

Conversations with Theodore C.  
 (“Ted”) DeLaney, Jr.

VII: “Washington and Lee and  
Southern History”

With Barton A. Myers, Interviewer

Recorded September 21, 2018

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**Myers:** Good afternoon. Today we're here on September 21, 2018, in the Mason Taylor New Room of Washington and Lee University for an interview with Dr. Theodore DeLaney. Dr. DeLaney is professor of African-American history here at Washington and Lee University and we're going to be talking today about W&L and Southern history. I'm Dr. Barton Myers, Ted's colleague and friend from the History Department. I teach the American Civil War here. Today we're going to be talking with Dr. DeLaney about a number of topics related to the intersection of Washington College and Washington and Lee University and the history of the American South. Ted, whenever you came to Washington and Lee, what was your impression of the school's intersection with the history of the American Civil War and with the historical character of Robert E. Lee? Could you muse a little bit on that, your perception?

**DeLaney:** Yes, I can. To qualify that a little bit, when I come to Washington and Lee to be tenure track, or when there were other comings to Washington and Lee as a student or whatever, I think that I'd rather focus on it as coming to join the faculty in 1995 after having been away for two or three years, in fact.

When I arrive at Washington and Lee in 1995, one of the things that is somewhat surprising to me is there is this, or at least I'm told by colleagues in the History Department, that there's this emphasis on Lee the president rather than on Lee the Confederate general. Nobody ever explained why this was so. It was a little bit surprising given the people who are telling me this because this is not something that seemed to be a part of their nature or a part of their own necessarily particular beliefs. I was never really sure whether this emphasis on Lee the president was to dodge a bullet with regard to the loaded term or the loaded connotations of the Confederacy with regard to recruitment, or whether this was to acknowledge the problems that both of us understand historically with the Confederate cause. Nobody ever articulated why there was a problem with Lee the general, the Confederate general, as opposed to Lee the president. And so there now is this renewed emphasis on stressing Lee the president that a lot of people don't understand is not something new here but something that was going on nearly twenty-five years ago.

**Myers:** Yes, in the mid-90s.

**DeLaney:** Right, because I returned here in '95 and this is what I find. Right after I return I discover that even though I was trained in Southern history, not in African-American, when I return I learn that—and I shouldn't have been shocked by this having been a student here, having done an ABD [All

but Dissertation] fellowship here, having grown up in Lexington—but what I found was, and I guess I realized it for the very first time and it's post-graduate school education, that the kind of discourse that you can have or the kinds of questions that you can ask about any other figure in American history, you could not ask about Robert E. Lee on this campus. It was fraught with danger.

**Myers:** Could you talk about the constraints of talking about Robert E. Lee in class, some of those experiences?

**DeLaney:** I don't think that it was such a problem talking about him in class as it was talking about him to colleagues or talking about him publicly. I can give an example of this, and the example sort of fast-forwards us a little bit to something that's in my notes here anyway. In 2007, the university, whether officially or unofficially, observed the 200<sup>th</sup> birthday of Robert E. Lee. The Art Department did this interesting thing called “Re-visioning Robert E. Lee,” and part of this was an exhibit of art about Robert E. Lee that was pretty much largely orchestrated by the sculptor, who was Larry Stene. The other side of it was a panel discussion that Pam Simpson put on and she moderated it. She was the first woman professor here and probably, at the time, she was the chair of the Art Department. She had me and Holt [Merchant]<sup>1</sup> to be on the panel. Holt and I don't differ tremendously in our views about Southern history and causes of the Civil War and all of that stuff. But I found that I had less latitude to say the things that Holt said than I thought might ought to be the case. And so we are in this forum and Holt had explained to Pam that there was some level of not agreeing between the two of us, but we were friends, and so it wouldn't be that we would necessarily be reflecting the same viewpoint.

Of course, it's always a big distraction when you are in Lexington and you're participating in something that has a serious nature to it. This is taking place in Staniar Museum, which is in Wilson Hall, which is the art museum, and in walks this guy dressed as Robert E. Lee. It's like: “Wow!” This really sort of takes all of the air out of the room because there is this visual that you just can't believe that suddenly appeared. Somebody asked a question about a story from Douglas Southall Freeman.

**Myers:** The famous Pulitzer Prize-winning historian.

**DeLaney:** Yes. The story that was asked ended up being something of a problem for me afterwards because Holt and I both responded to the story. The story was of Robert E. Lee in church after the war

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<sup>1</sup> W&L history professor and Civil War historian.

and the black man who comes down the aisle and goes to communion. He kneels at the communion rail and everybody sort of freezes. Nobody's going to communion. Robert E. Lee gets out of his seat, goes down and kneels next to the freeman, and thus gives permission for everybody in the church to receive holy communion. Holt's response to it was that there's really no evidence that this happened. He said the story is probably apocryphal.

So then Pam wanted my view and I said I would bring a slightly different perspective to it than the people who promulgate that story. Having grown up in a liturgical church, and the Episcopal Church is not that far from the Roman Catholic Church, that at that point in what's going on in church, there's nothing the priest can do about whatever is happening. The lay people have to take care of what's happening. The priest is standing there in the most sacred part of the Eucharistic celebration. He's got the sacraments in his hand, he is ready to distribute the sacrament to the faithful, and nobody's coming to communion. I said if this story is true, what I see Lee as doing possibly is coming to the rescue of the priest. I think it says more about what's happening with the service than anything that Lee may think about the freedman. The *News-Gazette* quoted me accurately on this<sup>2</sup>. Fran MacDonnell, Suzanne Keen's husband<sup>3</sup> who is Roman Catholic, was there. He comes up to me afterwards and he says, "You know, I think you've got something there." Of course, Fran is a historian too, but we're both Catholic and, yes, you're kind of coming to the rescue of the priest in this. The *News-Gazette* quotes me accurately and one of my history colleagues, who was not present, marches into my office the next week. He's read the story in the *News-Gazette* and he's like a madman. He says to me, "I've worked for God knows how many years to cultivate alumni and you've destroyed all of that in less than five minutes.

**Myers:** Why did he think that?

**DeLaney:** You tell me why he thinks that. Of course, that kind of statement, you have no evidence that I've destroyed anything. You just don't like what I said. He screamed and yelled and carried on. "With friends like you, who needs enemies," then out of the door and he slams it behind him. I thought, this is really crazy. Since when can historians [not] disagree without having a temper tantrum? This is the kind of thing that I've experienced and it reminds me of Alan Nolan's book.

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<sup>2</sup> A local weekly newspaper. Kit Huffman, "Robert E. Lee and the Freed Blacks: Should He Have Done More? Professors Debate Lee As W&L Marks His Birth." January 17, 2007, pp. C1-2.

<sup>3</sup> She a professor of English at W&L, he a U.S. historian at Southern Virginia University.

**Myers:** Oh yes, *Lee Considered*.

**DeLaney:** Oh Yes!

**Myers:** A very searingly critical book on Robert E. Lee.

**DeLaney:** Absolutely, but here is a historical figure that it becomes very, very, at least on this campus, dangerous—

**Myers:** Ted, maybe we can talk about this a little more generally than just Washington and Lee. What do you think is the enduring hold of Robert E. Lee over Americans, over Southerners? There's been a huge debate within the last few years over Lee's place in American history. What do you think, from your own experience here, where do you think that comes from? What's the root of it?

**DeLaney:** I think that part of it is rooted in the whole concept of reconciliation. In this whole concept of reconciliation, then, there is a concentrated effort on the part of the South to be viewed as a noble cause that's equal to the cause of the Union and to be able to have some of the same status that the Union has. At the very same time that that reconciliation is happening between North and South, as you well know, it's happening at the expense of the freedmen. So I think that, even as we live in to this time, we've seen even more of this right now with the tension that goes on, back and forth, about how we honor the people who are part of the Confederacy. I also think that there is this mystique of a “Lost Cause” that plays into this, and this mystique that Lee doesn't live long and you can turn him into whatever you want him to be after he's dead.

**Myers:** Yes, he never writes his memoirs. He never writes an official history of the war. That allows all kinds of people who fought during the war to create their own narratives, both about him and about the war itself. He never arbitrates that.

**DeLaney:** And there's not any real effort of people in the North to counter these Confederate histories that are coming out either.

**Myers:** It's a much weaker effort in terms of publishing.

**DeLaney:** Yes. I mean, some of these histories that come out are pretty bad. Even if you look at the four-volume history that's written by a noncombatant [Douglas Southall Freeman], or somebody who probably was far too young to be a combatant at the time, Woodrow Wilson, it is very, very pro-South.

Of course, Wilson grew up in Reconstruction Georgia and South Carolina. A lot of that is reflected there, plus the fact he was great friends with Thomas Dixon and D. W. Griffith.

**Myers:** He was, and used some of his history of Reconstruction in the D. W. Griffith film, *Birth of a Nation*.

**DeLaney:** I think that there's a lot that's going on that sort of revises history. We know very well that this kind of revisionism of the causes of the Civil War begins in 1865. There is a concentrated effort on the part of the South to be victorious, at least in the history books.

**Myers:** Ted, this is a question about the “Lost Cause” myth because I know a lot of people use the myth and they talk about it as a sort of a shorthand for a number of arguments and tenets about the American Civil War. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that and where you see Washington and Lee's role in the creation and burnishing of both the Lee myth and of the “Lost Cause” itself.

**DeLaney:** I think Charles Reagan Wilson<sup>4</sup> does a really good job with it, especially the chapter where he's talking about the funeral of Robert E. Lee. At the funeral of Robert E. Lee, on that very day, you have the creation of the Lee Memorial Association. And so there is this concentrated effort that begins with how Robert E. Lee is going to be remembered and honored, and the fundraising mechanism that's put into place to be able to do that.

**Myers:** It's extensive.

**DeLaney:** Absolutely.

**Myers:** It's mostly the living members of the Confederate high command are vice presidents of the organization. It's an amazing effort in order to try to capture that story.

**DeLaney:** Right. I think that there's also a religious dimension to it which I think is a viewpoint that I long felt that I share with Charles Reagan Wilson that the myth of the “Lost Cause” is almost like a civil religion.

**Myers:** I would agree. I think it is.

**DeLaney:** It is a very powerful thing. I was trying to explain to some students the other day in an

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<sup>4</sup> *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920*. (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1980), ch. 7.

education class. I was looking at all of this imagery and was showing a picture of the Recumbent Lee [statue] in the [Lee] chapel. I don't think the students were really ready for these kinds of questions: "What do you see here?" especially when I used the pointer and outlined the sarcophagus underneath the Recumbent Lee. "What is this thing that's a lower part of the sculpture?" Nobody knew. "Okay, it's a sarcophagus. What is that?" Nobody knew what a sarcophagus was either. I said to them, "If you were Episcopalian or if you were Catholic, a sarcophagus looks pretty much like a marble altar. What do you think is going on with this image? This is what Mrs. Lee wanted, this recumbent Lee atop a sarcophagus. What does this image say to you? What does this image seem to mean?" And of course, that image is central to this campus and the whole idea that somehow that image becomes central to this chapel that was built to be the university chapel rather than a crypt. W&L, to a large extent, is very much a part in the late nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century—

**Myers:** Absolutely, and it doesn't begin or end with the Recumbent Lee. It goes on and on for decades.

**DeLaney:** Right. Some of this stuff is stuff that I ended up distancing myself from. I distanced myself from it professionally and for comfort reasons. I distanced myself from it in the community as well because it was just terribly uncomfortable. I didn't want to be involved with it, even to the extent of not wanting to be lured into conversations with tourists who were strangers I didn't know who might say, "What do you do for a living?" The last thing I wanted to say was I taught history because the next question would be a Civil War question that I wasn't going to want to engage in.

There's been a certain level of discomfort, and even though I studied with a guy, a really weirdo guy in response, but an absolutely magnificent gentleman in graduate school named Ludwell Johnson. He often wrote for the *Southern Partisan* and vowed that his last lecture at [The College of] William and Mary would have Grant surrendering to Lee. There again, Ludwell Johnson was a very complicated and complex man. From the one hand of being a student of Ludwell Johnson's but also being a student of Eugene Genovese's, and sort of distancing myself from [the] Southern history period while here, I found that it wasn't completely possible to distance myself from Southern history either in the greater community or in Lexington.

**Myers:** Why do you think that is, Ted? What is so central about Lexington?

**DeLaney:** People are always looking for a speaker and sometimes you inadvertently find yourself trapped into a situation, or not trapped into a situation but lured into one. For instance, I had been

working on—somebody else beat me to publishing it—I had been working on the Virginia textbook controversy, a controversy that Adam Dean published.<sup>5</sup> I knew Adam. I was working on it even before Adam started working on it and was really excited about the stuff I'd learned, how these Virginia history textbooks had been manipulated by the textbook commission. They had put in place this favorable image of the South that was largely an ambiguous history that was sort of mixed with half-truths and things that weren't completely true.

I'd been working on this and I knew this historian who worked for the state Department of Historic Resources named John Kern. John was a really nice guy and John was, as I recall, a Northerner who ended up in Virginia working. Sometimes these well-meaning friends can get you in trouble. John suggested to the Danville Historical Society they get me as a speaker. I'm very excited.

**Myers:** The last official capital of the Confederacy.

**DeLaney:** Yes. What I saw in Danville was unbelievable and this is about 1997. It's late '90s and so I'm just going to say '97. I can't be sure of the date. So I agree that I'm going to go down and going to give a talk, but I'm going to give a talk about the textbook controversy and Southern history. I get to Danville in spite of the fact that a couple of colleagues on campus said to me, “Ted, you're making a mistake. You really should not go to Danville to speak.” I go to Danville, my wife goes with me, and to help put this in a historic perspective, this is before we have good cell phones. We have in our car one of the early versions of a car phone that you plug into the car, but there are not a lot of towers. The closer we get to Danville, the greater our reality that it doesn't work anymore. We get to Danville and we check into a hotel, and the first thing they tell us is that their telephone service is out. We realize that we're going to be in Danville and we are cut off from the outside world. We have a son who is a student at William and Mary, and if he needed to get in touch with us for some reason, he couldn't.

The Danville Historical Society officers pick me up and take me out to dinner and we have a great time at dinner. At one point I look at my watch and I said, “Your event is supposed to start in five minutes.” Real quickly there's a paying of checks and off to the historical society we go. They have an auditorium and the ladies there are frantic because the speaker and the officers of the society haven't arrived. I walk in and I see something that is just unbelievable to me.

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<sup>5</sup> “Who Controls the Past Controls the Future: The Virginia History Textbook Controversy.” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 117, 4 (2009) 318-355.

There is a middle aisle and there are folding chairs on either side. All the black people are on one side of the aisle and all of the white people are on the other side of the aisle. All of the black people are dressed like we are, or the female equivalent, and almost all of the white people are dressed like we are, or the female equivalent, except one row of white people. This particular row of white people have sweatshirts on with Confederate motifs on them, and baseball caps with the Confederate flag, and they're all sitting in one row. I realize there's a statement being made here but I can't let that distract me, and when I gave my presentation I felt really comfortable about the things that I was saying. Then when I finished, in the Q&A, these people came alive.

These were angry people who felt that PC [political correctness] had taken over the schools and that Martin Luther King had replaced Robert E. Lee. Oh, God, it was absolutely amazing. The questions got so ugly that it was unbelievable. In fact, one of them had the audacity to ask me, "Well, if your people hadn't been brought over here as slaves, how do you think you would have gotten your education?"

**Myers:** Wow! That is incredible.

**DeLaney:** Then all of the well-dressed white people started helping respond to them. Black people aren't saying a word. They're not saying a word. It was the most amazing evening that I had ever spent in my life. At the end of the evening there was this line of well-dressed white people who were waiting to say to me, "I'm so sorry," or "I don't know where those people came from, but I apologize." So there are these people who are lined up to apologize to me and then, at the end of the line, there is this boy, a sixteen-year-old white kid, who was there because his high school teacher suggested he go. He was in tears. He said, "I am so embarrassed." I thought, no kid should be in a situation like this. I felt so sorry for this kid that I didn't know what to do.

Then we went into the adjacent room where the goodies were set up for the reception, and I thought these people would have left. They had not. They were there at the reception. Somebody said to me at some point in conversation at the reception, "You handled that so beautifully; you must get questions like that all the time." Before I could respond, my wife said, "No, he doesn't." I was amazed because that's not my wife. My wife doesn't usually chime in in a situation like that. Finally, after it was all over, the officers, particularly a woman whose name is Mrs. Levine—her son Stan was a student here, I know, and she was the treasurer of the historical society—a most unusual home that she and her husband had. They took us back to their house for coffee. It was a sort of recapping of the evening and

we were there much too late. Finally they took us back to our hotel, and when we get to the hotel, my wife wants to drive immediately back to Lexington. I said to her, “Lexington is nearly three hours away. It is too far to drive this late at night.” She was terrified of staying in the hotel. “I never want to come to this place again in my life. I want to get out.” I said to her, “I’ve got a class in the morning. I need to be rested for the class. If we drive home, it’s going to just mess up things for me.” I went to bed and went to sleep, to get up to find out she hadn’t slept at all. She was just in terror. She was just absolutely scared out of her mind. We came back to Lexington and I thought, “how did this happen? How did this happen at all?”

Then our son calls from William and Mary and he said, “What went on in Danville last night? I have a friend from Danville that I met in Latin Academy. She called and said, ‘my parents told me what they did to your dad in Danville last night’ and she apologized to me.” I thought, here are two college sophomores who are in communication because of this incident in Danville. John Kern later calls me, the historian who had recommended me as a speaker, and said that the folks down there had done some research. These people had traveled all the way from Petersburg—obviously, they had a connection in Danville—and they belonged to an organization called the National Association for the Advancement of White People. Why would my talk cause people to drive all the way from Petersburg to Danville to protest a lecture that, I thought, was fairly innocuous?

Then I got myself into it a second time.

**Myers:** When did this one happen? What was the location of this?

**DeLaney:** The location of this one was Richmond. I sort of made some notes to myself for this one and this one will involve people that you know, for sure. I’m sitting in my office one day, working. I’m minding my own business and I get a telephone call from John Coski.

**Myers:** Oh yes, I know John.

**DeLaney:** I’m sure you do. John Coski has a Ph.D. from the College of William and Mary, just like I do. I certainly was not a student at the same time he was but I knew who he was.

**Myers:** Was John working as curator at the Museum of the Confederacy at this point?

**DeLaney:** He was curator at the museum and he was calling to ask a favor of me. The Museum of the

Confederacy has an annual lecture that they call the Elizabeth Roller Bottimore Lecture that they sponsor together with the University of Richmond Department of History. This particular year, which was 2005, in fact it was in September 2005, it was going to be a panel discussion instead and he wanted to ask me to be on the panel. Very suspicious of all of this, I said, “John, why are you asking me to do this?” not figuring that I had any outstanding credentials that qualified me to be on the panel. He said, “Because every other black historian I've asked has turned me down.”

**Myers:** Well, John was incredibly honest.

**DeLaney:** He was incredibly honest and I should have turned him down, too. Probably the reason I didn't turn him down was because of the William and Mary connection.

**Myers:** Was this before John published his book?

**DeLaney:** Oh no. The book had been published. The book on the Confederate flag, it had already been published.<sup>6</sup> He explains that this panel is going to consist of a guy named Brag Bowling who is a lawyer in Richmond who's a member of the Sons of Confederate Veterans. Fitz Brundage was going to be on the panel. Well, Fitz is an old friend of mine. I've known Fitz ever since he was a young graduate student.

**Myers:** He's down at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill?

**DeLaney:** Yes, he's now at Chapel Hill. He's head of the department now, but when I met Fitz he was a Stonewall Jackson House summer fellow in his first year of grad school at Harvard. He was here in Lexington. John himself was going to be on the panel, and me. Then John begins to explain to me that this guy from the Sons of Confederate Veterans feels a little uncomfortable about being on the panel with three academics. And so John says, “I know that you and Fitz are going to pretty much share the same views, and so I'm probably going to lean in the direction of this guy so that he won't feel so by himself.” But then John sets me up. He says that the people who come to this are upper middle-class people who are well educated, well dressed, and that it should just be a good evening. So I took him at his word. Once again, the evening just seemed to spin out of control in incredible ways.

**Myers:** Was it the Q&A again?

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<sup>6</sup> *The Confederate Battle Flag. America's Most Embattled Emblem* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2006).

**DeLaney:** Well, it was all Q&A, and it was moderated by the director of the Museum of the Confederacy, Waite Rawls, who is a VMI alumnus. There was a list of prepared questions and beforehand there had been dinner with members of the History Department at the University of Richmond and some of the members of the Museum of the Confederacy. The event took place at the University of Richmond and I was staying in the guest house at Jepson School of Leadership. It was about the tug of war about Confederate monuments - and this is in 2005!

**Myers:** Oh really? Before this current round of controversy.

**DeLaney:** Well, one of the issues was the Nathan Bedford Forrest Park in Memphis and the city council wanting to get rid of it.<sup>7</sup> Monuments in Richmond were also in play in this and monuments in other places, but of course there was no question of taking monuments down. It was a question of getting rid of the Nathan Bedford Forrest Park in a city that was now black-controlled. And so the questions were very much like the questions that we see in 2018, with the same kind of passion. Oftentimes the questions would be directed to me first, and when I thought the questions were a bit loaded I said, "I'll pass and let one of the other panelists go first." One of the things that became apparent during the panel discussion affected my identity.

**Myers:** In what way?

**DeLaney:** In a way that I really had not expected and this way I found to be completely offensive. It came to the fore when this guy from Sons of Confederate Veterans was talking about some Republican polling outfit who had done a poll of Southern people who did not have any problem with these Confederate monuments, so he didn't know what the big problem was. At that point I began to hear what I'd been hearing all evening and probably hadn't heard as clearly before. It was the "Southern people." All of my forebears are Southern. I was born and reared and grew up in the South, but I was no longer a Southerner and I wasn't a Southerner because I was black. I took him on on that. I said, "Did these Republican pollsters talk to black Southerners, because they would have had a problem with this." Some of the responses from people in the audience were unbelievable, some of the comments. There was some guy who got up and just ranted about the PC historian James McPherson who had called his forebears Nazis.

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<sup>7</sup> The park contained an equestrian statue of Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest, who ordered the execution of surrendering black troops at Fort Pillow and was a founder of the Ku Klux Klan.

**Myers:** Who wrote the *Battle Cry of Freedom*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian, *For Cause and Comrades* on soldier motivation, and a most esteemed scholar.

**DeLaney:** Absolutely. One of the most esteemed historians in the field and you're calling him a PC historian? It was an education for me and an education for me because it was different from the Danville situation. The Danville situation, I was hearing from a blue-collar working class that was angry, but in Richmond I'm hearing from a very different segment of society. I'm the only black person in the room and there are about seventy-five people. There were people whose anger was so visible that night that it was incredible. It was just absolutely incredible.

The next morning I get an email from Fitz Brundage that said “you had a receiving line afterwards and none of the rest of us did.” It wasn't a receiving line at all. These people were chastising me. They were shaking one hand and they were using a dagger to stick in my side with the next. Each one of them came up and was chewing me out, and there was a long line of these people. I stood there and it was unbelievable. Nobody lined up to talk to Fitz. Nobody lined up to talk to Coski. Nobody lined up to talk to Bowling, but all of these angry people to talk to me. When I went back to my room I didn't sleep at all. It was just like it was in a nightmare. The only good thing that I found about it is that I learned something.

**Myers:** What's that?

**DeLaney:** That there are people like this out there and that their views are so hard and inflexible.

Then there's a follow-up to this that becomes even nastier. Subsequent to this, there's a problem with the [Rockbridge County ] Courthouse in Lexington. The county board of supervisors doesn't do what the judge says they have to do - or else he's going to build a new courthouse - and that is to remodel the existing courthouse. When the judge, by court order, says there's going to be a new courthouse, then this place on Main Street where our [W&L's] Business Office is presently located—it's [now] a rented space for the university—the Museum of the Confederacy decides they want to move there.

**Myers:** They're working on building a satellite museum at that point. They want to put one here.

**DeLaney:** They were going to move here lock, stock, and barrel as I understood it.

**Myers:** Oh really? This is before my time.

**DeLaney:** They had public meetings here.

**Myers:** This is the [museum] site that ultimately ends up at Appomattox today.

**DeLaney:** Right. But there are people here who are really fostering that too<sup>8</sup>. One of the people who was fostering that was Brian Shaw, who at the time was the director of the George Marshall Library. I was just “No, No. They can't come to Lexington.” In one of these open forums somebody asked about flags and they said yes, Confederate flags will be flying outside of the Rockbridge County Courthouse. That will be the Museum of the Confederacy.

**Myers:** They wanted to convert the building into the museum facility.

**DeLaney:** I took a public stand against the Museum of the Confederacy moving to Lexington and was not secret about my experiences in Richmond as a speaker for the Museum of the Confederacy.

**Myers:** What was the distance in time from the time you spoke in Richmond to the courthouse?

**DeLaney:** Maybe a couple of years, at the most. It made *The Washington Post*.<sup>9</sup> It made the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. It got a lot of news coverage. I thought the most horrible thing that could happen is for them to end up in Lexington. Why would they end up in Lexington in the first place?

Then angry alumni seemed to take umbrage at me speaking out. There was one guy who wrote to senior members of the History Department and copied me on it. It was almost like “you need to reel this guy in.” kind of thing. I was really angry about that. By God, I was born and reared here. I'm a taxpayer and I have a right to speak out. How dare anybody write to senior members of my department and take issue with me for speaking out against something in Lexington. Subsequently, there's even one person who writes to the Board of Trustees. There was an effort that Ken Ruscio kept from me for a long time to get me fired.

**Myers:** Our former president of Washington and Lee, Ken Ruscio.

**DeLaney:** Right. One letter I shared with Ken where this guy finally wrote to me and had said derogatory things about Ken. I sent a copy of the letter to him and he said, “Yes, I know. I've been

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<sup>8</sup> I.e. moving the Museum of the Confederacy into the old Rockbridge County courthouse (now W&L's Business Office).

<sup>9</sup> Neely Tucker, “Swept Away By History; Virginia's Museum of the Confederacy is Struggling Not to Become a Relic of the Past.” *Washington Post*, April 4, 2007, p. C1.

trying to keep this from you for a long time.” But it's the idea that somehow these alumni did not understand that whether I worked here or not I had free speech, and that not only did I have free speech, but also something called academic freedom. A lot of difficulty, if you will, where you're crossing this line with anything that has to do with the Confederacy.

**Myers:** Can I ask you a question?

**DeLaney:** Sure.

**Myers:** This is one that I've always wanted to get you to talk a little bit about and it relates directly to your training in Southern history. I'll ask you two, one more lighthearted and fun, and one specifically about one of your mentor, Eugene Genovese. I wonder if you might talk a little bit about your experience working underneath Genovese in graduate school, and tell me a story or two about what that was like.

**DeLaney:** OK. The big surprise with Eugene Genovese for me, because I had first been introduced to him here when I was an undergraduate—

**Myers:** Oh really? I didn't realize that.

**DeLaney:** He is friends with a law professor emeritus named “Lash” [Lewis Henry] LaRue and he also had become friends with Holt [Merchant], and so he had been here to speak when I was an undergraduate. I was impressed with his book, *Roll, Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. Also, much to my surprise when I got to the College of William and Mary, they had landed Eugene Genovese, who had just left the University of Rochester. I had interesting experiences with him. I took a course from him that very first semester that was actually a lecture class. It was offered for both advanced undergraduates and graduate students, although I think it was mostly graduate students. It was called “The Southern Conservative Tradition.” The readings for that were really hard and sometimes very hard for me to take. I can remember, although I'm having a senior moment right now with the particular authors, but there were a couple of Southern writers who wrote early in the twentieth century whose writings I found to be particularly racist. I went to his office to talk to him about that. I will never forget what he said.

**Myers:** It's not U. B. Phillips or somebody like that?

**DeLaney:** No, it was not U. B. Phillips, but it was—I'll think about who these people are. One of them was M. E. Bradford. Another one was somebody who was of that same ilk. He looked up at me and he constantly had a cigar.

**Myers:** Yes, legendary cigars.

**DeLaney:** The legendary cigar, and he would light one with the one he was putting out. [Laughter] He had to keep the door to his office closed because all the faculty were pissed off about him smoking cigars. He looked up at me and he said, "You need to know that stuff. So what if it's racist? Your contributions to the class discussion will be even better." That is really what education is about. You need to be exposed to a different viewpoint and you need to know what those viewpoints are, which is what I learned at the Museum of the Confederacy panel discussion. That was the kind of thing that being with Eugene Genovese was because, at that particular point, he was moving ideologically in a direction that was really a surprise to me. Before class there would be these political discussions, and it became apparent that he was voting for George H. W. Bush that fall. It was like, the radical Eugene Genovese, the Marxist professor, is voting for George H. W. Bush?

**Myers:** I think you maybe, as much as anyone, saw this evolution to his intellectual life up close.

**DeLaney:** Oh yes, I did see the evolution. He had moved all the way from Marxism back to the Catholic Church, after being separated from Catholicism for fifty-two years, and to the Republican party without ever being a liberal. In fact, he made a big deal about not trusting liberals. That was the reason Dumas Malone had directed his dissertation because Dumas Malone—

**Myers:** The great biographer of Jefferson.

**DeLaney:** Right, that he could trust him because he wasn't a liberal.

**Myers:** [Laughs] That's interesting. I didn't realize that.

**DeLaney:** There was this interesting transition that was occurring, but there was also the personal relationship that developed.

**Myers:** Tell me a little bit about that.

**DeLaney:** Well, Eugene Genovese lived the first thirty-seven years of his life in New York City and he

never had a driver's license. During his entire lifetime he never drove, and Williamsburg is kind of a difficult town to be in if you don't drive. His apartment was on my way home and so usually, sometimes later in the day, he would say, "What time are you leaving? Mind if I bum a ride?" I would drop him off at his place and then I would head on to my apartment. I joked with graduate students that when I got ready to sell that car I was going to have a sign in front "Eugene Genovese rode in this car." Of course, only history students would know what that meant.

He also was very, very professional with his graduate students. Even though he liked graduate students, he would do nothing with them socially until after the course was over. Either after the first or the second course that I took with him, I don't remember, he invited me out to dinner, but cocktails first at his apartment; and he made probably the strongest martini. I don't know what on earth he put in the martini, but I was drunk when we walked out.

**Myers:** He was a bit of a legendary drinker.

**DeLaney:** Oh yes, he was a legendary drinker. The other side of it is the conversion to Catholicism that caught me off guard. Then there was an attempt to convert me to the Republican party and, as Gene said, "It's not going to happen."

**Myers:** Really! Wow!

**DeLaney:** I can remember one time he told me my son would never be a successful lawyer unless he became a Republican.

**Myers:** Oh really!

**DeLaney:** The worst part probably was with my wife. She had never met him and Contact brought him in to speak one year.

**Myers:** The Contact [Visiting Speakers] Committee here on campus.

**DeLaney:** The LaRues had a dinner party for him and we were invited. By this time he can't talk anything but religion. He had the zealotry of a convert. Over dinner he says - and my wife's a cradle Catholic - over dinner he says that he thought that Pope John Paul [II] should excommunicate all of the feminist nuns. My wife did not say a word at dinner and, when we get in the car [she said]: "I don't know why you like that man." [Laughter] It was the kind of the evening where you think, "oh boy, the

after-the-party thing is not going to be fun.” The thing that I tried to explain to her is that he had been very helpful to me getting to where I was professionally, and that I had a great deal of respect for him personally but I didn't agree with him. I know DeLanays on the other side of the Church from me, and it's like, “what difference does it make what side of the Church anybody's on, especially when you're in public?” and most of the people who are listening to this aren't a part of the Catholic Church, or maybe aren't a part of any church for that matter. But after the conversion, he never got very far from references to the Church, as the last trilogy of books that he wrote indicates, especially *The Mind of the Master Class*.<sup>10</sup> It's more theology than it is history.

I recently turned over to Special Collections the commentaries that he wrote on my dissertation chapters.

**Myers:** Oh, that's fantastic!

**DeLaney:** I also sent a copy of them to David Moltke-Hanson.

**Myers:** Former head of the Southern Historical Collection in Chapel Hill.

**DeLaney:** Right, and David immediately wrote me back. He said “this is going to be very helpful for somebody who is writing about the Genoveses.” They [librarians] were trying to figure out why they [the Genoveses] had withdrawn their support from Patrick Buchanan's presidential campaign, and “it's in one of these letters that he wrote to you.”

**Myers:** That's amazing.

**DeLaney:** There was something that Patrick Buchanan had done that they [the Genoveses] viewed as racist, and they decided they would distance themselves from Patrick Buchanan. They did have integrity and it was fascinating working with him. Some of the stuff that he wrote, some of the little collections of essays, or not essays but lectures like *A Consuming Fire*—

**Myers:** Yes, that came out whenever I was first starting to work for the [National] Park Service, actually.

**DeLaney:** He was very into dealing with the reason or the concept that people had for why the

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<sup>10</sup> *The Mind of the Master Class. History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' World View* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Confederacy lost and this kind of thing which is one of those lectures in *A Consuming Fire*.<sup>11</sup>

**Myers:** Ted, how long have you been a member of the Southern Historical Association? You've been a member for quite some time.

**DeLaney:** Probably since '95, and since '95, a member of St. George Tucker Society, which Gene founded as his non-PC interdisciplinary organization on Southern culture, and for a while—even though Holt said “you can't do this,” but you can't say no to Eugene Genovese—in the founding efforts of the historical society that he founded because he had decided that the AHA [American Historical Association] was a bunch of thugs. They shouldn't be charging for ads for graduate jobs in their journal. They should do this free as a service for the profession. At least for the short-lived historical society I was there in some of the original planning. Then they divorced the historical society for unfortunate reasons. One of the reasons they were leaving was because of health and, at that time, it was Betsy's<sup>12</sup> health. Then there was an issue about the fact that none of the leadership was pro-life. Well, what does that have to do with a professional organization in history? But that was a part of the zeal of the convert.

**Myers:** Any fond moments from SHA [Southern Historical Association] meetings over the last twenty, twenty-five years?

**DeLaney:** Lots of fond moments, even in St. Petersburg, Florida, when I was sitting around the bar listening to comments about Catherine's presidential lecture [2016].

**Myers:** Catherine Clinton?

**DeLaney:** Yes, and there were some interesting comments. One of the things, and I didn't go to the lecture, but it was interesting to sit there and listen to people's responses to the lecture.

**Myers:** We had a W&L student with us on that one. John Crumb ['17] was with us down there.

**DeLaney:** Oh yes, but John Crumb wasn't sitting at the bar. I didn't see John Crumb nearly as much at that meeting as I saw Alex Reztloff ['15] and Cory Church ['15] and Jillian [Katterhagen ['15] the year before.

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<sup>11</sup> *A Consuming Fire: The Fall of the Confederacy in the Mind of the White South* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> His wife, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese.

**Myers:** Was that Atlanta?

**DeLaney:** Yes. I took them to Pittypat's Porch and Alex Reztloff fell in love with watermelon rind pickles that the other students thought was the most disgusting thing they'd ever tasted. That was fun.

[Laughter]

**Myers:** One of my favorites is whenever we were in Little Rock and we went men's clothes shopping. We had that lunch.

**DeLaney:** Yes, the Little Rock meeting was fun.

**Myers:** The Clinton Presidential Library.

**DeLaney:** Ah, that horrible architecture of the Clinton Presidential Library.

**Myers:** Ted, this has been very enjoyable.

**DeLaney:** It's been a nice conversation. I'm happy to sit down with you.

**Myers:** I really appreciate it. Thank you so much, Ted, for taking the time and for being a great and fantastic colleague and friend.

**DeLaney:** Well, thank you. I look forward to a much longer friendship.

**[End of interview]**

**Acknowledgements:** Ted DeLaney and David Peterson would like to thank the following people, whose generous assistance made this project possible: Brandon R. Bucy, Senior Academic Technologist; Tom Camden, Director of Special Collections; Marc Conner, Provost, Jo and James Ballengee Professor of English; Emily Cook, Research and Outreach Librarian; Paula Kiser, Digital Scholarship Librarian; Julie Knudson, Director of Academic Technologies; Seth McCormick-Goodhart, Senior Special Collections Assistant; Lisa McCown, Senior Special Collections Assistant; Molly Michelmore, Associate Professor of History, Department Head; Barbara Muller, Transcriber; Barton Myers, Class of 1960 Professor of Ethics and History; David Pfaff, IQ Center Academic Technologist; Judi Rhodes, ITS Information Desk Supervisor; Dylan Tallman, Technology Integration Specialist; Elizabeth Anne Teaff, Head of Access Services; Mame Warren, Oral Historian; and John White, ITS Shared Services Supervisor.