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The 'Angel of Marye's Heights' and Civil War Memory

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Abstract
In 1862, the small Virginian town of Fredericksburg found itself between two opposing armies. The Federal Army of the Potomac sat restlessly, eagerly awaiting means with which to cross the Rappahannock River, while elements of the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia were called to take defensive positions in and behind Fredericksburg. What ensued was a bloody spectacle that claimed thousands of lives, and tempered the fighting spirit of the armies for the remainder of the Civil War.

[*excerpt*]

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Comments
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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER
ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

The ‘Angel of Marye’s Heights’ and Civil War Memory

This post is part of a series featuring behind-the-scenes dispatches from our Pohanka Interns on the front lines of history this summer as interpreters, archivists, and preservationists. See here for the introduction to the series.

By Jon Danchik ‘17

In 1862, the small Virginian town of Fredericksburg found itself between two opposing armies. The Federal Army of the Potomac sat restlessly, eagerly awaiting means with which to cross the Rappahannock River, while elements of the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia were called to take defensive positions in and behind Fredericksburg. What ensued was a bloody spectacle that claimed thousands of lives, and tempered the fighting spirit of the armies for the remainder of the Civil War.

Confederate infantry held back the Federal advance by occupying firing positions along the infamous “Sunken Road” at the base of Marye’s Heights. Supported by a considerable number of cannon, Confederate infantry were so effective at halting Federal charges that they nearly ran out of ammunition on several occasions. Despite their numerous successes, many Confederate soldiers were appalled by the bloodshed that they caused, forced by their stationary deployment to continuously gaze upon a veritable sea of dead or wounded Federal soldiers—their own victims.

On December 14th, the cries and screams of the wounded Federals took its toll on the entrenched Confederates. Sergeant Richard Kirkland of the 2nd South Carolina Volunteer Infantry asked his commanding officer permission to climb over the stone wall which had afforded the Confederates their protection, with the goal of comforting their dying foes in their final hours. He gathered filled canteens before leaving the protection of the wall. The bullets stopped flying once Federal remnants realized what one lone gray-clad soldier was doing in no-man's land. Accounts place Kirkland's show of "Christ-like mercy" at taking around one and a half hours, causing him to be called "the Angel of Marye's Heights."

A monument to Kirkland stands today, in front of the only remaining fragment of the original stone wall. Such a juxtaposition is not coincidental, given the monument's timing: 1965, the centennial of the Civil War, is noted by many historians as having seen a considerable emphasis placed on themes such reconciliation and brotherhood, instead of addressing the underlying causes of the war that continued to plague the country, and continue to do so to this day. The short stone wall yields to the imposing silhouette of Kirkland risking his life to offer what comfort he can to a dying soldier in his final hour.

Kirk Savage asserts that statues and monuments followed a limited set of common themes after the war's end. When memorials provided a written account of actions, oftentimes simple explanations were given, such as fighting for the preservation of the Union, or the sovereignty of different states. Going off of monuments alone, one might easily conclude that the war was fought exclusively by whites, for limited political reasons. With no mention of slavery, neither side would seem to have been in the wrong, but merely caught up and moved along in the currents of history. "With the issue of slavery displaced from the ideological center, and the war recast as a struggle between two ultimately compatible 'principles' of union and state sovereignty," Savage argues, the dominant narrative, for a time, came to do away with any concept of blame, affording both sides dignity and honor. Monuments and writing produced in that period only helped strengthen such a position with a large volume of material.

The Kirkland monument's eastern face enshrines the sergeant's actions as having been "dedicated to national unity and the brotherhood of man." It says nothing of the factors which caused southern states to secede, or the reasons that brought the armies to Fredericksburg. It is because of this narrow view that it becomes hard to contest Kirkland's story. If one were to imagine a "counter-monument" to Kirkland's memorial, what might it look like? In order to nullify a show of mercy, little can be done but to take the extreme in the opposite direction—perhaps a showing of unmistakable violence or hatred could be used. Given that common sentiment

during the centennial emphasized reconciliation, however, it hardly seems likely that such a display would have ever been immortalized in stone. A corresponding “Devil of Marye’s Heights” statue will most likely never adorn the sunken road. It also seems unlikely that the monument can be substantially altered in future generations due to its singular purpose—the only dynamic reinterpretation of the statue is a very literal one that offers context for contemporary trends in historical memory. One lone statue cannot tell the story of the Civil War in anything close to its entirety, but it can certainly help a modern audience to understand how others have remembered it since then.

Sources:

Kirk Savage, “The Politics of Memory: Black Emancipation and the Civil War Monument,” in John R. Gillis, ed., *Commemorations: the Politics of National Identity* (Princeton, 1994): 127-149.

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