsthand experience, were transformed by what they learned about African American men on the battlefield. By war's end, they supported the extension of citizenship rights to African Americans.

Women's Roles

As a consequence of wartime disruptions in daily life, women seized previously unavailable opportunities and assumed new responsibilities. Their efforts precipitated substantial changes in gender roles, expectations and possibilities. Many women not only served as nurses but—like Mary Ann Bickerdyke—also advocated, organized and directed substantial health care efforts on behalf of soldiers. Similarly, during the war years women performed new duties (in homes, on farms and at businesses) that previously were reserved almost exclusively for men. In the public sphere, women raised funds to support the war effort, collected supplies for the armies, and, in certain instances, vocally promoted the cause of freedom. Other women—wary and resentful of the war and its effects on their families—spoke publicly on behalf of the Peace Democrats' agenda. Some women simply wrote powerful and defiant letters expressing their disenchantment with the carnage and human cost of war. In these ways and others, women actively worked in spheres formerly considered the province of men only.

Ohio in the Nation

The status of Ohio in the nation changed markedly as a consequence of the Civil War. Ohio-born army generals like Ulysses Grant, William Sherman, and Philip Sheridan were prominent in major military campaigns that made the Union victory possible. Similarly, Ohio provided the nation with key members in the wartime cabinet and high profile representatives and senators in the halls of Congress. Ohio's industrialists and financiers generated both the materials and the funds for a successful war effort. After the war, Ohio continued to play a leading role in the nation's public life. Prior to the Civil War, no native-born Ohioan had been president; over the next two generations, seven Ohio-born men were elected to this office. Five of these presidents were former officers in the Union army.

Other related manifestations of change are similarly cogent, significant and worthy of pursuit. Examples include changes in the make-up of the state's population, the foundations of its burgeoning economy, the relationship between the state and national governments, and also the relationship between contemporary citizens and their government. These are all areas in which Ohioans initiated and experienced substantial

change—both intended and unexpected—during this time of war, upheaval, innovation and reorganization.

Primary Theme #3

Memory and Commemoration

Searing experiences and deeply ingrained memories from the war were enduring and life altering for a large number of Americans of the Civil War generation and in subtler ways for succeeding generations of Americans as well. To this very day, the aftereffects of the Civil War in combination with collective memories of that era—handed down from one generation to another and, in the process, modified and reworked—reverberate throughout American culture and society, simultaneously shaping and reflecting contemporary attitudes and perspectives in diverse ways.

The Civil War was a series of interrelated cataclysmic events that profoundly affected the everyday lives of a vast number of Americans. During the years of fighting, over 320,000 soldiers from Ohio participated in the Civil War and approximately 35,000 never returned home. In the country as a whole—North and South—approximately 3 million Americans served in the military from 1861 to 1865, and over 600,000 died. For those who came home as well as for those who remained in the state while loved ones fought in military campaigns, life was forever changed by the conflict. Although the war ended after four years, its repercussions continued to generate a wide array of challenges, and powerful memories—private and public, individual and shared, prized and horrific—played a substantial role in the new realities confronting ordinary Americans in the succeeding decades.

In the years following the war, towns, cities and counties throughout the country dedicated memorials and performed communal rituals of commemoration. In Ohio today, Civil War memorials can be found in 85 of the 88 counties, with the overwhelming majority constructed between 1865 and 1930. The Civil War memorials reflect the values, priorities, experiences and compromises of the generation and the era in which they were constructed. Most of those memorials honor soldiers who died during the conflict, while only a very few make reference to the anti-slavery dimensions of the struggle, to the killed and wounded African American troops who fought for freedom and the integrity of the Union, or to the large number of ordinary women who supported the war effort and assumed unusual duties on the home front. They are testimony to some of the ways in which memory itself fluctuates over time, for as new memorials to war are crafted today, they include a more diverse viewpoint.

Another means by which memories from the Civil War era emerged publicly in the aftermath of the conflict can be found in the organized gatherings of veterans in subsequent years. In 1866, shortly after the war's end, a small band of veterans formed the Grand Army of the Republic in Decatur, Illinois. By 1890, the organization claimed over 400,000 members nationally with 7,000 local chapters or posts; in Ohio alone there were approximately 700 posts.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, G.A.R. members marched in annual Memorial Day parades, created soldiers' homes, lobbied for veterans' benefits and endorsed candidates for public office. The organization also convened a yearly national encampment where veterans assembled to renew old bonds, recall wartime experiences and provide support for one another. In 1888, one of the largest of these encampments was held in Columbus, Ohio, where tens of thousands gathered. By 1949, however, the G.A.R. consisted of only sixteen members, and in February 1951, the last remaining Civil War veteran died at age 104.

Still, communal memories of the Civil War lived on in a variety of ways, and new organizations were born to replace veterans' groups: the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War and the Daughters of the Confederacy are still active today, among others. Other initiatives, such as national observances, public school education, history textbooks and scholarship, letters and memoirs, popular novels, Hollywood films, and public television documentaries have reflected each succeeding generation's modification and reinvention of Civil War memory in light of its own experiences, struggles, concerns, attitudes and perspectives.

In a related vein, each generation also forgot aspects of the Civil War, sometimes because certain parts were too horrible and uncomfortable to remember and sometimes because memory, both individual and collective, is subject to subtle as well as blatant negotiations, lapses and distortions. In this sense, both memory and forgetfulness are purposeful social constructions, and, consequently, what we forget is as illuminating and revealing as what we remember. As a nation we have again and again reframed and reformulated the narrative of the Civil War. These interpretations of the war, its causes and its consequences are very much a reflection of the era in which each is cast and fashioned.

The Civil War 150 offers Ohioans an opportunity to investigate the individual and collective memory of the Civil War era through its legacies today, to explore the variety of ways in which the meaning of those memories changed over time. For local communities, the commemoration can also serve as an occasion to consider together what the war meant to the people who inhabited Ohio towns, cities and counties in earlier eras, to think about the values and ideals of those who struggled to understand the conflict in generations past, and to reflect on the experiences, circumstances and beliefs that both connect and separate modern-day residents from previous ones. By focusing on the theme of memory and commemoration over 150 years, Ohioans can reinvigorate not only the war's legacies and our shared heritage but also the richly textured quality of contemporary community life in the state and the nation.

Credits

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