

© Christopher Rolinson



PWP
PITTSBURGH WRITERS PROJECT

{Issue 3 Volume 2}

spilt ink

**Q & A with
Michael Aubrecht**

{author, historian}

Q: In a nutshell, please describe your work?

A: My work has actually become so much more than just writing over the last few years. This of course is the foundation for everything I do, but it has evolved into so many other forms of media that require my attention. Each project feeds the other, and so many doors have been opened for me. I believe that it is very important for writers, no matter what their genre, to take advantage of every opportunity that comes their way because you never know where it may lead.

For example, I wrote a book, that led to a newspaper article about the book, that led to an invitation for me to do a speaking engagement at a university, that led to a hi-profile position on a museum board, that led to an appearance on Voice America radio, that led to yet another book contract. One of these events would never have happened without the others. Living here in historic Fredericksburg Virginia, there are so many opportunities for someone with my interests to become involved and stay busy.

At any given time I can be doing several of the following: researching material for new books, writing articles

for our local newspaper, contributing features to magazines, speaking to university and roundtable groups, doing radio shows, leading personal tours, promoting our museum foundation, blogging / maintaining my website, and occasionally leading classes and consulting on documentaries. Frankly, I am to the point now where I am turning work down because I simply cannot keep up. I am however, vigorously exploring full-time historian opportunities.

Q: How many words do you usually write a day?

A: For articles or essays it simply depends on the deadline so I'll speak to the bigger, long-term projects such as books. As a historian in the non-fiction genre, I don't necessarily have a set amount of words that I shoot for each day. Some days I spend hours reading through references, compiling copies, taking notes and digging through archives either in person or online. During this process, I don't write anything 'concrete.' I'm buried in the gathering stage, acquiring sources, determining the general outline and assessing what is available. This can take many weeks or months and I actually enjoy this part the best. It's like being on a treasure hunt and you have no idea what you will discover.

This process is made easier living in the 21st-century. Many sources in our National Military Park Service's catalog have been entered into a searchable database. Each item has a series of keyword designators and a short abstract telling you what the collection includes. By typing in a keyword,

such as “churches” it provides a PDF document with all of the sources on file featuring that particular word. This technology enables researchers to identify multiple volumes that hold potentially usable reference material and sources. Each item with the word “churches” is then listed by vol. number, section number, page and chapter number, and a brief description outlined the major topics. It would take months to do that traditionally.

When it comes to writing, I can fluctuate from 3,000 words, all the way down to 250. I can also go days in between without writing anything. I once read that noted historian Shelby Foote considered penning a few hundred words a night a success. I guess that’s why it took him 20 years to complete his Civil War trilogy! That said he proved that quality will always trump quantity.

Q: How long does it usually take you to complete one of your books? How many times to revise it?

A: I would estimate that it has taken me anywhere from 8 to 16 months per book. At least 4 months is spent doing straight research and during this time I spend approximately 30 hours per week gathering reference and photos. Writing the manuscript takes several months of course, then I always have that rough draft proofed, then I edit, get feedback from fellow historian or experts, revise, re-proof and re-edit, send updates to the experts to verify I got it right, then back to my proofer and off to the publisher. My publishers, of which I have 4, never see anything until that entire process

has been completed.

In fact, I am almost ‘OCD-ish’ when it comes to delivering clean manuscripts and I have been complimented on numerous occasions by editors and production people for turning in extremely organized copy. This is by no means a finished piece, but the better quality I provide the editors, the smoother the editing process goes. I also feel that I have earned more control over my work when they know what to expect to me. Two of my publishers have signed me to second books and they gave me more control over the follow-ups.

I have refined this process over time, but it is not without surprises. When I submitted my first draft for *Houses of the Holy* (a book that presents the histories of Fredericksburg’s landmark churches during the Civil War) to my friends at the NPS, they really hit me hard on a number of issues that they felt I was too soft on. The manuscript markup they sent back was a mess and I had to refocus and rewrite a major portion of it over a 3 month extension period. The amount of additional work was overwhelming at times BUT the finished product was so much better than it ever had been if not for the additional work. Sometimes it hurts to do good work, but as writers we can always do better.

After I receive the final proofs, I usually pre-write a 60-minute lecture on the book and do promotional materials to help market the work upon its release. My publishers have great PR people, but every bit helps. My background in media design has aided me

greatly in that regard. I will also add that when I am writing a book, that is usually the only thing that I am writing. I'll accept the occasional freelance article, but for the most part I keep my main focus on the manuscript.

Q: How many books have you written?

A: To date, I have published four in print, one online, and I am in the process of working on 2 more. These include *Historic Churches of Fredericksburg: Houses of the Holy*, *The Southern Cross: A Civil War Devotional*, *Onward Christian Soldier: The Spiritual Journey of Stonewall*, *Christian Cavalier: The Spiritual Legacy of Jeb Stuart*, and an eBook titled *Luckiest Fans On The Face Of This Earth: History of the New York Yankees in the Fall Classic*. I also estimate I have written close to 400 articles and essays.

Q: What are you currently working on?

A: I am currently in the process of completing *You Stink! Major League Baseball's Terrible Teams and Pathetic Players* with co-author/historian Eric Wittenberg and researching *Campfires at the Crossroads: Confederate Encampments in Spotsylvania County* as part of *The History Press' American Chronicles Series*.

Q: What piece of advice have you received over the course of your career that has had the biggest impact on your success?

A: One of my editors taught me that research is only step one. Obtaining reference is key, but how do you manage it? Especially when you end up with ev-

erything from old newspaper clippings and diary pages - to official reports and meeting minutes? As with most historians, organization is my top-priority. For *Houses of the Holy*, each church had its own folder with a contents and index. As I gathered more and more sources, books, clippings, photos, contacts, and archived materials, they all went into the folders.

By the time I was done I had a stack of folders bursting at the seams with reference. This kept everything categorized and organized for me as I wrote each church's section separately. It also helped when it came time to credit people and I referred to these sources for the bibliography. What is extra nice is that I now have an extensive collection of pre-prepared materials that I can refer to again and again for future projects. So through this one book, I now have sources for a dozen more projects. I would like to add that I simultaneously collected the data on Spotsylvania's churches and I am already prepared to draft a companion volume when the time comes.

I have to add this too... always verify your sources! Accuracy is essential in historical writing. The Internet of course has opened up a whole new world to writers, but it must be used with caution. We can now get access to tons of cyber information, but we must always keep in mind that the facts on the Internet are only as good as the person who posted them. Therefore I always compare multiple sources whenever possible. I also tell my kids that Google is NOT the end all. It is a great tool, but it does not provide all of the answers. Over the

- years, I have compiled a large reference library and book collection that I refer to again and again.
- Q: What's the one thing you can't live without in your writing life?
- A: My laptop and digital camera. There are five computers in my house between the older kids and our family system, but my laptop is MINE and off limits to everyone else. It is my second brain and contains all of my work. I use a hard drive back-up frequently. As I live within a 15-minute drive of four major battlefields and dozens of museums, and I frequently travel to tour others, I typically shoot hundreds of digital photos that help me to recall the locations that I write about. Without those tools I would not do what I do.
- Q: In what way (if any) has your writing life changed in the past five years?
- A: It's certainly been a blessing indeed. I get to meet all kinds of wonderful folks who come out to my book signings and speaking engagements. My kids think I'm a 'D-list celebrity' down here and I will admit that there is an ego boost that comes with people coming to an event to see you. On a more important level, my writing has allowed me to proclaim my faith, help important preservationist causes, donate books to our troops overseas, and help our foundation with establishing a new multi-cultural Civil War museum here in Fredericksburg. That is the legacy I hope to leave behind, not necessarily what I accomplished in writing, but what writing enabled me to accomplish.
- Q: What book/author most influenced your life or your career as a writer? and why?
- A: Of course the Bible first and foremost, but on more relatable level, there are 3 books that are favorites of mine and each one influenced me in a different way:
- The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson: An autobiography and public and private letters. Jefferson is my favorite Virginian, perhaps even my favorite American, and his genius shines through in this exhaustive work. This book proves that no one will ever write a better insight on a brilliant individual than that individual. So don't even try. Find something original and present it in an original way.
- The Goebbels Diaries, 1942-1943 by Joseph Goebbels. I read this tremendously long book in high school and it scared the hell out of me. That said, it taught me two things: 1. Evil can be absolutely brilliant and 2. The written word can be perverted and manipulated for all the wrong reasons. Though this book tells little about the author's personal life, it does tell the story of Germany's transition from almost total victory to total defeat.
- Christ In The Camp by Rev. J. William Jones. This book was originally published in the late 1800's and details the role that religion played in the Army of Northern Virginia during the Civil War. From the establishment of chaplains in the Confederate army to the 'Great Revival,' Jones' recollections show how faith can aid us in times of war. I recently lectured on this title and was surprised how many issues it examines are still relevant. *BP*