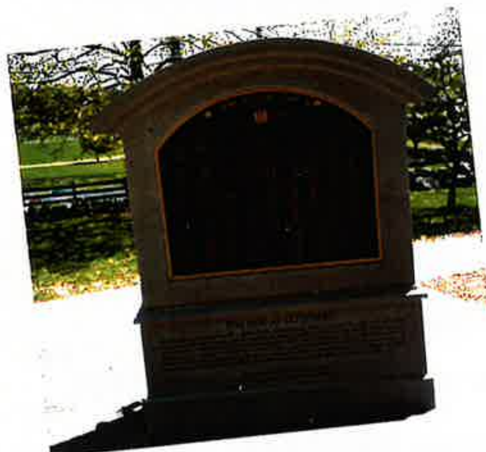
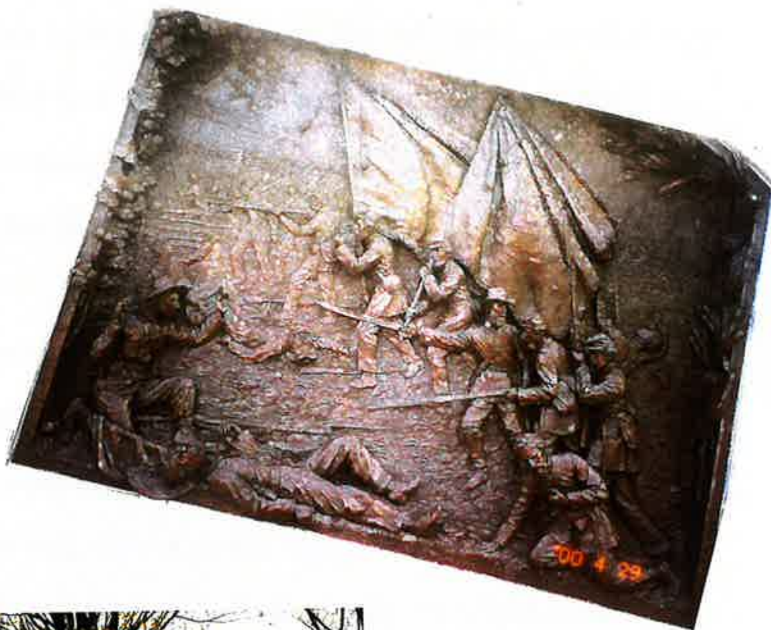
MYSTIC CHORDS OF MEMORY

An Address by Ken Burns
Delivered on April 29, 2000
At Gettysburg, Pennsylvania
For the Dedication of the Delaware Memorial





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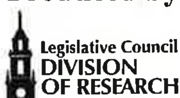

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MYSTIC CHORDS OF MEMORY

by Ken Burns

Listen. Early in the Civil War, well before the Battle of Gettysburg and far removed from any of the other major fighting, a young fugitive slave named Alex Turner made his way north and eventually joined the Union Army. In the spring of 1863, on the eve of the calamitous events that led deadly armies to this peaceful crossroads, he guided his regiment back to his old plantation at Port Royal, Virginia and killed his former overseer.

He served with distinction throughout the war, fighting for a new version and a new vision of the Union and its great ennobling promise, made four score and seven years before, that all men were created equal. Now, as the war drew to its close, Turner moved to New England, finding work as a logger. Ultimately, he decided to settle in Vermont, because it was, he told his family, the only state admitted to the Union with slavery already proscribed. In fact, as early as 1786, the quirky, defiant, fiercely independent Republic of Vermont had passed a bill forbidding the sale of human beings, forbidding one American owning another, or their forced removal from its territory.

Alex Turner lived out his life in the gentle green hills of Grafton, Vermont, running a farm and raising a family which came to include, in 1883, a daughter Daisy, who would in <u>her</u> miraculous

lifetime help a documentary filmmaker struggling to understand the great battle that happened here, dramatically connect the past with the present, and so perpetuate that magnificent drama we call history.

Good afternoon. (More on Daisy in a minute.) Governor Carper, Mr. Smith, Colonel Moore, distinguished guests, citizens of the great State of Delaware--the First State I hasten to add in this nearly perfect union--ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls. I am deeply honored, as a proud son of the State of Delaware, that you have asked me to speak today on so important an occasion--as we also this day perpetuate that magnificent drama we call history.

First let us all say how moved and reminded we are with this magnificent sculpture and let us offer up our thanks to the artist who crafted it, memorializing for our posterity the courage and sacrifice of the sons of Delaware who helped achieve the new birth of freedom this country has enjoyed since those terrible three days in July one hundred and thirty seven years ago. Mr. Tunison we are in your debt. You have helped us to have a history.

In this day and age, we are conditioned by our consumer culture to think of history as something distant, dry, cold, removed from our experience. We see it mostly as an unnecessary and completely irrelevant pursuit of things best left dead, left permanently in the past, of no value to us now. Nothing could be

further from the truth. As Harry Truman said, "The only thing that is really new is the history you don't know."

So let us also give thanks to the miracle of history itself. We do not celebrate the past because we can in anyway alter it, as nostalgia so often and too often tries to do, but because we find in an open exploration of the events that went before us, a window through which we can see much of who we are now. The questions we ask of the past are questions asked in this present. William Faulkner once said, "History is not 'was' but 'is'". A consideration of what has gone before does nothing to effect those past events; history only has meaning for us now. It holds up a precise and sometimes difficult mirror in which we can see imaged the people we are now, our flaws and strengths, our deepest recesses and our loftiest hopes. In a strange and miraculous way it even suggests our future. The miracle of history then, paradoxically, permits the past to heal the present and ensure our future. It is medicine for us now.

Let us not forget to give up our thanks this day to the miracle of small states. At the heart of the genius of this remarkable Republic was an insistence by those smaller former colonies that our Constitution give special attention to those without dominating geographical size, vast natural resources, huge population. Small states first saved this Union at its inception; without our headstrong intransigence, we would probably resemble more the former Yugoslavia than the greatest, most powerful, most united and free nation on earth. And ...we sent our sons here, the First and Second

Delaware Regiments, from New Castle and Kent and Sussex, from North Star and Canterbury and Mission, as well as Wilmington and Dover and Rehoboth--some of whom did not come back--for the incandescent ideals forged by our god-given stubbornness. Let us give thanks for that!

Ladies and Gentlemen, I am honored to have this opportunity to speak with you today, to celebrate the special messages the past -- our common heritage -- continually directs our way. Let us listen. Too often as a culture we have ignored this joyful noise, becoming in the process blissfully ignorant of the power those past lives and stories and moments have over this moment, and indeed, our unknown future.

Daisy Turner, of Vermont--another small state where the granite in this monument is from--lived to see more than one hundred of her own years, finding as she went enough time in her busy life to give a documentary filmmaker a few minutes of priceless film poetry. Sitting blind and nearly totally deaf, in a nursing home that would be her final residence, she flawlessly recited the dozens of rhyming couplets that make up "The Soldier's Story", a poem she had known for more than ninety years, a heart-wrenching poem about a young man's death in battle during the Civil War.

We divided her stunning recitation into five more or less equal sections and distributed them, no, sowed them like seeds, throughout our sequence on the battle of Gettysburg. The result is that Daisy

Turner became a kind of cinematic Greek Chorus, rising above the terror and horror of the greatest battle ever fought in the Western Hemisphere. Daisy personalized our presentation in a way few histories have been able to do, and by so doing, reminded us all of the power of history itself.

I am interested in the "power of history", in its many varied voices and its many messages. American history is a loud, raucous, moving, exquisite collection of noises, that in the aggregate often combine to make the sweetest kind of music.

More than anything else these myriad voices remind us that history is not just the story of wars and generals and presidents, but ordinary people, like you and me, who form the real fabric of our history and society.

Woodrow Wilson felt this strongly. He wrote: "When I look back on the processes of history, when I survey the genesis of America, I see this written over every page: that the nations are renewed from the bottom, not from the top; that the genius which springs up from the ranks of unknown men is the genius which renews the youth and energy of the people. Everything I know about history, every bit of experience and observation that has contributed to my thought, has confirmed me in the conviction that the real wisdom of human life is compounded out of the experience of ordinary men." Today we celebrate ordinary men. Today, we

listen closely...to hear their stories. Today, we strain to hear the ghosts and echoes of an almost inexpressibly wise past.

For many years, I had hoped to do a history of the Civil War on film, but had never been able to get up the courage. Then on Christmas Day, 1984, I finished reading a book which literally changed my life. It was a novel of the battle of Gettysburg called "Killer Angels" and it was written by a man named Michael Shaara. It had won the Pulitzer Prize in the mid-seventies and had been recommended to me by many friends.

"The Killer Angels" told the story of three of the most important days in American history; the high water mark of the Confederacy, the mistake of all mistakes by Robert E. Lee, indeed, the price the South would have to pay for having Robert E. Lee as its general: Gettysburg, the greatest battle ever fought in the Western Hemisphere.

But what was important to me about the book was that it introduced me, for the first time, to a man not unlike many of the sturdy Delawareans who fought here. His name was Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain. It is my belief that Chamberlain represents the best kind of history, that he is the best kind of American. His is the story, though, like the dozens we laud here today, which always gets overlooked in the superficial aerial views of history we are usually presented with. He enlivens, though, page after page of history, as we learn first of his early life as a professor at Bowdoin College, then

as the green colonel of the 20th Maine, finally as hero at Fredericksburg, Petersburg, and Gettysburg, especially Gettysburg, where on Little Round Top he executes an obscure textbook maneuver that saves the Union army and quite possibly the Union itself. (As he was doing that, the 2nd Delaware was down just below him in the Wheatfield, the terrible wheat field, where the small creek would later run red.)

Chamberlain is also a hero of another kind at Appomattox. In my view, this was truly his finest hour. It was a different kind of heroism there that we need so desperately to be aware of today. Chamberlain was given the task of receiving the flags of the tattered Confederate Army during the formal surrender which took place a few days after Lee and Grant had met, to discuss in preliminary fashion the terms. Now, at this solemn ceremony, where Chamberlain had already forbidden his men to cheer or taunt their rebel counterparts, he made an extra-ordinary gesture. John B. Gordon, the Confederate general who had the painful task of supervising the final march of his army, saw and said it best I think, and I quote: "Chamberlain called his men into line and as my men marched in front of them, the veterans in blue gave a soldierly salute to those vanquished heroes--a token of respect from Americans to Americans." In reconciliation, Chamberlain made his greatest contribution to war. And that is the most important thing we should take from today: our American genius has been for reconciliation and compromise, and when it has broken down, as it did throughout the

magnificent orchards of South Central Pennsylvania throughout this beautiful farmland, we murdered each other.

For many years and some generations after the war, Chamberlain's story was overlooked, the actions of this citizen-hero for the most part forgotten. That is the way it is in history. Many worthwhile events and people get lost in the interpretive shuffle and it takes a new generation, a later generation to rescue and save that which it finds important. Let us remember to always save our stories, particularly the 691 loyal Delawarians we immortalize today.

It is important to add that it was not all solemn and serious during the Civil War. Despite the great carnage he watched inflicted on his species, besides the useless death he saw, besides his own six wounds, Chamberlain still found time to record sweeter moments. A few weeks after the battle of Fredericksburg, that unmitigated disaster for the Union, Chamberlain told his brother Tom that he had never felt so well and so alive in his life, and added, "What makes it strange, is that I should have gained 12 pounds living on worms."

Humor, of course, played an important role in the Civil War, easing the pain and relieving the horror we were visiting on our own family members. During the long, cold, rainy winter of 1863, Confederate forces huddled in defensive positions south of the Duck River, near Tullahoma, Tennessee. Confederate officers liked to explain that Tullahoma came from the Greek word "Tulla" meaning mud, and "homa" meaning more mud.

Abraham Lincoln said if he ever saw a man homelier than himself, he'd shoot the wretch and put him out of his misery. Stonewall Jackson never ate pepper because he thought it would make his left leg ache. He rode into battle, in fact, with one arm raised, to keep, he said, the blood balanced, and he never mailed a letter if he thought it would be in transit on a Sunday. The bombastic John Pope, a terrible Union general, so often signed his dispatches "headquarters in the saddle" that Lincoln finally said Pope had his headquarters where his hindquarters ought to be. U.S. Grant said he knew only two tunes: one was Yankee Doodle and the other wasn't. And Sherman hated newspapermen so much that he said if he killed them all there would be news from Hell before breakfast.

For many of us, we are brought to our history in just this fashion. With story, memory, anecdote, feeling. These emotional connections become a kind of glue which makes the most complex of past events stick in our minds and our hearts, permanently a part of who each of us is now.

Several years ago a friend of mine at the National Archives sent me a bunch of old papers about some skirmishes in Western Virginia during the Civil War. There wasn't time to include it in our series, indeed, the old top down version of history would not have even glanced at these old papers of campaigns long forgotten, statistical records best left unsifted. I bring them up because they have personal meaning to real people, sometimes they speak louder

than the larger aerial views of the war do. Those reports included mentions of the actions of a Union General Averall in the newly created State of West Virginia at Moorefield in August of 1863. It seems that Averall was able to capture a group of Confederate cavalrymen in a small skirmish. The Southerners were mostly from Captain McClanahan's Co. of Virginia Horse Artillery. They were, in the fascinating details of these records, completely out-gunned. Three men were killed, five wounded, and thirteen were made prisoners and sent to Camp Chase in Ohio to be eventually paroled in March 1865. The records at Camp Chase are sketchier, but they do record receiving, processing and releasing (paroling) the prisoners. They are a fairly non-descript bunch. Most seem to have come from Bathe County, Virginia. None were slave holders, or looked to have much interest in the Constitutional issues. One fellow was described as being 5 feet, 4 inches tall, with a dark complexion, gray eyes, and dark hair. He said he was a blacksmith in life and stated to the copyist, a Mr. R. W. Pearson, that he had been forced to join the Confederate Army. Another copyist, a Mr. Jameison places the group of "rebels" at Cox's Wharves on the James River near City Point on March 11 or 12, 1865, where all records of the men disappear.

I was struck by the impersonal nature of the papers and yet a sense that real Americans had lived through this war. Had been touched by it. Fought. Were captured. Held prisoner. Released. Shod horses. Maybe in the top down version of things they didn't matter much, but in someone's history they do and that makes for a different history.

10. Mystic Chords of Memory--Gettysburg, 4/00

Listen. Several years ago, not far from Abraham Lincoln's White House, Vaclav Havel, the poet-president of the Czech Republic spoke about the salvation of the human world. That salvation, he said, "lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human weakness and in human responsibility." Freely quoting the sixteenth president, Havel acknowledged that Lincoln too knew about the human heart and the human world.

More than 150 years ago, in 1838, Abraham Lincoln challenged us to consider the real threat to the country, to consider forever the real cost of our inattention: "Whence shall we expect the approach of danger?" he wrote. "Shall some transatlantic giant step the earth and crush us at a blow? Never. All the armies of Europe and Asia could not by force take a drink from the Ohio River or make a track in the Blue Ridge in the trial of a thousand years. No, if destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of free men, we will live forever or die by suicide." Lincoln, of course, presided over the closest this country has ever come to national suicide. This was the Civil War, our great, tragic epic story, the American Iliad; as relevant today as at any time in our history. It was a poignant family drama that reveals more of the American character, is more defining of us as a nation than any other event before or after.

Listen. At 4:30 a.m. on the 12th of April, 1861, General Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard directed his Confederate gunners to

open fire on Fort Sumter, at that hour only a dark shape out in Charleston harbor. Thirty-four hours later a white flag over the fort ended the bombardment. The only casualty was a Confederate horse. It was a bloodless opening to the bloodiest war in American history.

No one could have predicted the magnitude of the explosion that rocked America following that opening shot. Until then America had been, as Bruce Catton wrote, "small enough to carry in the mind and in the heart, and a young man's fatherland was what he could see from his bedroom window." Yet most of what America was before the Civil War went into sparking that explosion and most of what it became resulted from it. Entirely unimaginable before it began, the war was the most defining and shaping event in American history -- so much so that it is now impossible to imagine what we would have been like without it.

Shortly after Appomattox, Walt Whitman, a Brooklyn journalist and sometime poet who worked in the appalling Union hospitals, warned posterity of what he had seen. "Future years," he wrote, "will never know the seething hell and the black infernal background, the countless minor scenes and interiors of the secession war; and it is best they should not. The real war," Whitman insisted, "will never get in the books."

The writers and historians of future years have not been scared off by Whitman's admonition. In the century and a quarter since the War's conclusion, more than fifty thousand books have

been published on the Civil War. Each year dozens of new titles appear, again offering to revisit the war, to reinterpret or rearrange those strange days and hard events -- faint traces and distant signals now -- looking still for the coherent, the conclusive explanation.

And yet Whitman's words retain their force. The "real war" stays there, outside all the books, beckoning to us. Why did Americans kill each other and how did it happen? Who were these people who fought and killed, marched and sang, wrote home, skedaddled, deserted, died, nursed and lamented, persevered and were defeated? What was it like to be in that war? What did it do to America and Americans? What happened to the movement that freed blacks from slavery? Why have succeeding generations obscured the war with bloodless, gallant myth, blurring the causes and its great ennobling outcome -- the freeing of four million black people and their descendants from bondage? What did it mean that the Union won? What does it mean to be a Union? Why are we still so drawn to this tale of suffering, catastrophe, heroism and death?

Some events so pervasively condition the life of a culture that they retain the power to fascinate permanently. They become the focus of myth and the anchor of meaning for a whole society. Shelby Foote, author of the classic three-volume narrative history, The Civil War, said in an interview for our film series: "Any understanding of this nation has to be based, and I mean really based, on an understanding of the Civil War. It defined us. It was the crossroads

of our being, and it was a hell of a crossroads: the suffering, the enormous tragedy of the whole thing."

Like so many others, we are all drawn today to that crossroads: brought back to the words and images those who lived through it left behind, to the mire of questions and myths, to the brutality and heroism of the four year struggle that defines us as people.

The Civil War had been given many names: the War Between the States, the War Against Northern Aggression, the Second American Revolution, the Lost Cause, the War of Rebellion, the Brother's War, the Late Unpleasantness. Walt Whitman called it the War of Attempted Secession. Confederate General Joseph Johnston called it the War Against the States. By whatever name, it was unquestionably the most important event in the life of the nation. It saw the end of slavery and the downfall of a Southern planter aristocracy. It was the watershed of a new political and economic order, and the beginning of big industry, big business, big government. It was the first modern war and, for Americans, the costliest, yielding the most American casualties and the greatest domestic suffering, spiritually and physically. It was the most horrible, necessary, intimate, acrimonious, mean-spirited, and heroic conflict the nation has known.

Inevitably we grasp the war through such hyperbole. In so doing, we tend to blur the fact that real people lived through it and were changed by the event. One hundred eighty-five thousand black

Americans fought to free their people. Fishermen and storekeepers from Deer Isle, Maine, served bravely and died miserably in strange places like Baton Rouge, Louisiana and Fredericksburg, Virginia. There was scarcely a family in the South that did not lose a son or brother or father.

As with any civil strife, the war was marked by excruciating ironies. Robert E. Lee became a legend in the confederate army only after turning down an offer to command the entire Union forces. Four of Lincoln's own brothers-in-law fought on the Confederate side, and one was killed. The little town of Winchester, Virginia, changed hands 72 times during the war, and the State of Missouri sent thirty-nine regiments to fight in the siege of Vicksburg: seventeen to the Confederacy and twenty-two to the Union.

That war, this war, has touched a chord in our collective life which is still vibrating and will continue to vibrate as long as the Republic lives. If you see the history of your country in the same sympathetic and personal way you see the life of a human being, then it is clear that the Civil War was the great traumatic event in the childhood of this nation. Disguise it as we may, ignore it as we usually do, distort it as we have so often done, we cannot ultimately not be continually influenced by this terrible terrible memory of the four years during which we came close to ending our national life.

My own mother, known to many of you in Delaware, died when I was eleven, permanently changing me and permanently influencing

all that I would become. The Civil War defines us in just that way, at both an intensely intimate level and in a broad national sense.

Finally, Lincoln, of course, said it best. Early in 1861, at his first inauguration, when he still hoped to keep his country together, he implored Southerners not to go to war. "We must not be enemies," he said, "We must be friends." But then he went on, "The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be by the better angels of our nature." Isn't that it?

The Mystic Chords of Memory.

The Better Angels of Our Nature. That is why we are here today.

Speaking of memory. Remember that Confederate blacksmith captured at Moorefield, West Virginia and imprisoned at Camp Chase in Ohio? His name was Abraham Burns--my great, great grandfather.

[the following brief report will appear in the program at the dedication:]

The Art of the Delaware Memorial at Gettysburg

by W. Barksdale Maynard, Delaware College of Art and Design

The Delaware Memorial will be one of the last at Gettysburg, as a moratorium has been imposed. The design was chosen by an advisory committee headed by R. Thorpe Moeckel of Moeckel, Carbonell Associates and Kim Burdick, Project Director; site preparation was overseen by James Codori. The memorial has three components: the nearly 11-foot-tall granite monument, the bronze bas-relief sculpture, and the rear plaque. The sculpture by Ron Tunison, of Cairo, New York, depicts Delaware soldiers along Cemetery Ridge who, having helped repulse Pickett's charge, hurl themselves forward in a countercharge, a vivid scene of action punctuated with banners and bayonets. A border of oak and pine boughs symbolizes the distinct cultures of northern and southern Delaware. Tunison made a small-scale model that was enlarged before being cast at state-of-the-art Tallix Foundry, New York, where the Leonardo da Vinci horse was recently completed. His relief is set into a 21-ton granite monument designed by W. Barksdale Maynard and Richard L. Dayton of Homsey Architects, Wilmington. Their traditional design recalls the famous Shaw Memorial, Boston, by Augustus Saint-Gaudens (1897), but the monument was quarried and carved by Rock of Ages in Barre, Vermont, using the latest technology. The rear plaque bears the names of 692 Delaware soldiers who fought with the First and Second Regiments, as researched by Charles Fithian and James Stewart of Delaware State Museums. Engraved text on the rear of the memorial discusses the regiments' battle history and concludes, "This monument is dedicated to the memory of all Delawareans who fought at Gettysburg, both Union and Confederate." The front bears a simple inscription in letters derived from the ancient Column of Trajan in Rome: "DELAWARE."