In the wee hours of May 13, 1862, a slave named Robert Smalls sailed a Confederate cotton steamer out of Charleston harbor and to Union lines, delivering himself, his crew, their families, and a valuable ship out of the slave South. The four-hour journey was daring, remarkable, and certainly unique. While thousands of slaves escaped slavery during the Civil War, most journeys were much less celebrated. Nevertheless, a history built around Robert Smalls’s extraordinary journey can explore the larger stories of how enslaved people seized freedom during the war and how the Union Army became a vehicle for emancipation.

On the one hand, microhistories, with their focus on the small scale, have the potential to shift paradigms by revealing connections and patterns obscured by the birds-eye view. However, examining a narrow subject so deeply may also offer a window into wider society because as historian Jill Lepore puts it, “however singular a person’s life may be, the value of examining it lies not in its uniqueness, but in its exemplariness, in how that individual’s life serves as an allegory for broader issues affecting culture as a whole.” The era of the Civil War is particularly suited for such deep dives, because it so significantly redefined the nation, and because so many individuals recorded their experiences. As we continue to expand our scholarship to include the experiences of those on the margins – people, places, and events often left out of traditional narratives of the period – we must grapple with an important question: to what extent can human singularity illuminate universal truths? This conference will address questions both of the value of individual stories and lives for their own sake, and of how seemingly small stories can offer a richer understanding of the broad contours of this period and even shift how we understand the period at all.

We welcome papers covering the Civil War era, broadly defined. This can include the political and cultural causes of the conflict, the ways individuals experienced the war on the battlefields and on the homefront, the shape of Reconstruction, and the legacies of war and emancipation. We are particularly interested in papers that consider subjects, groups, and ideas not traditionally covered in Civil War histories. We also welcome papers considering the methodology of microhistory in the American Civil War context.

Professors Richard Bell (University of Maryland) and Judith Giesberg (Villanova University) will deliver keynote presentations.

Please submit your paper proposals (max. 500 words) as well as any questions to Caitlin Verboon (cverboon@vt.edu) by January 15, 2019. Proposals should be accompanied by a brief CV. All presenters will be asked to submit written papers in advance of the conference, and the papers will be considered for publication in an edited volume or special journal issue. This conference is sponsored by the Virginia Center for Civil War Studies (civilwar.vt.edu). A limited amount of funding to cover lodging is available for scholars without access to departmental funds. Please indicate in your application if you would like to be considered.