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Liberty on the Border: A Civil War Exhibit
Cincinnati Museum Center,
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This outstanding exhibit enlightens, entertains, and challenges visitors to contemplate liberty and what it meant before and during the American Civil War in the western border states of Ohio and Kentucky. From the moment visitors enter, they are surrounded by the sights and sounds of history brought to life. Music contemporary to the time plays in the background and applies appropriately to the subject under consideration. In the soldiers' camp, for example, one hears the singing of songs such as “Tenting on the Old Camp Ground.” This reviewer visited the exhibit on a Tuesday afternoon, and was impressed with the reaction of the other visitors who obviously enjoyed experiencing history “up-close.” Some were standing before artist Rudolf Tschudi’s large painting of Appomattox when a man told his son, “Your grandmother, mother, and I stood in that room in Virginia. This is very historic.”

One considers the dilemma of slavery from several perspectives. For example, an interactive display asks what the viewer would do if he or she were a slave in Union-occupied Kentucky in 1862? Two choices emerge: If viewers decide to run away to a Union army camp in search of freedom and lift the panel for this choice, they learn that the chances are great that their master will find them, bring them back, and punish them. If they decide to stay where they are, they learn that they will continue in slavery indefinitely. Another display asks what would one do if she or he were a white resident in Ohio and a fugitive slave family appeared at their door asking the members of the household to participate in the Underground Railroad and protect them? If viewers decide to help, they learn that they might be arrested for violating federal law, and if they decide not to assist the fugitives, they will have to live with their consciences.

The exhibit is in three sections, and the first, “Liberty Denied,” challenges visitors to consider the conflicting definitions of liberty in the antebellum period. Immediately slavery confronts them—an enlarged photograph shows slaves picking cotton under the watchful eye of a mounted white overseer. An interactive console of slave songs features a spiritual, ring-shout, parlor song, and boatman’s dance, and as viewers move on, the melancholy music hangs in the background. Graphic panels, photos, documents, and artifacts show how Henry Clay walked “the tightrope of compromise” and advocated gradual emancipation and colonization. A minority of Kentuck-
ians, such as John G. Fee, demanded immediate emancipation and Lincoln’s father, Thomas, voted with his feet by moving out of Kentucky.

Although Ohio was free of slavery, white residents denied African Americans liberty by law, social pressure, and mocking entertainment. The Black Laws of Ohio discriminated racially with restrictions such as the requirement that a black family had to prove they were free before settling in the state. Two handbills invited people to minstrel shows in which white performers in black-face makeup degraded black Americans with jokes, songs, and dances that wreaked “enormous social damage that lasted for generations.” On the other hand, Levi Coffin and others conducted for the Underground Railroad, and Cincinnati became a hotbed of abolitionism that gave the nation Harriet Beecher Stowe. There is a handbill advertising the play based on Uncle Tom’s Cabin, a display of Stowe’s writing set that she may have used in writing the novel, and a copy of the first edition of the book.

The infamous abolitionist John Brown resorted to violence in the 1850s, and the exhibit includes, for the first time in this region, John Brown, Jr.’s collection of weapons on loan from the Ohio Historical Society. Brown’s Sharps carbine, Colt Navy Revolver with shoulder stock, and, standing against the wall, Brown’s pike, offer visitors the chilling realization that in the 1859 Harper’s Ferry, Virginia, revolt, John Brown, Sr., planned to arm slaves throughout the South with this “crude but effective close-quarter weapon.” The graphic panel, “The Case of Margaret Garner,” brings into sharp focus the disagreement of the Ohio Valley public on the slave issue. Color art from the period illustrates how Garner, a fugitive slave from northern Kentucky, when surrounded by slavecatchers in Cincinnati, murdered her two-year-old daughter rather than have the child returned to slavery. Proslavery people argued that the crime simply illustrated the brutality and inferiority of black people. Antislavery spokespersons said that a mother killing her child rather than have her live in slavery illustrated how horrible slavery really was.

Cincinnati and northern Kentucky had two great military alarms during the war and the exhibit’s second part, “Liberty’s Trial,” includes both. First, residents went into a panic when the Confederate army invaded Kentucky in 1862 and General Henry Heth marched on Fort Mitchell with six thousand veteran troops. Union General Lew Wallace declared martial law, closed businesses, ordered all males into service, erected a pontoon bridge to Covington, and strengthened the defenses in northern Kentucky from Fort Thomas to Ludlow. Cincinnati police, acting as provost marshals, arrested about six hundred black men on the city’s streets and at work in its shops and hotels. They marched them by bayonet point to a hog pen on Plum Street and forced them over the river to work on the fortifications without even allowing them to say goodbye to their families or to grab a hat and coat.

This might have gone down as one more example of liberty denied, but someone told Wallace about the unauthorized impressments and the federal com-
mander ordered Cincinnati Judge William Dickson to take charge and organize the men along military lines. Dickson brought the men back home, gave them some time with their families, and organized them into the “Black Brigade.” With dignity, they returned to the labor and contributed meaningfully to the successful Union defense. Heth’s division withdrew without attacking and the Black Brigade was dismissed, having contributed to one of the best kind of Union victories, that with little bloodshed. Purportedly, the Black Brigade was one of the first organized uses of African Americans for military purposes in the war, and the men were so proud that they asked Peter Clark to write a book about them. The exhibit includes a copy of Clark’s The Black Brigade of Cincinnati and the engraved sword that the men gave with gratitude to Dickson.

The region’s second crisis arrived with Confederate John Hunt Morgan’s crossing of the Ohio River and his subsequent raid through Indiana and Ohio. Businesses closed and local authorities declared martial law in Louisville, Indianapolis, Cincinnati, Covington, and Newport. The Union Navy closed traffic on the Ohio River and ordered the destruction of all flatboats, skiffs, and scows to prevent Morgan’s escape. Federal troops captured most of Morgan’s men at Buffington Island, following Ohio’s only Civil War battle. Morgan himself was captured in northern Ohio and imprisoned in the Ohio State Penitentiary in Columbus. The exhibit includes, also on display for the first time in this region, on loan from the Museum of the Confederacy, Morgan’s saddle, frockcoat, kepi, officer’s belt, ivory-handled Colt revolvers, and the writing desk he used in prison. From The Filson Historical Society, the exhibit displays the autograph book of one of Morgan’s officers. On the back wall of the display hangs the guidon of the federal 9th Kentucky Cavalry and, among the battle honors, it proudly proclaims, “defeated MORGAN at Buffington...Captured HIM July 26th, 1863.”

Morgan was indeed a famous Kentucky Confederate hero, and on the Union side, the exhibit features Cincinnati’s most prominent military hero, General William Haines Lytle. Like Morgan, Lytle’s men greatly admired their commander, and like Morgan (who was from Lexington) he was killed in the war and honored by his hometown with the largest funeral up to that time. Born in Cincinnati, Lytle was a lawyer and Democratic state representative before the war. He wrote poetry, and schoolboys throughout the nation memorized his poem, “Antony and Cleopatra.” Lytle organized the 10th Ohio Volunteer Infantry and the exhibit displays the first time the regiment’s flag, made by women in Cincinnati. When it was presented to Lytle, he said, “Sir, tell the ladies that there is not a man in these ranks who will not shed his heart’s blood like water beneath these colors.”

The most striking artifact in the exhibit is the gold, jeweled Maltese Cross that the men of the 10th Ohio gave to Lytle. Epitomizing courage, he was wounded in the leg at Carnifex Ferry, Virginia, and in the head at Perryville, Kentucky. At Chickamauga, Georgia, on the Union right, his brigade came under attack by advancing enemy forces in overwhelming numbers. He declared, “All right, men, we can die but once. This is the time and place. Let us charge.” His men repulsed the Confederates momentarily but Lytle, mortally wounded, ordered a retreat. The exhibit includes his frockcoat, shako hat, boots, sword, and other personal items.

Part III, titled “Liberty’s Legacy,” is unique in that it is the first Civil War exhibit to incorporate the theme of David W. Blight’s path-breaking 2001 book, Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory. Blight states that a national memory of the war, one that reunited the once-divided sections around a mythology of shared white sacrifice and valor, was achieved only through white Americans’ collective erasure from that memory of African American participation in the war and the nation’s acceptance of southern-style racial segregation as a whole. Thus, in a sense, Americans’ sectional reconciliation could not have occurred had
not the entire nation “jumped Jim Crow.” In fact, the museum staff consulted with Blight in planning the exhibit and he visited it on May 8, 2003, when he was in Cincinnati to speak in the Seminar on the City lecture series. During the introduction to his talk, he recommended the exhibit as the most outstanding he had ever seen in its depiction of the politics of Civil War memory in postwar America. He stated that *Liberty on the Border* proves especially strong in its relating of local events to national history. “All history, like politics, is local,” Blight remarked in praise.

“The Blue & Gray,” a brief, poignant video, presents film clips of the great blue-gray reunion at Gettysburg, July 1-4, 1913, on the fiftieth anniversary of the battle. About 53,000 white veterans from both sides attended, and their average age was seventy-four. Newspapers hailed the event as the “Great Peace Jubilee,” and the climax was a reenactment of Pickett’s Charge, with the shaking of hands across the stone wall at the Bloody Angle. As with most blue-gray reunions, speakers ignored the fact that slavery caused the war, proclaimed that neither side was wrong, and swept aside the goal of equality for African Americans. No black veterans received invitations to the Gettysburg reunion and black editors were horrified and dismayed that participants gave no attention to the fact that Jim Crow segregation deprived African Americans of the promise of liberty. The narrator of the video points out that in 1913, white mobs across the country lynched fifty-one black individuals.

Indeed, “Liberty’s Legacy” forces visitors to confront the reality that racism continued after the war. The section includes a Ku Klux Klan robe and a bright orange minstrel show costume with a box of black face makeup. One of the features of this section is the video kiosk with segments from *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Gone With the Wind* (1939), *Roots* (1977), and *Glory* (1989). Very effective commentary calls attention to the stereotypes and racist attitudes in the first two movies and celebrates the more realistic portrayals in the last two, portrayals that show African Americans as intelligent, courageous, and strong.

If any criticism can be offered of this exhibit section’s sweeping and powerful assessment of national culture, it is that the local story gives way to a more national interpretation of the Civil War’s racial legacy. Its interpretation of national reunion does not account for the shift of regional politics and identity between South and North, revealed clearly by the Ohio River as border and by those who lived on either side of it. Kentuckians and Ohioans, despite their shared racist ideology, clearly did not consider themselves of the same ilk after the war. If anything, the Civil War shaped this region in terms of regional identity, politics, and experience beyond any that had existed previously, a phenomenon on which the exhibit fails to carry through. Despite this shortcoming, *Liberty on the Border* is history up-close and in-depth and, to take full advantage of it, one should allow at least three hours.

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Review Essay

The Zoar Community: A Review of an Ohio Historical Site

In the early nineteenth-century, many Americans believed confidently that they could create heaven on earth. Inspired by the democratic promise of the Revolution and the perfectionist faith of evangelical religion, reformers created a number of utopian communities that dotted the landscape of the United States. At Brook Farm in Massachusetts, Nathaniel Hawthorne and other Transcendentalist writers joined George Ripley in an experiment combining literary and manual labor. At Oneida in upstate New York, John Humphrey Noyes and his followers engaged in a radical communitarian experiment based on what was termed “complex marriages.” A good number of utopian communities were religious in nature. As early as 1732, German Dunkers led by Conrad Beissel established the Ephrata Cloister in Pennsylvania. Another German pietist, George Rapp, founded the Harmony Society in western Pennsylvania in 1804. Perhaps the best known among the many religious utopias in America were the Shakers, led by Mother Ann Lee who migrated to America in 1774. By the 1830s, the Shakers had founded close to twenty successful communities.

One of the most successful religious communitarian experiments in nineteenth-century America was Zoar Village in eastern Ohio. Skillfully preserved today in a charming pastoral setting in Tuscarawas County, Zoar Village stands as a vivid reminder of this important phase of freedom's ferment in American social history. Established by German religious refugees in 1817, the community at Zoar was based on the sharing of labor and wealth. The Zoarites, originally Protestant dissenters known as “Separatists,” originated in the Lutheran State Church of Germany. Similar to other German pietistic sects of the eighteenth century, these Separatists renounced worldly possessions, emphasized a direct relationship with God, and believed that the church should be simple and bereft of all ceremony. In Germany, the Separatists had been aggressive dissenters. They refused to send their children to Lutheran schools and their pacifist beliefs shielded them from military service. The German religious refugees who established Zoar were led by Joseph Michael Baumler (later changed
to Bimler), who was born in Germany in 1778. Driven by religious persecution and a famine that struck their communities in 1816, Bimler and his followers left Germany for a better life in America.

In October 1817, sympathetic Quakers in Pennsylvania aided the Zoarites by selling them land in the Tuscarawas River Valley in Ohio. Bimler named the new community Zoar, meaning “a sanctuary from evil” after the biblical city in which Lot sought refuge during the destruction of Sodom. On April 19, 1819, Bimler established the Society of Separatists of Zoar. Driven by economic necessity, the families at Zoar pooled their resources and established what was essentially a communistic society. The organization held all property and wealth, and each member of the Society agreed to follow the decisions of the Society’s three Trustees, who each served for a term of three years and who each could be re-elected indefinitely. The Trustees appointed supervisors for each industry in the community and worked with a standing arbitration committee of five to settle all disputes. In return for following the authority of the Trustees, members of the Society received food, clothing, and shelter. Zoar was officially incorporated by the Ohio state legislature in 1823.

Zoar succeeded in becoming an economically self-sustaining communitarian society, aided in part by its location on the Ohio-Erie Canal. Zoarites, in fact, helped to construct the canal by digging seven miles of the trench for which they were paid $21,000 by the state of Ohio. The residents of Zoar also profited from their location by selling food, clothing, and other goods to canal workers. Even without the canal, Zoar prospered. Local residents produced a subsistence for themselves and even created a surplus that they sold in surrounding towns. The settlement at Zoar included a sewing house, a tailor shop, print shop, pottery, butcher, tannery, and saw mill. Over the course of the nineteenth century, Zoar grew wealthy. By 1874, the Society owned about 7,000 acres of land and local residents were reputed to be worth more than one million dollars. But several factors led to the eventual demise of the Zoar community.

The death of Joseph Bimler in 1853 denied the Society the charismatic leadership that had sustained it during its first three decades. The Civil War challenged the community’s pacifist ideals, as several Zoarite men went off to fight for the Union. The building of railroads in the 1880s brought more of the outside world into an otherwise isolated community. And the rise of mass production in many industries made their small shops obsolete. Finally, in 1898, the Zoar Society voted to dissolve. Each member received land, a house, and possessions in the division of assets.

Zoar resembled other utopian communities in early nineteenth century America in two crucial ways. The first was an emphasis on labor. Historians now believe that a Market Revolution that be-
gan shortly after the War of 1812 transformed the American economy from a self-sufficient agrarian order to a commercial and industrial one. In this process, small independent artisans like those in Zoar witnessed an erosion of their skills and autonomy as they became entwined increasingly in a market economy. By the mid-nineteenth century, these artisans had become wage earners, providing a basis for the much vaunted “free labor” order in the North. Yet the transformation to capitalism was ambiguous, complex, and contested. Specifically, Americans in this period explored the meaning of free labor in a variety of ways that included such utopian communities as Robert Owen’s New Harmony settlement in Indiana. Zoar proved no different. Labor there became central to the communistic endeavors of that community. Practically everybody—including children—engaged in productive work. Teenage girls worked in the dairy to make cheese and butter, milking cows twice a day, and they carried heavy buckets of milk on their heads. Those members of the Society not already engaged in skilled labor assembled each morning at 5:30 a.m. to receive their work orders for the day. People usually lived where they worked. For example, it is believed that the young girls who worked in the dairy slept upstairs in that building. Like agrarian communities of the late eighteenth century, workers at Zoar practiced traditional skills and manufactured goods on a small scale. Zoarites grew their own flax and produced their own linen. They built wagons that became noted for their quality and traditional blue paint. Even a Zoar furnace was built to forge locally mined iron.

Zoar also allowed women a more expansive role than was customary in nineteenth century America, and, like other utopian communities often unintentionally elevated the status of women. For example, of the original signers at Zoar who created a “community of goods,” approximately 66% were women. Indeed, at times, women constituted roughly two-thirds of the membership of Zoar. Men and women possessed equal political rights, and women could hold office in the Society. Like the Shakers, the Zoarites first chose celibacy, although the Society permitted marriage after 1830. Marriages were contracted by mutual consent, and children were taken from homes at age three so that their mothers could work.

The Zoar Village of today closely approximates the appearance of the community in the nineteenth century. It remains neatly arranged along rectangular streets. Many of the original buildings, such as the dairy, the greenhouse, the bakery, the tin shop,
and the wagon shop, still stand and are open to visitors. The dominant building on the Village site is the Number One House, once the home of Joseph Bimler. Built in 1835, it is an impressive two-story home executed in the Georgian style. It has a deep and cool cellar used to store food for the entire community. Today, the house serves as a museum, explaining the origins, growth, and decline of the Zoarites and displaying examples of Zoar furniture and crafts. All the buildings at Zoar house are faithful reconstructions of life in the community during the nineteenth century. The garden, situated prominently at the center of the village, reflects the religious beliefs of the founders. It was planted in neat geometric patterns to symbolize the New Jerusalem described in chapter twenty-one of Revelation. Twelve paths lead toward a center of thirteen trees, representing direct routes to Christ.

Historic Zoar Village is a testimony to the dedication and skills of public historians at the Zoar Community Association, the Historic Zoar Garden Club, and the Ohio Historical Society. Visitors are offered two separate tours of the buildings that are led by informative guides in period costumes. Each tour takes approximately forty-five minutes. Annual events include a Harvest Festival in August, an Applefest in October, and Christmas celebrations. Zoar Village is located approximately thirty miles south of Canton and is easily accessible from Interstate 71. For more information, see the Zoar website at www.zca.org or email TourZoar@wilkshire.net.

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