

### A Valley Divides: Cd-Rom Offers 'Self-Guided Tour Along The Path Toward War'

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## Review

### A VALLEY DIVIDES

#### CD-ROM offers 'self-guided tour along the path toward war'

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**Ayers, Edward L. and Rubin, Anne S.** *The Valley of the Shadow: Two Communities in the American Civil War with CD-ROM*. W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2000-08-01. ISBN 393046044

Once in a great while, we encounter a scholarly work so thoroughly unprecedented that we must strain to comprehend and explain it. So it is with the new book and CD-ROM set, **Valley of the Shadow: The Eve of War**. In this case, the innovation is not so much in the form of the work-there are other CD-ROM and book combinations-but in the information in the package, and in its myriad implications.

Even the more familiar product, the book, attests to the originality of **Valley of the Shadow**. It contains only three chapters. In the first, we encounter a rousing description of the subject communities, Augusta County in Virginia and Franklin County in Pennsylvania. Edward L. Ayers and Anne S. Rubin reveal the unexpected connections of the two areas: both rest within the Great Valley (called Shenandoah in Virginia, Cumberland in Pennsylvania), both benefited from the same migration patterns, outside of slavery their economies were more similar than different, and both would suffer in the war that lay ahead. As an introductory piece, the chapter is unusual. It does not set up a specific thesis or delineate historiographical boundaries. Instead, Ayers and Rubin use the early pages to let their subjects speak for themselves. Quotes abound, revealing both what had united and what would separate these two counties and their nation, and these voices herald the intriguing presentation that follows in book and CD-ROM.

Ayers should be well-known to those interested in the history of 19th century America; he is author or co-editor of several books, including a prize-winning synthesis, *The Promise of the New South: Life After*

*Reconstruction*, and is Hugh P. Kelly Professor of History at the University of Virginia. He is also founder of the Valley of the Shadow Project at the University of Virginia, where Anne Rubin was project director from 1994-96. She now teaches at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, and will soon publish a monograph, *A Shattered Nation: The Rise and Fall of the Confederacy, 1861-1868*.

In the second chapter of **Valley of the Shadow**, Ayers and Rubin examine what they call "digital history." Here, the uniqueness of the collection becomes more evident, for readers learn about the history of the Valley of the Shadow Project, the features of the CD, some paths through the electronic records, and the credo of the larger enterprise and this compilation. As Ayers and Rubin proclaim on page 30, patterns wait "latent in the digital data we provide, but they become history only when people translate them into stories and arguments. And there will be arguments. The Valley Project demonstrates what historians have long known: the evidence does not speak for itself, nor does it tell only one story." Five pages later, they profess that their work "does not push any particular interpretation," and encourage those engaged with **Valley of the Shadow** to accept that "there were more than two sides to the Civil War, that blacks and whites, rich and poor, Democrats and Republicans, and men and women saw things differently."

One begins to suspect that **Valley of the Shadow** is offered in a new form because accepted methods of historical presentation are not quite adequate for the breadth and variety of this way of telling the story. The extensive third chapter, "The Impending Crisis," contains ample evidence of this new dilemma. By traditional standards, this narrative section provides a compelling introduction to the politics and public events that led toward civil war. National developments, well-known leaders and their issues, and political maneuvering and outcomes are all explored in a crisp and engaging style. The authors even manage to connect national and regional events to the people of Augusta and Franklin counties, and do so without reducing the two communities to local-color status, or oversimplifying national questions in the limited context.

But traditional standards, the book's earlier chapters have proclaimed, no longer apply. Readers have been promised they can have more, that the past holds more than one compelling story, and that they can find and assess it for themselves in an ongoing dialogue of past and present. This sort of democratic promise is hard to make and easy to break. Fortunately, the CD-ROM delivers

even more than the book suggests.

Opening the CD (which is Windows- and Mac-compatible), one is immediately struck by the wealth and variety of the information within. One option is to proceed by choosing from the different types of information: diaries and letters, enlistments, music, census and tax records, churches, maps, newspapers, images, timelines, or reference. Selecting any one of these options narrows the breadth of information available but introduces a great depth of data.

Genealogists, for example, will delight in the opportunity to search quickly and thoroughly through all the extant records for these two counties before the Civil War. Those primarily interested in the war itself will be astounded at how many doubting voices were raised before the conflict, as men and women in each community questioned the likelihood of war, the wisdom of military preparations, and finally, their people's ability to escape the conflict. Students and other researchers will be amazed at the ease with which **Valley of the Shadow** delivers up the secrets of the past, reducing inquiries that might have required months of archival work to a few keystrokes and a brief wait. Even more readily than the Valley of the Shadow website, the CD-ROM makes it easy to undertake a self-guided tour along the path toward war.

But not all users will want to embark without a guide, nor should they. For those desiring a more structured approach, the CD offers another option, "The Valley Album." Instead of organizing the information by types of record, the Album is set up by topic. One may choose to learn about the Great Valley, households and farms, runaway slaves, John Brown, secession, or the beginning of the war, among many others. Pursuing any one of these topics opens information in a variety of ways: users can hear Ayers's audio assessment of the issue, look at illustrations from the period, or explore digital sources for a customized approach to the question. Thus, the Album offers the scholarly framework that users less familiar with the era's history may initially need, while also providing resources to encourage individual assessments and interpretations of major issues. Advanced high school and college students will appreciate this unique combination of guidance and intellectual opportunity, and the work should soon be on the reading lists of numerous courses concerned with 19th century America and the Civil War.

There are risks to this approach. Users of **Valley of the Shadow** enter a re-creation of the past without the usual boundary markers of scholarship;

indeed, users are expected to construct their own intellectual analysis. Moreover, this work about the origins of the Civil War avoids naming any particular cause as central to the conflict's occurrence; neither fanaticism, nor separate economies, nor diverging societies, nor political ineptitude is singled out as the most important element.

Yet, the text, especially in the third and longest chapter, does imply an overarching perspective. We are reminded that it was the peculiar history of this era—the unanticipated events, innovations, and mistakes of the years preceding First Manassas—that led to the adoption of extreme measures and the acceptance of harsh consequences. Ayers says as much in an audio clip in the CD's Album, describing history as "people responding to events beyond their control in the best way they can think of." Indeed, the Valley Project is designed "to show how people make their own history . . . day by day. . . ." By opening up records that transport so much of the past, **Valley of the Shadow: The Eve of War** gives us each the opportunity to write and understand history "day by day," to comprehend the ways our subjects were swept along and struggled, and to appreciate the new sense of nation their sacrifices brought forth.

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