Summer History & Heritage -- #6 (July 16)

This week includes commentary on jazz great Duke Ellington, Andrew Jackson and the National Bank, and controversial Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest.

Duke Ellington --- (*Almanac*, July 3)
Raised in middle-class Washington, D.C., **this black composer (1899--1974)** led an orchestra that stood atop the nation's jazz scene for four decades (1920s to the 60s)? He moved to NYC in 1922 to pursue his musical dreams, playing for theaters and dance clubs and developing a distinctive sound characterized by blues and improvisation. A virtuoso pianist as well, his best known works include the suite *Black, Brown, and Beige* (1943) and the songs "Mood Indigo" and "Sophisticated Lady."

National Bank or National Banking System --- (*Almanac*, July 5)
It was Andrew Jackson (U.S. president from 1829 to 1837) who proved to be the fiercest opponent of the early version of **this American economic institution?** In 1832 Jackson vetoed a bill to renew its charter (not scheduled to expire till 1836), and then proceeded to remove the U.S. stake in the institution in his second term. His opposition was based on his conviction that the system itself was unconstitutional and smacked of special privileges and public favors for the few at the expense of the many.

Jackson and the Bank --- (a follow-up)
Even if one sympathizes with Jackson's critique of the national bank of his day (this teacher does), the president may not have been prudent to move so aggressively to undermine the financial system. Jackson was determined to pay off the federal debt (a good idea), and, as a result, many funds were withdrawn from the Bank of the United States. What was left (along with new revenues) was distributed among several state banks. The immediate result was a kind of economic bubble or boom as many financial institutions, some sound some unsound, had more money to lend at lower interest rates. However, the bubble eventually burst and the Jackson years were followed by one of the deeper economic downturns or depressions in American history. How much of the pain and suffering can be laid at the feet of Jackson and his gut-level dislike of banks and bankers is arguable.

Nathan Bedford Forrest --- (Clyde Wilson; *Chronicles*, June 2012)
Sherman called him a devil, but Robert E. Lee considered **this Tennesseean (1821--1877)** the greatest soldier to have arisen from the War Between the States? Controversy attends his early life as a slave trader, his supposed responsibility for a "massacre" of Union troops at Fort Pillow, TN, and his involvement with the Ku Klux Klan after the war. But there's no denying he was a brilliant citizen-general who triumphed repeatedly with very modest resources, much like Andrew Jackson.

More on Nathan Bedford Forrest --- (Clyde Wilson; *Chronicles*, June 2012)
In "Neither Devil nor Mystery," historian Clyde Wilson reviews two recent books about Nathan Bedford Forrest. Here are a couple of excerpts:

Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest was no more a devil than you or I. He was an arresting character, a powerful leader of men, and one of those natural-born military geniuses who appear from time to time in history, which is not the same thing as a devil. The "devil" label was given to him by Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman, who hoped to have Forrest murdered. . .

It is said that after the war an Englishman asked General Lee who was the greatest soldier produced by the late gigantic conflict in America. Lee replied without hesitation that it was a gentleman in Tennessee whom he had never met---General Forrest. Sherman agreed with the assessment. Forrest's repeated astounding successes in pitting meager resources with skill and daring against superior forces resemble those of Washington and Andrew Jackson, likewise military amateurs, although Forrest's accomplishments were on a much larger scale. The citizen-general who could achieve victory with an economy of resources used to be an honored American type but has long since been replaced by the Grant model of a professional manager who marshals overwhelming materiel against an outnumbered enemy.

At the war's end, Bedford Forrest, like many Southern leaders in the 1870s, supported the aspirations of freed blacks and reached out to them in cooperative friendship. Some have suggested this was motivated by Christian conversion (Forrest did confess Christ publicly after the war) or was perhaps indicative of liberalization on his part. Professor Wilson believes nothing could be further from the truth, a complete misunderstanding of historic context, of Forrest and his times:

[His] stand had nothing to do with religious conversion and does not indicate an embrace of modern attitudes. Southerners knew their Bible well and knew that Scripture did not consider the status of a master in itself a sin---though being a bad master (or a bad servant) was evidence of a sinful disposition.

Forrest's reach across the color line had its true source in the paternalism and the close relations of races in the Old South, not in any late-life conversion to liberal attitudes. Forrest had been known as a good master. He took 50 of his black men to war with him as teamsters and cooks and promised them freedom if they served faithfully. Subsequently, he signed 49 emancipation papers. If Forrest had truly moved toward the "modern" attitude of his own time---the attitude of progressive Northerners---he would have regarded the black people as an alien presence in the United States and wished for their disappearance. This was certainly the feeling of Lincoln, Grant, Sherman, and most Northerners until they discovered the usefulness of blacks as targets in place of whites and of black voters in controlling the South. It was because of old ties, and not a new attitude, that hundreds of black people attended Forrest's funeral, while they were barred from Lincoln's.