Why History Matters

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Why History Matters

by Dr. Thomas Mach ’88

ONE OF THE PRIVILEGES OF TEACHING at Cedarville is rubbing shoulders with thoughtful, intelligent, and serious thinkers. Although they likely wouldn’t know it, these individuals have profoundly influenced my thinking.

Professor Donald Hanna taught criminal justice at Cedarville for years before retiring in 2008. He sent me a short essay he wrote last year entitled “Why Read History?” I have used it in my Introduction to History class ever since. It begins with a restatement of Ockham’s Razor, which has given the field of science the basic axiom that the simpler the explanation for a naturally occurring event, the better. Professor Hanna applied this theory to history when he wrote, “Avoid complexity when possible and begin with the known before venturing into the unknown. Lessons from history are based on the known past to guide into the unknown future.”

This article confirmed what I witnessed about Professor Hanna while serving with him at Cedarville. As a young faculty member I learned much from watching Professor Hanna at committee meetings. He seldom spoke, but when he did, he had an economy of words and a powerful common sense that never failed to bring us back to the substance of the matter with a focus on our common objectives.

Professor Hanna’s wisdom is a case study in why history matters.

Begin With the Known

When I was asked last year to consider updating the history of Cedarville in preparation for its 125th anniversary, I reflected on why it is important for an institution like Cedarville to remember its past.

“In part, the history of Cedarville is important because it is a part of our personal histories.”

My students will tell you that I get up on my soapbox each semester at the start of a course and expound on the importance of history as a part of our liberal arts core and why American citizens need to know their past.

But what about a university? Why is it important that we — administration, faculty, staff, students, alumni, and indeed all Cedarville constituents — appreciate the past of this institution? This question (and the opportunity to expand my soapbox) caused me to ponder.

As an alumnus, my initial thoughts were very personal. I graduated from Cedarville long ago, and I have a special place in my heart for it. It was here I stepped out into adulthood, developing habits and patterns of discipline in my life that would stay with me. It was here I learned God’s call for my life. It was here I made lifelong friends. It was here I met the love of my life. It was here significant mentors invested in me and modeled for me what it meant to walk with Christ. In part, the history of Cedarville is important because it is a part of our personal histories.

I also thought about significant figures who have walked the halls of this institution’s expanding number of buildings. I thought of so many people who invested so much here — people like Margaret Burrichter serving 35 years in the business office,
Dr. Paul Dixon leading the University for 25 years, and other well-loved faculty like Dr. Dan Estes ’74, Dr. Al Monroe, and Ed Spencer. It is unfair to mention some and not all, but you can add to my short list from your own memories. Their work was and is valuable. Some of them are still working here doing what they have always done. An institution needs to remember its people, both past and present, who have given it its character. They deserve to be honored for what they have done, but more importantly, they need to be remembered. This generation of young faculty and staff needs their example for Cedarville to continue fulfilling the call God gave it back in 1887.

For me, personally, the prospect of working on the history of the University was more than just an opportunity to preserve a proper understanding of the past; it was an occasion to honor a man who has had a profound impact on my life. Dr. Murray Murdoch wrote the centennial history of what was then Cedarville College in 1987. He was my advisor and professor as a student, and he hired me in 2000 to teach United States History alongside him. Since then he has continued to mentor me, and I owe him a significant debt of gratitude for the guidance and care he has shown to me over the years. This project is in part an opportunity for me to honor him for his commitment to Christ, and his dedication to Cedarville, as I picked up where he left off.

Lessons From History

All of these reasons to reflect on Cedarville’s past are part and parcel of the conclusions to which Ockham’s Razor leads us. We must understand Cedarville’s foundational history to effectively move forward into an unknown future. While that history may seem as varied and complex as the number of people who have passed through our doors, the history of the institution is really rather simply summarized. Perhaps Dr. Paul Dixon put it best: “The only way to explain Cedarville is God and the people He has brought here.”

When we examine the goals of those who founded Cedarville 125 years ago and those who continued its work in 1953, we realize anew what should be our focus in this momentous year. We also recognize how understanding our history can help us maintain that focus. All the elements of the Cedarville experience are focused on the teachings of God’s Word. The doctrinal statement, daily chapel, Bible minor, integration of faith and knowledge, campus standards, and more are driven by the recognition of those who have come before us on this campus that biblical principles must drive all we do.

The joyful remembrances of those like me who studied here are a product of sharing class, work, worship, and fun with fellow members of the body of Christ. The debt of gratitude that I and thousands more owe is a product of men and women who were sold out to Christ and committed their lives here over the years.

We see in Scripture that God regularly used history to teach His people how they ought to live and to remind them of all He had done for them. As we celebrate 125 years of Cedarville University, let us dedicate ourselves to remembering and maintaining what has defined Cedarville historically; and let us move into the unknown future confident in the Lord’s continued faithfulness.

“We must understand Cedarville’s foundational history to effectively move forward into an unknown future.”

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The 125th history book will be available for purchase by spring 2012.