2015 Lincoln Forum Report

# Austin R. Justice – Student Scholarship Recipient

The opportunity to attend the 2015 Lincoln Forum Symposium in historic Gettysburg, PA in November – the month of my birth, no less – was one which is unequivocally defining for a young aspiring historian. As a student with a lifelong fascination with the social sciences & humanities, I can seldom imagine a more exciting way to spend my time than listening to the insights of our nation’s foremost Lincoln scholars while exploring the now-peaceful fields & hilltops of Gettysburg in my free time. There are few other paths to such an experience, and likely none so welcoming and academically & personally enthralling as the annual Lincoln Forum Symposium.

There are a multitude of things one can say about the Lincoln Forum experience. When recounting it, one surely cannot omit the incredible generosity and community of the people who compose this organization. At every turn during my hospitably free stay in Gettysburg as a scholarship recipient, I felt as though I had been welcomed into a community of friends – “The Lincoln Forum family” as I’ve heard it put. Amid lectures and tours, there was always room for questions, interaction, and a few jokes (not the least of which were playfully aimed at other scholars and consisted of cheese sandwich references). Several times I had other attendees stop me to congratulate & welcome me and ask me about my experience or where I’m from.

Make no mistake though, the Forum was also a platform for intellectual stimulation. The 2015 Symposium presented a schedule featuring highly reputable, engaging historians from across the nation. Discussion topics ranged from Lincoln’s 1865 visit to a beleaguered Richmond to the antebellum lives of Grant & Lee. As is often the case in Lincoln studies, these subjects lead not only to academic enrichment but also to personal growth. Keynote speaker & R.N. Current Award recipient William C. Davis’s talk *Grant and Lee: The Generals That Nobody Knows* helped me remove Grant from the context of the war in order to examine his life as a whole. What’s more, it also led me to better identify with Grant’s personality – particularly his keen interest in exploration, seeing the world beyond his small corner of it.

Elizabeth R. Varon’s *Legacies of Appomattox: Lee’s Surrender in History and Memory* was a lecture to which I sincerely looked forward. Having become acquainted with her *Disunion*, I anticipated an equally intriguing account at the Symposium from her. She didn’t disappoint. Varon’s lecture intensified my interest in Civil War memory, especially the lingering echoes of the Confederate Lost Cause. In fact, it prompted me to purchase her work *Appomattox: Victory, Defeat, and Freedom at the End of the Civil War.* Currently, I’m channeling this newfound interest into studying a variety of sources – primary and secondary – in order to develop a presentation provisionally entitled *Mystic Chords of Memory: Origins & Implications of the Confederate Lost Cause* for the Big Sandy Heritage Center in Pikeville, KY.

The 2015 Lincoln Forum was also an epicenter for the latest in Civil War Era scholarship. This is evident from its speakers, which included Martha Hodes whose seminal *Mourning Lincoln* received the prestigious 2016 Lincoln Prize, to its presentations and events. One example of this which I’ve found especially noteworthy was the panel discussion *‘A King’s Cure’ in Film and Fact* which strove to examine Lincoln and the 13th Amendment as presented in Spielberg’s *Lincoln.* True, this movie (which I have seen multiple times, as many other attendees have) was released in 2012; but the innovation lay not necessarily in the specific content, but in the methodology. We live in an unprecedented digital age which remains relatively new in the human story. The bridge which historians attempt to build traversing the river of time must inevitably set its foundation upon both the bedrock of history & the shifting sands of popular memory. Today, that memory is largely molded and recast online, in the media, and in the theaters.

Ever resourceful, the Forum digs into these new age sources and analyzes them while many seem to ignore them. They realize that the future of the humanities must be intertwined with technology. Films have been influencing popular memory of the war for the past century – one need only look at *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) or *Gone with the Wind* (1940). As technology advances, these films and new ones like *Lincoln* are made available to an even wider audience, and are but a factor in the equation of historical memory alongside their counterparts of videos, TV shows, sketches, webcasts, and much more. The Forum’s discussion on *Lincoln* demonstrates that the Lincoln Forum is a standard-bearer guiding the field into the 21st century. To me, it parallels with *Muster*: a website published by UNC Press’s *Journal of the Civil War Era* which offers reflections on popular culture as it relates to the 19th century.

This is an encouraging fact about the Forum, as it lends hope to other digital humanities projects. For myself, as chairperson for the River Cities Research Commission – the first ever academic arm of the international youth organization DeMolay, - it’s personally inspiring. The RCRC aspires to provide free, original academic content & educational programming, much of which is web-based. Indeed, my time at the Lincoln Forum has affected me in a variety of other ways including cementing my decision to apply to Brown University after hearing Michael Vorenberg and interacting with Brown’s former librarian Thomas Horrocks.

Moving on, there’s also much to be said for what the Forum offers beyond its own schedule. As a scholarship recipient, the Forum’s kind generosity to an eager student provided me with the chance to roam the Gettysburg battlefield – a dream which I didn’t expect to achieve anytime soon prior to receiving this award. Standing atop Little Round Top in the crisp November air proved a breathtaking sight. Somewhat ironically, one feels a true, quiet peacefulness about the battlefield. I suspect that other Forum attendees have oft taken advantage of this as well.

Returning to the Symposium itself, I appreciated the incorporation of music into the programming (specifically the stellar performance by the US Army Chorus at the end). Often described as the, “songiest war that ever was”, the music produced by the American Civil War is both an emotional bridge to the past and an insight into social sentiments, political movements, and changing ideas. Some, like *The Vacant Chair*, convey chords of sheer sorrow and mourning which are still tender elements of the human experience. Others, like *Marching through Georgia*, hint at society’s progress – in this case, acceptance of emancipation as seen in the line, “Hurrah, hurrah, we bring the jubilee! Hurrah, hurrah, the flag that makes you free!” Whichever you’re listening to, you’ll consistently find that these songs act as ambassadors to the present. So packed are they with feeling that they retain the capacity to make us laugh, cry, and shout like we are right there with prior generations. Early American music is quite a passion of mine – in fact, the RCRC is currently working on a long-term series called *Writ in Burnished Rows of Steel: A Musical History of the American Civil War Era.*

Ultimately, the 2015 Lincoln Forum was an inexplicably memorable chapter in my life. Its scholarly discourse combined with its open, friendly nature forge an atmosphere of deep fascination and great fun. It even provided a great deal of comfort to me in a time of personal emotional crisis, the details of which are irrelevant here. I urge any student with a genuine passion for the past to get involved with the Forum. As a matter of fact, I’ve provided links to its scholarship application on the James Klotter Chapter (Rho Kappa National Social Studies Honor Society) website for generations of students to use.

In his immortal 1863 address, Lincoln – typically characterized by “long-headedness” – made an enormous predictive error by saying, “The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.” Rather, it is because the world does much note and long remember what he said there that it can never forget what they did there. The Lincoln Forum is unquestionably the group that ensures the world remembers what he said there.