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Interview of Eric P. Totten

Eric P. Totten 00:00

My main project is called, 'Demoralized on the Slavery Question: Military Occupation and the Federal Department of the South and the Politics of Emancipation from 1862 to 1863.' The Federal Department of the South is a bureaucratic unit. It extends from South Carolina to Key West. It's a zone of military responsibility, and it's headquartered at Port Royal and Hilton Head, South Carolina. And I'm looking at various regiments from New England, especially from Connecticut, New Hampshire, Massachusetts and Maine that have a great deal of conservative and anti-abolitionist and nativist members of the units who carry with them their beliefs into the war.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:49

[Intro music fades in] Historians and Their Histories is a podcast by the Massachusetts Historical Society. It introduces listeners to our community of researchers. We learn about the paths they took to become a student of the past and the projects they are working on at the MHS. I am Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai, the Director of Research at the MHS. Today, we are sitting down with Eric P. Totten, an instructor at the University of Arkansas. Dr. Totten received support from the New England Regional Fellowship Consortium sponsored by the MHS. Eric, you are the 1,000th research fellow.

Eric P. Totten 01:24

Feel super important.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:27

It has been many decades that we've offered a fellowship program, and you are lucky number 1000. Would you like to reflect a little bit on the importance of fellowships?

Eric P. Totten 01:40

Absolutely. One: thank you so much for the Massachusetts Historical Society for inviting me to the podcast, and for the New England Regional Fellowship Consortium for offering me the fellowship. It has been an amazing journey. I actually applied to this program for many years, and finally I figured out the recipe I suppose, to actually get it done. And I had an amazing experience at the Connecticut Museum of Culture and History and the New Hampshire Historical Society, and now I'm here at the Massachusetts Historical

Society. It's just a lovely part of Boston and a great facility and amazing staff. I think support for the humanities is critical in order to help us connect with our shared past and to connect with stories that bind us and unite us and transcend time and place, and really help us understand that we are all members of one species, and more importantly, that the humanities we're the only species that I know of in the entire universe that reflect upon our past. And so it is, it is critical that we continue to support inquiry into the past and to help understand where we've come from and where we're going.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 02:46
That's very nice. It's very kind of you, and you can hear how passionate you are about all of this. How did this develop? What's your origin story? Why did you become an historian?

Eric P. Totten 02:59
I became a historian because I'm terrible at math, at least that's what I tell my students when I'm forced to do basic math in front of them. You know, what's this plus this? You know, you guys figure it out for me. I would say that my family is one of the critical motivators for me to get into to be a historian. My grandmothers Delorus Berube and Ann Van Cott cultivated in a very young age my interest in my heritage and in the past. Delorus told me about my Puritan ancestors, who came over in the 1630s and the 1640s as religious refugees fleeing from the oppression in Great Britain towards the Puritans. And she also told me about my French-Canadian family who fled, or, I won't say, fled, but were brought over in the 1610s and 1620s and probably those branches fought each other at one point in time, in the various imperial wars of New England or around the region. And back when the History Channel actually had history on it, when it wasn't just Ancient Aliens, she would go and tape on VHS tapes, old documentaries for me, even on The Learning Channel TLC, which I don't even think is around anymore. And so, she was always very much trying to introduce me to that sort of past. And my other grandmother, Ann Van Cott, she told me about how our ancestors fought the Bolsheviks during the great Russian Civil War, and how my great great grandfather, Marcel Holtzer, was sent to a concentration camp in the 1930s and managed to get out because of the help of an American businessman with the Pennsylvania Railroad Company called Alfred Ball. And that just sort of piqued my interest again, and not only my own heritage, but just history in general. And I suppose what really sort of sealed the deal for me, the defining moment of my journey was when Didi, Ann Van Cott took me on a battlefield tour in 2007 I believe. And it was all the great battlefields of the east. We went to Gettysburg and Antietam and the Bull Run/Manassas. And it was at the Manassas battlefield that we were being led by John Hennessy an amazing historian, and he brought us over to the secluded area

away from the battle site itself. And he knelt down around this area of disturbed ground. And he had told the story about how these two Union soldiers were shot and wounded during the battle, and they crawled their way to the secluded grove and passed and how they were later found by Virginia family and interred them there, and years later, their bodies were discovered, disinterred and brought to Arlington National Cemetery with full military honors. And everyone in the group broke down crying, and I saw right then and there, the power of history, this, this power to stories about our shared humanity connects us and binds us and and moves us. And I decide right then and there that I want to do this for the rest of my life and tell similar stories.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 05:48

And where did you grow up? And you say you're taking the tour of these eastern battlefield sites.

Eric P. Totten 05:52

I grew up in Maine, or at least the first 10 years, and then my father, who probably watched a little too much Miami Vice in the '80s and early '90s, decided we wanted to move to South Florida. So, I lived there for a number of years. I went to UCF, University of Central Florida in Orlando, where I got my bachelor's and master's. Go Knights. And I worked there under Dr. John Sacher on my MA thesis, which was on the military occupation of St. Augustine during the Civil War. And that kind of really solidified me staying in Civil War history, that in the fact that I'm not very good at foreign languages. And so, I figured, you know what, stick with the American history sort of thing. So, I completed my thesis there in 2011 and I worked in, sort of doing government work, grant work, for a while with the Institute of Simulation and Training. And I got really into curriculum building in the digital humanities and what technology can offer in terms of supplementing course instruction. And from there, I decided, you know, the great recession was on. Things were we were still dealing with the aftermath of it, I suppose, and it was more and more difficult to get grants. And so, I decided to go back into academia, and I applied and got into the University of Arkansas, and I studied under the now retired Dr. Daniel Sutherland, a giant in the field. And I'd say that probably his work on A Savage Conflict: The Decisive Role of Guerrillas in the American Civil War really helped sort of point me in the direction of military occupation and the effects, or the effects, of guerrilla warfare and how these occupying forces are dealing with resistance from Confederates, resistance from civilians, and even resistance from African American refugees who are have their own priorities and their own agenda and their own goals of freedom and emancipation and equality, and so that kind of led me to look at occupation, not

just in Florida, but sort of in a larger format. It's which has kind of led me to the current project that I'm working on now.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 07:54
Well, we'll get to that in a second. I'm curious why the Civil War?

Eric P. Totten 07:58
It's the defining conflict of the American story. It's the arguably, the Iliad of the Ulysses of the American of the American narrative. It is still affects us to this day. We still argue about it to this day, and we still battle over how it's the memory of that conflict, whether it's in textbooks or whether it's in movies, and just our public discourse in general, and you find the best and the worst of humanity in the Civil War in stories of the Civil War. Courage and honor and sacrifice for the lofty goals of freedom and equality, but also cowardice and drunkenness and just the base, contradictory nature of humans in general. And so, you see so many different aspects of humankind, and also just history in general. And so that's kind of what drew me into it, that and the fact that I watched Gettysburg and Glory probably way too many times as a young man, and those, those sort of things stick with you. So, it's it's always fascinated me that to this day.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 09:00
One of Maine's great civil war heroes, Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, talked about how war was a matter of character. It made bad men worse and good men better.

Eric P. Totten 09:08
I love that at the time because your own work on Northern character, I think, has been very influential for my own studies. This those of us who deal with Civil War history know well Bertram Wyatt-Brown's book Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South, and this concept of southern masculinity, and it's a violent outburst as a way to maintain their their own conceptions of honor and what it means to be a man. But I think that your work on Northern character is a good supplement to that, because northerners, too have a concept of honor. It influences how they conduct themselves, not only in public affairs, but also in the military. And so, these ideas of what it means to be a restrained, gentlemanly man is different than sort of the martialized manhood of the lower classes in the urban north, and that absolutely has an effect on the conduct of civil war armies in the field. You don't just wake up one day and say, hey, you know, I'm completely washing myself of my past, all these different political ideas I've had, and social, cultural ideas or

religious ideas I've had, they don't matter. I'm just going to go in with a clean slate. And we know that's not true, and I've seen that viscerally in my own work on the Fourth New Hampshire, which was a quote, unquote, suspected Democratic regiment. They had a lot of Irish immigrants in the regiment. Their officers were prone to drunkenness, and that those two things made them suspected to be Democrats. And there's a whole set of lingo and language that goes along with these labels on the Fourth New Hampshire, and it carries through the entire war. They are constantly having to prove that they're loyal soldiers, and not just Democrats, but also Republicans. They're having to fight against these bad press that they're receiving. At one point in time, the colonel of the regiment is court martialed for an episode in St. Augustine where a he returns a woman who, to his eyes, is white, but she's technically an enslaved woman of Minorcan descent. And because of this, David Hunter ends up court martialing him. And in the end, David Hunter is removed for various reasons. He Lincoln doesn't like what he's doing with his emancipation orders, and it's kind of hurting Lincoln's balancing act to keep the border states in the Union. And Hunter is removed and the episode goes away. Bell is never formally charged with anything that I can find, but this affront to his character, which he says multiple times in his correspondence, leads him to want to stay in the army. He had wanted to leave by 1862, 1863 but this makes him decide to stay in. So, he enlisted for honor and for patriotism, duty to God and country. But he's staying in because, at the end of the day, he's from a very prominent northern family. He can't have this stain on his character. And if he wants to have a life in politics, he better show he's the good officer of a good unit. And for the rest of the war, he attempts to do this, until he finally dies on the parapet at Fort Fisher in January of 1865.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 12:08

You're very energetic, and you're fired up talking about the past here, and your own history and the importance of history. Do you find it challenging to inspire undergraduates to feel the same way. I mean, we're gonna get to the question of the challenges of being an historian. I'm assuming that making the case that the humanities are really important is also something you see in the classroom. But I could be wrong.

Eric P. Totten 12:33

It is increasingly difficult as AI is taking over lots of the student work. I find more and more what I'm doing is policing sort of AI usage, but you find ways to coopt it. You bring in a source into class, you have them open up their various AI things, whether it's Gemini or ChatGPT or whatever it happens to be, and you have them wash through a few sources, and you show them, yeah, it can kind of summarize. It can do this. It can do that, but it doesn't give you context. It doesn't give you morality, and it will straight up lie to you if

you are not careful. So, coopting the technologies they're already using and trying to show them the strengths and limitations is one way to get them engaged. The other way is just be as loud and exuberant as you can. I have that stepdad voice it carries, and probably the northern Yankee voice as well he carries for rooms and rooms. And so, they have to listen to me, whether they like it or not. And so just being passionate about something showing them that these are not marble models of the past. These are living human beings who are insanely contradictory, just like we are today. You know, I love talking about [Geroge] Washington. Washington has all these problems from modern perspectives, right? He's an enslaver. He's not exactly the best with tactics. He loses more battles than he wins, but he keeps giving away power. He keeps the idea of civilian control of government, and he he could have made himself king, and when he keeps giving away power, even King George the Third, you know, theoretically the arch nemesis of the country says, well, that's like the greatest dude ever living. So, we can see just in this one story, Washington is terribly complicated. And students like complicated things, right? They often want easy answers. But when you dive into the details and you show them these contradictory people, it really connects them. Also just showing them that we have a consistent theme in American history, which is our politics are so toxic we make counterproductive decisions in all times and all places that we believe in conspiracy theories, whether it's the American Revolution or the quote, unquote slave power conspiracy, or the black Republican conspiracy that leads to the Civil War, or these ideas about what happened to JFK and his assassination, things are coming up in the news again. They hook onto those major themes. You know, history versus memory, that people have agency, that we are politics are toxic, that we make counterproductive decisions and conspiracy theories in human history. And when they like those stories, they they get engaged in that material when you just are able to explain it to them. That being said, of the 40 students in a given class, I may save 10, you know, but that's still a win, you know. I'll have five great students, five good students, 10 average, and the rest are wherever, and you just have to pick and choose your battles. And I enjoy going to battle every day at my university.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 15:39

Are there other challenges to being an historian in the 21st century?

Eric P. Totten 15:43

For my own part, I suppose just the weight of greater events on us. My research was complicated in 2008 2007 because of the Great Recession. I didn't have a lot of money, not a far ability to travel very far. I had to rely on digital humanities a lot. And I was very happy to see that the Massachusetts Historical Society and

other great institutions in this fellowship consortium have done so much work on the digital humanities to make it accessible to historians who may not always be able to get the funding to travel. Same thing with the great covid pandemic of 2020. That limited my ability to complete my research, and in a way, almost helped me, because every time my dissertation committee had a question about my work, I said, well, I couldn't get to it because the pandemic was on, everything was closed, and that was acceptable to them. So, I would say those have been sort of the major professional challenges that I have faced, things that are bigger than us, that we can't exactly control. But then, as you said, just trying to reach our students every day and convincing not only them but their parents that this is a worthy subject to study and to major in or minor in, that these majors, minors in history have utility. They have core competency skills that are necessary for the job market. And trying to convince them of that is a challenge. But like I said, I think I think we do an okay job at reaching a few of them every semester.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 17:07

We are on the cusp of marking the 250th anniversary of the Battles of Lexington and Concord and the start of the American Revolution in Massachusetts, and then a wider commemoration next year. Do you think that the 250 is an opportunity? Is there any opportunity in perhaps making the case of the importance of history at this particular moment?

Eric P. Totten 17:27

There always is and anniversaries are one great way to get the public to reengage with this material. As you know, we had just a decade or so ago, the sort of 100th anniversary of the outbreak of World War One. We've had, I think it was the 150th anniversary of the Civil War, and now 250th for Lexington and Concord. This is an amazing opportunity for us to engage with the public and to tell them the stories that they haven't heard. Everyone is I would hope, familiar with the shot heard around the world, even if [Ralph Waldo] Emerson may have gotten the exact place of where it was wrong. But it's also a chance to talk about stories that others haven't heard, like Sibbell Ludington and her own ride to alert I think she was a young girl at 16 years old in New York, and she traveled dozens of miles to spread word that the British were coming. And you know, we talk about Lexington, but we sometimes forget about Prince Estabrook or Salem Poor who served these are African American members of the militia who served in these militia units against the British and so this is not just a story of one small group of New Englanders fighting against this imperial overreach or tyranny. It's a story of all of us of Caucasian, African American descent, and others who have a long who have participated in these events, in telling these anniversaries are a great opportunity

to highlight those stories, to bring in broader segments of the public to engage in our field. We also have really cool exhibits that I'm looking at right now here, cannons and portraits and things that I think people still find interesting and engaging.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 19:08
Let's turn to the work that you are doing here at the MHS. You've hinted at this but tell us about your project.

Eric P. Totten 19:16
the current project, which I'm guilty of having too many floating around in my mind. But my main project is called, 'Demoralized on the Slavery Question: Military Occupation and the Federal Department of the South and the Politics of Emancipation from 1862 to 1863.' The Federal Department of the South is a bureaucratic unit. It extends from South Carolina to Key West. It's a zone of military responsibility, and it's headquartered at Port Royal and Hilton Head, South Carolina. And I'm looking at various regiments from New England, especially from Connecticut, New Hampshire, Massachusetts and Maine that have a great deal of conservative and anti-abolitionist and nativist members of the units who carry with them their beliefs into the war and these beliefs end up undermining the civil military relationship between the soldiers and their officers, the officers and the commanding generals, the generals in the Lincoln administration, and then the civilians at home who are all debating the conduct and war aims of this conflict. And so, it's a story. It's not this it's not a story of a progressive march to freedom, but it's a story of start and stop, of complications, of nuance, guys running around, getting drunk on whiskey, beating up African American refugees, others, like the American missionary association or in other groups, charitable benevolent societies trying to help the African Americans who are escaping the sinful institution of slavery and trying to make a life for themselves. It's a terribly complicated story with lots of different agendas, lots of different moving parts, and it's kind of part of what we call like the dark turn in history for the Civil War studies, again, not the glory and sacrifice on the fields of Gettysburg like Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain or [Robert] Gould Shaw at Battery Wagner. But stories again, of cowardice, of drunkenness, of, you know, people who can be bigoted and do not so nice things to people but also are fighting for greater ideals at the same time. So that's kind of the major thrust of my project.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 21:36
So, you're really talking about wartime reconstruction.

Eric P. Totten 21:39

It does start early on. Yes, in 1862 1863 depending on where you where you start. So, yeah, I do look at that in a way. I focus more on Northern soldiers, because what got me sort of into this originally was military occupation for the first 60 years of its writing was all about Southern civilians, mostly white, and then '70s, '80s, '90s, you get into African American southerners and what they're dealing with. But I found that in the tales of the occupation of Florida, you don't get a lot of Northern soldiers. It's only the southern perspective. And so, I wanted to humanize these people and try to understand why one regiment acts differently from another. Why is it that the Fourth New Hampshire, which seems to have more Irishmen and have more Democratic individuals, tend to treat African Americans quite poorly, whereas the Seventh New Hampshire deals with it much more fairly or the Seventh Connecticut, the 10th Connecticut, the 17th Connecticut, all of them serve at St. Augustine at one point, they all treat African Americans far better than other New Hampshire units. And then, if you go and you look at more New Hampshire history, you tend to find that they are described, I think Emerson once called them the 'South Carolina of the North' that should be just peeled out of New England and dropped into the ocean somewhere where it belongs, which everyone knows anything about New Hampshire politics to this day, they tend to be quite opinionated. So that's what really kind of led my focus was I want to I want to understand why these regiments act so differently in military occupation. And it does have to deal with that does tie into the historiography of the of the Reconstruction of the South, though I deadline right at 1865-1866.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 23:19

And what types of sources are you looking at, what sorts of collections and what are you finding here at the MHS?

Eric P. Totten 23:24

So, one just getting back to the amazing, digitized humanity work that you all do, the Charles E. Briggs letters are a wealth of information. He's a member of the 24th Massachusetts who takes part in Battery Wagner takes part in the occupation of St. Augustine. They fight later on at places like Petersburg and Drury's Bluff and the Bermuda Hundred campaign under Benjamin F. Butler in the army of the James and this is a great information for studying, again, the military occupation of the Department of the South, as are the Francis William Loring papers, which are also fully digitized, again, lots of information. He's also a member of the 24th Massachusetts so lots of good information there. In terms of the collections proper,

I've gotten a lot of good usage out of the Albert G. [Gallatin] Browne papers. He's a treasury agent in the Department of the South, and he appears to have a great amount of not only political power but influence over generals as well. He's he's negotiating with Rufus Saxton and General Gilmore and General Hunter about how to treat African Americans, how to try to squeeze as much cotton as you can out of this region so that you can maximize the funds necessary to fight this war. And I find that, you know, he does some good things, like he ends up confiscating goods from one merchant to give to the starving civilians of Fernandina and St. Augustine, Florida in 1863 1864 the winter, the winter of those years. And he saves lives. The same time, it appears he may be dabbling in some forms of corruption, you know, wetting his own beak. And his son even writes a letter at one point saying, you know, when we capture the city, I bet you're going to make a quite a nice little deal off of it. So again, you see those the best of humanity and the worst of humanity at the same time. So, the Albert G. [Gallatin] Browne papers, that's sort of I was expecting to find the costs of occupation, what it actually cost to do this, and then I ended finding all this political information. It's those hidden gems that you never expect to find, where I'm just I'm flipping through this letter book for it seems like for hours and hours, and my eyes are going cross, and then finally I see that piece of evidence that I want, and I'm like, oh my gosh, this made my entire trip. Those are the moments that you live for as a historian.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 25:45
Anything unexpected?

Eric P. Totten 25:47
Like I said, the story of the confiscation of goods in order to feed the starving civilians of St. Augustine and Fernandina, that was that really jumped out at me. Also, I found a number of really interesting stories from a guy called John M. [Murray] Spear . He wrote a book called, Army Life in the 24th Massachusetts, where he describes some of the political problems within his regimen, which you don't typically find in a soldier's reminiscence. I also was quite interested in the Frederick August James papers. He talks a lot about the war and, you know, just his daily life, he's a, he's a, from what I can tell, an immigrant to the nation, but he has the same bigotry as many other northern soldiers. He dislikes African Americans. He's really angry at the treatment of white soldiers, or he claims, by the army. And I wasn't expecting to find that there. And he goes on to describe just the huge amount of anti-abolitionist politics in this department that complicates the efforts of David Hunter and other generals who are abolitionists who want to free or support the self-emancipation of African American refugees, but these soldiers ain't exactly going along with it. Getting back

to that civil military relationship. You can order something from Washington or from Hilton Head, but there's still guys on the ground who got to get it done, and oftentimes they don't want to, and they actively undermine those efforts. So that was quite unexpected as well.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 27:15
Would you like to comment about any collections from our sister institutions, Connecticut or New Hampshire?

Eric P. Totten 27:21
There are regimental papers from one member, oh George F. Towle of the Fourth New Hampshire volunteers, and his diary, his journal is a wealth of complaints. He thinks he's smarter than everyone else. He is clearly a Democratic soldier. He does not like the Republicans in his regiment. He doesn't like the politically connected Bell family who has gotten their son to be a lieutenant colonel and later colonel of the regiment, and he has a lot of self-inflated stories, but he really gets into the nitty gritty of drunken officers, of petulant soldiers, of street fights, drunken brawls, and all in everything in between, as well as him fighting in these great battles of Battery Wagner and Petersburg and Fort Fisher. He's always quick to to undermine or to criticize officers until one of them dies. And then you see his narrative becomes a little bit more gentler towards them. So that resource alone at the New Hampshire Historical Society was amazing. And another set of papers at the Connecticut Museum of Culture and History that I found more useful than I realized would was the papers of [General Alfred Howe] Terry. He is an abolitionist of Connecticut. He is a commander in the Department of the South. He leads the to the taking of Fort Fisher in 1865 and he has this great line in a letter to his mother where he essentially says, you know, we need to keep losing battles so that the Democrats of this army will get out and we can make this a Republican Army bent on the destruction of slavery. So, it's very clear what his motivations are very clear in his politics, you know, little bit of a wheeler-dealer, you know, trying to climb up that ladder, trying to get a better position in life. And so again, you know, a guy of strong political opinions. No problem with the whole concept of politicking and trying to get yours. But also, very fervent in his religious ideas and his belief in freedom national and he actively works to make the army into a tool that will bring about the freedom of 4 million people.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 29:32
This is Alfred Terry?

Eric P. Totten 29:34

Yes, just as a little hint, if you go through all of the various telegraphs he sends, especially right around the election, he has labeled every unit and what their election returns were for the McClellan-Lincoln election of 1864 which anyone who's doing work on that very pivotal election would find valuable in and of itself.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 29:54

All right. Well, what do you hope audiences will take away readers will take away from your book? How do you hope that it will help them understand the past?

Eric P. Totten 30:04

I think continuities in American history again, kind of hitting on this theme I've talked about before, that our politics are so toxic, we can tend to make counterproductive decisions that fake news and hyper partisanship have always been around. I think William Blair just wrote a book on this actually. I hope that they see that history is messy and nuanced, and that's a good thing. It's not just a progressive march to freedom, but it is again, the people who make questionable choices. And I hope that people realize that at the end of the day, no matter what time in history you're talking about, people are people, and we all make choices. And you can make choices to make a better tomorrow and to stand up for what you believe is right and to sacrifice to achieve it, or you don't have to. You can do whatever you want. You can let others make the world a worse place. And the choice was theirs then, and the choice is ours now. And so, I asked this audience, what choices are you going to make because regardless of whatever you choose, there is historical precedent for it and fascinating stories to tell why people acted the way they did when they did. Thank you again for the invitation, and I'd just like to again thank the Massachusetts Historical Society and the New England Regional Fellowship Consortium for all their efforts to preserve our shared past and to help us disseminate it to the broader public.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 31:30

[Outro music fades in] Historians and Their Histories is produced by the research department at the Massachusetts Historical Society. We would like to thank Eric P. Totten from the University of Arkansas and Sam Hurwitz, Podcast Producer at the MHS. Music in this episode is by Podington Bear. Please see our show notes for details. Thank you for listening and please also rate, review and subscribe to both the MHS produced shows wherever you listen to podcasts.