

## Virginia Geography Module Civil War

I'm Ed Ayers. I'm a historian here at the University of Virginia. As it turns out, I'm also Dean of Arts and Sciences, so this is a lot of fun to come get a chance to talk about my first love.

### *Understanding the Landscape, Understanding the Civil War*

You know, I think the Civil War is often really confusing to kids. It's just this long list of battles and dates and things, and I think if you start with the landscape and work up, you begin to understand the Civil War in a different way.

The first thing that you'd understand is that the Union Army has this great success early on by mastering the rivers – coming down the Ohio, then down the Tennessee, and the Cumberland, and taking huge parts of Tennessee and Kentucky right off the bat because they were able to use water.

The other places, and if you think about where most of the battles are in Virginia, they're at railroad junctions. So in the Civil War, you think about why is there a battle in this place? It's usually just because it's where two railroads crossed. Or where it was a place that people could supply their armies because of all that.

So, if you're trying to understand why they're fighting all around Richmond, or what's the point of Fredericksburg, or why does Appomattox happen where it does, why in the world are they there, it's all about transportation and about geography. So if you think about even, on a small scale, the story of Gettysburg, the story there in many ways was, which army was going to control the relatively small amount of high ground? Because if you're on high ground, you're able to command all of the landscape around you. If people have to fight uphill to get to you, and also if you have artillery that can shoot down hills at people, it's crucial.

So, I think that a lot of times, in the Civil War, if we would begin with the land, and the river, and the railroads, a lot of it would make sense in a way that it simply doesn't – not to mention the ocean. So, in many ways the Civil War was a battle, was a series of battles, over control of the landscape. You have a control over the landscape – the crucial rivers, the crucial railroads, the crucial passes in the mountains, you control the war itself.

### *Focus on Virginia*

Anyone who visits Virginia would have to be struck by the number of signs about Civil War battles that were over here, and there's in fact a large number of battles here, and in many ways Virginia was the whole focus of a large part of the war. Now, it's ironic because it's a vast area – the size of Continental Europe – the South, that had to be conquered. But they thought at the time – two things – one if they could take the capitol of the Confederacy, that that would be a way to signal that the Confederacy had been defeated and to prevent the English and the French from siding with that nation. It's also because, and interesting, that the capitol of the United States and the capitol of the

Confederacy are so close to each other, that it's partly because they're trying to take the capitol at Richmond, but they're trying to protect their own capitol of Washington D.C.

### *The James River*

When you come and visit at the National Civil War Center at Tredegar, just walk right out the front door and you'll see a major reason that the city of Richmond is there, and a major reason that it was such an important target throughout the Civil War: the James River. The James River – the first European settlement in North America, and it takes you right to the ocean. So ships could come all they way up to Richmond because of the falls there. People from the Shenandoah Valley came down smaller rivers to Richmond on smaller boats, and Richmond was the place where the two would join. So if you're there with your class, walk out into the parking lot and see the falls there and all the rapids. That's why the city is there, and that's why it's the capitol of the Confederacy, is it's a way, and also why it was a target for the Union Army, is that it was a way to connect to the outside world and also to connect to the Virginia interior.

### *The Valley is Targeted*

The Shenandoah Valley that we're talking about, and that the Valley of the Shadow project lets you explore carefully – it's absolutely crucial to the entire confederacy because it is the way to supply food. And so the Confederacy devoted enormous resources to protect the Valley. And they did all the way up through 1864 when the Union Army marched systematically, as I said, up the Valley, which is to the South. We say up the Valley because they're going against the river, right? And burn the granaries and barns and steal the livestock because it is supplying so much of the Confederate Army. So, one reason that I focused on the Shenandoah Valley for my story to try to encapsulate the entire story of the American Civil War into a human scale is because it was such a valuable resource for the Confederacy, and therefore such an important target for both the Confederates and the Union Army.

### *An Easy Path North and South*

Now if you look at this map of the movements of various military units across the landscape on the Valley of the Shadow you can see how much of the military effort went into moving up and down the Valley and in many ways trying to constantly make the United States Army feel that Washington was under direct attack. Today, if you drive North in the Shenandoah Valley and take a right on I-66 it takes you right into Washington D.C. Well, that's why Manassas was there, why there's two battles there. It was a point where the railroads were close to Washington D.C. So you go there today and a big mall is there for the same reason that it was so important at the time. And the same reason that there's an interstate there is the same reason that it was important militarily at the time – is that the geography said, this is the easiest way to go to the North.