

Carol Stewart
HIST 490
Professor Matthew Mason
September 29, 2026

Biography, Memory, and the Stories We Keep

National memory tends to clean up the people it remembers; Mason and Bell put the complications back. Bell does this especially clearly with Baron Steuben. He begins with the familiar Valley Forge story, in which Steuben arrives almost as a savior and transforms a freezing, undisciplined army into an effective fighting force. Bell quickly complicates that version. Much of the story became patriotic mythology, but he does not simply tear down the heroic version and leave it there. Steuben exaggerated some of his credentials, yet his contribution to training and organizing the Continental Army was substantial. Bell gives us a Steuben who is less perfect than the legend but more interesting than either the legend or a simple debunking of it (Bell, ch. 6).

Mason does something similar with Edward Everett. Everett could easily be dismissed as sentimental, overly reverent toward Washington, or politically ineffective because his effort to preserve the Union through compromise ultimately failed. Mason pushes against that reading from the beginning by challenging George Forgie's interpretation of Everett and others as evidence of a "sentimental regression from politics to domesticity." The part I found most convincing is that Mason does not treat sentimentality as something surrounding the politics. He treats it as part of the politics. Everett and the Mount Vernon Ladies Association used memory, domestic imagery, religious language, and emotional attachment to Washington in a deliberate effort to strengthen loyalty to the Union (Mason, 266–67).

The strongest similarity I saw between Mason and Bell is that neither replaces one overly simple historical story with another. Bell allows Steuben to be less heroic than the legend and still historically important. Mason allows Everett's emotional Unionism to be culturally powerful even though it had serious political limits. Both authors let the contradictions remain instead of forcing their subjects into a single category. I think that is one of the things biographies can do especially well. People rarely behave as consistently as the labels later attached to them suggest.

The strongest difference for me is how each author uses the individual life to get at a larger history. Bell's subjects often become entry points into much bigger stories about the Revolution. Steuben leads the reader into Valley Forge, European military practices, the Continental Army, and the mythology that later formed around the Revolution. Molly Brant

opens a different history of Native diplomacy and competing understandings of liberty. Peggy Shippen leads into loyalism, exile, refugees, and the divisions later obscured by what Bell calls a “myth of unanimity.” Bell never loses sight of the people themselves, but he repeatedly moves outward from an individual life into the larger consequences of the Revolution.

Mason stays closer to Everett because Everett is not only evidence of emotional Unionism; he is also someone Mason argues helped produce it. Everett was consciously trying to shape how Americans understood Washington, the founding generation, and the Union. His “Character of Washington” oration was delivered 129 times in 1859 alone, and he ultimately donated nearly ninety thousand dollars in proceeds to the Mount Vernon cause. People filled halls, contributed money, and sometimes cried as speakers connected Washington, Mount Vernon, the Constitution, and the founding generation to the preservation of the Union (Mason, 267–71). Everett’s association with Washington became so strong that Mason describes him as a natural choice for the Constitutional Union Party’s vice-presidential nomination in 1860 (Mason, 272).

I was especially interested in Mason’s treatment of emotion as historical evidence. Tears, family metaphors, pilgrimages, relics, religious language, and references to Washington as almost a sacred figure could be easy to brush aside as excessive nineteenth-century rhetoric. Mason does not brush them aside. In his account, Mount Vernon functions as a shrine, Washington almost as a saint, and the Farewell Address almost as a sacred text. Preserving the Union could therefore become something closer to a moral obligation than a calculation of political advantage. Mason’s description of this as “affective Unionism” made sense to me because the emotion was not decoration around a political argument. It was part of the argument and part of its power.

That is also where Mason’s treatment of Everett feels different from Bell’s treatment of Steuben. Bell is largely looking backward at a national story that has already hardened into myth and asking what survives once the myth is tested against the evidence. Mason is showing Everett using historical memory while the political future was still unsettled. Everett was not simply caught inside a national story about Washington. He was trying to make that story politically useful. That difference made Mason’s chapter feel less like an examination of memory after the fact and more like a study of memory being put to work.

Mason also gives that power real limits. The Constitutional Union Party lost in 1860. Everett and the Mount Vernon movement did not prevent secession, and several Southern Unionists eventually sided with the Confederacy. People could feel a deep attachment to the

Union and still disagree about what preserving it required once secession became real (Mason, 273–74). I see another similarity with Bell here: neither author measures historical significance only by whether his subject succeeded. Steuben’s legend can exaggerate his role without making his real contribution unimportant. Everett’s political effort can fail to prevent secession without making the emotional Unionism he helped cultivate meaningless.

The part of Mason’s chapter that interested me most comes after that failure. Once war began, the language and imagery Everett had used for years—family, memory, sacrifice, sacred obligation, and attachment to the founding generation—did not disappear. Mason connects it to Lincoln’s First Inaugural and Lincoln’s appeal to the “bonds of affection” and “mystic chords of memory” connecting Americans to one another and to their national past (Mason, 274–75). I especially liked Mason’s reversal of the way we usually think about those passages. Instead of Everett sounding Lincolnesque, he suggests that Lincoln was sounding *Everettesque*.

The Gettysburg comparison makes the limits of that similarity important. Everett still looked backward to the Union of Washington and the Founders, while Lincoln could use the war to point toward a “new birth of freedom.” Their understandings of the nation were not identical. Still, both men used historical memory to explain what the war meant and why the Union justified enormous sacrifice (Mason, 275–76).

Mason’s final claim is the one I keep returning to. He writes that Everett’s mobilization of Washington’s memory “could not stave off secession, but it helped assure that secession meant civil war” (Mason, 276). That is a striking claim because it moves Everett from someone who reflected widespread Unionist feeling to someone who helped shape what Americans were ultimately willing to do because of it. Bell often shows what happens when individuals become part of the stories a nation later tells about itself. Mason, in this chapter, lets us watch someone trying to create that kind of national memory while the outcome was still uncertain.

My question for Professor Mason is this:

What evidence convinced you that Everett and people like him helped create a willingness to fight, rather than giving language to an attachment to the Union that already existed? How do you distinguish between a historical figure who reflects a political culture and one who helps produce it?