

Comments on the Ohio Civil War 150 Interpretive Framework

Dan Reigle, 31 March 2010

(Note: These are my own opinions, as posted on the Ohio Civil War 150 website, but not necessarily the opinions of the Cincinnati CWRT collectively.)

After reading the document several times, my first comment is to thank and congratulate the committee on their production of an excellent overall statement. It takes a good deal of bravery to even attempt such a statement, so my comments here are intended in a positive, complimentary context.

For me, there are two areas that seem to have too little attention in the framework relative to their importance, and one area that seems to offer an opportunity for making further connections among and across the three themes.

(1) Not enough attention is devoted to understanding the Participants' Experience. By participants, I mean first of all those who were in military service or closely-related civilian service, and I include both men and women, whites of all geographic regions and African-Americans both slave and free. I also include those who were at home and who had direct involvement with the war and/or with its participants.

- We need to take advantage of the quantities of letters, diaries, articles, and memoirs that are still coming to light, and that provide insight into this experience. In terms of passing the personal dimensions of the Civil War era on to our descendants, there is nothing as powerful as the actual words of our ancestors about their experience.

- It is important to learn something of the military life of those who served, including camp life, life on the march, and combat experience. This tells us something about their qualities of character and endurance, their values and the challenges that they were able to overcome.

- We should not forget (or pass by lightly) the sheer magnitude of the death and disabilities resulting from the war, including not only those caused by combat but also those caused by disease and accident, and their effects on the families and communities. Drew Faust's *This Republic of Suffering* conveys the sense of the central importance of death in the experience of participants in the war and the lifelong impact on survivors, families, communities, regions, and the nation.

(2) Not enough attention is devoted to understanding the economic impact of the war. This is given some reference in the Transformation theme, but needs greater attention. I include in this the development of railroads, the river transportation system, manufacturing, business management and organization, banking and the financial system, and the government role in the economy.

An opportunity for further connection and integration of the three themes:

Although the subjects of slavery, racial attitudes, post-war reconciliation, and citizenship are mentioned in the Integrated Framework draft, it seems to me that aspects of this broad subject cut across the themes of Democracy, Transformations, and Memory/Commemorations in ways that might be used to tie them together. For example:

- Whites and African-Americans held a wide range of viewpoints on the best and likely outcome of the war relative to slavery, ranging from the bare minimum elimination of slavery but with no further individual rights and protections; to the middle range of opening the political, legal, and economic rights of citizenship to African-Americans; to the elimination of personal and social prejudice and bigotry. There was substantial confusion, distortion, and manipulation of these issues or choices, both during and after the war, continuing to some extent to the present day. For some people, abolition of slavery also meant the elimination of the political, legal, economic, and social restrictions on African-Americans that we would today lump under the heading of racism. For other people, abolition of slavery did not mean that free African-Americans were entitled to vote, to hold office, to be educated, or to be able to hold jobs in any location or organization based on their qualifications.

- What can the Civil War era teach us about the effect of these issues on Democracy, and about the efficacy of Democracy in producing such changes?

- Why did the transformation of racial attitudes after the Civil War or the effect of the changing roles of women during and after the war not result in voting rights for women or many African-Americans for 50 to 100 years after the war?

- How has our collective Memory/Commemoration of the war been influenced by the issues of abolition, citizenship, and racism in the 150 years since the war?

- What was the cost...in terms of Democracy, Transformation, and Memory/Commemoration... of the movement toward reconciliation among Northern and Southern whites simultaneously with retrenchment or regression on the citizenship commitments of the 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution?