

[Should We Admit We're Getting History Wrong?](#)

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In this post for the H-CivWar Author's Blog, Lois Leveen asks historians to share their thoughts on the inevitability of getting history wrong.

Two years into H-CivWar's Author's Blog, perhaps it's time to address the octopus in the room. Wait, no, not the OCTOPUS! How could I have thought, let alone typed, nevermind hit "publish post" on anything including such an erroneous claim? Surely no one wants to claim the elephant in the room is actually an octopus! That would be wrong. Isn't the point of our work NOT to get it wrong?

Or is the belief that we *aren't* getting history wrong the most octo-proposterous idea of all?

My fellow H-CivWar bloggers and I have used previous posts to ponder a series of related concerns: [whether to deem a particular primary source reliable](#); [what do about numbers we find in historical sources that don't add up](#); [how much conjecture is kosher for a biographer or historian to include](#); and [whether the language we use to conceptualize and discuss the historical past is inevitably muddled by differences between the period we write about and the contemporary moment in which we are writing](#). All these posts, and the responses they've garnered from readers, reflect our efforts to "get history right." As integral as these efforts are, our discussions of them skirt the *oetopus* elephant in the room: the inevitability that we are getting history wrong.

During a recent stint in the National Archives, I came across a document I hadn't known existed. Although only tangentially related to my project, it revealed that I had, in an article published a few years ago, gotten the name of a key figure I was writing about wrong. Whoops! This was more than a mere erratum. Once I learned the correct name, I was able to dig around and find more about this individual, turning up information about his life that complicates my earlier analysis of his interactions with the woman I'm writing about.

This wasn't the first time I got something related to my current book project wrong. I've been researching and writing about [the subject of this biography](#) on and off for decades; a few months ago, I realized that I'd been interpreting some of the first "substantiated facts" about her life entirely incorrectly. These are instances in which I've long known *what happened*, but only recently recognized I'd been completely mistaken about *why* those things happened. The facts themselves haven't changed. But my future publications will inevitably involve correcting my own previously published misconceptions of how she came to be in particular places, doing particular things, at particular moments -- and what those experiences would have meant to her.

The process of tracking down sources, gathering evidence, piecing together findings, and interpreting them (in part through the lenses provided by the work of other scholars) is, of course, exhilarating. But it's also a bit terrifying. Because no matter how hard we try, what we

produce will be flawed.

Last fall, Vincent Carretta kicked off [a seminar at the Massachusetts Historical Society about an article Cornelia Dayton published on the later years of Phillis Wheatley's life](#) by noting that in his biography of Wheatley, he had accounted for this same three-year period, with “an explanation . . . which I thought was plausible and actually somewhat elegant. Unfortunately, as Professor Dayton has demonstrated, it was simply totally wrong.” Dayton hadn't set out to correct Carretta's work on Wheatley; she'd been researching a seemingly unrelated topic (intellectual disability in early America) when she came across a court case involving Wheatley's husband, John Peters. These newfound documents provided information no Wheatley scholar ever knew existed; as Carretta joked, now he knows what he'll do in his retirement: revise his previously published book.

I find Carretta's gracious and self-effacing *mea culpa* both reassuring and daunting. His enthusiasm for Dayton's findings is a reminder that ours is a collective effort, and that each thing any of us publishes inevitably makes only a partial contribution to the whole. As someone who works primarily outside the academy, in the public humanities, I regularly stress to audiences that part of what historians grapple with is newly emerging evidence and nuanced interpretation.

Nevertheless, at a moment when the teaching of U.S. history (particularly the history of race and racism in the U.S., which is the focus of my work) is under political attack, it feels more imperative than ever to get things right. Indeed, it seems almost dangerous to get anything wrong, as though it can undo all our credibility.

And, to be totally honest, I also simply don't want to accept that I might be overlooking anything, that I might miss some potentially revealing source, or gravely misinterpret one I've found. I don't want that to happen because I care about my subject and want to do justice to her fascinating, complicated life. But also because I don't want to get something so wrong I end up with egg, or octopus, or elephant on my face.

Thus, my question for readers of this post: How do we simultaneously strive to get history right yet acknowledge the inevitability that we are getting history wrong? How do we proceed with writing books and articles (and even blog posts), when we know we can never really know whether what we're saying is -- and always ever after will be -- all quite right?

CIVIL WAR AUTHORS BLOG publishes a new post on the fourth Friday of each month. These posts reflect questions and challenges from Civil War books-in-progress, and are intended to create conversation among H-CivWar subscribers. In addition to our regular contributors, we welcome posts from guest bloggers. If you would like to contribute a guest post, please contact David Prior at dmprior@unm.edu.

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