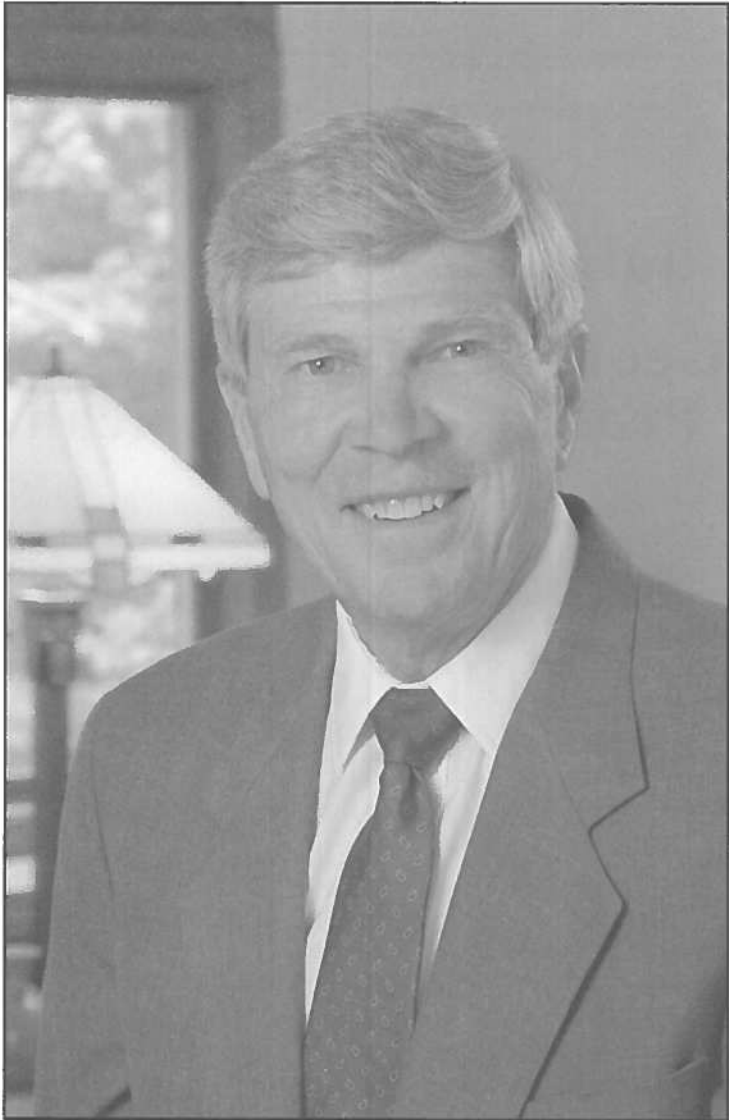


**James M. McPherson**  
**George Henry Davis '86**  
**Professor of American**  
**History**  
**Princeton University**  
**President**  
**2003**



*Photo by: David Kelly Crow*

# James McPherson:

## Historian in the Academy and in the World

I first met Jim McPherson on a hot July day in 1986 on the Antietam battlefield in Maryland. We were both participating in a British-produced television documentary on the Civil War, *The Divided Union*, which was designed, in part, to take the views of scholars to a wider audience. Meeting him in such a place and for such a purpose was particularly appropriate, perhaps, in view of Jim's career and scholarly work. Of course, long before 1986 and Antietam, I already knew of Jim as a notable historian.

Born in 1936 in Valley City, North Dakota, Jim received his BA degree from Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota, in 1958. He went on to Johns Hopkins University, where he studied with C. Vann Woodward and received the PhD in 1963. Appointed an instructor at Princeton University in 1962, he has remained on the faculty there ever since, rising through the ranks to become full professor in 1972. He is currently George Henry Davis '86 Professor of American History at the university.

Jim began his career as a student of abolition and race. His first book, *The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Princeton University Press, 1964), made a signal contribution to the understanding of abolitionists' attitudes toward race and their influence on both the cause of emancipation and the resulting thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth amendments to the Constitution. For the next ten years, abolitionists, race, and issues of race relations remained central in Jim's work. In two important books about blacks and the Civil War—*The Negro's Civil War: How American Negroes Felt and Acted During the War for the Union* (Pantheon Books, 1965) and *Marching Toward Freedom: The Negro in the Civil War, 1861–1865* (Knopf, 1968)—he described and examined the vital participation of African Americans in the Union war effort, thus becoming one of the first scholars to point out what has now become received wisdom. Continuing this thread of inquiry, Jim explored, in another noteworthy book—*The Abolitionist Legacy: From Reconstruction to the NAACP* (Princeton University Press, 1975)—the postwar impact of the abolitionists and their descendants on racial thought and policy.

After a decade of concentrating on questions dealing with abolition and race, Jim changed his scholarly direction in the late 1970s, an intellectual shift that turned out to be significant. Having been asked to write a textbook on the Civil

War era for upper-class college courses, Jim began to think about what the book should contain. A new treatment of the subject had not appeared for more than a decade and a half. Jim determined that military history—including the descriptions of the battles and the role played by soldiers—would have to be an essential component of the book. He knew, of course, how to do the archival research for the book; but he decided in this instance that he also needed to see the actual sites of the conflict. He began visiting the war's many battlefields. *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction* (published by Knopf) came out in 1982 and immediately became the standard-setting, classic examination of the period, and remains the almost unchallenged leader in the field.

Jim did not know when he signed on to write *Ordeal by Fire* that it would not only reorient his scholarly course for the next two decades and beyond, but would also fundamentally transform his career. His absorption in the Civil War in all its facets meant that in addition to becoming an eminent Civil War historian, he also became the most influential historian in transmitting the story and meaning of the war to an audience far beyond the halls of academe. In this age of overspecialization when too many scholars write jargon-filled prose accessible only for other scholars of like mind and interests, Jim became that extraordinary rarity—a widely known and respected scholar who could communicate his scholarship in lucid, eloquent narratives to an interested public outside the academic campus.

The most critical landmark along McPherson's new road was the publication in 1988 of *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (Oxford University Press). *Battle Cry* is superior narrative history and, without doubt, the finest treatment of the Civil War between two covers. Especially impressive is the manner in which he connects military history with its social and political context. But no one, Jim included, anticipated its astonishing success with book buyers. Appearing just before Ken Burns's blockbuster documentary on the Civil War, *Battle Cry* connected magnetically with a public eager for a first-rate study of the war. Jim gave them something exceptional—a book that is marvelously written and utterly comprehensive, and at the same time, sophisticated in its historical arguments. To date more than one-half million copies of *Battle Cry* have been sold in all its editions. The popular embrace was accompanied by critical acclaim, capped by Jim's winning the Pulitzer Prize for history in 1989.

As an academic scholar who was also the preeminent popular historian of the Civil War, Jim flourished. He guided numerous groups on tours of Civil War locations, bringing throngs of interested people face-to-face with battlefields and other historical sites and introducing them to serious scholarship on various dimensions of the war. He has made countless appearances on college and university campuses, and before historical societies and other groups gripped by the

war. To each audience Jim brings his conviction that a serious research historian can effectively share his findings and thoughts with people outside the academy, without oversimplifying his conclusions. The overwhelmingly positive reaction to his talks and the ongoing flood of invitations attest to his success in taking scholarly history to the public.

Communicating scholarship as usefully and effectively in the public sphere as in the academic world is not Jim's only concern. One of his most important activities is to help battlefield preservation. Along with many other concerned citizens, Jim believes in the importance of preserving the "hallowed ground" of Civil War battlefields. He was instrumental in the formation and direction of the first major modern preservation groups and was appointed in 1991 by the United States Senate to the Civil War Sites Advisory Commission, created by Congress and charged to designate the major battle sites, to report on their condition, and to recommend strategies for preservation. As a colleague on the commission, I can affirm that Jim was an articulate and influential member. The commission's activities directed national attention to the critical need for battlefield preservation. Moreover, it spurred existing local preservation groups to become more active and also brought other such groups into being. Jim's public persona was a major reason for those achievements. Even after the commission was disbanded in 1993 (having successfully fulfilled its mandate in its two-year legislative life span), Jim continued in this effort when he took a leadership role in blocking the Walt Disney Company from constructing a theme park practically adjacent to Manassas National Battlefield Park.

Jim's engagement with the public and his success in popularizing Civil War history did not distract him, however, from his work as a research historian. During the past decade and a half he has been editorially involved in numerous volumes relating to the Civil War, volumes ranging from biography to cartography and historiography. Moreover, he published two notable collections of his essays: *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 1990) and *Drawn with the Sword: Reflections on the American Civil War* (Oxford University Press, 1996). In these two books Jim commented intelligently and forcefully on various Civil War topics, chiefly Abraham Lincoln and his role in leading his side to a military victory that both kept the Union whole and destroyed slavery. His most recent book, *Crossroads of Freedom: Antietam* (Oxford University Press, 2002), superbly fuses the particular with the general in a succinct study that illuminates both a bloody battle and the enormous repercussions stemming from it.

Jim did not confine his scholarly attention only to the leaders. He also studied the men—North and South—who did the actual fighting between 1861 and 1865. For this project he crisscrossed the country reading thousands of soldiers'

letters and diaries in dozens of archives. In 1994 he brought out an introductory study, *What They Fought For, 1861–1865* (Louisiana State University Press), and three years later, a fuller treatment, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (Oxford University Press, 1997). In these books Jim challenged the view that depicted soldiers as ideologically neutral, as ultimately fighting for loyalty to unit, or friends, or even only to fight. Although he never denied the influence of comrades, he argued convincingly that ideology mattered to soldiers on both sides. Underscoring the tragedy of the conflict, Jim made clear that Yankees and Confederates shouldered arms, marched into battle, and often sacrificed limb or life for their differing conceptions of the holiest of American precepts, liberty.

Not surprisingly, Jim has received numerous honors in recognition of his scholarship. He has held fellowships from the John S. Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University, and the Huntington Library. He has also been the Commonwealth Fund Lecturer in American History at University College, London (1982), and The National Endowment for the Humanities named him the Jefferson Lecturer for 2000. In addition, his books have garnered several prizes. *Struggle for Equality* received the Anisfield-Wolf Prize, while *Battle Cry of Freedom* received the Christopher Award, the Best Book Award of the American Military Institute, and the Pulitzer Prize in 1989. *For Cause and Comrades* was awarded the Lincoln Prize in 1998. Jim is a past president of the Society of American Historians, and, of course, he is now president of the American Historical Association.

In his calling as historian Jim has acted on his convictions: do your work and present your findings based on the evidence. Yet, unlike most of his fellow historians, Jim's calling went far beyond a scholarship confined to the cloisters of academe. It included taking serious history to a wider audience. Jim is indeed a distinguished historian and a true scholar, as much in the academy as in the world.

*William J. Cooper Jr.*  
*Louisiana State University*

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