

David Cantwell

*The “Lost Cause” Movement
and the Debate over Confederate Monuments*

ABSTRACT: This article discusses the ongoing debate over the removal of Confederate monuments from public display. An examination of the pro-Confederacy “Lost Cause” movement (that originally constructed the memorials in the early 1900s) reveals how and why the controversy surrounding these statues has waxed and waned over time. In the early twenty-first century, the battle for social justice is raging once again around these monuments, sparked by the murder of George Floyd. The article argues that, until the United States comes to terms with the implicit racism of Confederate monuments, it will never truly be able to move on.

KEYWORDS: modern history; United States (U.S.); Confederate States of America (C.S.A.); Civil War; Robert E. Lee; monuments; memorials; Lost Cause; race relations; Civil Rights

Introduction

New Orleans, 1884: The city once known as “The Jewel of the Confederacy” shines, pulsing with the party atmosphere of Carnival season. On this February twenty-second, amidst the citywide festivities, a crowd of thousands gathers in Lee Circle, including VIPs from all over the South—a veritable who-is-who of state officials, judges, mayors, and other dignitaries. As the moment of the grand reveal approaches, a sudden rain brings an abrupt halt to the litany of speeches and orations about the man being honored. As a reporter for the *Southwestern Christian Advocate* later described the scene: “[T]here swept through...one of the most terrific storms...that scattered the crowd almost in a panic.”¹ Luckily for the celebrants, there soon comes a respite in the downpour, and much of the (now rather damp) crowd returns just in time to witness former Confederate States of America President Jefferson Davis pull the rope, releasing the veil covering the bronze monument dedicated to the late General Robert E. Lee, towering triumphantly over the mass of people below. A roar of approval bursts from the excited crowd, especially from a large collection of proud Confederate veterans, as Lee’s statue gazes toward the North, seemingly scanning the horizon for the Union enemy.

New Orleans, 2017: After many decades of confrontations and controversy, Confederate statues across the city are being removed in response to calls for racial justice and equity that echo throughout the United States. Despite dust-ups and fistfights during the removal of other statues between advocates both for and against, a pervasive Mardi Gras-like party atmosphere saturates Lee Circle this May nineteenth, as thousands gather to witness the permanent removal of the Robert E. Lee statue from its eighty-foot-high perch. While the work crew (clad in full-face masks and bulletproof vests in response to anonymous death threats) moves to set up their equipment, the crowd surrounding the circle parties on.

¹ “Multiple News Items,” *Southwestern Christian Advocate*, February 28, 1884, 4, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers [database].

Brass bands play counterpoint to radio broadcasts; kids and adults alike jump rope or dance; some take a moment to pay respects by saluting the General; some take pictures, all seeming to have a good time. Finally, as the workday ends just after six p.m., a crane reaches out and lifts the statue off its lofty position of high honor with little fanfare, ending over a century of Lee's northward gaze. In a blink, the monument is gone, summed up by one observer as, "It happened just like *that*."²

The statue of Robert E. Lee in New Orleans is only one example of the Confederate monuments that pepper the United States from coast to coast. The majority of them, erected mostly in the early decades of the twentieth century, coincided with the passing of segregationist Jim Crow laws in the former slave states and a resurgence of the white supremacist terrorist group known as the Ku Klux Klan. A second wave of monument building kicked off in the 1950s and 1960s as a response to the Civil Rights movement, as summed up by Alabama Governor George Wallace in his 1963 inaugural address: "I say segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever."³ Though protests against Confederate memorials have taken place since their inception, the latest push for their removal began primarily as part of protests following the 2015 Charleston shooting incident at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Protesting has continued more or less unabated to the present before coming to a head in the wake of the murder of George Floyd in May 2020. The contrast in society's attitude between the two highlighted time periods demonstrates how the country has moved away from the glorification of the Confederacy and its attendant heroes. I argue that though progress has been made over the years, until the United States is willing and able to address the disparate race-based reaction to Confederate monuments and their implicit support for a failed white supremacist regime, racial division in society will continue to fester and never properly heal.

I. The Mythological Confederacy

There is a vocal contingent of Americans in the modern era who consider removing Confederate monuments to be a slippery slope. "What's next?" they might argue, "removing statues of Washington and Jefferson because they were slave owners? Why are you trying to erase history?" This is a common argument put forth in favor of preserving the monuments: they are important for remembering a troublesome past and removing them just to ease the fears of the offended is tantamount to erasing said past. This argument is laced with irony, as it was essentially the mission of pro-Confederate groups such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy (U.D.C.), various connected monument associations, the Sons of Confederate Veterans (S.C.V.), and a variety of other veteran and women's associations to rewrite or reinvent the actual history, which

² Campbell Robertson, "From Lofty Perch: New Orleans Monument to Confederacy Comes Down," *The New York Times*, May 20, 2017, [online](#).

³ Michael J. Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: The Supreme Court and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 407.

they found offensive. Whatever way such groups may wish to spin it, the removal of Confederate monuments, far from being an erasure of history, can be thought of as a kind of "course correction," working to remove the remnants of white supremacy's failure and the demonstrably false political propaganda known as the "Lost Cause."

There is often a misperception that the "Lost Cause" narrative is legitimate history and is simply the Civil War told from the South's point of view. None of these claims are even remotely true. At the conclusion of the Civil War, the United States was grappling with the devastating losses and destruction left in its wake, especially prominent in the defeated and demoralized former states of the Confederacy. The death toll of the war had claimed nearly an entire generation of men, leaving survivors with the feeling that the Southern way of life was under threat of total eradication. This was a bitter pill for Southerners to swallow, having fought, sacrificed, and prayed so much and so hard while still being denied the promised victory against Federal oppression. The population began to question themselves: "What did we fight for? Was it worth it? How are we going to remember what happened?" The imaginary ahistorical narrative of the "Lost Cause," as outlined by authors such as Edward Pollard, former Confederate General Jubal Early, and former Confederate President Jefferson Davis, was invented as an attempt to answer these questions, justify secession, and obfuscate the actual history of the Confederate States of America (C.S.A.).⁴

The tenets of the "Lost Cause" include a litany of excuses for the South's eventual defeat, such as that they were outmanned and outgunned from the start and that the Union generals employed dishonorable and dirty tactics to win, among a slew of others. Confederate notables such as the "holy trinity" of Robert E. Lee, Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson, and Jefferson Davis are practically treated as saints in this new Southern mythology, while battlefield soldiers are idealized as honorable and stalwart defenders of their homeland and the Southern way of life, doing their constitutional duty to stand against federal tyranny.⁵ Slavery and its attendant evils are whitewashed and downplayed, putting forth the imaginary character of the "faithful and happy darkie," while claiming that the South would have given up slavery in time.⁶ The push for erecting monuments and memorials to commemorate the Confederacy grew in tandem with the dissemination of the "Lost Cause" myth, a movement driven primarily by the women of the South.

During the years of reconstruction following the war, the "Lost Cause" really began to hit its stride. Southern white women, drawing on a nineteenth-century

⁴ Matt Atkinson, "Jubal Early and the Molding of Confederate Memory," lecture, February 16, 2016, *YouTube*, [online](#); Edward Alfred Pollard, *The Lost Cause: A New Southern History of the War of the Confederates* (Charleston: Nabu Press, 2010; first published 1866).

⁵ Caroline E. Janney, "The Lost Cause," *Encyclopedia Virginia*, February 6, 2023, [online](#).

⁶ Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018; first published 1997), 46–47.

societal belief that women were inherently apolitical, organized into memorial associations, the largest and most connected of which was known as the United Daughters of the Confederacy.⁷ The specific purpose of the U.D.C. was to shore up and supplement the political writings of their menfolk, and it is largely due to their efforts that memorials glorifying the C.S.A. became so widespread. According to Karen L. Cox, history professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte,

White Southerners understood these monuments as symbols of defiance—against racial inclusion, federal intrusion, and challenges to the Southern way of life. African Americans understood that the hundreds of Confederate monuments spread throughout the Southern landscape in places of prominence, whether in town squares, on courthouse lawns, or on university campuses, stood as symbols of racial inequality.⁸

Although the memorial associations never explicitly stated that their work was intended to intimidate blacks or celebrate the plantation class's return to power post-Reconstruction, their tacit endorsement and approval of racially motivated violence and oppression makes it difficult to believe any different. Perhaps the most succinct summation of this attitude appears in a 1916 book penned by Los Angeles U.D.C. chapter president Annie Cooper Burton, titled *The Ku Klux Klan*, at the end of her introduction: "[The Klan's] work was nobly done; and our rescued South still sings her gratitude to her heaven-sent protectors, the mysterious K.K.K."⁹ All of these measures to promote an imaginary past were undertaken as part of an overall intent to focus on more than simply "polishing up" the South's reputation; they also served as an attempt to reverse the war's effects on the South through political agitation. The end goal was to reestablish the unparalleled antebellum power the plantation class had once held and retighten their grip on the political landscape before they lost all control permanently.

II. Political Ploys Protecting Power

After the Civil War, the Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery; the Fourteenth granted American citizenship to those newly freed; and the Fifteenth protected the right to vote for black men. Nullification of these new laws became another goal of this movement, and to that end, most Southern states instituted poll taxes and literacy tests, attempting to limit black access to the ballot box. In a rather ironic twist, these laws often had the unintended consequence of also preventing most of the poor white population from exercising their voting rights. While such measures were also employed in the North (especially for incoming waves of immigrants in the late 1800s), what set the South apart was the addition of violent

⁷ Janney, "Lost Cause."

⁸ Karen L. Cox, *No Common Ground: Confederate Monuments and the Ongoing Fight for Racial Justice* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 21.

⁹ Annie Cooper Burton, *The Ku Klux Klan* (Los Angeles: Warren T. Potter, 1916), 1.

physical intimidation to promote black voter suppression.¹⁰ Many elected officials in the South voiced full-throated approval of the violence, openly advocating for what was essentially terrorism. In 1900, Senator Benjamin "Pitchfork" Tillman of South Carolina went so far as to defend white supremacist violence on the floor of the U.S. Senate, stating in a blatantly racist tirade:

We did not disenfranchise the negroes until 1895. Then we had a constitutional convention convened which took the matter up calmly, deliberately, and avowedly with the purpose of disenfranchising as many of them as we could under the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments...[The negro] is not meddling with politics, for he found that the more he meddled with them the worse off he got. As to his 'rights'...We of the South have never recognized the right of the negro to govern white men, and we never will. We have never believed him to be equal to the white man.¹¹

Whatever the stance in the Senate or the South may have been, there were numerous white Union veterans in the North who stood vehemently against memorializing the C.S.A. For example, in 1889, Grand Army Regiment Post 88 of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, filed a petition with the state protesting the erection of the first Confederate monument at the Gettysburg battlefield. Their strong stance gained much support from the local population as well as other Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.) posts across the country. These men had fought in battle and felt betrayed that the Gettysburg Battlefield Memorial Association would choose to build a monument "commemorating the disloyal deeds of...[a] rebel regiment."¹² In response to their petition, Pennsylvania Governor James Beaver, himself a Battle of Gettysburg veteran, stated in an interview, "I am strongly in favor of the government making appropriations to erect markers on the positions occupied by the Confederate commands, as a matter of history...[but] I am and always will be opposed to any rebel organization erecting its own monuments within the grounds."¹³ The petition did not go unopposed, however, as ex-Confederates, Southern apologists, and even some Unionists (acting in the spirit of national reconciliation) stood fiercely against it.

No matter how heavy the opposition, G.A.R. Post 88 chose to double down on their position, releasing a scathing statement to the press on Halloween 1889:

As soldiers and citizens we have no apologies to make for calling words by their proper names, 'traitor' a traitor and 'rebel' a rebel...We reiterate that we are opposed to the erection of monuments...upon the battlefields of Gettysburg or any other...that will in the slightest degree

¹⁰ Brad Epperly, Christopher Witko, Ryan Strickler, and Paul White, "Rule by Violence, Rule by Law: Lynching, Jim Crow, and the Continuing Evolution of Voter Suppression in the U.S.," *Perspectives on Politics* 18, no. 3 (2020): 756–769.

¹¹ "Speech of Senator Benjamin R. Tillman, March 23, 1900," *Congressional Record*, 56th Congress, 1st Session, 3223–3224, reprinted in Richard Purday, ed., *Document Sets for the South in U.S. History* (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1991; first published 1990), 147.

¹² "Opposing the Rebel Monument," *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, November 21, 1889, 2, [online](#).

¹³ "Monuments at Gettysburg," *Rock Island Daily Argus*, October 26, 1889, 2, [online](#).

make glorious the deeds of those who trampled underfoot the national ensign. We believe in making treason odious."¹⁴

These statements show that back then, even as now, opposition to honoring the Confederacy had been given voice since the first dedications in the closing years of the nineteenth century. After the rash of memorial construction funded by the U.D.C. in the 1910s and 1920s waned, dissemination and support for the "Lost Cause" were diminished but never fully disappeared, becoming a "sleeping dragon" that could stir at any time. In the 1950s and 1960s, the snoozing beast of the Confederacy once again awoke to attack the burgeoning Civil Rights movement.

III. Mid-Century Resurgence

In the first years of the 1960s, young black men and women began to take direct political action to draw attention to America's racial inequality. Protests such as the 1960 Greensboro "sit-in," organized by North Carolina Agricultural and Technical (A&T) State University students, and the Freedom Riders' testing of federal laws regarding segregation on interstate public transit in 1961 kicked off the Civil Rights movement in earnest. With those first actions establishing a solid foundation, the stage was set for the 1963 March on Washington, where over 250,000 people walked to the Capitol to present their arguments for racial equality to Congress.¹⁵ The message came through loud and clear, and the government finally responded. In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act, outlawing discrimination based on race, color, religion, gender, or national origin. The following year, Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, prohibiting racial discrimination in the voting process. These sudden changes righting historic racial inequities triggered many white Southerners, creating the right conditions to allow the "Lost Cause" to come to the fore once again, just in time for the centennial of the Civil War.

The time between 1961 and 1965 was chock full of displays of the "Lost Cause" and the revival of Confederate heroism during centennial commemoration ceremonies. Multiple state legislatures voted to add the Confederate Battle Flag to their state banners, supported by white supremacist groups like the Citizens Councils of America, a.k.a. the "White Collar Klan." Those same legislatures authorized hundreds of thousands to fund centennial celebrations, including battle reenactments and parades. Monument building was not left out of the mix, with thirty-four new statues erected between 1950 and 1969.¹⁶ Many of these became rallying points of protest for black Americans, such as the Meredith March in June 1966 in Grenada, Mississippi. Though the Confederate soldier monument located in the center of the town was not the primary point of the march, the

¹⁴ "By Their Proper Names," *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, October 31, 1889, 2, [online](#).

¹⁵ Cox, *No Common Ground*, 70.

¹⁶ Cox, *No Common Ground*, 70-71.

bronze statue stood as a symbol of the white dominance facing challenge.¹⁷ Protests for equality continued to mount, shifting the target and attacking the statues directly. One such demonstration took place in Tuskegee, Alabama, following the killing of twenty-one-year-old black man Sam Younge Jr. and the escape from justice of the sixty-eight-year-old white man who had shot him dead after an argument over which restroom Sam could use. Following the shooter's acquittal, the furious crowd defaced and damaged the local Confederate soldier monument, splashing it with black paint and stoking a bonfire at its base. Passions ran high, with cries of "Black Power!" ringing out and one woman shouting, "Let's get *all* the statues – not just one! Let's go all over the state and get all the statues!"¹⁸ Since the crowd could not act against the killer directly, the statue stood as an analogue and target for their anger and frustration. The same feelings would continue into the mid-1970s, though they lost steam as the Confederate dragon returned to its slumber and passions cooled off. Just as before, the beast was merely snoozing, and the underlying issues still remained unaddressed and unameliorated.

IV. Here in the Now

Now, in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, the controversy over the Confederacy has once again risen to prominence. Questions over the legitimacy and often de facto, if not explicit, government approval of Confederate monument culture have been on the rise, expanding beyond the medium of honorary sculpture into naming conventions. Though statues and stone markers are the most common manifestations of "Lost Cause" memory, commemorations take a wide variety of forms. The names of schools and colleges, military bases, counties, cities, and even state holidays all serve to normalize the false memory of the C.S.A. in America today. Until very recently, the majority of government entities at the state level have supported keeping Confederate monuments intact and maintained by tax dollars despite protests from local residents. Furthermore, there is little evidence to support claims of a cohesive nationwide movement to bring down the monuments en masse. In fact, out of the over 1,700 examples located across the country, only about 100 have been removed or renamed since June 2015.¹⁹ Claims that the calls for removal come top-down from one side of the aisle or the other have been proven false, and the majority of opposition has come at the local, grassroots level. For example, the order to remove four C.S.A. statues in New Orleans (including that of the aforementioned General Lee) came after a vote of the city council in response to public outcry following the 2015 shooting at

¹⁷ Cox, *No Common Ground*, 100–101.

¹⁸ Cox, *No Common Ground*, 102–104.

¹⁹ "Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy," *Southern Poverty Law Center*, February 1, 2019, [online](#).

"Mother Emanuel" in Charleston, South Carolina.²⁰ "Old Joe," a Confederate statue in Gainesville, Florida, was quietly removed and relocated by order of the county commissioner after being in place for over a century.²¹ In October 2017, a Fayette County council vote to remove two statues in Lexington, Kentucky, was unanimous, and the statues were relocated to a local cemetery, despite protest from the state heritage council. As Mayor Jim Gray put it, "our local authority remains intact; this is a local decision, as it should be."²²

Also in 2017, the city of Memphis, Tennessee, wished to remove a statue of the notorious Confederate General and Ku Klux Klan founder Nathan Bedford Forrest, initially funded by the U.D.C. and erected in 1905.²³ Preventing the removal was a state law that prohibited the city itself from acting. The council got creative, finding a workaround by selling the land to a non-profit organization, which chose to promptly relocate the statue to a local cemetery maintained by the Sons of Confederate Veterans organization. Shortly after the relocation, a Republican contingent of the Tennessee legislature retaliated, opting to cut \$250,000 in funding for the city, which Democrats and even some of their fellow Republicans condemned as a "punitive" measure.²⁴ There are numerous more examples to choose from, though the overall pattern is the same: state legislatures serve as the primary obstacle to towns and cities deciding whether or not to keep or remove their local monuments. However, that obstacle has not curtailed ongoing efforts by some local-level governments to remove the monuments from the public sphere.

While there is nothing inherently wrong with honoring war dead, if one believes that monuments to the Confederacy have any connection to true historical education, that belief is dead wrong. In fact, the majority of those today who wish to use the memorials as historical research tools are those who oppose their existence. The overwhelming consensus holds the position that these statues belong in museums rather than in public, but unfortunately, most museums cannot or do not want to be saddled with the burden of them in their collections. Large pieces of statuary are difficult and expensive to maintain, and the logistics involved with placing outdoor sculptures into limited indoor spaces are usually beyond the average museum's means.²⁵

²⁰ City of New Orleans, Mayor Latoya Cantrell, "City of New Orleans Begins Removal of Divisive Confederate Statues Commemorating 'Cult of the Lost Cause'," April 24, 2017, [online](#).

²¹ Andrew Caplan, "'Old Joe' Comes Down," *The Gainesville Sun*, August 15, 2017, [online](#).

²² "Kentucky City Removes 2 Confederate Statues from Courthouse," *CBS News*, October 18, 2017, [online](#).

²³ Lorado Taft and Adeline Adams, *The History of American Sculpture* (Tokyo: Athena Press, 2019; first published 1930).

²⁴ Alex Horton, "Tennessee Lawmakers Punish Memphis for Removing Statue of Confederate and KKK Leader," *The Washington Post*, April 18, 2018, [online](#).

²⁵ Noah Caldwell and Audie Cornish, "Where Do Confederate Monuments Go after They Come down?," *NPR*, August 5, 2018, [online](#).

One possible solution to display these pieces would be the establishment of a new museum dedicated to the history of slavery and black oppression in America. Such an exhibition would have the potential to shift the context in which these monuments are interpreted and promote the truth behind their construction and promotion. The downside of this approach would be the possibility of such a place becoming a twisted type of shrine for white supremacists, similar to the actions of Neo-Nazi groups in Holocaust museums and concentration camps in Germany.²⁶ In the end, there may be no good answer to the Confederate conundrum, and even if every monument faced a vote to be removed, it would take years, if not decades, to accomplish that goal.

With all of the difficulties and controversies involved in combatting the historic revisionism of the “Lost Cause” and its propagation of a false history of heroism on the part of the C.S.A., historians are faced with the question of whether or not the effort is worth it. Intense examination of the dark eras of the nation’s past can aid us in dealing with the issues we have today and counteracting the fake narrative of the Confederate States. It provides context to the origins of modern problems and can help stimulate creative solutions. While it is fairly easy to explain how the Battle of Waterloo or the “fall” of Rome have shaped the modern world, discussing the influence of slavery, colonialism, and indigenous genocide poses a much more difficult challenge. Comparatively, however, the latter is probably a much more constructive conversation to have.

Conclusion

The establishment of the Confederate States of America and the resultant Civil War mark one of the darkest and bloodiest times in America’s history, and the disagreements, conflicts, and debates over whether those who rebelled against the Union deserve recognition are ongoing and seemingly without a solution. Conflict arising from the message and meaning of symbolic Southern statuary will continue to take place as it has since the very beginning, driving ever-increasing racial unrest and division in society. Monuments serve as a type of storytelling, displaying the historical narrative of a country and showing what it values and honors the most. More than a century after their construction and dedication, these memorials to Confederate white supremacy and its “heroes” remain lightning rods of racial division and unrest in the country. The United States must finally recognize, acknowledge, and fight against the false “Lost Cause” narrative of Confederate historical claims, in addition to removing its monuments, if it wishes to finally mend the wounds that remain open and bleeding freely after all these years.

²⁶ Agence France-Presse, “Neo-Nazi Provocations on the Rise in Germany,” *Courthouse News Service*, April 14, 2020, [online](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *David Cantwell of Riverside, California, earned a B.A. in History (2023) from California State University, Fullerton (CSUF). The article published here originated in a Historical Writing seminar offered by CSUF's History Department.*