Facilitator Notes

The Civil War:

Divided Loyalties and Mountain Identity

Echoes of Eden in Western North Carolina: The Johnstone Settlement, 1852–1864

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About This Guide

This guide uses the Johnstone Settlement as a window into Civil War loyalties — the forces that shaped allegiance in the mountain South, the intimate violence those divisions unleashed, and the echoes we can still hear in how Americans navigate political identity today. It is designed for two main audiences: faith communities and educational institutions. Book clubs will find it equally useful, especially for personal and group reflection.

At its heart, the guide explores who chose a side, who was forced to choose, and who tried not to — questions that feel just as urgent now as they did in 1861.

The discussion questions here aren't a script. Pick the ones that fit your group. Rearrange them, combine them, skip some, rewrite others. The goal is honest, meaningful conversation — not covering every item on a list.

The Readings at a Glance

Participants should arrive having read the materials listed in the Overview. Here's a quick orientation to what each source brings to the conversation:

- **Gralley, Echoes of Eden** — The main case study. The Introduction establishes the Johnstone Settlement's Lowcountry origins and its distinctive character in the mountain landscape. Chapter 5, "The Collapse of Eden," traces how the war unmade the community from the inside out: early Confederate enthusiasm, mounting disillusionment, and finally the violence of deserters and bushwhackers who targeted the settlers' wealth and politics.
- **Heath, "What Our Past Can Tell Us About Polarization Now"** — Surveys recurring cycles of political fracture in American history. Establishes that today's divisions — partisan sorting, geographic clustering, economic grievance, the breakdown of shared institutions — are not historically exceptional. Provides the conceptual vocabulary for the guide's "then and now" section.
- **McKinney, "Layers of Loyalty"** — Analyzes 261 amnesty letters written by western North Carolina elites after the war. Finds that loyalties were layered, fragmented, and intensely local: roughly 40 percent expressed no clear political allegiance, identifying primarily as "citizens" of their county rather than of state or nation. A corrective to any simple Confederate–Unionist binary.
- **Oshnock, "The Isolation Factor"** — Demonstrates that geography and class shaped loyalty more than culture or sentiment. Higher elevation correlated with stronger Unionism; valley communities with commercial ties to the Lowcountry leaned Confederate. Provides the structural argument against which the Johnstone story can be measured.

- **Yates, "Zebulon B. Vance as War Governor"** — Frames Vance's political arc as a mirror of his constituents: Unionist turned reluctant Confederate, defender of the state caught between Richmond's demands and ordinary North Carolinians' survival. Vance's trajectory is the guide's most vivid example of conditional loyalty under institutional pressure.

Supplemental Readings:

- **Blackmun, "War Comes to the Hills"** — Documents the collapse of civil order in western North Carolina after 1863: scarcity, desertion, bushwhacking, and the Shelton Laurel massacre. Provides the ground-level texture of wartime violence that the other sources analyze more abstractly.

Tailoring the Discussion to Your Setting

For Churches and Faith Communities

This material will likely land with both historical weight and personal resonance — especially when discussion turns to the intimate, neighbor-against-neighbor violence that destroyed the Johnstone Settlement, and to the contemporary parallels Heath draws between past and present fracture.

A sequence that tends to work:

- Start with Geography, Isolation, and the Roots of Identity to build a shared historical foundation, then move to Conditional Loyalty and the violence sections.
- Look for questions that bridge past and present. Then and Now Questions 2 and 3 connect naturally to faith traditions' teachings on truth-telling, conscience, and the cost of communal belonging.
- Use Question 6 from the Then and Now section — about what practices help sustain genuine curiosity across political difference — as a closing prompt or take-home reflection. It tends to open conversations people didn't expect to have.
- Consider connecting this to your congregation's own local history. Many communities in western North Carolina have direct ties to the families and places this guide describes.

Pacing options:

- **Single session (60–90 min):** Two questions from Geography and Identity, one from Conditional Loyalty, one from Class and Violence, one from Then and Now.
- **Multi-week study:** Dedicate a full session to each section.

For Advanced Secondary Schools, Colleges, and Seminaries

Academic groups tend to engage through analysis and comparison across disciplines — and this guide rewards that approach. The combination of scholarly summaries, quantitative historical data, and a specific local case study is a natural model for interdisciplinary inquiry.

A few practical suggestions:

- Assign the readings before class so you can use session time for discussion, not recap.
- Many of the questions are compound. Consider breaking them into smaller pieces and assigning sub-questions to small groups before reconvening.

- Push the “then and now” comparisons. Ask students to be specific about where the analogy between wartime Appalachia and contemporary political polarization holds — and where it breaks down. The friction is where the thinking happens.
- Pair Oshnock’s geographic argument with Geography Question 4 (whether the underlying forces have fundamentally changed). Pair McKinney’s amnesty letter analysis with Conditional Loyalty Question 4 (what triggers a shift in held loyalties).

A possible three-session arc:

- **Session 1** — Geographic and class roots of loyalty (Oshnock, McKinney, Gralley Introduction)
- **Session 2** — Conditional loyalty, institutional overreach, and the Vance paradox (Yates, Blackmun, McKinney, Gralley Ch. 5)
- **Session 3** — Class violence, the collapse of order, and contemporary echoes, closing with Then and Now Question 6

Connecting the Readings: Themes to Track

These thematic threads run across all the sources. Keep them in mind as you move between sections — they’ll help the conversation feel like one continuous inquiry rather than separate questions about separate texts.

Geography as Destiny — and Its Limits

Oshnock’s core argument is structural: elevation, slaveholding rates, and market access predicted loyalty more reliably than any declaration of principle. The data is striking — Confederate soldiers in Buncombe County averaged nearly six times the wealth of their Union counterparts. Yet the Johnstone Settlement complicates this picture. Wealthy, slaveholding, and Confederate in a landscape that was largely Unionist, they fit Oshnock’s economic logic but defy his geographic one. Use this tension as an opening move: where does the structural argument hold, and where does individual or group particularity push back against it?

The Many Faces of Conditional Loyalty

McKinney’s four categories — consistent Unionists, consistent Confederates, Unionists who became Confederates, and the noncommittal — are a useful diagnostic throughout the guide. Most of the figures who appear across the readings don’t fit neatly into any one category: Vance enters the war as a Unionist and becomes the Confederacy’s most effective governor; mountain men enlist with genuine enthusiasm and desert within a year; amnesty letter writers “rejoice” at the Confederacy’s collapse having served it faithfully to the end. The category that will resonate most for contemporary discussion is probably the neutral or noncommittal — people who performed their civic duties while privately withholding allegiance. Encourage participants to think about what that kind of loyalty costs the people who practice it.

What the Government Demands, and What People Will Bear

Vance, Blackmun, and McKinney each show a Confederate government that systematically destroyed its own base of support: conscription that fell hardest on the poor, the Twenty Negro law that exempted wealthy slaveholders, impressment of food and livestock from farms already near starvation, the suspension of habeas corpus. The pattern is worth naming explicitly: the same government that asked the most of ordinary people protected those who had the most to give. That asymmetry — not ideology — drove desertion and disillusionment in the mountains. It also drives

the “rich man’s war, poor man’s fight” grievance that surfaces in the Class and Violence section and in the contemporary parallels Heath identifies.

The Intimacy of Mountain Violence

The Civil War in the Blue Ridge was not a distant battlefield conflict. The danger came from the next ridge over — from neighbors, former allies, and men who shared enough of the same grievances to have briefly marched under the same banner. Blackmun’s account of Shelton Laurel — thirteen men and boys executed without trial, including a thirteen-year-old — is the guide’s most powerful illustration of what happens when institutional authority collapses and violence becomes local. The Johnstone Settlement’s destruction fits the same pattern. Return to this intimacy whenever the discussion threatens to become abstract: what does it mean that the men who destroyed the Johnstone community had, not long before, nominally shared the same side?

Reconciliation and What It Requires

The communities fractured by the Civil War in western North Carolina had to go on living together afterward. The speed with which many amnesty letter writers expressed relief at the Confederacy’s collapse — having enforced it loyally to the end — raises hard questions about what reconciliation actually is. Is it the restoration of civic function without any accounting for what happened? Or does it require something more? McKinney’s finding that most correspondents simply returned to their U.S. allegiance without bitterness is historically significant and morally unresolved. Use it as a bridge to Heath’s question about whether current divisions can end the same way — and whether that outcome would actually constitute healing.

Preparing for Hard Conversations

Some Principles to Start With

- Set expectations before the first question: honest engagement with the evidence, willingness to examine how geography, class, and power shaped both past and present, and genuine respect for everyone in the room.
- Distinguish discomfort from harm. Discomfort is productive — hold space for it without rushing to resolve it.
- Expect some defensiveness, and meet it with curiosity rather than judgment. Participants with Appalachian roots, family ties to the Confederacy, or strong feelings about contemporary political polarization may resist parts of this framing. Try: “What about this feels difficult?”
- Let the primary sources do the heavy lifting. When conversation gets abstract, return to specifics: Oshnock’s wealth data, Blackmun’s account of Shelton Laurel, the particular men whose amnesty letters McKinney quotes.
- Don’t demand personal confession. Questions about contemporary political identity are invitations. Important reflection often happens after people leave the room.
- Be honest about contested ground. Whether the current political moment is genuinely comparable to the Civil War era is genuinely open. You don’t need to resolve it — you need to help people think carefully about it.

When Participants Identify with the Mountain Confederates

Some participants — especially those with family ties to the Appalachian South, or those who feel their own loyalties have been tested by institutional overreach — may find unexpected resonance with the men Gralley and McKinney describe. This isn't a problem. It's a door.

- Acknowledge it openly: "Many of us might have made similar calculations under similar pressures. What does that tell us?"
- Then press on the asymmetry: "What did the Johnstone settlers have that their neighbors didn't? What did the Confederate government protect, and who bore the cost of that protection?"
- Use Oshnock's data to keep the discussion grounded in history rather than personal guilt. The settlers weren't uniquely virtuous or uniquely villainous — they were operating within a structure. What was that structure, and who built it?

When the Contemporary Parallels Get Politically Charged

Heath's survey of polarization cycles and the guide's "then and now" questions will likely surface strong feelings about current politics. Here's what tends to help:

- Keep the historical anchor present. The question isn't "Which party is right today?" but "What does the Johnstone story reveal about how ordinary people navigate institutional betrayal and shifting loyalties?"
- Be precise about types of loyalty. Some mountain men chose their allegiance; some felt compelled by family and community; some tried not to choose at all. That precision reduces heat and invites more honest self-reflection.
- If the conversation stalls on contemporary politics, redirect to the historical specifics: "How did people in Watauga County express dissent when the cost of open opposition was too high?" — and then, more quietly, invite participants to recognize the parallel themselves.

A Note on the Local Dimension

For participants in western North Carolina, this isn't distant history. Shelton Laurel, Flat Rock, and Dunn's Rock are close to communities where many of your participants may live, work, and worship. The questions about wealth, loyalty, class resentment, and the violence that simmers beneath political division in the 1860s may land with unexpected immediacy.

That local resonance is an asset. It makes the history immediate. It can also make the conversation tender. Be ready for participants to bring strong feelings about their own families and communities into a discussion that is ostensibly about the past. That convergence isn't a distraction — it's evidence the material is doing its work.

A Note on the Dual Audience

While this guide is useful for book clubs, it was designed mostly with churches and classrooms in mind — and that's intentional. Loyalty has always been both a political phenomenon and a moral one. It is shaped by geography and class, tested by institutional pressure and personal fear, and experienced as conviction, compromise, survival, and sometimes betrayal.

The questions that matter most here — about what makes loyalty genuine or conditional, who bears the cost of collective commitments, what happens to communities that fracture along political lines and then have to go on living together, and whether the patterns of the past are recurring or merely rhyming — belong in both the sanctuary and the seminar room.

Quick Reference: Pairing Questions Across Sources

For facilitators who want tight thematic control, these pairings work especially well:

- **Geography Q1 (Johnstone as exception to Oshnock's pattern)** → pair with Oshnock's wealth data on Confederate vs. Union enlistees (the structural argument and its limits)
- **Conditional Loyalty Q2 (Vance's trajectory)** → pair with McKinney's "Unionists who became Confederates" category (state loyalty vs. national loyalty)
- **Conditional Loyalty Q4 (what triggers a shift in loyalty)** → pair with Then and Now Q2 (the "conditional Confederate" posture in contemporary mountain politics)
- **Class and Violence Q2 (Shelton Laurel)** → pair with Blackmun's narrative of institutional collapse (what has to break down before atrocity becomes possible)
- **Class and Violence Q3 (rich man's war grievance)** → pair with Oshnock's wealth comparisons and Heath on economic grievance as a recurring fracture point
- **Then and Now Q6 (practices that sustain genuine curiosity across difference)** → use as a closing prompt in any setting; it bridges every section