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## Historical Essay Submission: Brunswick and the Civil War

It is 1860. Tensions are high, and so are the stakes. It's Civil War era, and the whole country is on edge in anticipation of battle. In December 1860, the first state secedes from the United States, and the Confederates are formed.<sup>1</sup> Soon after, civil war breaks out. Stretching from 1861 to 1865, the American Civil War changed the face of America forever, particularly for black Americans. There were war heroes, and other less conspicuous heroes working behind the scenes. While the whole country played a role in the Civil War, also behind the scenes were the small towns that reshaped history. One of these towns was Brunswick, Maine.

The Civil War started in 1861 and, to the surprise of most of the country, stretched until 1865. The Confederates in the South were at a substantial disadvantage when compared to the far more modernized Northern Union, but war lasted four years, which was about three years longer than the country had anticipated. The Civil War was violent and casualty filled, and ended the lives of many people, whether they were Union or Confederate, soldier or citizen, slave or free. There were about 1.5 million casualties altogether across the four years of fighting, including around 620,000 deaths.<sup>2</sup> The war started because of disagreements over slavery, but not strictly over the morality of the institution of slavery, although this also played a role. The major argument that sparked the violent disagreement between the North and the South arose from discussion on how new territory should be divided into slave and free states. The South wanted new states to be admitted to the country with the legal means to own slaves, and the North disagreed. This argument came up frequently in the nineteenth century, such as when discussing the acquisition of new territory like Texas or California, the Missouri Compromise, and similar debates concerning slavery geography. Other incidents like the Dred Scott Case also challenged expansion of slavery and raised questions on whether slavery was even constitutional. The turning point for war was when President Abraham Lincoln, opposed to the spread of slavery into new territories, entered the Oval Office. The sixteenth president of the United States and the

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<sup>1</sup> 1. "Civil War Timeline," National Parks Service, October 6, 2022, <https://www.nps.gov/gett/learn/historyculture/civil-war-timeline.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> 1. "Civil War Casualties," American Battlefield Trust, September 15, 2023, <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/civil-war-casualties#:~:text=There%20were%20an%20estimated%201.5%20million%20casualties%20reported%20during%20the>.

first Republican president, Lincoln represented a gateway to freedom for many black Americans and a voice of reason for many Northern inhabitants. His election sparked the secession of the first state, South Carolina, in December 1860.<sup>3</sup>

While Lincoln's election was certainly enough ignition for some states to back out and rebel against the North, the Civil War, while arguably inevitable, could have had roots almost a decade earlier than Lincoln's election, in Brunswick, Maine.

Officially formed as a town in 1739 after being known by its Native American name "Pejebscot" for the 100 years prior, Brunswick has been home to many historic sites such as the Brunswick Naval Air Station, which played a critical role in World War II, and Bowdoin College, founded in 1794 and producing notable alumni such as President Franklin Pierce.<sup>4</sup> During the Civil War era, Brunswick was most well known for Bowdoin College. However, Brunswick was also renowned for its iconic Maine Street, which was built in 1717 by the Pejebscot Proprietors, a land company started by eight men from Boston.<sup>5</sup> Maine Street is famous for its width, as it was built to span 12 rods or 198 feet. Today, Maine Street still exists as an unusually wide street that has since been designed to contain parked cars and traffic. Besides Maine Street, other streets, including Pleasant Street and Mill Street, are still intact and functioning today after revolutionizing from the 1800s.<sup>6</sup>

As a town in the far northern state of Maine, Pre-Civil War Brunswick was largely defined by both religion and abolitionism. To embrace both of these traits was Harriet Beecher Stowe, who moved to Brunswick with her family in 1850. There, she authored her renowned book *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

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<sup>3</sup> 1. "Civil War Timeline," National Parks Service, October 6, 2022, <https://www.nps.gov/gett/learn/historyculture/civil-war-timeline.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> 1. History of Brunswick Maine - digitalcommons@umaine, accessed October 1, 2024, <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1166&context=mainehistory>.

2. "Historical Sketch," Bowdoin College, accessed October 1, 2024, <https://www.bowdoin.edu/about/history-traditions/historical-sketch.html#:~:text=By%201990,%20Bowdoin%20was%20nationally%20regarded%20as%20a%20small,%20highly>.

<sup>5</sup> 1. William A Wheeler, William A. Wheeler's Series on His Town of Brunswick, accessed October 1, 2024, <https://curtislibrary.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/William-A.-Wheeler-Works.pdf>.

2. "Begin Again Pejebscot Proprietors," Maine Memory Network, accessed October 1, 2024, [https://www.mainememory.net/sitebuilder/site/3101/slideshow/1889/display?format=list&prev\\_object\\_id=4902#:~:text=A%20group%20of%20eight%20men%20from%20Boston%20formed%20the%20Pejebscot](https://www.mainememory.net/sitebuilder/site/3101/slideshow/1889/display?format=list&prev_object_id=4902#:~:text=A%20group%20of%20eight%20men%20from%20Boston%20formed%20the%20Pejebscot).

<sup>6</sup> 1. William A Wheeler, William A. Wheeler's Series on His Town of Brunswick, accessed October 1, 2024, <https://curtislibrary.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/William-A.-Wheeler-Works.pdf>.

Harriet Beecher Stowe was born in 1811 in Litchfield, Connecticut. Her mother died when she was five, but Stowe's father remarried and Stowe ended up having eleven siblings altogether. She got her love for religion from her father, who was a preacher. Throughout her darkest days, Stowe could always turn to Christianity and God. Stowe was close with her sister, Catharine, who started an all girls school in 1823, the Hartford Female Seminary. Stowe attended this school and later taught there. After she spent her early years teaching at Hartford Female Seminary, Stowe moved with Catharine and her father and began teaching in Cincinnati, Ohio at another girl's school in 1832. It was in Ohio, only miles from the slave state Kentucky's border, that Stowe witnessed slavery first-hand. She met runaway slaves and gathered their stories, and also visited a Kentucky plantation on one occasion. All she saw and heard on the subject shocked her, and Stowe became a dedicated abolitionist after her experience in Cincinnati. Stowe's passion for religion, abolitionism, and writing came together in a perfect storm in 1851 to produce her groundbreaking novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.<sup>7</sup>

In 1836, Stowe married her husband Calvin Stowe. They had six children together, and in 1850 the family moved to Brunswick, Maine, as Calvin had accepted a teaching job at Bowdoin College. It was there that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was born. A revealing and naked description of life as a slave, Stowe shocked America when her book hit the market in March 1852. Beyond preaching her own abolitionist views, Stowe also threads her own religion of Christianity into the plot. Tom, the main character in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, is a slave living on a plantation in the South. Despite his unfortunate circumstances, Tom holds a strong Christian faith even in the worst of times. Beyond her experiences in Ohio and her strong faith, Stowe may have been inspired to write this story by the passing of her eighteen-month-old child in 1851. This tragic experience led her to connect on another level to mothers of children impacted by slavery, including those separated from their child through slave trade and those who experience watching their child grow up in bondage.<sup>8</sup>

Stowe's book was incredibly enlightening to the general public, specifically in the North because there were few people there who'd had the opportunity to see first-hand how most plantation slaves were treated. In the South, on the other hand, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was met with

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<sup>7</sup> 1. "Harriet Beecher Stowe - Facts, Books & Cabin," History.com, accessed September 30, 2024, <https://www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war/harriet-beecher-stowe>.

<sup>8</sup> 1. "Harriet Beecher Stowe - Facts, Books & Cabin," History.com, accessed September 30, 2024, <https://www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war/harriet-beecher-stowe>.

resistance and denial. Many Southerners claimed the book falsely portrayed plantation life, even after Stowe published *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1853, full of the historical records and documents Stowe used as resources for her prior book.<sup>9</sup>

There are many rumors that Stowe's book, crafted in the small town of Brunswick, helped jumpstart the Civil War. In fact, Abraham Lincoln is supposedly quoted as saying, "So you're the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war" upon meeting Stowe at the White House in 1862. While this quote remains unconfirmed, there is no doubt *Uncle Tom's Cabin* proved to be a grim awakening for many individuals who had been in the dark about how slaves were really treated.<sup>10</sup>

After Calvin retired in 1864, Stowe's family moved to Hartford, Connecticut, leaving Stowe's legacy of abolitionism behind in Brunswick.<sup>11</sup> However, Stowe was not the only abolitionist from Brunswick who changed the tide in the Civil War era. Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, a former student of Calvin Stowe and graduate of Bowdoin College in 1852, was a Union Civil War general. Chamberlain was born in 1828 in Brewer, Maine. In 1855, after marrying his wife Fannie, Chamberlain returned to Bowdoin as a professor. He taught there until the Civil War broke out, and at that time enlisted. He made his name known through his impact fighting for the Union army in the Battle of Gettysburg. He led the 20<sup>th</sup> Maine Infantry in charge down Little Round Top, and after his performance leading his regiment, Chamberlain was awarded the Medal of Honor. After a near-death injury received in Petersburg in 1864, Chamberlain was promoted to general, and it was he who received the Confederates' surrender on April 12, 1865. After the war, Chamberlain returned to Maine, where he served as State Governor and later President of Bowdoin College. Like Stowe, he represented the town of Brunswick as an abolitionist and warrior against the Confederacy.<sup>12</sup>

The Civil War resulted in over a million casualties and led to much heartbreak and loss, but the result of this catastrophic peril was an America no longer defined by slavery, and a step towards race equality. Involved in this significant feat was the town of Brunswick. Through

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<sup>9</sup> 1. Debra Michals, "Harriet Beecher Stowe," *Biography: Harriet Beecher Stowe*, 2017, <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/harriet-beecher-stowe>.

<sup>10</sup> 1. "Harriet Beecher Stowe - Facts, Books & Cabin," History.com, accessed September 30, 2024, <https://www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war/harriet-beecher-stowe>.

<sup>11</sup> 1. "Harriet Beecher Stowe - Facts, Books & Cabin," History.com, accessed September 30, 2024, <https://www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war/harriet-beecher-stowe>.

<sup>12</sup> 1. "Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain," American Battlefield Trust, accessed September 30, 2024, <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/biographies/joshua-lawrence-chamberlain>.

Bowdoin College, and people like Harriet Beecher Stowe and Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, Brunswick educated and housed war heroes and pre-war public informers. While only a small town, the schools and people there left large footprints on American history and contributed to the America we see today.

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