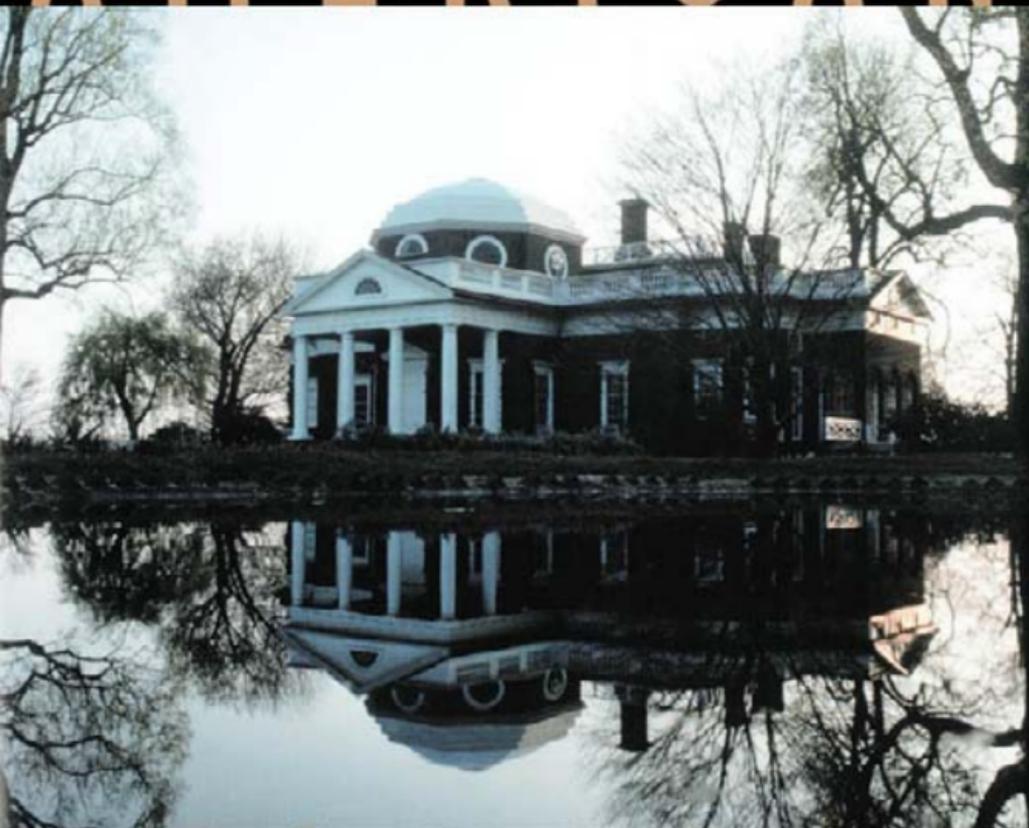


# AMERICAN



# PLACES

*Encounters with History*

America's Leading Historians Talk about the Sites Where  
the Past Comes Alive for Them

Edited by WILLIAM E. LEUCHTENBURG

**A M E R I C A N   P L A C E S**

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AMERICAN  
PLACES

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Encounters with History

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*A Celebration of Sheldon Meyer*

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*Edited by*  
*William E. Leuchtenburg*

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## Preface

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**T**his book has two aims in mind. One is to gather together essays by prominent historians on a fascinating range of American places. The other is to pay tribute to a stellar editor. Of the two purposes, the topic of places is likely to be the one to which the reader will more readily relate. It may be harder to grasp why a book would be motivated by the desire to celebrate an editor. For generations, filmgoers have been tutored to appreciate that beyond the words and images spoken by actors on the silver screen stands a director, and the names of some directors have become legendary—Hitchcock and De Mille, Bergman and Fellini. But it is uncommon for even the best informed reader to be aware of the contribution of an editor to the success of a book. Only rarely does the name of a Maxwell Perkins swim into public consciousness.

It is especially unusual for an editor to be honored with a Festschrift, for “festival writings” have been thought of as a fanfare not for an editor but for a distinguished scholar, a mentor who is tendered on a special occasion, usually his retirement, a volume of essays. *American Places* is very likely a unique enterprise in that it is a testimonial not to a professor but to an editor. Sheldon Meyer, though, invites such an exception. He is, as I said in dedicating my book *The Supreme Court Reborn* to him, “Editor Nonpareil.” It is doubtful that any other editor in the long history of publishing in the United States has had so large an impact on a field as has Sheldon Meyer on American studies, or so distinguished an array of authors.

Sheldon Meyer’s interest in U.S. history is long-standing. He majored in history and American civilization at Princeton, from which he was graduated in 1949 Phi Beta Kappa and summa cum laude. In the half century and more since then, he has read so widely in history, especially American history, that he has few peers in his familiarity with the literature.

## PREFACE

During these same years, he also steeped himself deeply in popular culture—from jazz (on which he is a recognized authority), to the musical theater, to the world of sports on two continents—from the baseball diamond exploits of the Mets at Shea Stadium to the heroics of Leeds United, Bayern München, and Real Madrid in the soccer arenas of Europe.

Before going to Oxford University Press, Sheldon had stints at two publishing houses with names so Dickensian that they have come to seem drolly premodern. He began with Funk and Wagnalls. (Some years later, the TV program *Laugh In* could draw guffaws simply by crying out the inane line, “Look *that* up in your Funk and Wagnalls.”) Sheldon then moved on to Grosset and Dunlap, the first publisher’s name to catch my attention as a little boy because it appeared to be on the jacket of almost every book I read. Indeed, Sheldon was hired there in 1955 ostensibly to supervise the Tom Swift and Hardy Boys series, although actually to work on a new paperback line: Universal Library. (I should add parenthetically with regard to these early years that our friendship of four decades has survived only because of my largeness of spirit—for Sheldon persists in taking enormous pleasure in the darkest day of my life. He exults in a certain October day in 1951, not because it marked his entry into publishing—which it did—but because it was on that day that Bobby Thomson hit his egregious home run that enabled the Giants to snatch the National League pennant from the more deserving Dodgers.)

In 1956, Sheldon Meyer joined Oxford University Press, and the rest, as sports announcers are fond of saying, is history—in this case, literally so. His new position gave him a desk in what was arguably the most prestigious publishing house in the world—but not one that was a front-runner in American history. I remember vividly a morning in 1950 in Northampton when my good friend and Smith College colleague Daniel Aaron told me that he was submitting the manuscript of his book *Men of Good Hope* to Oxford University Press, and I expressed bewilderment. Why Oxford? I knew, of course, that Oxford University Press had a luminous heritage going back nearly five centuries and that it was responsible for such landmarks as the *OED*. But in American history, it did not begin to have the éclat of Harper or Knopf. In those years, an aspiring historian hoped not for an invitation to clink glasses and swap yarns at an Oxford party, but to lunch with Alfred Knopf, whose garish shirts semaphored his presence from a great distance away.

## PREFACE

Under Sheldon's aegis, Oxford University Press soon assumed a considerably larger presence in the field of American history and after a time became the dominant house. Historians from Orono to San Diego learned to say, as convention time approached, "I'll meet you at the Oxford party." To mark how greatly the stature of Oxford has changed since the 1950s, one needs only turn to a convention program of the Organization of American Historians. At one recent meeting, where Sheldon Meyer was honored, the publication carried an astonishing eight full pages of advertising for OUP books, far beyond the spread of any other publisher; the list comprised no fewer than 138 titles.

The rise to eminence of Oxford University Press in U.S. history closely tracks the career of Sheldon Meyer. He rose from assistant editor to become Executive Editor for Trade Books, then Senior Vice President, Editorial, with his own publishing unit. Though he has recently stepped down from that post, he continues to work with Oxford authors as Consulting Editor.

Sheldon Meyer all but reinvented the calling of editor. He would pop up on a college campus less to sell books, though he did that well, than to inquire of a young professor, "What are you working on?" When he found out that the man or woman was engaged in a topic not regarded as mainstream, he would convey the inspiring message not only that the project was worthwhile but that there was a renowned firm on Madison Avenue eager to publish it. He did not create new fields, but he did do a great deal to foster communities of scholars—to assure anxious historians venturing into uncharted seas that other explorers had set out on the same sorts of voyages. And when the manuscripts arrived on his desk, he would help shape them into books in which both the author and the press could take pride.

Lewis Bateman, who, as a consequence of thirty years at Princeton University Press, the University of North Carolina Press, and Cambridge University Press, enjoys an enviable reputation as one of the country's foremost history editors, wrote Sheldon in 1998:

You changed the landscape of scholarly publishing in the United States. Most editors at university presses waited until manuscripts arrived over the transom and found them at annual meetings. You actively sought them out on campuses. . . . When I joined Princeton University Press in 1972 . . . everywhere I went you had been there before

## PREFACE

me or anyone else. A few weeks ago, C. Vann Woodward . . . mentioned to me that you knew what everyone was working on. Few of my colleagues would admit it, but we are merely trying to replicate your efforts in our modest careers. We know what a wide net Oxford has cast as a result of your tenure as editor there.

In short, if any of us accomplishes one-tenth of what you have done in your career, it will be a lot.

Sheldon's performance at OUP has been truly remarkable. He has edited no fewer than six Pulitzer Prize-winning books and seventeen that have won the prestigious Bancroft Prize—a record. Merely reciting the names of the authors of these award winners indicates the extent of his influence: Eric Barnouw, Ray Billington, Charles Capper, Robert Dallek, John Demos, Stanley Elkins, Eric McKittrick, Don Fehrenbacher, Louis Harlan, Kenneth Jackson, Robert Johannsen, David M. Kennedy, Gordon Levin, Leonard Levy, James McPherson, Robert Middlekauff, Samuel Eliot Morison, Mark Neely, James T. Patterson, Merrill Peterson, Joseph Wall, and Donald Worster.

Furthermore, the *kinds* of books he has edited have frequently broken new ground. Consider some of those he shepherded in the single area of African American history:

John Blassingame, *The Slave Community*  
Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*  
George Fredrickson, *White Supremacy and Black Liberation*  
Louis Harlan, *Booker T. Washington*  
A. Leon Higginbotham, *In the Matter of Color*  
Nathan Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*  
Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*  
August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *CORE*  
Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion*  
Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks*  
Brenda Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*  
Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture*  
Robert Toll, *Blacking Up*  
Richard Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*  
Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race*

## PREFACE

Note, too, the impact Sheldon Meyer has had on the publishing of histories of American women, another field shamefully neglected when he began. The books he has edited include:

William H. Chafe, *The American Woman*, revised as *The Paradox of Change*

Allen Davis, *American Heroine: The Life and Legend of Jane Addams*

Carl N. Degler, *At Odds: Women and Family in America*

Mary Kelley, *Private Woman/Public Stage*

Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out of Work*

Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past* and *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness*

Regina Morantz-Sanchez, *Sympathy and Science*

Paul Nagel, *The Adams Women*

Sheldon has been especially innovative in fostering works in popular culture. Just a sampling of the books in this field that he edited embraces Gunther Schuller's *Early Jazz*, called "the most important musicological statement on jazz's infancy"; Martin Williams's *The Jazz Tradition*, cited as "the most distinguished critical work in the field"; Whitney Balliett's *American Musicians*; Gerald Bordman's *American Musical Theatre*; Michael Kammen's *The Lively Arts*; Andrew Sarris's *You Ain't Heard Nothin' Yet*; and Alec Wilder's *American Popular Song*. In 1987, thanks to Sheldon Meyer, Oxford University Press received the Carey-Thomas Award for "creative publishing" for its list in jazz and popular music, and in 1997 it was applauded for having brought out more ASCAP prize books than any other publisher.

Gary Giddins, who has published four books on jazz with Oxford University Press, has written in the *New York Times Book Review*:

Sheldon Meyer merits, at the very least, a flourish of saxophones, a melody by Jerome Kern and a high-kicking chorus-line salute. Over the past 40 years, Meyer turned the world's oldest and most staid publishing house into the leading chronicler of jazz, Broadway musicals, popular-song writers, broadcasting and black cultural history.

Sheldon Meyer's achievements have won international recognition. The Association of American University Presses honored him with its

## PREFACE

Constituency Award “in appreciation of outstanding service to the University Press Community,” and in 1993 Oxford University bestowed on him an Honorary Master of Arts. The Oxford degree ceremony is an awesome experience because it is carried out entirely in Latin, a language most of us do not readily fathom—although I once read in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that Dan Quayle had been studying Latin so that when he went to Latin America he could converse with the natives. The late C. Vann Woodward, whose essay in this volume is, sad to say, very likely the last he ever wrote, once confessed to me that when he received an honorary degree from Oxford most of the words swam by him. He did piece out, however, that “*Jacobus Corvinus*” were the two final words of his *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, yet another book edited by Sheldon Meyer in its later editions. Similarly, Sheldon, wondering what the oration in Latin would do with *jazz*, picked out “*musica vulgaris*.” The Oxford ceremony took place at the Sheldonian Theatre, and one chirpy young woman said, “Oh, isn’t it nice for Sheldon that they’re holding it in his own theater.”

Sheldon had yet another tribute in store for him. After he turned in his keys at 198 Madison Avenue and set up advisory editor quarters in his apartment on Riverside Drive, Oxford University Press resolved that proper notice should be taken of his change of status and of his illustrious career. Clearly, neither a gold watch nor a monogrammed briefcase would be adequate. Instead, the press decided to put together a Festschrift, with his most prominent authors as contributors.

When Peter Ginna, OUP’s trade editor, first approached me about editing the volume, he already had a well-thought-out conception of it. He sought not a mere “collection of essays” but “a book that will hold together and be of interest in itself to the same kind of general readership that Sheldon’s list has reached out to over the years.” In the course of a generation, Sheldon had edited manuscripts by so many outstanding historians that it would not be easy to decide whom to invite, but we would collaborate with Sheldon on making the choices, and, to include as many as possible, the total would be unusually large. In the end, there were more than two dozen. Our only regret was that even with so many, there was not room for more numbers of highly esteemed scholars.

Too often, volumes of this sort, no matter how well-intentioned, have wound up as random aggregations of miscellany; at worst, batches of

## PREFACE

yellowed essays exhumed from file drawers—with no theme and no reader appeal. I recall painfully the opening line of a review by Arthur Schlesinger of a tome in honor of my mentor, Henry Steele Commager, to which I had submitted a piece: “As an art form, the Festschrift is a loser.” We agreed that this book must have a theme, and the theme should be “American places.”

That topic had more than one feature to recommend it, not least that most of us associate Sheldon Meyer with places: a cavernous hotel room where he reigned benignly at an Oxford party; a dinner table at the leafy Commander’s Palace in New Orleans; on a Chicago rooftop overlooking Lake Michigan; a cramped campus office where he appeared in quest of a manuscript; a frigid seat at Giants Stadium in the New Jersey meadows; a sunlit luncheon venue with lobster salad and chilled Chardonnay at his summer home on Fisher’s Island off the Connecticut coast.

In our letter of invitation, we told prospective authors that we wanted them to write a short essay on a place that engaged them, and encouraged them to adopt a personal style. We were looking for, we explained, not just a descriptive piece about a particular site, but the interaction of the historian with that place. These were to be personal essays of a sort historians often do not get a chance to write, and the author was to be at the center of his or her essay.

The historians who were invited responded with gusto. All welcomed an opportunity to say thank-you to Sheldon, and almost all found the conception of the book congenial, although, taught from their first days in graduate school to eschew the *I* word, some took a while to adapt to the personal idiom. We made no attempt to impose topics on contributors, and they showed considerable imagination in their choices. James C. Cobb and David Brion Davis defined *American* to encompass the U.S. presence on the European continent; Edward L. Ayers comprehended *Places* to accommodate the virtual sphere of cyberspace. Some other venues were almost as unexpected: Fenway Park and the Polo Grounds, an arts and crafts colony in upstate New York, and a Hollywood bistro. The essays—ranging from coast to coast, with stops at places such as Stone Mountain, Georgia, and Main Street, Memphis, in between—can be no more than suggestive of the range of Sheldon’s reach. We present them for the pleasure of our readers, but especially, with abiding affection, for one particular reader: the redoubtable Sheldon Meyer.

WILLIAM E. LEUCHTENBURG

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## Taking Place

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**P**eople have always had a strong sense of place. The Romans spoke of the *genius loci*, the “spirit of a place,” and we can understand their meaning readily today, even if the spirit for us is a feeling rather than a deity. “Place,” writes Eudora Welty, “absorbs our earliest notice and attention; it bestows on us our original awareness; and our critical powers spring from the study of it and the growth of experience inside it.”

For anyone intrigued by history, the physical traces of the past, especially places, have a particular fascination. Certain sites speak to us because in visiting them we confront the past in a tangible, immediate way. Sometimes we visit historic places as an act of homage. Sometimes we visit them to satisfy simple curiosity—what did Walden Pond look like? Sometimes we discover history in an unexpected locale, like a restaurant or a baseball park. But whatever the occasion for our visiting these places, there is no question that we understand history in a different way when we encounter it “on the ground.”

Place stimulates the historical imagination in several ways. These different facets of the historian’s sense of place are displayed with sparkling variety in the essays collected in this volume. Perhaps the first way we think of place is as setting—the scene in which the events of history are played out. The battlefield at Gettysburg, so well evoked here by James M. McPherson, was the stage for one of the greatest dramas of the Civil War, while Elvis Presley’s Graceland witnessed the less edifying spectacle of the King’s demise, recalled in Joel Williamson’s wry tour. Yet in either case, we cannot imagine the event without the setting, nor can we visit the place without replaying in our minds what happened there.

Of course, place may be much more than a backdrop for history; it can itself shape people and events. Simple geography can be crucial. As David Kennedy observes, the very remoteness, in 1859, of San Juan Island prevented a spat between U.S. and British troops from becoming

## TAKING PLACE

an international conflict. Or something harder to define—a *genius loci*—may leave its mark. David Hackett Fischer detects, for example, a spirit in the history of Boston Common that has helped to give that city its unique character. On a more intimate level, Bertram Wyatt-Brown's recollection of growing up in Sewanee tells us about an unusual place (and its unusual inhabitants) that helped to form the writer himself.

Place is also a connector: some sites speak so strongly of individuals who have gone before us that we almost feel we can touch them there. To visit Monticello is, as Merrill Peterson shows, as close as we can come to spending a day with Thomas Jefferson. But we can also feel such a link in places that are not "historic" in the plaque-and-guidebook sense. Paula Fass learned that in a country store in California, where a chance discovery connected her to the past with the jolt of an electric current. And Alice Kessler-Harris writes movingly here of how, in a Fifth Avenue mansion, she heard the voices of Eastern European immigrants.

If places can shape history, it is no less true that they are shaped by it, often indelibly. It is no surprise, then, that many of our contributors "read" places as evidence—a historical record written in three dimensions. To William Freehling, Charleston's Battery and New Orleans's Jackson Square spoke volumes about the varied origins and cultures of the Old South. To William Leuchtenburg, the changing face of a Queens, New York, street corner encapsulates the modern history of his native borough. And Donald Worster, in his elegant essay on the Grand Canyon, finds inscribed there the story of an entire planet.

"One place comprehended can make us understand other places better," Welty went on to say. She might have added that it can make us understand history better, for the unfolding of events is inseparable from their location: that is why we say history "takes place." The writers in this volume have each "taken place," too, and eloquently. They have come together to honor a friend and colleague, but they have given us twenty-eight additional reasons to celebrate.

PETER GINNA

**A M E R I C A N P L A C E S**