



## TRANSCRIPT

### ***Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa***

#### **Professor Ed Ayers on Teaching a Morally Engaging History**

The Civil War historian talks about combining intellectual, cultural, social, and economic history to truly grasp the U.S.'s past, especially events that took place in the South. He shares with Fred how he helps make free, nonpartisan, educational resources for teaching lively history lessons.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast episode was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly at [hkelly@pbk.org](mailto:hkelly@pbk.org). Thanks for listening.

Lawrence: Hello and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. Since 2018 we've welcomed leading thinkers, visionaries, and artists to our podcast. These individuals have shaped our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters, in addition to sharing stories with us about their scholarly and personal journeys. Many of our guests are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars who travel the country to our Phi Beta Kappa chapters, where they spend two days on campus and present free public lectures. We invite you to attend. For more information about Visiting Scholar lectures, please visit [pbk.org](http://pbk.org).

Lawrence: Today, it's my pleasure to welcome Professor Edward L. Ayers, who is the Tucker-Boatwright Professor of the Humanities and President Emeritus at the University of Richmond. Among his many accomplishments, Professor Ayers has been named National Professor of the Year, received the National Humanities Medal from President Obama, and was a finalist for both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize.

Lawrence: Today, he is Executive Director of New American History, which is dedicated to sharing innovative work in words, maps, audio, and video with broad audiences and the nation's schools. His latest book is *Southern Journey: The Migrations of the American Past, 1790 to 2020*. Welcome Professor.

Ed Ayers: Glad to be here.

Professor Ed Ayers on Teaching a Morally Engaging History

Lawrence: Ed, you are a highly influential Civil War historian and scholar and university president, advocate for the humanities, but it wasn't so obvious from the beginning that that's how it was going to play out growing up in Eastern Tennessee. You've described yourself as a suburban hillbilly. So talk to us a little bit about what it was like where you grew up, how you grew up, and the path that took you to Knoxville and University of Tennessee that opens all the doors.

Ayers: As you mentioned, I did grow up in East Tennessee in Kingsport, part of the Tri-Cities area, Bristol and Johnson City and Kingsport, but my parents had migrated there about an hour north from Western North Carolina, from a town called Burnsville, outside of Asheville, where my family had lived since the 1830s, and they were both from that county and they moved to Kingsport because Kingsport had been designed by 10 Northern corporations to tap the so-called Anglo Saxon labor market that was underemployed there in the mountains. Eastman Kodak was the major employer, Mead Paper, Penn Dixie Cement.

Ayers: And when my parents went there in the early 1950s, it was the only place in the world where they could take a tree and turn it into a finished book, and they were quite finished books. They made World Book Encyclopedia and other very sophisticated work. So Kingsport was designed by city planners from Cambridge, Massachusetts with roundabouts and boulevards and everything like Washington DC, but also with the segregated area for the 5% of people who are African-American. So in the early 20th century, basically, using modern life to contain the aspirations of black people.

Ayers: And I think that kind of contrast is what inspired my interest in all this. We'd go back and visit my grandparents every other weekend or so, and they didn't have a telephone until I was 15 years old, and my grandmother would slaughter the chickens for dinner and it's like, "Okay, something happened between the life that I have now, which has McDonald's and red brick Baptist churches and radio stations that play all the latest songs and the lives that my parents and grandparents knew." I didn't know it at the time, but I was going to try to bridge that distance in a lot of my work, try to explain how it could be that the South was deeply implicated in all the things that we think of as modern and new and American, and yet could go to war against the United States and could sustain segregation into my childhood.

Ayers: So I think it was that tension between having seen the future and having seen the past and trying to find a place for myself in between that helps explain my career trajectory.

Lawrence: How much of that do you think is looking back on it and getting perspective on your childhood and how much was actually self conscious at the time?

Ayers: Well, I knew at the time that I was really one cool kid. I knew I was hip. I was happening with whatever was going on, but also knew that I loved my family and I could see that they weren't a part of that modern life. My grandmother with whom I would stay for weeks at a time while my grandfather was gone, got one channel on her television, black and white, and they never had Cokes or anything. So it's just like, "Ah, how do you do this?" So I knew that there was something special about it, and I think I love my

grandmother more than anybody I met before my wife, and the idea was I respected her and yet she didn't live in the world I lived in.

Ayers: In this little talk I gave in Knoxville, I ascribed my career path to working for minimum wage, part-time job, in a chain bookstore in Kingsport, a now defunct chain, and part of my job amid all the decorative bookmarks and sealing wax and other sort of knacks they sold in the early '70s were all these paperback books by both the great authors and also whatever was really happening at the time. But I would spend as much time as I could reading the backs of those books, trying to figure out by what magic do you take the only skill that I apparently had, which was talking, and making a life out of it?

Ayers: I wasn't like my roommates in college were a future nuclear engineer and an architect and a physics professor, and all I knew how to do was read books. And so I think getting a glimpse of that world that was presented in current literature, but seeing how Faulkner and Steinbeck and Kerouac, those folks were still alive, I thought I wanted to try to see if I could translate some of what I experienced into that magic called a book.

Lawrence: From Knoxville, University of Tennessee, you go up to New Haven, Connecticut to the storied American Studies Program at Yale for your PhD; but in particular, I want to talk to you about some of the real legendary folks you were privileged to study with, and I'm thinking of David Brion Davies, one of the leading, maybe the leading scholar of enslavement, and of course the great C. Vann Woodward, the Dean of the Study of the American South, and again, one of the great American historians of our time. Tell us a little bit about each of them, if you would, and what your experiences were, and actually, let me add one other piece of that. Woodward is an Arkansas boy, right? So I wonder, did that give you any commonality, because he had a path not identical to yours, but not so different from yours.

Ayers: Well, I will be honest and say when I went there I didn't know anything about either of those men, and I didn't go there to study any of the things that you just described. My goal was to get away from Tennessee, frankly, and to see the big world. And to do so I said I wanted to study American intellectual history of the early 20th century. So I was all about William James and Josiah Royce and philosophy and all this, and my wife and I, we were quite young, got married after college, went up there. She has the same accent I do, maybe a little more mellifluous, and suddenly discovered that I had an ethnicity that I had not recognized before, that I was a white Southerner. Everybody that I knew was the same. We'd never been anywhere. I'd never met anybody else.

Ayers: And suddenly I was interesting in ways that I had not anticipated being, but in a kind of quasi-exotic way, and so I became aware of that identity. At the same time, I discovered something I'd not known about, which was the new social history of the early 1970s, quantification and democratization. We could include now, imagine this, writing the history of women or of Black people or immigrants, and I put those two things together and said, "Whoa, I can write about anybody. It doesn't have to be William James, and I can use these new methods. Maybe I can write about the people I actually know about,

who don't seem to be in these books." Of the people who are being recovered, Black and white Southerners did not seem to me to be recovered in their full humanity.

Ayers: I think that I was, I never expected Woodward to be my advisor, and I think people who'd come to Yale with that expectation, had come there expecting Woodward, I came there and discovered, no, what I'm really interested in is using the kind of broad vision that David Davis has for the South, a morally engaged kind of history that doesn't make the distinction between intellectual and cultural and social and economic history, but sees how they're all parts of the same thing.

Ayers: So those were the big influences on me. Both those men were very generous. You'd asked about a common background of Woodward and me. I think by the time I showed up, he'd met so many young Southern white boys who'd come to graduate school that there wasn't much novelty in one more with an accent, probably not too far from the one he had originally. The short answer to your question, Fred, is I lucked out. I didn't really know what I was doing. I've taken exactly one class in what I do for a living, but I found that like all great teachers, they were willing to follow the student where he was ready to go rather than to try to tell me what was a worthy purpose.

Lawrence: Now you may have already now suggested an answer to something that I wanted to ask you and ask anybody who studies the Civil War. There probably is no part of American history more studied, written about, picked over, than the Civil War. So that's got to at least enter your mind of, "Mr. and Mrs. Ayers, look what your son is doing. I'm going to try to say something new in a field that thousands of people have written millions of words about." Was it about, "I have a different place in this story. I've got a different role in this story," that gave you the courage to jump off the dock and see where you're going to land?

Ayers: Yeah, let's call it courage. There's other words that you could use to describe what that was, and part of it was ignorance. I've never been interested in the Civil War. I actually grew up, I went to Andrew Johnson Elementary School in East Tennessee, and in the Civil War, we'd been Unionist probably, but my ancestors, it turns out, were Confederates way up in the mountains, but we just didn't talk about it. I asked my grandfather one time why, and he said, "Son, we shot each other." And it was literally dangerous in Appalachia too. Plus it was not cool, and I've already established how cool I was.

Ayers: And so I wasn't interested in history in general, but especially not the Civil War and going to graduate school in the shadow of Vietnam, military history was widely frowned upon. So my first book, to prove to Mom and Dad that I was a legitimate person, was actually writing something that you know a lot about, crime and punishment in the American South. And so I thought I should be able to explain to people why chain gangs and convict leasing and murders and all that, everybody associates that with the South, lynching. That seems important, and of course in the '70s, as you know a time when crime was front and center in a lot of people's minds, that seemed like a worthy thing to do as well.

Ayers: So, and then the second book was on the South after Reconstruction and I sometimes challenge people to say, "So name anything that happened in the South between the end of Reconstruction and the Civil Rights movement." And people usually can't name anything, and I say, "That's because nothing happened except the invention of the world's most powerful religious currents of Pentecostalism, America's only truly unique contributions to world culture in blues, jazz and country music. Only the invention of the most popular brand in the world of Coca-Cola, and the creation of a modern system of segregation that was copied by South Africa and other repressive regimes. Other than that, nothing happened. Oh, yeah, and the largest political revolt in American history in populism. Other than that, nothing really happened in that decade."

Ayers: So that was my first 12 years of my scholarly career. But then as you're suggesting, I decided if you're going to spend your life in the 19th century, especially thinking about the role of the South in it, you're going to need to tackle the Civil War. How would you do that? Well, my goal would be what do you say we turn the story upside down? Since I don't know anything about any of the generals, let's go ahead and include everybody in the story. Men and women, soldiers and civilians, Black and white, Southern and Northern.

Ayers: So I begin with the idea of writing a kind of history, and using the Civil War as the lens, rather than being interested in the Civil War for its own sake. I was teaching my big class at University of Virginia, it was the Rise and Fall of the Slave South, and the pivot in that fall was the Civil War. So I began it with the idea that this is fundamentally an African American story. Let's start there, and then think about how the most important thing that ever happened in this country, which is the end of perpetual bondage for 4 million people, happened. So that was the question. The question really wasn't about flanking maneuvers somewhere or that sort of thing, but rather, why did it matter? How was it resisting the way we teach it in the schools and the dominant historiography, which is that you have a modern North and an anti-modern South and the modern North recognizes that it's going to have to vanquish the South if it's going to be a just nation and so it goes to war to end slavery. Just unfortunately, none of those things are true.

Ayers: But the North did mobilize itself. The North, otherwise known as the United States, did have this moral awakening within the war. So that became the issue. How did the North in some ways become better over the course of the war, at the same time the South in many ways descended to an even worse version of itself and tried to destroy the United States? So the second volume is called *The Thin Light of Freedom*, which reminds us that freedom was won, but it was not a blinding light. People were struggling toward it. But that's testimony to my determination to get as close to the ground as I can to understand why people do the things they do. They don't do it for ideology. They do it for the things they believe, which are not the same thing.

Lawrence: Tell us a little more about the New American History Project that you're Executive Director of. Who's the audience and where is that heading?

Ayers: So, several tributaries flowed together. So when I was at the University of Virginia in this Civil War project we were talking about, I created something called the Valley of the Shadow: Two Communities in the American Civil War, which gathered, and this began six months after the web began, so we had to reinvent it over and over again. But it had many, many millions of users and still does today, but it was really hard to build because none of the tools that we take for granted, PDF files didn't exist, for example, when we began. And so we had to work with computer scientists to think about how would you write a program that would allow you to see a page of a newspaper? Or how would you actually conduct a search of the manuscript census and so forth? So we'd done that for 14 years. That was all done. I became Dean of Arts and Sciences in part so the University would help fund that, and because I wasn't doing all that data input. My graduate students weren't being paid. And so I took that administrative job to help sustain that. So we had that.

Ayers: When I went to Richmond, they said, "We really love this digital stuff that you're doing. Would you create a lab at Richmond?" Of course, just as if I'd been a scientist, that's what they would've asked me to do. And I said, "Yeah." So I created the Digital Scholarship Lab. And I said, "Unlike 1993, when we began the Valley of the Shadow, there is an impossibly large amount of data that's already digitized. The whole point is not turning the analog into the digital, which had been the point in the '90s, but rather making sense of these immense amounts of information."

Ayers: So what is the most prevalent form of information? Census data. And what is the most exciting new technology? Geographic. So we created American Panorama with support from the Mellon Foundation, a digital atlas of American history, and you'll notice a theme in my work. I didn't do it myself, because I was being President, but I hired three really talented people, helped get the grant. And there's maps on there that are spectacular that do things, for example, that shows the country of birth origin of every county in the United States from 1850 to the present. You click on that county in that year, and it sends out tendrils around the world where all the people in that county had been born. Then you can just choose that nation that people have been born, click on that. And it shows you where in the United States they live.

Ayers: So it's a billion pieces of evidence. But it's done with this beautiful, and my motto in all this, it looks good enough to sell, but I'm giving it to you, and because I knew that many students don't learn well from reading a textbook. I'm not sure anybody really does, frankly. But everybody can see themselves in a map of the United States and to see how where they live. And so right now, my colleagues there have created mapping inequality, which is about redlining, and it's in the news all the time. It's in *USA Today* this week about actually making how it is that segregation became sanctioned by the federal government, working with banking, woven into every city in the United States.

Ayers: So you had this kind of digital model. Then I made a TV series called *The Future of America's Past* where I've visited places where history has happened. And then I had this podcast, *BackStory*, where we for 12 years made 350 episodes. And so I had audio, I had video, I had representation of digital data, but what I really needed to add was a project I

ended up calling Bunk, which is named after the Henry Ford quote that said, "History is more or less bunk. The only history that matters a tinker's damn is the history we make today." So Bunk is a real time curation of representation of the American past in all media every day.

Ayers: So when you go to [bunkhistory.org](http://bunkhistory.org), which you can also receive through [newamericanhistory.org](http://newamericanhistory.org), it's a fascinating array, and you can see that people are using history every day to persuade you of something, to identify you, to sell you something, or to entertain you. And it turns out history is fascinating and it's in every kind of magazine and publication. So there's a team at University of Richmond of six students, and then I have Tony Fields, our producer. It's all elaborately tagged. So you find an article about something you're interested in. You click on that. It sends you to the original, but it also sends you into a web of things that are tied by the same time or the same place or the same person or the same topic.

Ayers: And all of this is a way of sort of crystallizing the history that's in the air. I dare you to go look at it and not get pulled in. And there's over 8,000 articles in it now, and it's different every day. And then finally, I hired an excellent director of education and outreach who taught me how do you translate this into forms that say a high school history teacher who has to teach about Reconstruction can use this? We can't afford to let fourth graders or seventh graders or 11th graders be bored by an understanding of how we got here today.

Ayers: So we're making these beautiful projects, nonpartisan, free, open educational resources to try to enliven the teaching of history. And we're working with community colleges and it's also used in elite colleges as well. So that's the idea, is trying to give as many passive entrants into the American past as we can, and whichever one appeals to you, we hope that you'll follow into things you didn't know before.

Lawrence: Wherever you get in, the great, great likelihood is it's going to take you deeper and further in and into additional paths. It almost doesn't matter what the port of entry is, as long as you're in, and thinking about where do you and your community fit into this great American story, and indeed world story.

Ayers: Exactly. I need you to do a promotional spot for us. That was great, Fred.

Lawrence: Now one of the questions I like to ask my guests on Key Conversations is to recommend a book or a couple of books for our listeners. Phi Beta Kappa members are typically big readers, and I'm going to assume that people have read a lot about the Civil War, but I'm interested in ones that are maybe surprising, that people wouldn't have necessarily read, that would expand their knowledge in the field.

Ayers: This is a book that people probably have read, but I want to call attention to it because it's very much in public debate right now. Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. It's about the Civil War, if you think that the Civil War is about slavery. And that is the point. I find that people, it's hard to see slavery in the American past in the way you can the Civil War, all the monuments and things. Something we're working on Richmond is to make visible

the domestic slave trade where 400,000 people were sold out of Richmond to other Americans, and yet there's no way to see that. So I think Toni Morrison makes history, that history of slavery, palpable, and it's hard to read because slavery was hard to live. And so that's what I would like to say on that front.

Ayers: And a wonderful counterpart to *Beloved* is David Blight's *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*, which I'm just reading very carefully again right now for the book that I'm working on about America before the Civil War. And struck by the example that Douglass holds up of bravery in the face of every kind of opposition and threat and the bravery that David Blight shows in taking on this remarkably vital and broad biography. It's a heroic act of scholarship.

Lawrence: I couldn't help but think as we've been talking today, Faulkner's famous aphorism, "The past isn't over. It's not even past." It animates so much of what we are, our sense of ourselves as we continue to try to move forward. We certainly can't make any progress as a country if we don't understand where we've been. I'm grateful for your role in that. As a member of the American Academy, I'm delighted that you're a Visiting Scholar for Phi Beta Kappa and we'll be spreading that wisdom through many of your visits on behalf of Phi Beta Kappa. And I deeply appreciate your sitting down with me today on Key Conversations.

Ayers: It's my pleasure, Fred. Thank you so much.

Lawrence:

This podcast is produced by LWC. Cedric Wilson is lead producer. Paulina Velasco is managing producer. This episode was mixed by Kojin Tashiro. Hadley Kelly is the Phi Beta Kappa producer on the show. Our theme song is Back to Back by Yan Perchuk. To learn more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our Visiting Scholar program, please visit [pbk.org](http://pbk.org). Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

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