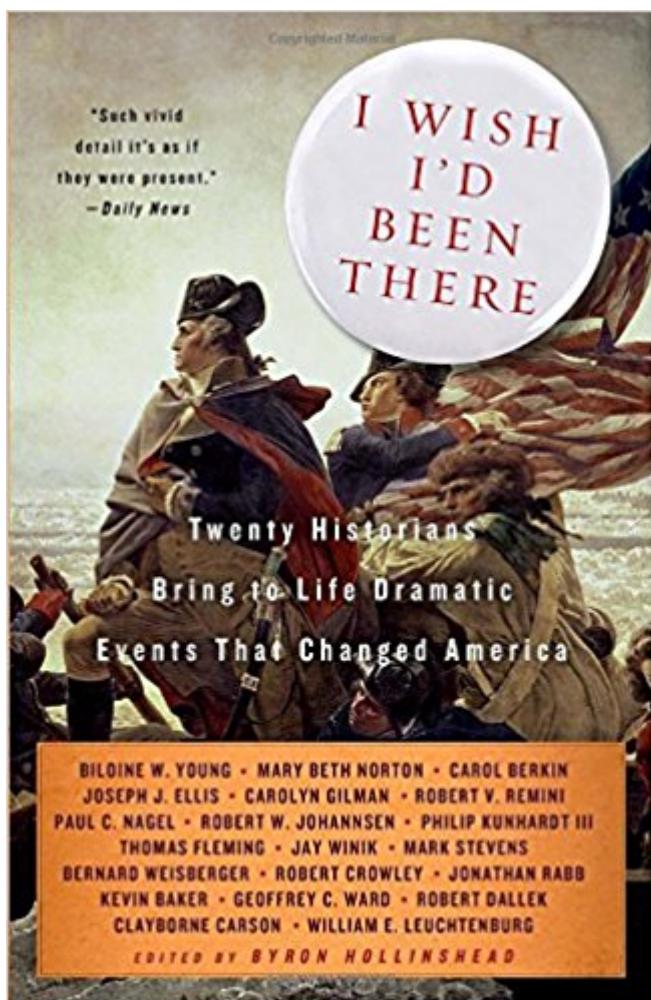


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# I Wish I'd Been There: Twenty Historians Bring To Life The Dramatic Events That Changed America (Vintage)



## Synopsis

I Wish I'd Been There brings together twenty of our most distinguished historians' responses to the question "What scene or incident in American history would you most liked to have witnessed and why?" The answers illuminate crucial moments in our past and give readers a front-row seat at some of American history's most dramatic events. The Salem witch trials, the raid on Harper's Ferry, the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, the voting rights march on Selma, the beginnings of the Vietnam War, all of these and more are vividly recreated here by a stellar list of contributors, including Mary Beth Norton, Joseph Ellis, Carol Berkin, Geoffrey Ward, Robert Dallek, Jay Winik, Robert Cowley, Carolyn Gilman, and William Leuchtenburg, among other luminaries of the profession. With imagination, insight, and vivid detail, I Wish I'd Been There is an engaging tour through key events in American history.

## Book Information

Series: Vintage

Paperback: 352 pages

Publisher: Anchor; Reprint edition (September 4, 2007)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1400096545

ISBN-13: 978-1400096541

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.7 x 7.9 inches

Shipping Weight: 11.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars 19 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #147,925 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #63 in Books > History > Historical Study & Educational Resources > Essays #6011 in Books > History > Americas > United States

## Customer Reviews

If she could be a fly on the wall at a pivotal moment in American history, Mary Beth Norton would have witnessed the Salem witch trials. These were driven not by greed or, as Arthur Miller would have it, by adultery, she writes, but by Massachusetts colonists' overwhelming fears about the frontier war with the Wabanaki Indians. Gathered by Hollinshead, former president of Oxford University Press and publisher of the military history journal *MHQ*, the best pieces in this uniformly perceptive and provocative volume dispel popular myths and serve up familiar events and heroes from fresh vantage points. According to Joseph Ellis, George Washington spent most of his first

term trying to find a just solution to the Native American sovereignty problem and bribed a Creek chief to achieve his goals. Geoffrey Ward wonders if FDR's physicians gave him the lowdown on his failing health before he decided to run for a fourth term, and William Leuchtenburg reimagines the tongue-lashing LBJ gave fellow "good ole boy" George Wallace before the 1965 civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery. Personal essays on the Scopes "monkey" trial, the day Lincoln was shot and the flourishing Indian metropolis of Cahokia (in present-day Illinois) circa 1030 round out this tantalizing collection. B&w illus. (Oct. 3) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Countless historians and lay thinkers have expressed their fantasy of being a "fly on the wall," able to view and listen in as a particular moment in history unfolded. Hollinshead has assembled an anthology of these participatory fantasies, written by 20 prominent historians. Through the imagined experiences of these historians, we can spend a day in -eleventh-century Cahokia, the Native American metropolis on the Great Plains; we can join Meriwether Lewis as he straddles the Continental Divide and puts to rest the dream of the Northwest Passage; we can sit in the sweltering courtroom as Bryan and Darrow joust over evolution. Although the various descriptions are well grounded in historical fact, they are inevitably filtered through the biases of the individual historians, and some will dispute their interpretations of reality. So this may not be strictly data-driven history, but it is provocative and should be a fun read for both historians and general readers. Jay FreemanCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

I found this collection of essays to be very enjoyable. They are based on factual events, but it is admittedly fun to speculate also, to imagine what might have been. I appreciate the broad scope of topics, but that does have limitations. Some of these choices seem too personal in nature, driven by personal, even political agendas. The choice of each historian of what event to speculate on, of course, is a personal decision. While these essays are well-written throughout, I wouldn't have chosen some of these topics.

The concept of this book is spectacular. Twenty well known historians choose the moment in history they'd love to have shared. I bought it since one of the stories is one that I'm writing about right now (The McGillivray Moment) and this book gave me great detail on an event in 1790 America almost all other books just mention. But after reading the one I bought it for, I read others, and enjoyed them even more! Have you ever heard of Cahokia? It's about an actual ancient city in the US that

was 500 years earlier than the Aztec Empire, and far and away the biggest ancient culture on the No. American continent. Where was it? Ever heard of it? I hadn't. And it's still there! You can visit it! All twenty stories are like this....some about well-known events or places, but these writers wrote these out of more than interest---these stories are their personal passions. Order this book. Every short chapter by each author is well written, and absolutely fascinating!

First, it should be noted that the title oversells the book: few of the historical moments depicted in this chronologically ordered collection of essays "changed America." Actually, the essays reflect the particular areas of interest of the authors and are invariably used to clarify, expand, or correct the historical record. The "wishing to be there" sentiment carries different meanings in the essays. In some cases, the interest is primarily to have observed or experienced the event, while others attempt to reconstruct events, including injecting possible speech and actions of key participants. The essays really are a mixed bag in terms of the approach, the importance of the event, and the recognition factor. They mostly seem like chapters from biographies. The subtle diffusing of an officer revolt by George Washington in 1783, the so-called corrupt bargain that elevated John Quincy Adams to the presidency in 1825, and details of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln are already well known. Some of the essays concentrate on the personal: the debut of the "Swedish Nightingale," Jenny Lind, on Sept 11, 1850, the illness of FDR in 1944-45, and the psychological distress of Meriwether Lewis in his explorations in the 1800s. A number of the essays are obscure and not particularly compelling: the last day of WWI in Butgneville, France (Nov 11, 1918), Sen. LaFollette's speech on US entry into WWI, the last meeting of Nation of Islam founders, and the machinations surrounding the Democracy's nomination of James K. Polk in 1844. Others are obscure but more interesting: the funeral of a chieftain in 1030 in the Mississippi River city of Cahokia and the last gasp of Indians led by Chief Joseph in 1877. The two essays on the Civil Rights movement in the mid-1960s involving the march on Washington and LBJ confronting segregationist governor George Wallace are powerful. The speculation on the wisdom of the Kennedy brothers keeping the US out of Vietnam seems more than a little self-serving. An essay on the John Brown raid on Harpers Ferry serves as a corrective to his sanctification by abolitionists. Four essays have not been mentioned here. The appeal of this collection may be similar to that of a collection of diverse short stories versus a novel. Some will not like the unevenness, fragmentation, and many personages introduced. These essays are probably best seen as supplementary to full length treatments of the various events, although the intrusion of the authors into the events may be bothersome. The claim of bringing events to life with such intrusion is a bit overstated.

I found this collection of essays to be very enjoyable. They are based on factual events, but it is admittedly fun to speculate also, to imagine what might have been. I appreciate the broad scope of topics, but that does have limitations. Some of these choices seem too personal in nature, driven by personal, even political agendas. The choice of each historian of what event to speculate on, of course, is a personal decision. While these essays are well-written throughout, I wouldn't have chosen some of these topics. I enjoyed the chapter on John Brown at Harper's Ferry in contrast to the treatment Brown receives in "Lies My Teacher Told Me." Thomas Fleming successfully debunks the notion of Brown as a "moral visionary" and "serious political thinker." Also, I admired some of the chapters on lesser-known incidents. This collection includes a wide range of topics, for example the Alexander McGillavary story, the significance of Jenny Lind's American debut, and a little known 1965 meeting between Lyndon Johnson and George Wallace. I don't mean to suggest that all the chapters concerned unknown events; much light is shed on greater-known historical events also. In conclusion, I recommend this collection as an intriguing, easy read for history buffs or novices. Also, while not definitive nor comprehensive as a source, (the essays are comparatively brief) it could be used as an excellent starting resource for history students. I would use it as a teaching tool.

This book is an engaging read and a great source of information. I initially had to read it as a school assignment, however I really enjoyed it and it is a great collection of historically accurate stories from a variety of different sources. I highly recommend it!

I majored in history, so I am somewhat biased. I told several people about it and many people seemed interested in the concept. Some of the chapter I found fascinating and others I was yawning (particularly the first one, so if you read it and can't get past the first few pages, skip to something more your appetite). I particularly liked the Salem chapter, MLK chapter, George Washington gives the speech chapter and the Corrupt Bargain chapter. Other people who I lent it to were less excited about it. Overall, an enjoyable read.

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