

James McPherson



James McPherson (Ron Cogswell, Fair Use)

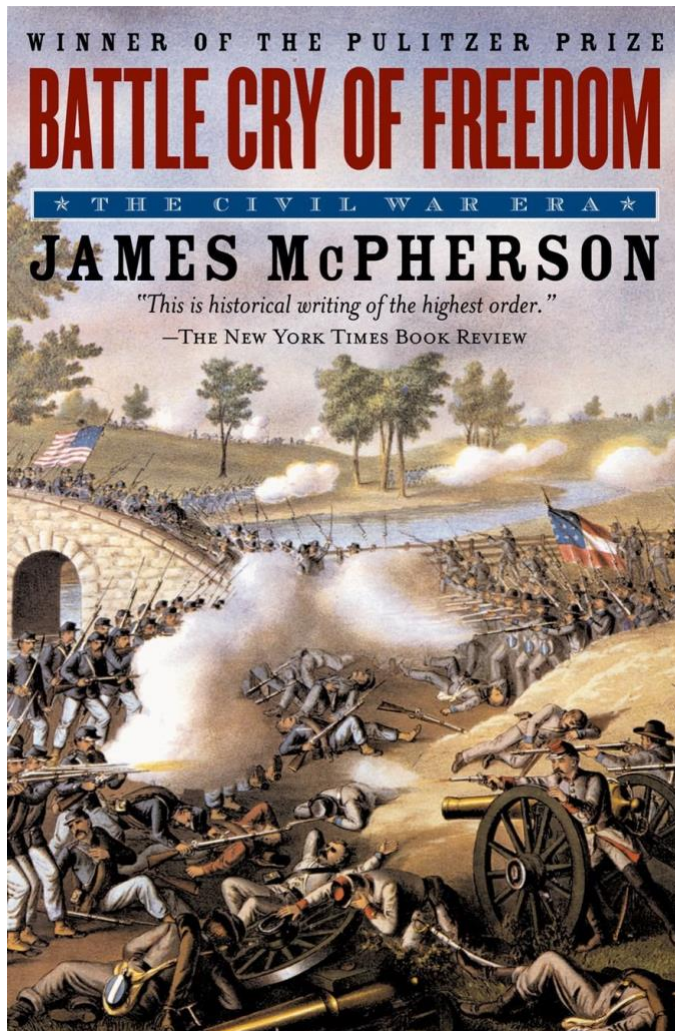
When one mentions modern day historians, one name that often gets mentioned is James McPherson. He is the Professor of American History, Emeritus at Princeton University, and an active member within the historical community. McPherson earned his bachelor's at Gustavus Adolphus College and his Ph.D. at John Hopkins University. His specialties include the fields of African American, Military, and Slavery studies. His author credits include *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War*, *Hallowed Ground: A Walk at Gettysburg*, *Crossroads of Freedom: Antietam*, and numerous other publications. His awards are numerous but his most prominent is the Pulitzer Prize. He was also named the 2000 Jefferson Lecturer in the Humanities.

Hidden History recently had the chance to interview James McPherson and discussed his views on some of the different aspects surrounding the American Civil War.

HH: *You are a Pulitzer Prize winning historian; and specifically enjoy research and writing on the American Civil War and the following Reconstruction. Do you have a specific moment in time that you realized you enjoyed that time period of American history? Was there a specific person involved in this moment?*

JM: I became interested in the role of the abolitionists in the Civil War and Reconstruction Era in graduate school, at Johns Hopkins from 1958 to 1962, because of their focus in the 1860s and after on "Freedom Now" and civil rights, political rights, and education for the freed slaves anticipated the issues of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s through which I was living at the time. I wanted to know more about the historical roots of these events. And as I learned more about the political context of the abolitionist activities in the 1860s and the military context of that political context, my focus broadened to include the political and military events of the era.

HH: *The Civil War was perhaps the most defining moment in U.S. History. In a presentation Hidden History recently did, most students did not realize that there were over 10,400 military actions in the Civil War and fighting happened across the United States and across the globe. The Civil War being fought on such a large*



scale, why do you think textbooks and in-class learning often only discusses the “highlight” moments and often leaves students imagining a much smaller war.

JM: I think that the limited focus on the highlights of the Civil War era in histories and teaching to students and the general public rather than the 10,000+ events you mention is accounted for by the inability of non-specialists to absorb much more than those highlights and the necessity to focus on what is most important in order to teach effectively.

HH: *The general public often has their own version of events in the Civil War, but why do you think most have a wrong idea of what the major issues the Civil War was being fought over? What would you consider to be the major issues of the Civil War?*

JM: The major issues of the war were A) creating a new nation called the Confederate States of America vs. preserving the United States as one nation, indivisible; and B) preserving slavery vs. abolishing slavery. Many white Southerners are uncomfortable today with the idea that their ancestors fought for the preservation of slavery, so they tend to deny or at least downplay B.

“James M. McPherson has helped millions of Americans better understand the meaning and legacy of the American Civil War. By establishing the highest standards for scholarship and public education about the Civil War and by providing leadership in the movement to protect the nation's battlefields, he has made an exceptional contribution to historical awareness in America.”

~Chairman William Ferris,
National Endowment for the Humanities



HH: *Your research for your books relies heavily on primary sources. In your research in the Civil War and Reconstruction what was perhaps the most interesting piece of primary material you came across (quotation, person, ideal, etc.)?*

JM: The most interesting research I have done in primary sources was the letters and diaries of soldiers for my book *FOR CAUSE AND COMRADES*.

HH: *If you could discuss any era in American history, what would that era be? And whom from that era would you want to talk with and why?*

JM: The most important era of history that I would like to discuss is the Civil War, with none other than Abraham Lincoln.

Unfortunately, Mr. McPherson was unable to answer the final three answers to his satisfaction, because of the too numerous available answers. We have left the questions below for your own consideration.

HH: *The era surrounding the American Civil War is one that has had many amazing stories and feats in battles. In your opinion what is one important battle that is often overlooked and perhaps a person as well?*

HH: *In your professional opinion, who is the most misunderstood person of the Civil War and why?*

HH: *As a leader in the history field and a well-known historian, what is your advice to other historians looking to succeed in the history field?*