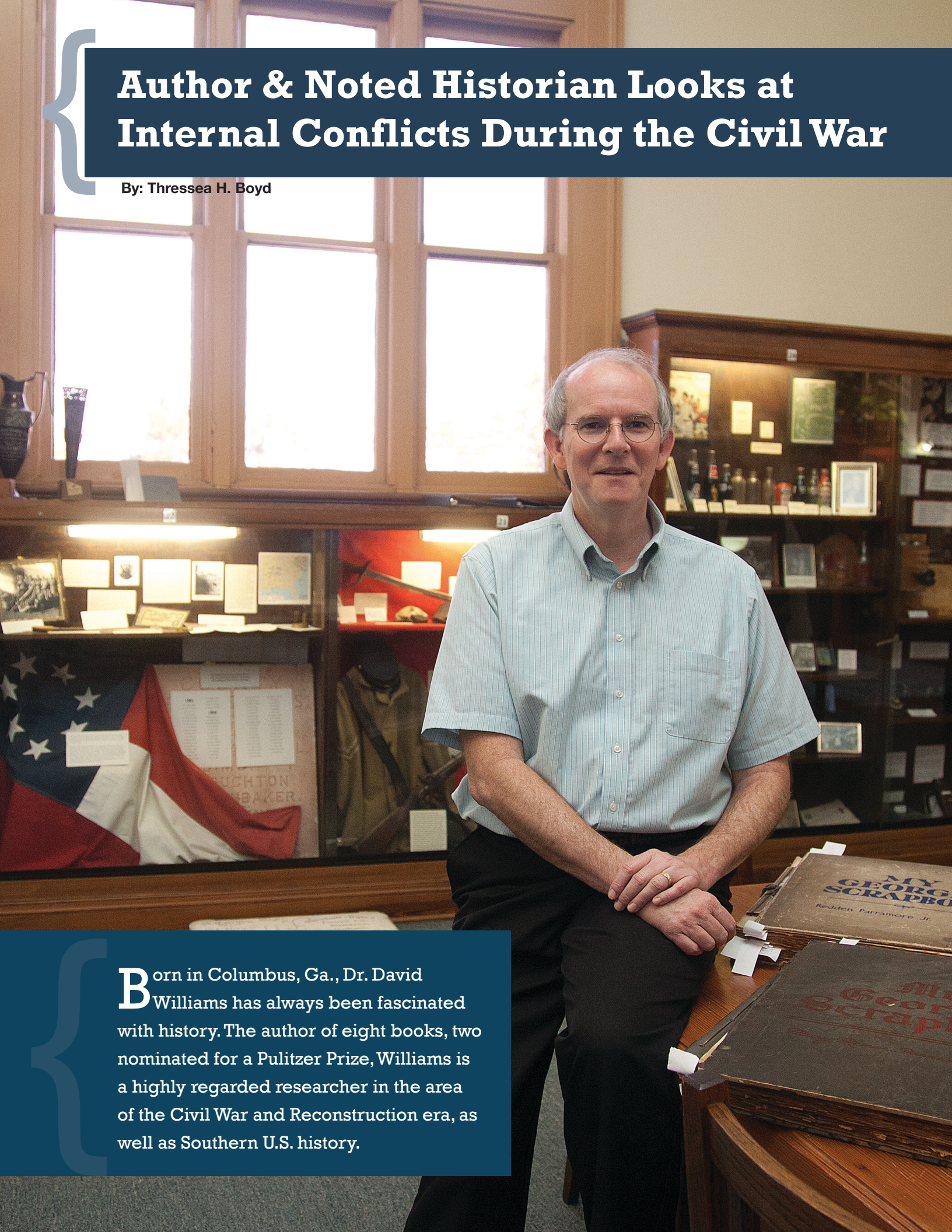


# Author & Noted Historian Looks at Internal Conflicts During the Civil War

By: Thressea H. Boyd



**B**orn in Columbus, Ga., Dr. David Williams has always been fascinated with history. The author of eight books, two nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, Williams is a highly regarded researcher in the area of the Civil War and Reconstruction era, as well as Southern U.S. history.

*“In my research, I wanted to look at what was going on behind the lines and explore what impact that had on the battlefield,” Williams said.*

“My best subject in school was always history,” said the Valdosta State University professor of history. “That seemed to be the most attractive.”

Williams, 53, received a bachelor’s degree in history and political science and a master’s degree in social studies from North Georgia College and State University. He then spent three years in the U.S. Army, while earning a master’s degree in history from Washington College. In 1988, Williams completed a doctorate in history at Auburn University.

While attending college in the North Georgia mountains, Williams became interested in the history of the state’s gold rush years, which later became the focus for his doctoral dissertation and first two books: *Gold Fever: America’s First Gold Rush* and *The Georgia Gold Rush: Twenty-Niners, Cherokees, and Gold Fever*.

## **Desertion Among the Confederates**

Later Williams focused his research on the history of Georgia and, more specifically, the Civil War (1861 to 1865).

“In my research, I wanted to look at what was going on behind the lines and explore what impact that had on the battlefield,” Williams said. “One issue that always puzzled me was that the Union Army outnumbered the Confederate Army two-to-one even though traditionally accepted desertion rates might suggest otherwise.”

Through his research of newspaper articles and the soldiers’ diaries, Williams found that soldiers were deserting the Confederate Army primarily due to hunger and the need to take care of their families back home.

“The official desertion rates did not match what I was reading, and then I found an interesting quote from Jefferson Davis given in 1864,” Williams said. “Davis stated that two-thirds of the Confederate Army was ‘absent without leave,’ or you can basically say they had deserted. That explained a lot.”

Williams began to look at the issue of dissent in the South during the Civil War and, more specifically, what was prompting the high desertion rate and how it impacted the outcome of the war.

He explains that in today’s popular culture, there is a common opinion that most Southerners, especially white Southerners, were fully united with the Confederacy.

“This really wasn’t the case at all. In fact, most Southerners, even white Southerners, had opposed secession, even in the Deep South,” Williams said.

Middle class white farmers, often referred to as plain folk or yeomen, did not own slaves or had very few. This group became increasingly resentful of the political and economic privileges given to the planters, who were more affluent farmers that primarily grew cotton — a highly profitable commodity.

“By early 1862, it was so bad in the Confederacy that they had to resort to a draft, in which planters were excused,” Williams said. “This created a lot of anger for the plain folk.”

The Confederacy justified their decision based on the fact that the planters owned most of the land and, therefore, could produce the needed food supply for the Confederacy.

“However, they didn’t do this. Instead, they grew way too much cotton and not enough food,” Williams said. “First, they sent it to the Bahamas and then to New York. This caused a food shortage in the South. The soldiers were hungry, and their families back home were hungry. There were food riots in every major city in Georgia.”

## **Research Comrades**

In *Plain Folk in a Rich Man’s War: Class and Dissent in Confederate Georgia*, Williams examined how the war affected the “plain folk” and the rising dissatisfaction of this class towards the planters and government.

In writing the book, Williams collaborated with his wife, Teresa Crisp Williams, and then graduate student David Carlson.

Williams explained that his wife’s research provided the Southern woman’s perspective of the war, while Carlson focused on the issue of desertion of soldiers from South Georgia.

For more than 30 years, Teresa Williams has supported her husband’s quest for historical knowledge.

An administrative coordinator for VSU’s Graduate School, Teresa Williams says that she has always enjoyed helping her husband with his research. The couple, married 31 years, has spent thousands of hours reading newspapers, diaries, and other documents from the Civil War years.



"We would go to archives in Atlanta and at the University of Georgia and spend eight hours a day, five days a week, poring over original documents from the Civil War," she said. "This was how I spent my vacation time."

It was during these visits to the state's archives that Teresa Williams, who received a master's degree in public administration from VSU in 1997 and a master's in history in 1999, began discovering references to women rioting and conducting raids to get food or clothing items for their children or themselves.

She read many letters from the wives and mothers of Georgia soldiers who were writing the governor and other leaders, pleading for the release of their husbands and sons.

"They were not getting enough support from the government during the war. I kept finding all this material, and I thought it was fascinating, and I never heard of such a thing, especially in my home state," says the native of Columbus, Ga. "They tell their husbands that they are starving back home. The husbands are also starving, as the Confederate Army is unable to properly feed the soldiers."

Through her research, Teresa Williams identified more than 20 cities in Georgia, including Atlanta, Augusta, Macon, Valdosta, and Columbus, with documented incidents of women rioting to provide food and clothing for their families.

As part of Georgia's Civil War Sesquicentennial in 2010, a historical marker was erected in downtown Columbus at the site of the April 11, 1863 riot, where 65 women armed with knives and pistols marched through the town raiding stores of speculators before police could restore order.

"Getting the marker in Columbus was a dream come true for me," said Teresa Williams. "I thought it would be great for a marker to go up somewhere in the state about the riots."

Dr. David Carlson, assistant professor of history at Troy University, provided valuable research that he acquired while working towards a master's in history at VSU.

His thesis, titled "Wiregrass Runners: Desertion and the Origins of Discontent in the Civil War South Georgia, 1863-1865," provided valuable information on the issue of desertion for soldiers primarily from South Georgia.

"When David completed his thesis, I thought this was fantastic research, and I found that I was incorporating so much of his research in my book that I brought him in as a co-author," Williams said.

In 1997, Carlson, a graphic designer, decided to turn his hobby and fascination with history into a career. Carlson says the opportunity to co-author a book was a key factor in his acceptance to the doctoral program at Emory University.

"History and genealogy had become a hobby that increasingly took up most of my time, and after a few years of spending weekend after weekend in libraries and archives,



*Dr. David Williams, and wife, Teresa Williams, worked to get an historical marker erected in Columbus, Ga., at the site of one of the many riots that took place during the Civil War, and organized by women throughout Georgia.*

I decided to take a leap of faith and convert a hobby into a career," said Carlson. "It was a huge risk. His willingness to bring me on as a co-author of his book, incorporating my thesis almost in its entirety, not only validated my decision to go back to school, but provided a key factor in my acceptance to the doctoral program at Emory University."

In 2004, the Georgia Historical Records Advisory Board recognized David and Teresa Williams and Carlson with the Award for Excellence in Research Using the Holdings of Archives.

## **A Disciplined Researcher**

After completing *Plain Folk in a Rich Man's War: Class and Dissent in Confederate Georgia*, Williams wrote *A People's History of the Civil War: Struggles for the Meaning of Freedom and Bitterly Divided: The South's Inner Civil War*, both nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in history, in 2006 and 2009, respectively.

Williams devotes several hours a day to writing and is currently working on his ninth book, under contract with Cambridge University Press, which examines the contributions slaves made in securing their freedom.

"I am looking at how African Americans struggled during the Civil War and mainly trying to get the message across that they were not just sitting back waiting to be freed, but were taking a decisive part both on the battlefield and behind the lines," said Williams. "I have completed the research, and it should be out by 2015."

*Photo by Mathew Brady Courtesy of the U.S. National Archives*



*Due to deteriorating conditions at home, many soldiers chose to leave their army posts. Here, family and friends hiding out across the countryside welcome deserting soldiers. Illustration from Drake, Fast and Loose in Dixie.*



*Slouch hat worn by Lt. Col. Thomas A. Faires during the Civil War. Faires' family donated numerous Civil War memorabilia to the Lowndes County Historical Society.*

