

The Lost Gettysburg Address

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Sample Interview with David T. Dixon, author of The Lost Gettysburg Address.

David Dixon talks about the discovery of a lost piece of Gettysburg Civil War history, a forgotten hero, and the dangers faced by Southerners who remained loyal to the Union.

Q: Welcome, David, and thanks for taking the time to talk with us today. After four years of 150th anniversary commemorations, are you concerned that the public may be tired of Civil War stories?

DD: Certain moments in our history are so important and the stories so compelling that they generate seemingly endless interest. World War II and the Civil War top that list. Lincoln himself has had more books written about him than anyone except Jesus Christ. There are so many fanatical followers of popular events and figures. They constantly thirst for new information and perspectives.

Q: How did you happen to uncover an untold story about Gettysburg, of all places? It seems that the battle and Lincoln's address has been studied so much that most people would be surprised to find news there.

DD: Like the discovery of the lost manuscript itself, I came across Charles Anderson quite by accident. He had been in my idea file due to his progressive views on racial equality and his denial of the generally accepted notion (in his day) of white Anglo-Saxon supremacy. I planned to write a short article about him, but as I started to research him I found many interesting story lines. Once I saw a brief article on the discovery of the speech, I was hooked. Anderson is a character who deserves a scholarly biography.

Q: Why do you believe that no one has tackled Anderson's biography to this point?

DD: I think it is the same explanation that Laura Hillenbrand might give for bringing Louie Zamperini to the attention of today's readers in *Unbroken*, or why we had never heard of Henrietta Lacks until Rebecca Skloot stumbled upon her amazing story. Technology is making it easier to do the advance research needed to revive some of these long-lost characters. I also think there is a growing audience of people who love quality history but want to learn about someone other than Washington, Jefferson or Robert E. Lee.

Q: Is that why you started your website “B-List History”?

DD: Exactly. Family history enthusiasts have often been ridiculed by some in the academy for becoming obsessed with vital records and making dubious claims about ancestral connection based on faulty research. But genealogists, and even historians like Henry Louis Gates, are using family history to uncover fascinating stories of everyday people in extraordinary times. Zamperini is a classic example of what I call a “B-list” historical figure that was given an “A-list” media platform. When you combine that with the tremendous research and writing talent of someone like Hillenbrand, you can tell an important story that I think most of us connect with perhaps a little more intimately than one would with a titan like Napoleon or Lincoln.

Q: Few people know that Edward Everett was really the keynote speaker at the Gettysburg cemetery dedication. Despite speaking for two hours and reportedly bringing his audience, including Lincoln, to tears, both Everett and his lengthy oration have been all but forgotten today. What makes you think people would be interested in a third speech, given by a figure even less well-known than Everett?

DD: That is a fair question. Lincoln’s words were so elegant and so powerful that, at least in the collective memory of most Americans today, his two minute masterpiece has overshadowed almost everything else that happened that day. I argue that it not so much what either Everett or Anderson said, but rather how and why they said it. Lincoln was able to rise above Everett’s rather long and sentimental eulogy and Anderson’s fiery, provocative call to action, with an inspirational vision that defined the meaning of the war. Without understanding the two speeches that bookended Lincoln’s remarks, one cannot fully understand Lincoln’s address. The three speeches operated as an ensemble and had decidedly political messaging that coalesced as the event progressed. The day culminated with Anderson’s rallying cry to finish the job at hand by winning the war.

Q: What makes you the right person to write this book?

DD: If the book was about Everett, or entirely focused on Gettysburg, or Lincoln’s address, then there are clearly a number of other authors more qualified to tackle those subjects. Martin Johnson and Garry Wills each wrote award-winning books on Lincoln’s address, for example. My job was different. Anderson was an unusual character, particularly in his racial viewpoint. The fact that he was a Texas slave owner who came out so forcefully against secession also set him apart from his peers. My thesis and virtually all of my published work has involved Union men in the Civil War South and 19th century American black history. On both accounts, Anderson’s story really fits my sweet spot. I feel honored to have the opportunity to tell his whole life story, in which the Gettysburg speech is only one of more than a half dozen incredible events.

Q: What is it about Anderson’s story that is relevant today?

DD: I think there are several important connections that resonate with current events. For example, the recent controversy over the display of the Confederate battle flag on government property compels us to come to terms with the reality of a war that was fought by the South to preserve slavery, and by the North to preserve the Union. Anderson understood this as he was on intimate terms with many of the key leaders on both sides of the conflict. He chose the Union over virtually everything, and saw secession as simply rebellion and treason incited by a small group of political elites. It does not disrespect any descendant of typical Confederate soldiers to admit that, despite personal motives to protect neighbors and families, the rebels were fighting a war to perpetuate a morally abhorrent institution. The romantic myth of the “Lost Cause” has only recently been fully understood as the wrong cause.

Q: Why did you decide to self-publish this book?

DD: The decision to publish independently was the most difficult choice in the entire process. History and biography are common genres for self-published works. I was torn between a larger potential audience with a trade press and the scholarly discipline of a university press. Having published previously in peer-reviewed academic journals, and knowing that many are struggling with resource constraints, I initially approached trade agents, with no bites. Lincoln is a sure thing, but Anderson may be too much of a risk for most established trade presses. I hired professional editors and designers and am very pleased with the results, but the challenges of coordinating the entire production and doing the marketing are immense. If the book does well in hard cover, I may license the paperback rights.

Q: What was the biggest challenge you faced with this book?

DD: The biggest challenge in any work of non-fiction is keeping the pacing lively and holding the reader’s interest. I believe I accomplished this by being selective in the scenes I focused on in the run up to the Texas chapters, where the story really hits its stride. For me the key was just enough background to set the context. Too much exposition or analysis can cause the narrative and I strived to avoid that and keep the story moving.

Q: What part of the writing process do you enjoy the most?

DD: Like many historians, I love the research. It is often an arduous treasure hunt. From that perspective, Anderson was a dream subject. Personal letters, diaries, speech manuscripts, photographs all exist in abundance. I resisted the temptation to throw in every small incident or minor speech to keep the focus on the key events in his life. I am learning to love the writing and even the dozens of rewrites. The book production process, however, is still my least favorite activity.

Q: Are there current writers that inspire you?

DD: I have already mentioned Laura Hillenbrand. Her prose and pacing is remarkable. I find myself drawn to ex-journalists like Erik Larson and Tony Horwitz, who are committed to meticulous research, but also know how to tell a great story. For the Civil War, David Blight and Eric Foner are hard to beat for their insight and scholarship.

Q: How did you become interested in writing history?

DD: That is an easy one. When I was about 12 years old, my father gave me a book of historical fiction, *Northwest Passage*, by Kenneth Roberts. I was hooked right away and had read all of his books before I graduated from high school. Roberts was not only a great storyteller, but really ahead of his times. He wrote one book, *Oliver Wiswell*, from the perspective of a British loyalist during the American Revolution. This was unheard of in the 1940s.

Q: Are you a full time writer, or do you have another occupation?

DD: I am in transition from thirty-four years in marketing to a full time writing career next year. I have been publishing regularly for the past eight years, but *The Lost Gettysburg Address* is my first book.

Q: What is your next project?

DD: I am really focused on building my platform as a full-time author at the moment, rather than burrowing in the archives at the start of my next project. It will likely be a historical biography of another “b-list” character and leverage my expertise in Southern Civil War Union men and 19th century black Americans. As my career develops, however, I will follow a great story when I find it, as long as there is enough primary source material available to tell it with a measure of confidence.