

In this episode of [Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge's George Washington Slept Here](#), we are privileged to welcome Dr. Daniel Feller, a renowned historian and expert on Andrew Jackson. Dr. Feller outlines his impressive career and involvement in [The Papers of Andrew Jackson](#) project, which “collects and publishes Jackson’s entire extant literary record.” We also explore the Jacksonian Era, the War of 1812, nullification, and Jackson's presidency. Dr. Feller helps us examine the intersection of history and politics while providing insightful reflections on the role of historians as they navigate today's precarious political climate.

Quotes

"Let's unite in reason, listen with respect, and honor our civic duty. Together, we nurture the essence of humanity." – Daniel Feller

Amidst politics, let passion and reason harmonize, preventing one from overshadowing the other." – Daniel Feller

"We narrate stories not to judge, but to boldly acknowledge that like us, they were shaped by their generation." – Daniel Feller

Featured Guest

Daniel Feller

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Transcript:

Jason Raia:

Hello, and welcome to *George Washington Slept Here*, the civic education podcast from Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge, where we explore American history, civics, and the idea of liberty through conversations with some of our favorite thinkers, writers, and leaders. I'm Jason Raia, Chief Operating Officer at Freedoms Foundation and host of *George Washington Slept Here*. The format is simple, a long form conversation with a friend of Freedoms Foundation where everyone can learn something new. Before we go any further, a little housekeeping, we encourage everyone to subscribe to *George Washington Slept Here*. Wherever you listen to podcasts, make sure you get every new episode as soon as it is out. We love hearing from listeners, so please email us at gwshpodcast@gmail.com with your comments, questions, or suggestions, and hit us up at Freedoms Foundation social media @FFVF on Twitter and on Facebook and Instagram @freedomfoundation. Today's interview is historian and Andrew Jackson expert, Daniel Feller. Hello, Dan.

Daniel Feller:

Hello.

Jason Raia:

Our conversation today is going to be structured in a way to keep us on track. We wanna explore your origin story. How did you become the person sitting before us and your current work which includes The Jackson Papers and Andrew Jackson and all things in Andrew Jackson and state of America today a little bit. And then finally, we end with a quiz. so tell us where were you born and raised?

Daniel Feller:

I grew up in Bethesda, Maryland, which is a Washington suburb, lived there until I was seventeen, right before my senior year of high school, my family moved to Berkeley, California.

Jason Raia:

Ooo, that's a big move. Was, that work related or -?

Daniel Feller:

It was work related for my father. He had been a, dare I say it, Washington lawyer.

Jason Raia:

Ah.

Daniel Feller:

And then he became a law professor at UC Berkeley.

Jason Raia:

Oh, excellent.

Daniel Feller:

So we moved right in this was in show you how old I am 1967.

Jason Raia:

Oh, that's gonna be a big year at Berkeley.

Daniel Feller:

That was gonna be a big year at Berkeley.

Jason Raia:

And, so what you may so you spend your senior year in California.

Daniel Feller:

Spent my senior year in California went to a small college called Reed College in Portland, Oregon. After a year of doing various things, I decided I wanted to go to grad school in history and wound up at the University of Wisconsin.

Jason Raia:

Okay. And, so and I'm always curious because Wisconsin certainly has a great education program. Did you always have an idea that education and, was it just history, or did you wanna teach history?

Daniel Feller:

I just wanted to keep reading history.

Jason Raia:

Okay.

Daniel Feller:

I have been reading history since I was a kid. I went into grad school with the idea that I just wanted to learn more history.

Jason Raia:

Okay.

Daniel Feller:

But without any idea, really, of what I would do with it. You know, when you go to grad school, especially at Wisconsin, your career in fact lays out before you whether or not you knew it would. You know? So, so from there, the progression into being a college professor was kind of natural, but that's not why I went into it. I just wanted to read more history. My first love, in fact, was, medieval history.

Jason Raia:

Oh, that's interesting.

Daniel Feller:

And I wasn't admitted into the medieval history program. By that time, I realized that that to do medieval history, you have to be really good at languages, and I am really bad at language.

Jason Raia:

You need to have Latin and French and --

Daniel Feller:

Yep.

Jason Raia:

Absolutely. So when did the turn to the, you know, Andrew Jackson and the the sort of pre-Civil War American history?

Daniel Feller:

That's pure serendipity as I think it is for a lot of historians, actually. I thought I was gonna be a social historian to the extent that I thought I was gonna be a historian at all when I went to grad school. And I kind of gravitated over toward political history and really that until I did my dissertation, I had no particular idea about, a period or a subject. I just went as many grad students do rooting around, looking for something, found, an issue that interested me, which was the public land issue, in the Jacksonian period. And, that that was kind of puttering around in primary sources, and and I read you familiar with the Webster-Hayne Debate.

Jason Raia:

I'm not.

Daniel Feller:

This is the the debate, in the United States Senate in 1830, that ended with Daniel Webster, saying, "Liberty and Union, now and forever, one and inseparable." So I was just kind of reading various well known primary sources, you know, looking for something to do a dissertation on. And I read the Webster-Hayne Debate which is famous because it's it's a debate about nullification and the nature of the union, but it starts out and it actually went for a number of days when more people involved. It starts out talking about public land policy. And what they were saying didn't make any sense to me because I hadn't encountered the issue before. And I thought, what is this about? And went looking for the standard monograph on public land policy, which was written in the 1920's and was not fully satisfactory as an explanation. And at at some point along the way, I thought, hey, wait a minute. I just found a dissertation topic. That led me into into that issue in the Jacksonian period and it it kind of developed from there.

Jason Raia:

So was the, I'm curious, grad school, you're studying history. You come across this debate and this 1920's monograph and you realize that there there needs to be more that you might have something that, to say that, because this is unsatisfactory, 40 plus almost 50 years later, which makes a lot of sense. Was there anyone particular who was an influence as far as professors or who, you know, were sort of guiding that led you down this path, or was it really sort of, you know, as you're reading, you discovered it?

Daniel Feller:

It's a good question because there is the old model, you know, where you sit in a seminar with a professor and he usually, says, why don't you do this? Why don't you do that? But and, no, I didn't have any of that. I, I was, I don't wanna flatter myself too much, but I was pretty independent as a grad student. my advisor is is not to say he did not influence me. He did greatly, but not in this way -

Jason Raia:

Right.

Daniel Feller:

-was a professor named Paul Conkin who, was a great historian and and a great intellect. And, he was my advisor. I had taken his seminar, my first here in in 20th Century America, which was one of only about 25 topics of which he was master. But I just wanted him as in my advisor because I admired his intellect. and so I remember I bopped into his office one day, and I I found a dissertation topic. He said, good. And that was that.

Jason Raia:

Excellent. So he was he was, he was willing to you know, let you take the lead on this. And that's not always the case.

Daniel Feller:

That's correct. He was willing to take, let me take the lead in and not to leave out another, formative influence. Paul left Wisconsin right when I was in the middle of my dissertation to take a position at Vanderbilt.

Jason Raia:

Okay.

Daniel Feller:

He was an East Tennessee boy, and Vanderbilt wasn't this early move up from Wisconsin, but this was kind of coming home in a grand manner. there was another professor down the hall who who whose seminar I had taken, who I was familiar with Richard Sewell, who wrote what is still the standard history of of, anti-slavery politics. And so when when Professor Conkin, I've just called him Paul, Professor Conkin said, I'm leaving. Actually, he didn't tell me. I heard it from somebody else. When I learned he was leaving, I went down to the hall to to Professor Sewell, and I said, can I be your advisee? And he said, sure. And Sewell, unlike with, Paul Conkin - Paul had dissertation advise he's kinda scattered around various subjects because he himself, worked on everything from the history of communitarianism to philosophy of history to a still the best one volume biography of Lyndon Johnson to, standard work on the New Deal and, work on the Puritans and then on the pragmatist philosophy, you name it. Dick Sewell was a 19th century man.

Jason Raia:

Okay.

Daniel Feller:

And Dick produced a very, dare I say illustrious group of grad students, all of whom worked in one or another aspect of of 19th century. So in that sense, he had been, in a way, my logical advisor from the beginning.

Jason Raia:

Sure. So you get you write this dissertation and you achieve your PhD and you're looking for a job, where where do you end up before you wind up at Tennessee?

Daniel Feller:

1980 was not a good year to be on the job market.

Jason Raia:

Mmm. No. It wasn't.

Daniel Feller:

Wasn't, though it's only gotten worse since then. I'm sorry to say. There's a small school in northern Wisconsin, Ashland, Wisconsin, right on Lake Superior called Northland College. And there was an opening there. This is the way things often used to work and don't work anymore. The graduate adviser, the, the graduate placement officer at Wisconsin was familiar fact that there was an opening, at Northland. He suggested I applied for it. I applied for it. Wasn't I was told the first choice, but the first choice went elsewhere.

Jason Raia:

Wow.

Daniel Feller:

Oh, that happens.

Jason Raia:

Sure.

Daniel Feller:

And and so I this was an instructorship. I, I was filling in for, a professor who had gotten a two year research grant when was unusual at Northland College and was off writing a book.

Jason Raia:

Okay.

Daniel Feller:

So, I went up as a, visiting instructor at Northland. And then Chuck Twining, that was his name. Got another two year grant. He was I'm talking too much. He was a forest historian, and he was writing biographies of warehouse or executive because the warehouse company was paying him.

Jason Raia:

Oh, okay.

Daniel Feller:

So Chuck got another two year leave, and it so I wound up, I'm sorry. The original point was for two years. Then he then he got a two year, I got a two year extension. At this point, they started calling me a visiting assistant professor instead of visiting instructor and then at the end of the third year of that four year gig, by that time, I was ready to leave, though. Let me put in a word here for small colleges like Northland College.

Jason Raia:

Sure.

Daniel Feller:

This was the very opposite of the environment of grad school. nobody cared anything about public land policy in the Jacksonian era. I was the American historian.

Jason Raia:

Right. This was in in those small schools tend to be about teaching.

Daniel Feller:

Yes. And I taught the entire American history curriculum.

Jason Raia:

Mhmm.

Daniel Feller:

I've ran a film series. I ran a poetry in his three series. I was on the college planning committee. It was all these things that you would never get to do.

Jason Raia:

If you were at a big research institution.

Daniel Feller:

A big research institute. You wouldn't even get to do as a junior faculty member, and I was a temporary fill in.

Jason Raia:

Mhmm.

Daniel Feller:

So it, that was a wonderful experience, but at the end of three years, I was beginning to feel a little bit, remote.

Jason Raia:

Mhmm. And, and, and maybe like you, there were bigger things to for you to accomplish.

Daniel Feller:

Perhaps. So, at that time, the Papers of Andrew Jackson project, which we'll probably talk some more about.

Jason Raia:

Yep. A little bit.

Daniel Feller:

Was hiring an assistant editor. And the project then was located in Nashville on the grounds of the Hermitage, Jackson's plantation home.

Jason Raia:

Sure.

Daniel Feller:

And so I went there, and that kind of solidified my specialty in the Jacksonian period. And I, I, I worked there as a documentary editor for three years, was still looking at this point for a regular teaching job. And in at the end of three years, there, I got hired as, an assistant professor at the University of New Mexico.

Jason Raia:

Ah, okay.

Daniel Feller:

Spent the next 17 years there. And then to wrap up the story in 2003, the man who had been my boss, Harold Moser, as editor of the Jackson Papers, was retiring. The project had moved back to this locale that had always sponsored it, and that was University of Tennessee at Knoxville. So it was now back in Knoxville. And they were looking for somebody to be both a professor of history and editor and director of the Jackson papers.

Jason Raia:

Which makes it so that that brings those two sort of strands of your work together in a single place.

Daniel Feller:

Yes. And and I don't wanna be immodest and say that the position was written for me, but it might as well have been. And the the there were a number of other some of them, my friends, very well qualified, historians who applied for it, but none of them had also spent three years on the project earlier and knew it inside out, which I did.

Jason Raia:

Right. So tell us what is, that Andrew Jackson Papers and what what was the the purpose of the project? Because, obviously, this has been going on for twenty, you know, years before you even came on board is editor. What, what are they trying to accomplish and and what's the, I think I know, but, you know, I don't wanna assume anything?

Daniel Feller:

Well, first, let me say it's a publishing project, not an archive.

Jason Raia:

Okay.

Daniel Feller:

This many people say, oh, you have Jackson's Papers there? No. We don't. Jackson's original manuscript papers are in various places.

Jason Raia:

They're scattered.

Daniel Feller:

They're scattered. The largest single collection is in the Library of Congress in Washington.

Jason Raia:

Which makes sense.

Daniel Feller:

But there are also lots of other places. The Papers of Andrew Jackson is a project to gather, and that means gather images or copies, not the originals, gather order and then publish all of Andrew Jackson's extent literary record.

Jason Raia:

So everything.

Daniel Feller:

Everything.

Jason Raia:

If he wrote it, your your goal is to...

Daniel Feller:

Everything that was that that he wrote that was written to him that was written for him, like drafts of his presidential messages and put it all together. Again, put it in order, which is a very complicated process much more than you'd think, because we're talking about one hundred of thousands of pieces of paper, and they got mixed up. And, you know, some of them are letters without signatures, some of them are letters without dates, some of them are, commingled with other papers. And it's like doing it's like doing one jigsaw puzzle. It's like doing ten jigsaw puzzles that have the pieces have all been dumped together and you don't have the picture on the box to tell you which piece belongs where.

Jason Raia:

Let me just ask you. This is, so this is everything, not just his presidential papers. But this is personal correspondence.

Daniel Feller:

Everything.

Jason Raia:

This is professional when, you know, from his days in the army. This is, you know, you're you're trying to put your hands on everything.

Daniel Feller:

Yep.

Jason Raia:

And then publish it chronologically?

Daniel Feller:

Publish it chronologically. This is one of a number of similar projects. And there's a kind of genealogy of them. They it began with the papers of Thomas Jefferson.

Jason Raia:

Right. Which are over at Princeton that or at least that project is.

Daniel Feller:

That project is at Princeton. Yes. And that project got started back around 1950 and the idea was that they were gonna do this for Thomas Jefferson, and they were gonna do it in a few years.

Jason Raia:

And I know for a fact they're still working on it.

Daniel Feller:

Not only are they still working on it, but it's been divided into two projects. They started out with a chronological series, and then they set up another project, which is, at actually at Charlottesville, to do the, retirement years.

Jason Raia:

Okay.

Daniel Feller:

So they jump ahead to 1809 and go forward from there.

Jason Raia:

Okay.

Daniel Feller:

And but the Jefferson Papers started and and it would it was a great idea. This is, of course, long before the internet, and if you wanted at that time to canvas, you know, to to to what Jefferson had written what was written to it, be able to get in your car and drive all around around the country looking for stuff. So to put this all together, in a series of volumes was, was, a marvelous innovation. And partly spearheaded by the editor of the Jefferson Papers, a federal agency was created, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission NHPRC, which is still around. and then, a number of other projects spraying up mostly founding father's projects, including the papers of George Washington.

Jason Raia:

Sure.

Daniel Feller:

And there was a Hamilton project and a Franklin project. And then around the around 1970, partly under the orchestration of the NHPRC they branched out into the next generation. And so there was a Daniel Webster project, a Henry Clay project, and the Jackson Papers project. Then and so the project got started around 1970 and it took about ten years to just collect the stuff.

Jason Raia:

Mhmm.

Daniel Feller:

Because if you're gonna do it chronologically, you have to get all of it or what you think is all of it.

Jason Raia:

Right. Right.

Daniel Feller:

Before you start and to to carry that line of of story further along, back in the 1970's, a historian named Jesse Lemisch, issued a blast against what he called the Papers of great white men. Pointing out that that in doing all these projects and federally funding them, the historical profession was devoting a lot of energy to making a certain part of the American record available to the public. The guys who were on your on your currency.

Jason Raia:

Sure.

Daniel Feller:

You know? And so since then, partly, I think in fired by that that Lemisch blast, which was famous at the time, projects have sprung up to do famous women, famous non-white men and then to do a whole subjects rather than just people.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Daniel Feller:

So there's for instance, a a very well reputed, documentary history of emancipation.

Jason Raia:

Sure. That makes sense.

Daniel Feller:

Yeah. Relying very heavily on on the records of the Freedman's Bureau in Washington.

Jason Raia:

Okay. Okay.

Daniel Feller:

And then, of course, the internet and, and, online publication has has changed everything.

Jason Raia:

The ability to digitize those records.

Daniel Feller:

Yeah.

Jason Raia:

Yeah, I am I can imagine changes, maybe in some cases, the the at least in some people's minds, the necessity of of some of that because now if it's there's a digitized version on a website somewhere, at least it's searchable and and a researcher can find it as they're working on their PhD or their book. But, but I imagine there's something to maybe it it it splits generationally, the, the old the old guys like us who are like having a volume that you can take off a shelf and open as opposed to a a digital version. But I wanna I wanna get you and maybe we'll just pause there and and to talk for everybody listening give us your your best thumbnail sketch of of Andrew Jackson and what we ought to know about him that this that this project is built around.

Daniel Feller:

Oh, dear.

Jason Raia:

And he's a and he's a massive influence, but, you know, just just give us the, you know, what we have to know.

Daniel Feller:

There may be two questions. What the project is built around is the presumption that Andrew Jackson's important.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Daniel Feller:

And no more than that, that is -

Jason Raia:

Not that he's singularly, not that he's the most important, but that here's an important figure from American history for various and sundry reasons.

Daniel Feller:

Various and sundry is the key thing. And I would be tempted to leave it at that, rather than, make any judgment, of about whether he was worthy to be admired or condemned.

Jason Raia:

Well and that's the key debate, right, is because there is this is the hero of New Orleans. And if you go to New Orleans, there is there he is in the center of Jackson Square on horse, he's the hero because the last battle of a the War of 1812, he is there defending New Orleans. And and so, you know, there is this heroic. And then there are he's, he's a, a slave holder, which some people today, that's that's a black mark that covers, and, and then there's Indian removal, which is sort of the the the the the 900 pound gorilla whenever you talk about Jackson. And and so, he's complicated. He's as, he may be, in some ways, the very definition of of why American history is hard is because it's not black and white, and there are, there are no simple heroes and there are no simple villains because they're, we're talking about human beings.

Daniel Feller:

That's a better answer than I could— Thank you. You just let me off the hook. No. Actually, I think that's exactly correct. Let me there two issues here. One of them is is what the project does.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Daniel Feller:

And the other one is is is the view of Jackson. One thing about being a documentary editor is that you have to be if, you were gonna be good at it, you need to suppress a great deal of this. Your, your job is to put the facts before the public.

Jason Raia:

You're not making a judgment.

Daniel Feller:

You're not making a judgment. One kind of occupational hazard for documentary editors, and there are some very famous cases of this. Are editors who fall in love with their subjects and and, self identify with them to an extent that it actually distorts their scholarship. Well, it doesn't help. If you are editing the papers of John C. Calhoun that you've decided that John C. Calhoun was the greatest man who ever lived, and he was right about everything and his enemies were wrong about anything. And that's only one of many examples I could name. So, so as a matter of of of simply doing our job, we at the Jackson Papers are deliberately agnostic on on the question of whether he was a good or bad President or or an admirable or a despicable guy. I will say coming back to the question of his importance that that Jackson has, he's important, actually, for what he did, but also for what he symbolized, but that's not a static character. Jackson has always been taken as tremendously symbolic of America in all sorts of different ways. And it's always involved controversy. And the subjects of the controversy can change quite a bit but Jackson, it seems as always at the center of it. You mentioned, if you if you mentioned Andrew Jackson today, if you play, you know, word association with people, what do you know about Andrew Jackson? Well, he killed all the Indians.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Daniel Feller:

Well, it's not quite that simple, but that's what people think they know about them.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Daniel Feller:

Certainly Indian removal is the thing that we associate with Jackson today. As I love to point out, there's a book you're sure you're familiar with it by Arthur Schlesinger's *The Age of Jackson*.

Jason Raia:

Well, I was just gonna say this is the only man who in American history has a, a period, an era –

Daniel Feller:

Named after him.

Jason Raia:

– named after him, which by definition, at least to me, as a as a non-historian, says, oh, we need to pay attention. For no other reason, then why is it, at some point, a group of historians said, yes, this is, he is so emblematic of this period that we're simply going to call it the Age of Jackson.

Daniel Feller:

The Age of Jackson. And Schlesinger's book, which has 520 something pages of text. And it's a magnificent book, but by the way, almost nothing in it has gone unchallenged. But it's still being challenged. This is a book that was published in 1945 and, I still assigned it to graduate students. And there are not many things that are published in 1945 that you can read without just cringing now. It's a, a book that's, that's staggering in its scope and its erudition presents a decided view of Jackson, which many disagree with, but the point is that it is still the the basis for that disagreement. Do you know how much there's is in it on Indian removal?

Jason Raia:

I imagine it's very little.

Daniel Feller:

Two sentences.

Jason Raia:

Two sentences.

Daniel Feller:

And those two sentences are in a chapter on Andrew Jackson and religion.

Jason Raia:

Oh.

Daniel Feller:

Or actually on Jacksonian Democracy and Religion.

Jason Raia:

Oh, that's interesting.

Daniel Feller:

They're buried in a paragraph.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Daniel Feller:

Now the startling thing, I'm taking a historical perspective on historians here.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Daniel Feller:

Is that you read Schlesinger today, and you say, where are the Indians? That's not what most Americans said when that book came out.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Daniel Feller:

And won a Pulitzer Prize. It was challenged on other grounds, challenged on on the grounds that his view of the bank controversy was slanted.

Jason Raia:

So tell us and just tell us in two sentences for those who don't know, what what happens with the banks under Jackson?

Daniel Feller:

In two sentences.

Jason Raia:

Or three.

Daniel Feller:

The thing that passed for a central bank in the United States, in, in the early United States was something called the Bank of the United States, which was a part public part private, corporation incorporated by Congress, which was incorporated by Congress in order to do many of the things that the Federal Reserve now does and many of the things that the Treasury now does like print money. There had always been questions about its Constitutionality. There had always been a question about whether the country really needed one or not. There was an original first bank. I've already gone beyond three sentences.

Jason Raia:

Let's keep going.

Daniel Feller:

An original first bank that was created by the Federalists and then allowed to die by the Jeffersonians. And then after the War of 1812, they created a new one, the Second Bank of the United States, chartered in 1816 to run for 20 years. In 1832 with its recharter, or with the expiration of its charter on the horizon, Congress passed a bill to recharter it. Jackson vetoed it. And that veto message is the signature document of his Presidency.

Jason Raia:

And interestingly, if I recall, still holds some of the some of that language in that veto are is is still current today. There are those who whose criticism of the moneyed classes and and even of Capitalism are, maybe unintentionally quoting Jackson, and I don't have the the quote sitting here in front of me, but-

Daniel Feller:

Elizabeth Warren.

Jason Raia:

Okay. Yes.

Daniel Feller:

Among others. Yes. And and this was why Jackson was a hero to, the Democratic party up through about 3 quarters of 20th century, is that he was the man who had stood up against the big banks.

Jason Raia:

Right. And he pulls he pulls the federal funds out of the bank and --

Daniel Feller:

Yes.

Jason Raia:

It ends up being chartered as a as a Pennsylvania bank and then the state banks. And and there there is a it's a it's a really great look at, you know, what happens as a result of it? There are those who say, is it the 1837-

Daniel Feller:

The Panic of 1837.

Jason Raia:

The Panic is really the fault of of Jackson and, and and this controversy with the bank. But, you know, again, that's for, probably, at this point, for academic debate more than anything.

Daniel Feller:

Yeah. in the bank veto, Jackson said, now first, I should say he said a whole bunch of things. I mean, he threw every argument that he could against the bank. He claimed that it was of doubtful Constitutionality, which is an argument that had been around before. he claimed that it could become an agent of a foreign power there's an interesting backstory behind that argument. He claimed that it was an expedient. He claimed this. He claimed that. But the the passage that that that lingered was one where he said It is to be regretted that the rich and powerful too often bend the acts of government to their selfish purposes. And this argument, now I will be a little bit partisan here and say that Jackson's, attack on the bank has often been criticized as as ignorant and stupid and and and know nothing. In this particular argument, he

was, I think, if you've broaden out a little bit and there's something wrong, when bankers run the country to suit their interests and not yours.

Jason Raia:

Right. Right. And and what's interesting is it's an argument. It's not a new argument. It's Jefferson's argument against Hamilton. It's is going back to the beginning of the country and when Hamilton floats the idea of purchasing debt and and making the all of the debt of the states' federal debt. It's and the argument is, well, that means that we're going to be doing the bidding of of the wealthy. But what he saw was there's this other piece of So, but it's it's but but it becomes this defining action that Jackson in in vetoing the bank and sending and even though there's, I think, two years or or so left on the old charter, he pulls the federal funds out, puts it in a number of different state banks, which which brings up a whole nother level of issue, but it's not until the Civil War itself that the federal government really looks at banking again because they need to finance the war.

Daniel Feller:

Mhmm. So to skip ahead a little bit from that. Again, this the Jackson's battle against the Plutocrats, against the ballot factors of great wealth, these are later phrases, is what made Jackson important, to at least to those in his own party and the Democratic party up through up through the late 20th Century. So to circle back, this this is why Sclesinger could write a book called *The Age of Jackson* which is centered around the bank war, not even mention or barely mention Indian removal and passing.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Daniel Feller:

And, and most of his readership didn't see anything missing.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Daniel Feller:

And that tells us something that we could talk quite a bit about about the dangers of presentism, but, but but more about how the certain things always seem like they must have always been the way they are today.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Daniel Feller:

And, and, and studying Jackson, you realize that's not true. I'm not I'm by no means saying that Indian removal didn't deserve the prominence that it has. And in fact, I've I've pointed out myself when Jackson came to Washington as President he really had no idea what he was gonna do on a lot of things.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Daniel Feller:

His banking policy didn't develop for several years. The one thing he wanted knew he wanted to do from the very beginning was remove the Indians. That that was literally chronologically the first thing on his agenda. So-

Jason Raia:

So what so let let's talk about Indian removal. If that the thing he comes to Washington with a mind to do. And everything else is in some ways ancillary, and he'll figure out as he goes, why was that his number one issue coming into the Presidency?

Daniel Feller:

That's an excellent question. You know, that's professor speak for let me think a bit.

Jason Raia:

Sure. Interview, interview, interview speak too.

Daniel Feller:

Interview speak for. Oh, well, I think it was partly from his own background.

Jason Raia:

Because he's on the frontier, which at the time, it's he's he is the frontier. And, So there would have been or or let me ask, were there in his and there's the younger days clashes with, Native Americans?

Daniel Feller:

Yes, though let me moderate that a little bit. The the the major clashes were when he when he was a General during and after the War of 1812.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Daniel Feller:

So he had pronounced views on Indian removal, fully developed views on Indian removal.

Jason Raia:

And he's part of the Seminole Wars as well in Florida

Daniel Feller:

He is the Seminole War. Yeah.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Daniel Feller:

The, the, the reason why why I hesitated a minute there is that we have this image, or at least some people do, of Andrew Jackson and kind of hating Indians viscerally, from his days on as a frontier youth.

Jason Raia:

And it's really later.

Daniel Feller:

It's really later. The people Jackson grew up hating and fighting, were not Indians. They were British.

Jason Raia:

Yes. Of course.

Daniel Feller:

And, if you look at Jackson's authorized biography, the hatred of the British starts in the first paragraph.

Jason Raia:

Wow.

Daniel Feller:

The, the the this is biography written, of Jackson with his approval and with his help first edition was published in 1817, bought by two of his staff officers. And it talks about how Jackson grew up on the tales of British tyranny and oppression that his Irish born mother told him.

Jason Raia:

Ah, there we go.

Daniel Feller:

And as late as the War of 1812, Jackson in messages to his troops and and elsewhere portrayed the Indians as as dupes and puppets of the British. It's Britain. That's the the enemy of civilization, the enemy of, humanity, you know, the barbaric tyrannic go on the the the rhetoric here was quite overheated.

Jason Raia:

Right. Right.

Daniel Feller:

But but later on, during and after the war, Jackson, Jackson became a famous Indian fighter. He convinced himself for reasons that that he had reasons, which is not to say they were not self serving because they were.

Jason Raia:

-- Mhmm

Daniel Feller:

For believing that Indians and whites could not coexist. And therefore, the Indians had to move. It was kind of a standard argument. which it is easily to see easy to see the the holes in it. The –

Jason Raia:

Sure.

Daniel Feller:

And the front, the front of the racism in it.

Jason Raia:

Right and but it takes a very long time, and it takes, because as you say, Schlesinger's got two, two sentences in 1945, did you say?

Daniel Feller:

Yeah

Jason Raia:

And and so it it speaks to this idea that, you know, this is why you, you know, history and historians revisit topics because our the angle of our gaze changes, you know, something that wasn't important becomes important for a a new era. And certainly there has been a great deal of that in professional history over the last, several decades is the shift to telling a a different set of stories.

Daniel Feller:

A different set of stories and we hope a better set of stories.

Jason Raia:

Right. Right.

Daniel Feller:

And one has to realize that. And at the same time, I think recognize that people who told different stories in the past were and here I am talking about Schlesinger, and I could also talk about people like Edmund Morgan. Kenneth Stamp. We're not telling different stories or telling stories differently because they were bad people, but because they like we, were creatures of their own time.

Jason Raia:

Right. And and the one of the gifts of time is this distance from an incident that allows it to be examined differently.

Daniel Feller:

Mhmm.

Jason Raia:

And so is 21st Century important from the viewpoint of history, certainly was not 75 years ago. And and I think that's important, but but I also think what's important, and you've talked about this in academic forums, where is is how do we do this in a way that allows us to engage in an important conversation, but isn't steeped in politics, isn't steeped in appraisal or or judgment. But is simply a way to talk about the important things that need to be talked about. And there's not really a question there. So let me let me get to a let me let me get to a question.

Daniel Feller:

A statement, which I wish I had made myself.

Jason Raia:

But as a professional historian, you were at a conference in COVID amongst your peers and and it was specifically about this comparison at the time. And I think this was 2020, the comparison of, of President Donald Trump and President Andrew Jackson.

Daniel Feller:

Mhmm.

Jason Raia:

And you gave a paper talking about what does that mean? But and and what you thought was a a pretty tame, look at that situation and how historians, contemporary historians bring their own politics to these kinds of things. It blew up completely. So I'm I wanna hear about that because that, to me, gets to the the core of one of the things this podcast is really concerned about, and Freedoms Foundation is really concerned about, which is how do we engage with one another over difficult topics without, the incivility that you experienced in this situation, but that people experience how can be re how can we be rational and and listen to one another and be respectful, respecting one of the key components of civic responsibility from our point of view. And that's really hard in some cases, particularly when we start bringing in contemporary politics.

Daniel Feller:

Well, that was about ten questions.

Jason Raia:

Yes. So you got from none to ten. So pick any pick any of them.

Daniel Feller:

Well, let me start out because your listeners won't necessarily be familiar with this.

Jason Raia:

Yes.

Daniel Feller:

With the paper itself, and I don't wanna spend too much time on it. But, the origins of this of this particular paper that I delivered. All of a sudden, Andrew Jackson was all over the news after candidate Trump and then President Trump embraced Andrew Jackson as his model. And on the one hand, Donald Trump and his acolytes were singing the praises of what they thought was the historical Andrew Jackson. On the other hand, his critics were condemning Jackson for and and I had a phrase that I think I used in in in in the paper. Donald Trump said, I am just like Andrew Jackson. I'm a the hero of the common people, hated by the elites, loved by the masses. And Trump's critics said, yeah, you are just like Andrew Jackson. You're a bigot. You're a racist. You're an ignoramus. You're a tyrant. So that's kind of the way it was framed. As a historian, I was merely a bystander, I thought, to this debate, except that the debate quickly escalated to the point where people on both sides were saying things that were just flatly wrong about Jackson

Jason Raia:

So and that's where your alarms went off.

Daniel Feller:

Right? My alarms went off.

Jason Raia:

Politics didn't matter.

Daniel Feller:

I did not then, and I do not want now to take a position on contemporary politics. I mean, I have my views on contemporary politics, but they're separate.

Jason Raia:

And those, like you, those are not the concern of -

Daniel Feller:

Those are not the concern.

Jason Raia:

That the the what is the concern is this you know, the this controversy about for you history and and for us, how do we talk to one another about this?

Daniel Feller:

And and and what, frankly, I was not astonished to see some of the pro-Trump people saying some things that about Andrew Jackson that weren't true. These were not historians generally. I was surprised and dismayed see people of my own tribe, usually on the other side, almost always on the other side, not to see that they were criticizing Donald Trump again that as a historian, that's not my concern, but that they were saying things about Jackson that were just wrong.

Jason Raia:

And they should have known.

Daniel Feller:

And they should have known. They should have and and I said that. I said, you should have known better.

Jason Raia:

Mhmm.

Daniel Feller:

One of the things I said in the paper was, just because you despise Andrew Jackson, even if on good grounds, does not entitle you to accuse him of things he didn't do.

Jason Raia:

Fair enough.

Daniel Feller:

I thought that was fair enough. So we had historians, by the way, many of whom by new, saying things that I just thought were were nuts and and and and things. There's a whole area where where we can as historians disagree, often it comes down to subtleties of language.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Daniel Feller:

You know, was Andrew Jackson responsible as you mentioned for the Panic of 1837? Okay. That's a whole long debate.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Daniel Feller:

But it's a debate that can be held. But when you say, as a Pulitzer Prize winning historian said, that Andrew Jackson kept the skulls of Indians he had killed around the hermitage as trophies to show off to guests. Or when you say, as in fact, that same historian said that the Indian Removal Act, the law passed in 1830, mandated the army to go in and seize Indian lands. I mean, these are factual things that could be checked in 5 minutes by anybody who knows what they're doing.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Daniel Feller:

And so my paper, which was aimed largely, you know, at at at my own tribe, dare I say.

Jason Raia:

Mhmm.

Daniel Feller:

You know? Was an admonishment not to not to withhold our our perspective as historians, but to do as historians, what we has historians particularly know how to do, which which is keep it grounded in actual facts.

Jason Raia:

Right. And so there's a lot going on there. And I wonder that I think there is this question for the historians which is how do you engage? And and I think your advice is as all people have a right to engage in contemporary politics, we we just make sure that what we are saying is factual and, but I wonder is there something, some other advice that we can give that says, how do we not get caught up in the passion of of politics and leave behind the reason of a pursuit like history, that that that seems to be where the breakdown that that the passion of politics sort of overwhelms everything.

Daniel Feller:

I'm not sure if that was a question.

Jason Raia:

I'm not sure it is either, but I'm curious what you have to say.

Daniel Feller:

But I will agree entirely with it.

Jason Raia:

Yeah.

Daniel Feller:

There is this potential at least overlap or bleed through between the discourse of politics and the discourse of academia. And mostly I would say that the discourse of politics could learn a lot from the discourse of academia. What it could learn is precisely the civility of which you're speaking. It can learn how to be critical and to disagree and and unless I I, portray myself as pollyanna here, I I can be pretty critical.

Jason Raia:

Sure.

Daniel Feller:

When I when I've read a book that I think is deeply flawed and I write a review, I think it's my job to say that but it's also my job to explain why.

Jason Raia:

Sure. But it tends and I'm guessing it is not –

Daniel Feller:

It isn't -

Jason Raia:

It isn't based in, oh, I don't like this historian. It's based in, he, that this historian said these things, and here's my disagreement with these things that were said.

Daniel Feller:

And you can go at each other on an intellectual plane, and that's what academics are very good at. And I think if I'm probably living in a dream world, if people who engaged in political discourse, you know, follow that admonition, we would all be much better off. The the bleed through, unfortunately, I would say this was part of the problem that explains the reaction of my paper, was that it now goes the other way that historians are adopting the rhetorical devices, that were used to in politics, being careless in language being careless with facts and being personal.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Daniel Feller:

Let me give a a anecdote here, which would just comes to mind. There was a historian you may be familiar with named Charles Sellers.

Jason Raia:

I'm not. So –

Daniel Feller:

He was he was a great mid-20th Century historian.

Jason Raia:

Okay.

Daniel Feller:

He wrote a book called *The Market Revolution* in around 1990, which was supposed to be a grand, synthesis of the Jacksonian Era.

Jason Raia:

Okay.

Daniel Feller:

Before that, he had written, two volumes, though he never finished it. He written written the first two volumes of a biography of James K. Polk.

Jason Raia:

Oh, interesting.

Daniel Feller:

He was a leading Jacksonian period historian. *The Market Revolution* advanced a thesis. It was a synthesis built around a thesis. And it was rather severely criticized by, among others, Daniel Walker Howe who wrote –

Jason Raia:

What Hath God Wrought?

Daniel Feller:

What Hath God Wrought? And and interestingly, Charlie Sellers' *Market Revolution* was supposed to originally be the volume in the Oxford history of the United States that became *What Hath God Wrought?* That that that *Market Revolution* was supposed to be in that series. It instead was published outside the series by Oxford. And and then, Dan Howe wrote *What Hath God Wrought?* Another distinguished historian, a British historian named Richard Carwardine who's a leading Lincoln expert, but also an expert on the subject of religion and politics in the Jacksonian Era. And they had some severe criticisms of Sellers' work. Voth his defense and their criticisms were packaged together in a book called, *The Market Revolution in America*

Jason Raia:

Okay.

Daniel Feller:

As an edited collection. And the criticisms are pretty, they're pretty pointed.

Jason Raia:

Mhmm.

Daniel Feller:

None of it was personal. The people involved had the highest respect for each other. They still do. Charles Sellers died recently, and everyone lamented that.

Jason Raia:

Yeah.

Daniel Fellers:

I knew Sellers less well than some other but I had written a piece called "The Market Revolution Ate My Homework" which, which make it based something of what I thought of the thesis. It didn't matter. You know? We we were we were all in pursuit of, of a truer history and we all thought of ourselves as, you know, as as colleagues and fellows, and therefore friends. In that pursuit.

Jason Raia:

And you said the keyword, which was respect, that the criticism was grounded in respect for one person being criticized. That it and again, it's laying out that argument. It's it's it's marshalling the facts, but all of that doesn't matter if respect is not there. And and that seems to be and and once upon a time, there was we talk about it all the time, that there was a different relationship in, you know, in partisan politics, that there was there was respect in the - Ronald Reagan and Tip O'Neill often come to mind as they would during the day come to blows over policy, but they could sit and have a drink. And but I I wanna close this out because we're we're getting close to time because we've been talking about the politics and the and the and what it has done to us today. And in the last, we'll say decades just to not blame anyone particularly. But Andrew Jackson was part of a couple of elections.

Daniel Feller:

Mhmm.

Jason Raia:

Abd couple of them were sort of knocked down drag out know him and John Quincy Adams in in '24 and then again in '28. And then in '32, it's, Jackson and Henry Clay. Those 3 elections are, I I think we would look at them and and I think many people today would be surprised at how harsh they were. And and maybe I, I wonder, is there a parallel to politics and presidential elections today? And are there do you think there are any lessons that we might take from from what happened then to apply to today.

Daniel Feller:

Oh, I would shutter to take lessons.

Jason Raia:

Or maybe they're the anti-lessons of what not to do.

Daniel Feller:

I think I am gonna pass on on delivering lessons.

Jason Raia:

Fair enough.

Daniel Feller:

So as not to put myself in a false position, I'd I think looking at those elections one can see, and, actually, you can see this in in 1800 also.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Daniel Feller:

American politics has always had a cutthroat side. It's always had a seedy underside to it. Whether that seedy underside was was more whether the nastiness, the vulgarity, the slander, was more prominent then than now? I'm not sure myself.

Jason Raia:

Right. Is it a question of amplification today in a way that it wasn't thin, but—

Daniel Feller:

One thing I'll say is that I think historians have actually over amplified because this resonates more with us today. One aspect of, in particular, the 1828 campaign, I've seen it's frequently described as, like, the dirtiest campaign in American history.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Daniel Feller:

And I'd say, no, it wasn't. Not not even before recent campaigns was at the dirtiest campaign in American history, but historians have fixated, remarkably on one particular aspect of, Jackson's persona at the time, and that was his marriage to Rachel. And and this is, you know, this is the story that everybody knows. He was attacked for for his marriage to Rachel. And, she didn't hear about it till finally she did by accident, it broke her heart and she died. Well, my reading of things, and I think I've studied this election pretty carefully, the attack on Jackson for being a bigamist or a wife's dealer, is that actually a very minor part of of the criticism of Jackson's character. I mean, it was there. There were a whole lot of things there, just as there were a whole lot of things there in any modern campaign. The real criticism of Jackson the more central criticism of Jackson was that he was a dangerous man.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Daniel Feller:

That he was, the word psychotic hadn't been invented yet, but that he was bloodthirsty, openly contemptuous of behavioral norms, openly contemptuous of the limits of the United States Constitution, that he would become an American Caesar. And while my work at the Jackson Papers has convinced me that Jackson was not whether you like him or not. The the the worst of the accusations against Jackson turned out to be let's say unfounded. They weren't unfounded based on his previous career. The things that really got people's attention in 1828 more than his marriage to Rachel, were his defiance of orders, his willingness to shoot his own soldiers under under what many people thought were egregious circumstances his willingness to capture and shoot British civilians, his willingness to challenge everybody in, he saw practically, the duels. Even though he only fought one duel, he issued a whole lot of challenges. And people thought he was a dangerous man

Jason Raia:

Yeah.

Daniel Feller:

And based upon what you saw of men public in 1828, there was very, very good reason to think he was a dangerous man.

Jason Raia:

Right. Right. Thank you. I we we always end with a quiz. It's an easy quiz. It's really just, opportunity to learn a little bit more about you. Okay. what's one thing you would want every American to learn more about?

Daniel Feller:

The causes of the Civil War.

Jason Raia:

Okay.

Daniel Feller:

Or I would say the cause of the Civil War. There's only one.

Jason Raia:

There's only one. If you had not chosen a career in academia what might you have become?

Daniel Feller:

Tour guide at historic site.

Jason Raia:

There you go.

Daniel Feller:

I did it several times during summers, as a grad student. I thought it was first, it was a lot of fun. I thought it was the best training in the world.

Jason Raia:

Yep. And that's now what's interesting is that's now become public history and and something that, you know, is pursued academically and there's some really wonderful people who who take that, not just as a part time summer gig, but as a, as a real –Yeah. Yeah. What's one thing about you that would surprise most people? And I I I have one if you if you -

Daniel Feller:

I'm really a nice guy.

Jason Raia:

I I I well, that's that's not hard to believe. But I'll throw one to you. The - Knoxville Area Transit Most Valuable Passenger.

Daniel Feller:

You read my vita.

Jason Raia:

I did.

Daniel Feller:

I was so proud of that.

Jason Raia:

I'll tell you a quick story -

Daniel Feller:

By the way, I'm the one and only.

Jason Raia:

The one and only winner of that award? I was at a, a day long conference back when I was teaching, up in Boston at the, the Kennedy Library. And, when I left, and hopped on the red line to head home, who was in my car, but Governor Dukakis, who had been one of the speakers at this conference. He was truly dedicated, and I believe today's this day still is, a dedicated, MBTA rider. And, yeah, he took public transit everywhere, and here's this, you know, retired governor, former presidential candidate, and he's just sitting there, you know, chatting away with people. And we talked a little about the conference, and then, you know, we parted ways. And, I, I, I

loved, living in a city where that was, I I lived five years without a car and, just took the the bus and the train everywhere. If you can meet just one historical person, would it be?

Daniel Feller:

Well, it would have to be Abe Lincoln.

Jason Raia:

Okay. Even more than Andrew Jackson?

Daniel Feller:

I'm not sure I'd wanna meet Andrew Jackson.

Jason Raia:

And final question, and we ask this question of everybody.

Daniel Feller:

I I I will say that that if I have a fondness for any politician, of the Jacksonian Era, and that that that that's a big if it would be Henry Clay.

Jason Raia:

Yeah. Yeah. I find him fascinating. really and truly. Okay. Last question, bourbon or Scotch?

Daniel Feller:

English beer.

Jason Raia:

Okay. There it is. well, thanks to our guest, Daniel Feller. I can't wait to have you back and talk more. I also wanna thank our producers Lara Kennedy and Sarah Rasmussen a special shout out to friend of the pod, Bill Franz for his art design. Special thanks to longtime Freedoms Foundation historic interpreter, Bob Gleason, for his contributions to the intro. And most of all, I want to thank you, our listeners. Please subscribe, follow, rate, and review *George Washington Slept Here* wherever you listen to your podcasts, and please tell your friends to learn more about Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge, check out our website at www.freedomsfoundation.org and follow us on social media. And finally, our email, again gwshpodcast@gmail.com with questions, comments, suggestions. Daniel Feller, thank you very much.

Daniel Feller:

Thank you.