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The Interview of Michael Vorenberg

Michael Vorenberg 00:00

I just start poking around what's in here, and it's alphabetical by topic. And this was a person who had organized thematically all the records of the war, and the box had the letter E, and under the letter E was the tab, 'End of War' and I thought that's kind of interesting, 'End of War' and so I look in the folder, and it turns out it's all about the end of the Civil War. And this person had collected all these documents about when did the Civil War end. What is the end date of the Civil War? And that's when I found out that the legal or official end date was August 20, 1866, which I can get into later. But on that date is when the president of the time, Andrew Johnson, by proclamation, declared what he called a cessation of hostilities. In other words, a president declared that the war was over. Now I go back, lurking in the back of my mind is the George Bush speech, the mission accomplished speech [from the] President, right? And I'm thinking, really the Civil War ended because the President said it was over?

Megan Kate Nelson 01:10

[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 Megan Kate Nelson, a Historian and writer based in Boston. I am guest hosting special episodes of Historians and Their Histories that discuss books that have been completed by MHS research fellows. Today we are sitting down with Michael Vorenberg, Associate Professor of History at Brown University, and a recipient of a long-term fellowship sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities [NEH] and the Massachusetts Historical Society. Welcome Mike Vorenberg.

Michael Vorenberg 01:57

Thank you, Megan, and thank you for hosting this and it's good to see you. Thank you to the Massachusetts Historical Society for this chance to talk about the book and other issues. And thank you to the NEH that sponsored my long-term fellowship some years back at the MHS as well.

Megan Kate Nelson 02:18

Excellent. Yes, and I suppose we should note that we are here to talk about your upcoming book very soon upcoming. It is entitled Lincoln's Peace: The Struggle to End the American Civil War, coming out with [Alfred A.] Knopf. So very exciting. Congratulations.

Michael Vorenberg 02:35

Thank you. Yes, and publication date is March 18. So, this podcast may be coming out right about the time that the book is available.

Megan Kate Nelson 02:47
Excellent, perfect timing on everyone's part. Before we get to the book, I think we'd like to delve into your past a little bit, in terms of your historical past, of course. So why did you become an historian?

Michael Vorenberg 03:01
I don't have a sort of straight path to becoming a historian. When I went to college, I didn't really know what I was going to do. I took some American history in my first year at college and hated it. That's not quite true. I liked one professor in United States history quite a bit, and that was Patricia Limerick, who was at Harvard at the time, just by my good fortune when I was an undergraduate, she was there, although she eventually left and settled in University of Colorado. She was fantastic. But my real love as a kid had always been ancient history, and ancient especially ancient Greece. And so, I ended up as an undergraduate studying ancient Greek history and and it sort of really stemmed even further back from an interest in Greek mythology. Like many kids, I just never let it go, I guess. And so, when I got to college, I started studying ancient Greek history with the two professors who were then teaching it there. And that was really my that was my major field. And then as a minor field, I did US history. I was hired out of college to teach World Civilizations. That's where the ancient history comes in and at a prep school and in the teaching of that, they also allowed me to teach an elective in US history, which I did. And that's when I realized how little American history I knew, and I really hadn't given it a fair shot, and I wanted to know more, and I wanted to go back to school. So, I went back to get a PhD in American history. It isn't the case, for example, that I grew up playing with Civil War soldiers, and knew from the get go that I wanted to be a Civil War historian. I'm sorry that's not true of a lot of Civil War historians, either the Civil War soldiers, but the Civil War came to me quite late, actually, as these things go, even when I went to graduate school, I thought I was going to be doing 20th century US history and it just worked out. I landed in the Civil War.

Megan Kate Nelson 05:03
Oh, yes. So, what changed? Did you just run into another inspiring professor, or did you just hit upon Civil War history as you know, this is a field that's growing and changing in this moment and has a lot of interesting stuff to talk about?

Michael Vorenberg 05:20
I was struck by the fact I just landed on a question that struck me as interesting, and it happened to intersect with the Civil War. For me, I guess it was always about questions that were puzzling and seemed like there should be more written about them. And with the Civil War, like many, I came in thinking, 'Well, of course, all that can be said has

been said about the Civil War, so what possibly could be done?' I'll come back to the question in a moment. It's the person. I came to graduate school, not exactly clear who my advisor was going to be. And again, I kind of stumbled into having David Herbert Donald as my advisor. At the time, he taught the first seminar I took. But even then, I wasn't sure that really I wanted to be working on the 19th century. He then hired me to be a research assistant on his biography about Abraham Lincoln and because I got to do real research, archival research for that book, early on in my time as a graduate student, while doing my own work in other fields, I think I got spoiled, and I just got exposed to how rich the subject matter is of the Civil War, how many amazing archives there are, and how many interesting questions still to be answered, as I said, and yeah. And so, it was always for me about sort of peculiar questions, maybe and my dissertation was trying to figure out this sort of puzzle, if the Emancipation Proclamation is a crucial moment and yet the constant refrain about it was that it didn't necessarily legally free actual enslaved people, although I think it did. So, then what exactly is the process? How does the law, how does the law make one free? And that led me to write a dissertation that involved working on the 13th Amendment, among other issues, and it took me into legal history, another place I never thought I would go, but that's where I am now.

Megan Kate Nelson 07:26

That combination of kind of inspiring professors and then also people who introduce you to the work, which is, I think you know, if you talk to a lot of historians, that's the most exciting part, is doing the research and going into the archive, going into a place like MHS, and discovering things and looking at the documents in the past, to do as you're saying, to ask these really important questions. So, what are some of the most challenging issues? I mean, right now, we are in a very challenging moment for the field of history, for higher education, for archives. But you know, are there any challenging issues in particular that you have faced as a historian or with this project itself?

Michael Vorenberg 08:15

I should acknowledge that as historians go, I've been fairly privileged, lucky, whichever one you want to pick. I've gotten to teach at excellent institutions, beginning, I guess, for briefly, at Harvard when I was a lecturer, but then at University of Buffalo, and now at Brown [University] for some years. And in all of these places, I've had really good students. I've had support, financial support to do research other places, and I've had great colleagues. I think a lot of places have that, but I think we have to acknowledge that it's a challenge for a lot of folks who don't necessarily have those resources. And I do think that for historians, the issue of archival research is so important for us. It is absolutely true that there has been a digitization revolution of the past 20 plus years, which has led many people to assume that if it exists, it exists digitally. This is not true, as you know Megan, and that being the case, then you have to go to archives.

Michael Vorenberg 09:24

A lot of people who are not historians don't understand why one would need to go to an archive. First, it has to exist digitally. If it doesn't exist digitally, then it can't possibly be important. Why would you need to go see it? These are the assumptions and that's a real problem. It takes a lot of money and a lot of time to go to archives. And here we are, you and I talking as Americanists. Now imagine if one does right, ancient Chinese history or something. So of course, you have to go to archives. The challenge then is for historians is the archive. How do you get to the archive, and then in the archive, we are so dependent if we're going to do any good, if we're going to be any good at this, at the people who work at the archive and that's the greatest challenge for anyone, not just me. Are there people at the archive at the facility who know what's in the building? We would assume, of course, they do, but that isn't necessarily the case. Can they connect the interest of the person who shows up in the room to what is there? The person who shows up knows that there's two or three things there. They hope that they can find them, but it's the archivist who then plays the crucial role. Here are five things you don't know about that we have, and there are so many stories, and I bet you have some in which an archivist played the key role in saying, 'Hey, is of this, is this of interest to you?' And it turns out it's the key document. When I was at the Mass Historical Society, a wonderful facility with amazing archivists who did this, who said, 'Oh, I see that you're looking at this collection. Do you know about this person's papers?' And I'm no and, you know, not being a condescending or any way, they just said, 'Oh, well, maybe you should take a look.' And sure enough, I find riches there. And so, we really exist if our books are any good, if our articles are any good, yeah, we can take some credit. But if they really are good in dealing with original material, there's usually one or more archivists behind the scene, which makes it all so terrifying that these archivists could be going away in terms of publicly funded institutions, if not privately funded institutions.

Megan Kate Nelson 11:55

Absolutely. Yes, and we all do have those stories that kind of when we talk about serendipitous moments in the archive, those are almost always because a curator or an archivist has sort of said, 'Oh, you know, I know you're looking at this particular subject, this source came in or I ran into this earlier. Here it is.' You're like, 'Oh my God.' And you have that sort of amazing moment of epiphany. Now you talk about this a little bit in the prologue to Lincoln's Peace that the inspiration for this book came in the archive that you found a source that was helping you to answer one of these puzzling questions that you're interested in. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Michael Vorenberg 12:41

I want to explain that there was sort of a time gap between some of the inspiration for the book and the actual decision to dive in fully into the book. In a way the story really begins in 2003 in May, when President of the time, George W. Bush, stands on board a ship aptly named the Abraham Lincoln and gives a speech declaring that combat operations in Iraq are over. Behind him is a banner that says, 'Mission Accomplished.' So, this is often called the Mission Accomplished speech, and at the moment, he came in for a lot of ridicule from people for saying, how can you just declare a war over? But that's what he was doing. He then said, you know, operations will continue, but there

they are occupation. So, the idea of a speech in which you declare the war over is lurking in the back of my mind. I go to the archives. I'm working on a book about something entirely differently, and I ordered some records. And actually was an archivist who was helping me at the time, who ordered, who told me about these records. I didn't know they existed. And the records have to do with a clerk at the in the 1890s who decided to organize all the records of the War Department, which are an absurd project, but this person took it on, and basically, I ordered a box, and they brought the wrong box. And that happens all the time in the archives. It's not the archivist problem, it's the staff, and it happens. And so fine, and they go back to get the right box. Meantime, I open up the box, and it's an index box and I just start poking around what's in here, and it's alphabetical by topic. And this was a person who had organized thematically all the records of the war, and the box had the letter E, and under the letter E was the tab 'End of War' and I thought that's kind of interesting, 'End of War' and so I look in the folder, and it turns out it's all about the end of the Civil War. And this person had collected all these documents about when did the Civil War end? What is the end date of the Civil War? And that's when I found out that the legal or official end date was August 20, 1866, which I can get into later. But on that date is when the president of the time, Andrew Johnson, by proclamation, declared what he called a cessation of hostilities. In other words, a president declared that the war was over. Now I go back, lurking in the back of my mind is the George Bush speech, the Mission Accomplished speech [from the] President, right? And I'm thinking, really, the Civil War ended because the President said it was over? And, you know, here we are making fun of Bush, or saying, you can't just declare a war over. And yet, that's what Johnson did. And that becomes the official end date. By the way, later on, much later on, when I did dive into this book fully, I found out that political scientists, who track wars and come up with start dates and end dates of war, that for the main project on this, for political scientists, for international relations specialists, they use the date of Bush's Mission Accomplished speech as the official end date of the US Iraqi war, even though occupation went on and fighting went on and killing went on and death went on for another seven years, right? But that was the and the idea that you can declare a war over is, you know, we can talk about it in the abstract, but that then becomes a fixed point in the record. So that's a long-winded answer, of like, there's an archival story there, but it's very much informed by the events of the present, of that present, of that moment.

Megan Kate Nelson 16:30

Oh, absolutely. And I think what's so interesting about this question is, I think if you ask anyone, when did the Civil War end? I mean, even people who are not specialists, they'd be like Appomattox [Court House], and this is where you begin your story in the book because, as you argue, Appomattox is just this, it's a really compelling moment. It's really persuasive, right? Like, because we like our endings, but we'd like to have it all tied up neat in a bow. But that doesn't happen with war. That's not the way it works. But somehow we've convinced ourselves, as one of our kind of central American myths, that Appomattox was the end of the Civil War and everything is dated to that date in April 1865 in that house, you know, in Virginia, with [Robert E.] Lee and [Ulysses S.] Grant, and the focus is on the military cessations of hostilities, right? But you argue in this book that the real history of that is much more complicated, and

there are many different kinds of endings. So can you just take us briefly through kind of some of your arguments in the book and where you see kind of political endings, and then, or maybe not, and because I love how much in the book you're like and so the Civil War ended, or maybe not.

Michael Vorenberg 17:50

I'm aware that while a lot of people love history and like the historians who write them, there may be an equal or greater number of people who say to historians, I really hate it when you say it's complicated' and yet, that's what we do all the time, and it is complicated. That said, Appomattox as the ending of the Civil War makes a nice, neat ending. And despite having spent a lot of years and a lot of time working on this book, and yes, there's many things in there that can say that Appomattox wasn't the real ending, whatever the real ending is, I will continue to use Appomattox as a shorthand for the end of the Civil War. I can't stop myself from saying things like after Appomattox or post Appomattox or whatever. I'm not trying to rewrite the textbooks to say, 'Oh no, it's not Appomattox. It's event X or event Y.' My point is to what you just said. Wars have sloppy endings. They almost always have sloppy endings, yet they also are compelling narratives in and of themselves. We like our narratives usually to have beginnings, middles and ends, and so it's natural that we look for an end point, and quite fortunately, the war delivered us a great one at Appomattox, and it really is, if you have to pick an end point and only one, Appomattox might work better than any. However, it isn't you know the endpoint by any strict definition of the term. There are still armies in the field after Appomattox and so forth. Okay, so what are other possibilities or ways of thinking about the endpoints? Strictly militarily, Lee's army surrenders on April 9 and then stacks arms a few days later. Meanwhile, [Joseph E.] Johnston's army is this big, organized army North Carolina. They're not gonna officially surrender till the end of April. Then there's still armies out there. They're smaller, they're more diffuse. So okay, militarily, you can then say, when is the last battle? Alright, that's the way to kind of mark it. So, let's place the last battle. When's that? Okay, we've got a problem. We've got two different places that claim to be the last battle. But let's go with Palmito Ranch. That's a very small skirmish in southern Texas in early May 1865. It happens that there's a photograph I really like in my book where I've put two plaques next to one another. Each claim to be the last battle of the Civil War. One is in Columbus, Georgia, and the others 1000 miles away in Palmito Ranch, Texas, last battle. Alright, another way to think of it is well beyond the battles, in military terms, there's surrenders because sometimes an army isn't at war, but exists and then surrenders. So, when's the last surrender? When's the last surrender? Well, the last military surrender, we like to say, and I'm perfectly fine with this, is Stand Watie, and that's a wonderful story. Brings us into Native American history. Stand Watie is a Cherokee leader who is the last Confederate General to surrender. That's a good last army surrender. Complicating things is the fact, unfortunately, it actually isn't the last surrender again, because the [CSS] Shenandoah is a naval vessel, and that ship, the Confederate ship Shenandoah, doesn't surrender and it surrenders in Liverpool in November of 1865 and there's even a plaque on a wall in Liverpool marking that spot. So militarily, we've got to, you know, all those. Politically. Politically, it's complicated, because now we're into the mess of, what was this war? Was it a war? Was it an insurrection, or was it a war between two different political entities? The Lincoln administration says

it's insurrection. Okay, if it's an insurrection, then the war ends politically, ideally, when actually, in either case, either type of war, politically, you say a war is over when the civilian authorities have surrendered. The civilian authorities of the Confederacy that is to say, Jefferson Davis never surrenders. He takes great pride in this. And so that creates, in some ways, a political problem. So, you can then sort of say, well, maybe a president could just declare, as Johnson does, the cessation of hostility. So, let's go with that. But is it really the President's prerogative. After the war, excuse me, I should say after Appomattox Congress ends up being in charge. Congress ends up taking power over Johnson during Reconstruction. So therefore we can, we could make the argument that it's really Congress that gets to say when the war is over and indeed it is Congress that says we have decided that the war is not over until we admit the last of the representatives from the last of the seceded states, and that's in 1871. So, Greg Downs lays this out in his excellent book After Appomattox. He focuses especially on this episode in Congress, where an actual person stands up in Congress after the reps have been admitted from the last seceded state, and he says the person stands up in Congress says the war is over. Finally, and I'm sorry to go on at length, but this, in many ways, we're about to say is what I would argue is, in many ways the most important kind of way to think about the end of the Civil War. What do you call it? Maybe it is both political and strategic and cultural, and that is the end of slavery. The story of how slavery ends and the story of how the Civil War ends, they are necessarily connected. They have to be connected. We argue that the war was a war to end slavery. We might say it didn't start out that way, but I think historians agree, whether it started out that way or not, it certainly became such a war. Shouldn't therefore the end point of the Civil War have something to do with the end of slavery and then in a more broad way, can you really say the war is over if vestiges of slavery exist? So, at the very least, you could then make a compelling argument for finding a marker for the end of slavery, whether it be Juneteenth, which is June of 1865, maybe the ratification of the 13th Amendment, December '65 that's the amendment that abolishes slavery. And saying, 'Okay, we're going to make that the end of the war.' And by doing so, we acknowledge that the war was a war to end slavery. That's the key thing. Whatever date, whatever point one chooses as the end date, carries with it the message what is this war about? If you choose Appomattox, then you're saying this war is mainly about Eastern armies fighting one another, and when the main Eastern Army, Lee's army of Northern Virginia, surrenders, the war is over. If historians want to hold true to the what, I think most of us believe, that it was war to end slavery, then there's a logic to finding an end point that's about emancipation.

Megan Kate Nelson 25:31

Yes, absolutely and I should say, you know that the book is structured kind of chronologically, but you move back and forth, kind of between these military endings and political endings and emancipationist endings and cultural endings. And in that way, the book is rather interdisciplinary within the field of Civil War history, right? That you know, lots of people identify as only military historians, only social historians, but you are doing all of that bringing together this, this massive material. And one of the other things that you do in the book, of course, something I deeply appreciate, which is and you, and you say several times you know the when and the where of the war's endings are linked, deeply interrelated. Extending the chronology of something like the Civil War necessitates expanding the

geography, right? So, you take us in this book to places that many Civil War readers, I think, are going to be surprised by the Texas, Mexico border, you take us to Cuba, the northern Great Plains, the Desert Southwest, which, of course, is my favorite, the port at Liverpool, which you just mentioned with the Shenandoah. You know, this is, I think, one of the challenging things. This is one of the major ways that Civil War history is expanding, kind of in this moment. Which one of those places did you think, as you were researching was the most kind of interesting and bizarre?

Michael Vorenberg 26:59

The interesting and bizarre one is Liverpool, and I'll just spend a second there, but then come back to the larger story. I mean, it was probably the story that I most looked forward to telling in the book. I knew I would get to tell it the story of the Shenandoah, and it's so interesting. The Shenandoah is in the Northern Pacific because it's near the Bering Straits in the summer of 1865 when people back in North America, a lot of them think the war is over, and the Shenandoah's mission is to destroy the New England whaling fleet, and it does a very good job of that. So that, in itself, is kind of interesting. And then when the Shenandoah begins to catch word from other ships. 'Hey, you know, Richmond fell. Hey, you know, Lee surrendered.' They don't believe it. That just couldn't have happened, right? It's sort of the invincibility of the Confederacy. Until finally, they come across a ship that has headlines that has newspapers with headlines that announces and they say, 'Oh dear,' because this means that they've been committing these acts of depredation in a time when there may not be war, that makes means they're pirates. Technically they can be hanged. So, they got to make a run for it, and they don't know where to run to, do they run to South Africa, to Liverpool? Who knows, but they end up in Liverpool. But let me go back, especially because I have you here and you Megan Kate Nelson were part of what made this a book that had to change its boundaries, temporal and geographic. When I set out to write this book, I wasn't quite sure where I was going, and meanwhile, the ground of Civil War history was changing under my feet, and it was changing in these temporal and geographic ways. Let me just focus on geography and three different things. One, internationalizing the Civil War, bringing in other nations. So, I think of a book like Don Doyle's book The Cause of All Nations, but there are many things going on to internationalize it. Two, bringing the story of Mexico and the borderlands into the Civil War history, right? My colleague here, when I first got here, Karl Jacoby, he works on these very issues, had written a book very much centered on that story, and that was on my mind. And then there's the whole Native American history, right? And so here comes these people making this argument that really Western history, even the far southwest, should be incorporated into Civil War history, or maybe rather, Civil War history should be incorporated in native the two need to be meshed. And here's a book called The Three-Cornered War by Megan Kate Nelson. And so, following all this, I teach the Civil War. I'm incorporating this into my lectures, and I'm thinking, 'Well, that certainly is going to change how one thinks about the ending of the Civil War, doesn't it?' because when we think about the wars in the Southwest, if we think about the Navajo, if we think about a long walk the Bosque Redondo, and what's going on there, and if we create a timeline of events there, that is not a timeline that looks like the timeline that we look at in a textbook on Civil War events, just the timeline looks weird. You might have that timeline end in 1866 or 1867 depending on if you're just looking at the Navajo in

the Bosque and so forth. And so that means you have to start thinking about the ending in different ways. That's an example, a very specific example, of thinking about the southwest, or if you want to talk about the plains and the northern plains and the Sioux, and that is not a war that ends neatly by any means in 1865. Although I did find and I'll end here just with this point, that with the Appomattox ending and the surrender of the other major Confederate armies in the east, there are people who think this is, this is the moment. I'm thinking about Union officials, where we have an army, a large army, we can use it, plus diplomatic means to bring peace to the whole continent. The mission, I think this might be in terms of Native American issues, the mission, the mission of Senator [James Rood] Doolittle, the Doolittle mission to the West. That kind of blew my mind because that was the idea was to sort of take this what's going on in the West and go to the West and try to settle a peace. Now, the immediate trigger for that is to the depredations at Sand Creek and to seek information gathering of what really happened there, but what else is going on with native relations. But they seized the opportunity to see if they can make new treaties, establish new peace. And it blew my mind that this congressional delegation wasn't doing this from Washington. They went west. Doolittle himself goes to the Bosque, has his conversation with James Carlton, where he's neatly deceived by Carlton and thinking that all is well, right? And this kind of fact-finding mission that we're used to today. I don't know if that was a normal thing. I hadn't found it before, but that struck me as kind of interesting, that that episode.

Megan Kate Nelson 32:28
Oh yeah. I mean you and you see these commissions again under Grant, and they're the ones who are going to the South to discover what the KKK has been up to in this extension of the war into kind of white supremacist violence across the South too, right?

Michael Vorenberg 32:44
That's exactly right, this idea of like and maybe there's something to be said about that, that fact finding issue, and we have to go there ourselves, and the testimony we take will be made public. The Doolittle testimony, by the way, was so hot they didn't make it public right away. They sat on it purposely for a while. And then again, if you think about the KKK testimonies, how, how is that going to be made public? And again, we're still wrestling over these issues. Fact finding issues is one thing. And then how do you make it public? And the politics of releasing that information.

Megan Kate Nelson 33:15
Exactly and well, in the issue of treaties is so interesting in the West too, right, because part of the reason you're asking this question about when the war ended is that there was no treaty, right? And so, we're used to thinking about, oh, the Revolutionary War, it ends with the treaty. Oh, you know, like, I mean, we have these sort of moments in our history when that happens, but there is no treaty in the Civil War because to have one would be to acknowledge that the Confederacy was a separate nation. But then there are these treaties, many, many, many treaties with indigenous peoples over time, and almost all of them were totally broken. They didn't signal an end to the war either because it

just went on, right? So even treaties are not sacrosanct as a sort of moment of ending, which is something that you realize when you look at a place like the far west, and you consider it, you know, in the larger history of the Civil War, which, of course, was about the North and the South, but was also about the West, which, you know, I think that you do a great job here extending those boundaries and really kind of showing us in great detail how the war is moving in all directions.

Michael Vorenberg 34:26

If you look at the Constitution and you say, 'Oh, surely there must be something in the Constitution about ending wars.' The only thing there is the treaty making power, right? And that does relate to Native Americans if you make treaties. But on the point of Native Americans, what you just said is so crucial, which is, treaties are made all the time. And then, of course, what real meaning do they have? When I was in high school, I had to memorize all these treaties. And then I mentioned having in college, you know, Patricia Limerick, who was in the process of writing the book that became The Legacy of Conquest and then, if you think, oh, right, in an imperialist framework, in a framework of conquest, what is a treaty in such a framework, right? It's a stop gap. And thus, it's so telling that the United States declares the War Department effectively declares, in the early 1870s no more treaties, right? They and that moment is a moment that basically acknowledges publicly what you just said, yeah, they're not doing anything, and it isn't the way we operate anyway.

Megan Kate Nelson 35:32

Exactly. We're just going to turn to all out warfare and [James Henry] Carleton, actually, who you talk about in the book, who's such a brilliant commander of US troops, and such a horrible commander of Bosque Redondo and the reservation there and the Navajo people, he's one of the first ones to articulate that, like no more treaties, we're just going to start with war and we're going to force surrender and then we were going to force removal to a reservation where indigenous people will be surveilled and controlled and kept out of the way until they choose to be civilized. And so, you know, this is one of these ways in which the Civil War and the Indian Wars, I mean, you know, for those listeners out there who teach US history. I mean, we're used to that timeline, right? The Indian wars come after the end of the Civil War during the period of reconstruction. No, they were occurring for a very long time, and they were occurring during the Civil War, and then also after the Civil War, with many of the same troops. Definitely, many you point out, you know Phil [Philip] Sheridan, who has some great quotes in your book. Phil Sheridan and William Tecumseh Sherman are all over both conflicts, and Ulysses S. Grant also.

Michael Vorenberg 36:50

And Carlton, I mean, you deal with this in your book on The Three-Cornered War, but Carlton makes for such a perfect example of this, because he when he leaves California into the south, into the desert, if you will, of the Southwest. This is an operation against the Confederacy. There is reportedly a Confederate army that he's going, and

he gets to the place where he's going, and the army has left. So now he has an army, a US Army, and no enemy among the Confederacy. What does he do? And that's when he takes on the project, right? That becomes the Bosque Redondo and so these things are not merely overlapping temporally, and not just overlapping in terms of, like the same actors, like they are absolutely linked up and the other thing that you said why this is so important to see these two things together? I think people get hung up on the issues is this one war or two? That's a semantic issue. They're absolutely linked, whether it's one war or two, interesting enough question. The more interesting issue is like, how are they linked? And you just mentioned Carlton saying, 'No, we're going to fight this by force. We're going to force the surrender.' Okay, now you look to policy makers on the east in terms of reconstruction. What is the policy that controls and this is the title of the second part of my book, which is The Grasp of War. And that is a speech given by Richard Henry Dana, and it's a very carefully crafted speech in which he says exactly the way you said it. You know, no agreements, no whatevers [sic]. We will force the enemy to concede defeat, and we won't stop until they are doing what is demanded of them, right? And so that's Dana's line for the South. And then if we look to the West, you find someone like Carlton or someone like general [John] Pope in the plains saying things like, 'You know, we're supposed to be looking to settle a peace, but maybe war is the normal condition of things,' he says. And I'm like, well, he's saying that sort of the same time as Dana. I'll take this time to mention Dana, because where are Richard Henry Dana's papers? Oh, dear, they're in the Massachusetts Historical Society. And wasn't that useful to me when I was a long-term fellow. So eventually we were going to get there, and maybe this isn't the time, but I'll just throw out the fact that Dana's papers are very rich. They are at the mass historical papers and his correspondence with Charles Francis Adams, this is the elder Adams, not the younger Adams, who ends up one of the officers of a famous black regiment. But anyway, the Adams papers are there too, so that for me to be able to look at both sides of the correspondence in one place, the Mass Historical Society was really great. And that's just one example of archives at the Mass Historical Society. I'll throw that out since I mentioned Dana.

Megan Kate Nelson 40:01

That was the perfect transition because we were going to go there anyway. I mean, that is amazing. You rarely get to see both sides of the epistolary exchange, yes, and the MHS has, I think most people don't realize that, you know, the MHS has abundant Civil War records, and you know, many of them are from northerners, but they have a lot of southern materials too, and they have a lot of materials, really, from everywhere. So, you mentioned the Dana papers. So, what other MHS sources did you look at for the book?

Michael Vorenberg 40:35

Spend a little bit more time on the Dana papers, because Dana had a good-sized ego, and you kind of hope for that with somebody, because then they tend to hoard all their papers. Dana kept incredible collections of scrapbooks of every little and large speech he ever gave, but more importantly, every reaction, every reaction in the press to any speech he gave. So, scrapbook after scrapbook where I can say, okay, because, you know, somebody gives a speech

and you have no idea how it's received, maybe someone writes something in reaction to it. Say, great, Dana had done the work for me. Dana had collected all these cuttings from newspapers around, and there were scrapbooks in reaction to his various speeches, including his very famous Grasp of War speech. So that is really helpful. And again, not something digitized. I don't even know if it would be possible to digitize that would be so much work. So, you really have to go to the archive to find it. Other sources, the Mass Historical very kindly, I'm not sure exactly how this was done, but there was a project to put on microfilm every Civil War diary and small collection at the Historical Society. And so, these occupy many reels of microfilm, and it's extremely well indexed and described. So, I spent time looking at microfilm at the Mass Historical Society. I know that probably doesn't sound like everyone's idea of a great time. It's really nice when you know that there's going to be a variety of sources, men, women's diaries or men's soldiers paper like Samuel Quincy. Samuel Quincy is Massachusetts family. He ends up, kind of being the informal mayor of occupied New Orleans, and his mother is writing to him, and he's writing to his mother, and his mother's writing to him, saying, 'Hey, it's great doing all this stuff, but when are you coming home?' When are you coming home is a classic refrain for an end of war letter, right? You know, you can see these, many of these wives or mothers or children saying there are these newspaper reports that the war is over, and yet you don't seem to be coming home. Could you tell me you know what you're doing that explains why you're not coming home? So, there's a couple letters like that in the Samuel Quincy collection, very small collection, but very rich collection, and they're all nicely collected in one microfilm. Last collection just there's so many to talk about. There's diaries. Sarah Brown is a diarist that had been very useful to Martha Hodes when she was a Long-Term Fellow at the Masters Historical Society, working on her book on Mourning Lincoln and the diaries of women and that women's reactions New England woman to Lincoln's assassination. I went through some of the same diaries. Again, extremely rich. The person who has that wonderful name George Frisbie Hoar H-O-A-R, right? So that's a classic Massachusetts person, Massachusetts name. He was involved in what we call the Alabama claims settlements, which also involve the claims around the Shenandoah ship that I mentioned. The issue, there is a multinational tribunal to figure out who, if anyone, is owed money for the loss of Union ships, not necessarily warships, actually merchant ships because of Confederate ships that had been funded or built by or sold to the Confederacy by English, and the English end up paying out something like $15 million in the Alabama claims. But the George Frisbie Hoar papers have all these negotiations, the behind the scenes negotiations there where there are letters saying things like, 'Wait a second, you're saying that Shenandoah did this and this, but that couldn't be possible, because that's in the summer of 1865 and of course, the war was over.' And then they have to go back into the books and say, 'Well, actually, you know, the war is not over.' so it's perfect for me, right? So that's another example of a great collection for me.

Megan Kate Nelson 44:35

Were there any kind of real surprises for you in the archive? Sort of these moments where you're like, oh my God, I didn't know this was here or sort of these. I mean, you know, you're already talking about claims reports and then also the amazingly rich Dana papers. But did you have any kind of unexpected finds?

Michael Vorenberg 44:53

I mean, everything is always unexpected. I, for example, never would have thought that Charles Francis Adams and Richard Henry Dana would be disagreeing about things, because I say, well, gee, these are two New England classic, you know, elite reformers. So, the surprise is Adams basically saying, 'Look, we really have to go easy.' Let them up easy is a Lincoln phrase, and it's all over the book, but that's essentially what Charles Francis Adams is saying. And that was a bit of surprise, because his son was in the war and had seen combat, and you're thinking, I'm thinking, well, really, you're not going to take a little bit more of a vengeful line. But no, he doesn't. That was a bit of a surprise. I'll mention that one the best surprise I ever found, the Mass Historical Society, came many years earlier, when I was a grad student and I was going through the papers of John Andrews, the Civil War governor of Massachusetts. There's a big collection at the mass archives that's across from the John F. Kennedy Library, which, of course, there's a collection of the Mass Historical and one of the things I'd worked on as a grad school is this issue of colonization of African Americans. That is a question of deportation, whether voluntary or forced of African Americans during the Civil War under Lincoln's program. And there's this colony in Île-à-Vache, Cow Island. Île-à-Vache is a small island off of Haiti. It fails after a year. The US Navy sends a ship. They pick up the African Americans there on the island, and they bring them back. I knew that part of the story, but I didn't know what happened to them after and I was going through the John Andrews papers in the Mass Historical Society, and there's a sort of a random letter to somebody, one of Andrews's clerks or such, saying, 'Hey, I'm a recruiting agent in Washington, DC. This ship just came in from this island, and they're all these black people aboard, and they're all these healthy black men. Well, actually, they're not too healthy. They're underfed, but we can feed them and then enlist them in the Massachusetts regiments and thus fill our quota.' And my mind was kind of blown because I said, 'Oh, that's what happens.' The ship lands at the very moment that regiments are filling their quotas with African Americans all over the place. And here's this ship. And what better kind of way to tell the story of transformation of African Americans from going to this 'Oh, they're going to be sent away from the country. No, they're going to be incorporated into the US Army in this way.' So that's another story. It's not in this book. It's something I worked on earlier, but it's a great Mass Historical find for me.

Megan Kate Nelson 47:30

I love that. I love all the serendipitous moment stories and all the stories that people have from their archival adventures. So, what advice would you have for scholars who are coming to MHS or coming to any archive, either like super practical advice or more kind of meta-advice about doing research in these special places?

Michael Vorenberg 47:54

The lives of historians can often be a kind of lonely enterprise. Obviously, writing can be a lonely enterprise. I think when we go off to the archives, when I first went off to the archives, I had this kind of notion of a treasure hunt where I'm doing it alone. And I kind of like that, this idea of, I'm going off on a treasure hunt, I'll find things, and it's all about my hunt. I think this was a mistake, or is a mistake, that the hunt is a collaborative experience, and I think that's the best advice I can give. It's collaborative from the planning to the execution. So, you it's really incumbent on folks to talk to others who have dwelt in the field and say, 'I'm working on this topic. I'm going to this place. I see from your footnotes or from your bibliography, you went there? Any advice for me because I want to go there,' and you learn these things where the person you've written to says, 'You know, I never got to see this collection, or I know that people say, go look at this collection. I got to tell you, it's probably not worth your time.' So, others who have been there before you. That's a treasure of knowledge, that is, you know, seek that treasure out, then you get there. Actually, before you get there, you write to the archivist at least a month, if not more, ahead of time, tell them you're coming. And not just to say I'm coming, but to say, here's what I'm working on give as much detail as you can. The people there want to help you. This is their happiest moments, I think, are when they get to find something or help someone find something, and that person says, 'Wow, I didn't know that existed.' I mean, it's really gratifying for them. It's gratifying for you. And so, if you can give them the heads up and then stay in communication about it. Finally, when you're there and you look around and you say, 'Oh, look, there are other people here. I wonder who they are. I'm not going to talk to them. They don't want to talk to me. I'm here on my own little search.' Big mistake. This is the opportunity to meet other people. Maybe they're not working on anything related to you, but even then, they're probably working on something very interesting. But what if? What if they are related? What if, just talking to them, they say, 'You know, here's something I heard about,' and they turn you on to something in the archive. It's a community that you're dealing with. It's you're not alone there, and you shouldn't see yourselves as being alone. The archive is in itself a community of both the past, where you're talking with the past through the documents, but a community of the present, of scholars who are there at the moment and archivists who are there at the moment. And it's a real missed opportunity not to communicate with those people as much as you can.

Megan Kate Nelson 50:42

I love that. I think we'll end there because I that is a beautiful way to end advocating for the community of scholars, the intellectual endeavor that we all share together in the archive. So, thank you so much for being with us here on the podcast Mike Vorenberg.

Michael Vorenberg 51:01

Thank you, Megan, and very good to see and hear you from across the nation, as it were. And thank you for taking the time and for asking good questions and sharing our mutual fondness for Civil War era history let us say, if not Civil War history, per se.

Megan Kate Nelson 51:19

Oh, absolutely. Well, thank you for sharing the book. It's really, really great. I highly recommend it to all the listeners out there. It may not definitively answer your questions, all your questions about the end of the Civil War, but so many interesting and compelling stories in this book.

Megan Kate Nelson 51:41

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