

AMERICA ON THE EVE OF THE CIVIL WAR



Nationally recognized historians discuss the country's prospects in 1859, two years before the first shots were fired.

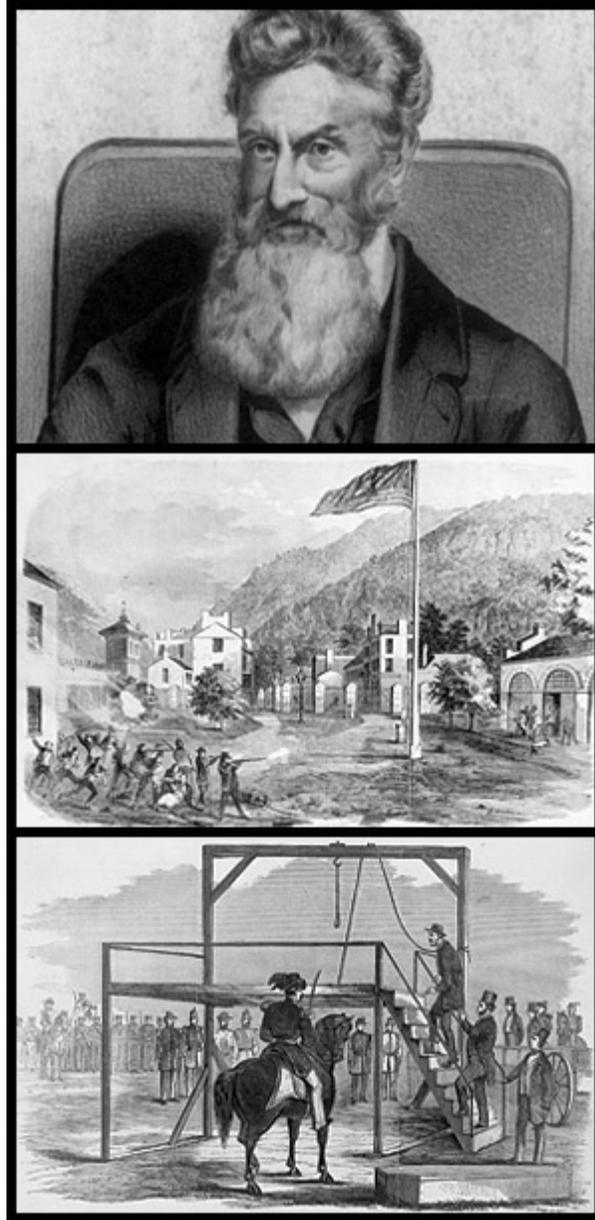
In late April, the University hosted “America on the Eve of the Civil War,” the first event sponsored by the Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission and the first major event in the nation to address the war on its 150th anniversary. The conference attracted nearly 2,000 participants from 26 states to the Robins Center.

President Edward Ayers, a historian of the American South, assembled four panels of nationally recognized Civil War historians to discuss the country's prospects in 1859, two years before the first shots were fired.

“Since we are refusing ourselves the familiar and distorting luxury of looking ahead, of sneaking a peek beyond Dec. 31, 1859, there will be none of the staples in the usual Civil War discussions today,” Ayers announced at the outset.

“No one secedes; in fact, the Confederacy does not exist,” Ayers said.

Robert E. Lee was still in the United States Army in 1859, and Tom Jackson was still a math professor at VMI. Sam Grant was a bill collector in St. Louis, and “Cump” Sherman was heading up a military school in Louisiana. Jefferson Davis was still a United States senator, and Abraham Lincoln was a successful lawyer and a failed senatorial candidate with good prospects.



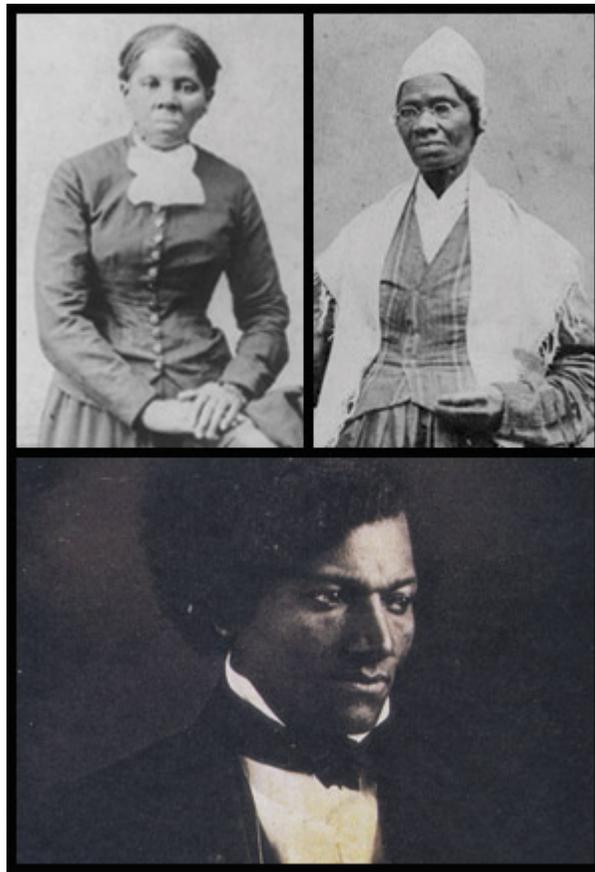
John Brown's raid on the federal armory at Harper's Ferry (middle) stunned the nation in 1859. His execution (bottom) and his letters from prison galvanized opposition to slavery in the North.

“Fredericksburg, Manassas, and Appomattox were just everyday places where people lived,” Ayers pointed out. “Richmond was a booming modern city, full of immigrants, free black people, and factories. Four million people across the South, hundreds of thousands of them in Virginia, struggled to build lives and hold families together in a system of slavery that had never been stronger or more firmly entrenched.”

The 16 historians who discussed those issues represented many different schools of thought on the Civil War, but they all “accepted the premise and then worked within that,” says Ayers, who moderated the unscripted discussions. “Nobody was putting forward their own arguments. Everybody was trying to help everybody else understand

what was going on. That's what was different—and exciting—for all the historians.” The conference was a unique opportunity to highlight “25 years of scholarship that has revolutionized our understanding of the field, but that the general public has no way of knowing,” Ayers pointed out. The conference integrated women's history, cultural history, African-American history, and economic history—“all the kinds of things that aren't in the Civil War section of the bookstore.”

Conference participants shared Ayers' enthusiasm. After two sessions, Kevin Levin, G'05, a teacher at St. Anne's-Belfield School in Charlottesville, posted this comment on his blog: “I am looking at eight of the top scholars engaging an arena full of people. What a treat. I can't think of a better way of opening Virginia's Civil War Sesquicentennial.” Though funded by the Commonwealth of Virginia, the conference was very much a University of Richmond production. More than 100 members of the campus community, from 37 different departments, served as volunteers. University Dining Services prepared and distributed 700 lunches to conference participants and volunteers. Historical organizations from throughout the Richmond region set up informational displays in the Robins Center, and others offered special promotions for conference attendees. Twelve members of the media, print and online, covered the conference. The UR Bookstore sold nearly \$10,000 in books, with the profits going to the general scholarship fund.



The conference highlighted abolitionist icons such as Frederick Douglass (bottom), Harriet Tubman (top left), and Sojourner Truth (top right).

The University webcast the event, and more than 22,000 Web site hits were generated on the day of the conference, says Carolyn Martin, C'86, the executive assistant to the president who organized the event. "People were logged on to the video archive 10 minutes after it was posted," she says. "It's unbelievable how engaging this has been. We started planning two years ago, hoping we would get 300 to 500 people in the concert hall for a morning. Then ... we decided that wasn't adequate, so we started building a studio in an athletic arena and invited the world."

Hosting the first event of Virginia's Civil War Sesquicentennial gives the University more than bragging rights. It exemplifies UR's strategic commitment to become more engaged with Virginia in general and Richmond in particular.

So many people came so far for the conference, Ayers told them at the beginning of the conversation, "to help us reckon with the hardest parts of American history to comprehend. You have come here to help us think through the meanings of slavery, of violence, of nation, and of history itself. You have come here because you know that if we do not lay the foundations for our understanding of the Civil War in the 1840s and 1850s, there is no understanding the 1860s and 1870s. And you know that if we do not understand the Civil War, we cannot understand the decades in the 150 years since, including our own. You have come here to show that Americans are ready, even hungry, to examine the Civil War on its 150th anniversary with fresh eyes."

The University is uniquely suited to providing a safe space where people can talk about difficult issues, Ayers says. One of his goals was to place the Civil War in a larger context, and to engage Virginia's and Richmond's heritage.

"I would like to think that the conference marked a step toward an open, constructive, and even exciting conversation about the pivotal event in our nation's history," he says.

Send comments about this story to krhodes@richmond.edu.