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NO LONGER HIDDEN IN HISTORY'S SHADOWS

ALUMS CONTRIBUTE TO NEW CIVIL WAR BOOKS BY DR. JONATHAN WHITE

by [Kelli Caplan](#) | October 4, 2023*Read time: about 4 min*

As Daniel Glenn was researching the history of the slave trade in 2016, an interesting, mysterious name kept popping up: Appleton Oaksmith.

The more Glenn learned, the clearer it became that Oaksmith was a character who had been hidden in history's shadows.

"Oaksmith's story is one which, once uncovered, had to be told. His life seems pulled right out of a movie—from courtroom drama, to blockade running, to kidnapping, it's a very engaging story," said Glenn, '19 [American Studies](#) and [Political Science](#).

A Northerner who was convicted of slave trading during the Civil War, Oaksmith underwent a profound transformation, emerging as an anti-Klan, pro-civil rights politician in North Carolina during Reconstruction.

Glenn, a [Summer Scholar](#), brought Oaksmith to the attention of Dr. Jonathan White, an American Studies professor with whom he was doing research for a proposed book on the 19th-century transatlantic slave trade.

As more details about Oaksmith's life surfaced, it proved so intriguing that White, who had originally planned to write a history of slave trading, decided to focus solely on Oaksmith's life. He told Oaksmith's story in "Shipwrecked: A True Story of Mutinies, Jailbreaks, Blockade-Running, and the Slave Trade." It is one of two new works about the Civil War that White has published with the assistance of students.

"Based on the newspaper articles I was seeing, Oaksmith seemed to be behind the scenes of several notorious slave trading operations. I asked Dr. White if he had ever heard his name and he had not," Glenn said.

"It's pretty remarkable, and it's a story no one had really uncovered before," White said.

"At first, I thought I would do a chapter on Oaksmith in my book, but the more I found out about him, the more I realized he needed a biography of his own," White said. Oaksmith appears in some of the most interesting moments of that period, including the California Gold Rush, filibustering in Nicaragua, Cuban liberation, and the secession crisis.

"He really was everywhere, and his story had important effects on the course of American history," White said.

For example, during the Secession Winter, the time between President Lincoln's election and inauguration from 1860-1861, Oaksmith tried to rally Northerners to support the flag. He organized large pro-Union meetings in New York City, although his pro-slavery positions alienated Republicans.

The book, Glenn said, "does a good job of presenting the historical record and letting readers arrive at their own conclusions about whether Oaksmith committed the heinous crimes for which he was prosecuted.

"I think readers will come away with a fresh perspective of various social and political issues of the late nineteenth century, having seen them through the lens of Oaksmith's tumultuous life. And even for readers who may not have a strong interest in history, 'Shipwrecked' is an engaging way to learn about complex, nuanced, subjects from the Civil War and Reconstruction eras."

In a recent review of "Shipwrecked," The New York Times called it "gripping," "astonishing," and "a fresh perspective on the mess of pitched emotions and politics in a nation at war over slavery."

"Shipwrecked" marks the second time that Glenn has collaborated with White researching and writing a book. White and Glenn published "Untouched by Conflict: The Civil War Letter of Singleton Ashenfelter," in 2019. The book presents a collection of letters written by Ashenfelter, a 19th-century college student.

"It is impossible to overstate the impact Dr. White has had on my education and professional success," said Glenn, who graduated from William & Mary Law School in 2022 and is now a clerk for a federal judge in Texas. "As I begin my legal career, no other person has so profoundly shaped the way I view history, writing and learning itself, as Dr. White. My work with him at CNU also equipped me with the skills that form that backbone of the legal profession—namely research, writing and editing."

"Final Resting Places: Reflections on the Meaning of Civil War Graves"

The second Civil War book published by White this fall is "Final Resting Places: Reflections on the Meaning of Civil War Graves." It explores the fascinating and unique ways people who died during the conflict were buried and memorialized. White and his co-editor, Dr. Brian Matthew Jordan, a history professor at Sam Houston State University, conceived the idea during breakfast at a conference in 2018. White and Jordan asked 28 renowned historians to pick a Civil War gravesite that is meaningful to them and write a personal reflective essay about it.

The picture on the book's cover was photographed by Chloe Baker, '22 American Studies, during a 2021 research trip to South Carolina with White and fellow students. Baker, who was in the Center for American Studies Junior Fellows Program, captured the image in the Beaufort National Cemetery. She also took two other photos used in the book.

"I am so proud to have one of Chloe's pictures on the front cover! She is such a talented photographer," White said. "Chloe also helped me with editing other images in the book."

Baker was thrilled to learn that her photograph would be so prominently featured. "I knew that some of my photographs would be used as illustrations in the book, but I was happily surprised to learn that the publishers had selected one of my photos for the cover design," said Baker, who now works at the National Defense Transportation Association as a project coordinator. "It's a special honor to have my work featured in one of Dr. White's books.

"Dr. White was a great mentor to me at CNU," Baker said. "I am putting many of the skills I honed as a Junior Fellow to use: writing, proofreading, graphic design, photo and video editing."

The essays in the book reveal a side of the Civil War that is not often told: how its dead were laid to rest, White

said.

"Each gravesite is different, and each chapter tells a fascinating story about American history," White said. "The essays are very powerful. Some have brought me to tears."

The essays are not just about 28 headstones. For example, one essay cites the USS Monitor as a gravesite since the remains of two soldiers were found in it. Another writer focused on the Stono River as a grave since 20 Black soldiers drowned there when a ship capsized. There are chapters about cemeteries on university campuses and one about a ditch on the side of the Delaware River where Confederate POWs were buried after a trainwreck.

White's two newest books join the growing shelf of other historical books, articles, essays, and reviews he has penned about the Civil War era. This month, a biography of Abraham Lincoln that White edited will be released. White was also recently awarded the prestigious [Gilder Lehrman Lincoln Prize](#) for his book, "A House Built By Slaves: African American Visitors to the Lincoln White House."
