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A Cause Lost, a Story Being Written: Explaining Black and White Commemorative Difference in the Postbellum South

Abstract
This paper addresses the disparate commemorative modes and purposes employed by black and white Southerners following the Civil War, in their competing efforts to control the cultural narrative of the war's legacy. I attempt to explain commemorative difference in the post-war era by evaluating the historical and rhetorical implications of the white Confederate monument, in contrast with the black freedom celebration. The goal of this research is to understand why monuments to the Confederacy proliferate in the South, while similar commemorative markers of the prominent role of slavery in the Civil War are all but nonexistent. I conclude that, while a white supremacist system denied black Southerners the economic and political capital to commission monuments, black Southerners organized public commemorative celebrations not only because they were denied monuments but because celebration and oration presented themselves as powerful strategies to advance black interests. White Southerners favored monuments as a commemorative form because, in the face of a culturally devastating loss, they sought to establish permanent testaments to a pre-war cultural landscape; however, the initial victory of emancipation, with its promise of not only freedom but equality, led black Southerners to seek communion about the past as a tool for understanding and shaping their future, and so celebration and oration became important strategies for consolidating historical narratives and collective imaginations about the place of blacks in a new America.

Keywords
Civil War, Commemoration, Black Southerners, White Southerners

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A CAUSE LOST, A STORY BEING WRITTEN: EXPLAINING BLACK AND WHITE COMMEMORATIVE DIFFERENCE IN THE POSTBELLUM SOUTH

Bailey M. Covington

From 1913 until August of 2018, a soldier stood stoically on the campus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, his gaze fixed unrelentingly into the upper distance above the heads of visitors to the historic campus. Students dubbed him Silent Sam, though he was erected as an anonymous stand-in for all Confederate soldiers who fell in America's Civil War, a monument to their sacrifice, generously sponsored by North Carolina's chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy.[1] There are hundreds of such monuments all across the United States, but they are especially concentrated in the South, like an occupying army that stands watch over the passage of time. Almost none of these monuments depict a black soldier or mentions the emancipation of enslaved black Americans. So, where are all of the black monuments?

The better question to ask is, while the University of North Carolina was dedicating Silent Sam to the Lost Cause, what were black Southerners doing to construct a memory of the Civil War and its consequences? Quite a lot, as it happens, though virtually none of it was monument construction. The literature on Southern commemorative history centers the monument within Southern efforts to memorialize the Civil War, and, by proxy, scholars have privileged white forms of commemoration. John J. Winberry's seminal work examines (implicitly white) Confederate monuments, and H.E. Gulley's "Women and the Lost Cause" gives Southern women a place in commemorative history without specifying that the argument applies only to *white* Southern women.[2] There are few comparative analyses of black and white commemorative activity, and even fewer attempts at explaining *why* black and white Southerners differed in commemorative modes and messages. Scholars like W. Fitzhugh Brundage have undertaken important analyses of black commemorative activity in the South and have attempted to explain differences between black and white commemoration by citing the political marginalization and resource limitations blacks faced.[3] However, I argue that this explanation reduces the agency involved in blacks' development of commemorative traditions. I suggest instead that blacks' commemorative difference can be seen not just as a response to adversity but also as a strategy developed for distinctive commemorative purposes under those conditions of adversity. A deeper examination of the issue proves worthwhile for understanding how blacks and whites used commemoration to accomplish different rhetorical goals.

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[1] David A. Graham, "The Dramatic Fall of Silent Sam, UNC'S Confederate Monument," *Atlantic*, Aug. 21, 2018.

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[2] John J. Winberry, "'Lest We Forget': The Confederate Monument and the Southern Townscape," *Southeastern Geographer* 23, no. 2 (1983): 107-121, and H. E. Gulley, "Women and the Lost Cause: Preserving a Confederate Identity in the American Deep South," *Journal of Historical Geography* 19, no. 2 (1993): 125-141.

[3] W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2005).

My analysis will juxtapose black and white commemorative messages, purposes, and modes from the end of the Civil War until 1917, when the U.S. entered the First World War. This period includes a moment of relative sociopolitical freedom for blacks after emancipation and during Reconstruction, followed by the rising anti-black violence of the early Jim Crow years which changed the terms on which black and white southerners interacted publicly. I center black commemoration in my argument by attempting to explain why black traditions differed from white ones. I will begin by examining the place of commemoration in collective memory and identity formation, followed by a comparative discussion of commemorative messages, forms, and purposes between black and white southerners. I conclude that, while white supremacist society did deny them the economic and political capital to commission monuments, black Southerners organized public commemorative celebrations not as a last resort, but as a fitting strategy to advance black interests. Black commemorative distinctiveness stemmed from what black Southerners sought to *do* with commemoration. While white Southerners used commemoration to establish permanent testaments to Confederate glory in the face of a culturally devastating loss, black southerners used commemoration as a forum to commune about the past and use that past as a tool for understanding and shaping their future.

The Implications of Commemoration

The versions of history which are commemorated become part of public memory and influence ideology, and, in the South as well as in America generally, this has contributed to the persistent codification of white supremacy. To understand why commemoration holds important implications for the identity formation of individuals as well as for the structuring of societies around norms and ideals, we must understand commemoration as a way of constructing and institutionalizing collective memory. My use of commemoration as a theoretical concept is influenced by the work of sociologist Maurice Halbwachs on historical and collective memory and of historian John Bodnar on American public memory and commemoration, combining key elements of both theories to contextualize my analysis.

First, I suggest that commemoration is a way of both representing and constructing collective memory, and that, while the collective memory of a society is formed by the individual memory of its members, collective memory remains distinct and in turn shapes the recollections and interpretations of the individual. I take this concept from Halbwachs's *The Collective Memory*, in which Halbwachs theorizes that individual memory relies on collective memory as a reference point, borrowing from it to construct ideas about the past and present. Halbwachs repeatedly refers to a concept of "social milieu," which I take to mean culture, and so I extend his theory of memory to include identity and ideology. According to Halbwachs, individual memory—or identity—is formed with the benefit of "instruments the individual has not himself invented but appropriated from his milieu." These "instruments," a term which Halbwachs uses somewhat ambiguously to describe "words and ideas," are treated here as ideological schema which individuals adopt from their cultural background, and which act as guides for the range of actions and attitudes appropriate to that culture.[4] I adapt commemoration to this theory by analyzing it as a manifestation of collective memory, and therefore as a process of representing and repeating ideological schema. Civil War commemoration in the South, then, is an expression of collective historical memory about the war's causes and consequences which carefully shapes the ideological identity of Southerners and prescribes what they should believe about the war.

Second, commemorations are deliberate curations of symbol and ceremony implicated in official culture, a force which maintains social organization around shared values and limits social change. Official culture, with commemoration as one of its tools, creates self-perpetuating structures which endure across generations. I pull the concept of "official culture" from Bodnar's *Remaking America*. Bodnar theorizes that cultural leaders produce and maintain official culture. These leaders benefit from the status quo, so they have a vested interest in “maintaining the social order and existing institutions” by working against radical change and emphasizing citizens’ duties to society rather than their rights within it. Cultural authorities use symbolic expressions such as commemoration to assert the dominance of their preferred interpretations of the past, present, and future, often implying that these interpretations are timeless or sacred, and therefore indisputable.[5] In Bodnar’s theory, public memory is the result of a dialectic between official and vernacular culture; however, his work is a study of American public memory on a national scale, while my analysis will address regional conflicts within the South. The South’s commemorative contests are best served by an analytical framework which is limited to an examination of competing official cultures between black and white communities. The relevant implication of commemoration as an expression of official culture is that commemoration becomes a means of solidifying ideologies for transmission across generations. Therefore, Civil War commemoration represents a concerted effort on the part of cultural authorities to enshrine a particular view of the war within the community, and to perpetuate that view across generations.

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[4] Maurice Halbwachs, "Historical Memory and Collective Memory," in *The Collective Memory*, translated by Francis J. Ditter, Jr. and Vida Yazdi Ditter (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 51.

From this theoretical framework, we can conclude that Civil War commemoration attempted to control and solidify cultural narratives around the war, shaping the ideologies of individual southerners and passing those ideologies down through generations. Particularly, commemorative activity involved interpretation of the past, present, and future of the war, meaning that it constructed ideas about the war’s causes and its implications, both for the commemorative moment and for the future beyond that moment. For its potential to shape collective ideology, commemorative space is a valuable form of social capital which whites—especially in the South—have attempted to monopolize. White commemoration of the Civil War as an honorable stand for the southern plantation lifestyle (intimately implicated in slavery) contributes to the perpetuation of white supremacy by discouraging progressive change and by downplaying the rights of blacks as equal citizens in favor of the “proper place” of blacks as second-class citizens. Any measure of success that this cultural narrative has met with has shaped collective memory and social organization into the image of white supremacy which persists today. The contestation of commemorative space, then, represented a life-or-death struggle for black southerners in which they fought to forge a narrative in which black southerners could have an equal place.

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[5] John Bodnar, “The Memory Debate: An Introduction,” in *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1992), 13-15.

Almost immediately upon the war’s conclusion, black and white Southerners sprang into action to construct competing narratives of the Civil War, attempting to control the definition of Southern identity, which was shaped around the war’s perceived causes and results. From their position as the defeated, white Southerners largely concluded that the war was caused by Northern aggressions and federal violation of states' rights, that the Confederate cause was a noble one, and that the Confederate dead deserved honor and praise from the living on the grounds of their loyal sacrifice.[6] Meanwhile, black southern discourse expressed the belief that the war was God's punishment for the crime of slavery, that the defeat of the Confederacy and the restoration of freedom to enslaved blacks was an act of divine justice, and that black claims to citizenship were deeply rooted in the nation's history.[7] The construction of these narratives involved a competitive discourse between and within the two groups, and the stories that southerners spun informed not only the commemorative messages they sponsored but the commemorative modes they adopted as well.

White Monuments to the Lost Cause

The story of white Civil War commemoration in the South is best understood by centering upon white southern women. Immediately following the Confederate defeat, white Southern commemoration was primarily about grief: before 1885, funerary monuments accounted for more than 90% of all Confederate monuments, and 70% of all

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[6] Paul A. Shackel, "Contested Memories of the Civil War," in *Memory in Black and White: Race, Commemoration, and the Post-Bellum Landscape* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira, 2003), 26-27.

[7] Brundage, *The Southern Past*, 91-94, and Kathleen Ann Clark, introduction to *Defining Moments: African American Commemoration and Political Culture in the South, 1863-1913* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2005): 9.

Confederate monuments were erected in cemeteries.[8] As mourning was a traditionally feminine duty, white Southern women placed themselves at the spearhead of the postwar commemorative movement, fundraising and organizing vigorously to erect the majority of Confederate monuments of this period.[9] The Ladies' Aid Societies that had valiantly tended to wounded Confederate soldiers during the war were transformed into Ladies' Memorial Associations (LMAs) to honor them afterwards.[10] These associations were foundational to the Confederate commemorative fervor that would persist for over a century after the Civil War.

The LMAs were succeeded by the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) in the 1890s, coinciding with the rise of the Lost Cause ideology—the principal lens through which white Southerners at the peak of commemorative activity understood the causes and consequences of the war—and an uptick in monument construction in prominent public spaces such as courthouses and state capitols. Winberry suggests various reasons for the shift in commemorative circumstance away from cemeteries and towards public spaces. He describes the shift as an attempt to preserve the memory of aging veterans, to mark a transition from immediate-postwar defeat to restoration, to retreat into the glory of the past through Lost Cause rhetoric, and to foster racial unity against black political advances.[11] I argue that Lost Cause rhetoric was the common language of white Southern commemoration, and that the need for this language grew from the disruptions of the Civil War. White anxieties about a changing social order prompted the desire to preserve a nostalgic Old South ideal in which blacks knew their place and white citizenship was united against the specter of blackness.

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[8] Shackel, "Contested Memories of the Civil War," 24.

[9] Winberry, "The Confederate Monument and the Southern Townscape," 112.

[10] Gulley, "Women and the Lost Cause," 128, 129.

The Lost Cause is a historical and cultural narrative of the war which gained popularity in the late nineteenth century as a means of mitigating the Confederate South's defeat. It represented a defensive response to Northern accusations of Southern guilt following the humiliating loss. As the victors, Northerners were able to assign the full burden of guilt for the war to the vanquished Southerners, and white Southerners vigorously resisted any guilt for their rebellion or for the enslavement of blacks.[12] The Lost Cause expressed a belief in the just cause of the Confederacy as a defender of Southern society. Various accounts within the Lost Cause genre insisted on Southern states' constitutional right to secede due to Northern abuses, sought to justify slavery, and depicted the Confederate soldier as a defender of southern honor.[13] This white Southern narrative of the Civil War erased slavery as a principal cause for the war and ignored emancipation as its most significant outcome, instead shifting the focus to states' rights as a cause and unjust Confederate victimization as a result.

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[11] Winberry, "The Confederate Monument and the Southern Townscape," 108, 115.

[12] Lori Holyfield and Clifford Beacham, "Memory Brokers, Shameful Pasts, and Civil War Commemoration," *Journal of Black Studies* 42, no. 3 (2011): 441.

[13] Shackel, "Contested Memories of the Civil War," 26

A 1914 address delivered in Savannah, Georgia, by the UDC's historian general, Mildred Lewis Rutherford, attempted to justify Southern secession and slavery in the tradition of Lost Cause rhetoric. She justified Southern secession as a response to Northern constitutional abuses, defending "the right of any state to withdraw from the Union of States, when a right reserved to it by the Constitution was interfered with." Rutherford also made several claims about the benevolence of slavery: that the practice civilized Africans, who were originally "savage to the last degree," and "[brought those] benighted souls to a knowledge of Jesus Christ"; that the Bible condoned slavery on several counts; and that, under slavery, blacks were "the happiest set of people on the face of the globe—free from care of thought of food, clothes, home, or religious privileges," and well-treated by their kind-hearted and paternal masters.[14] Rutherford's speech is not only a reflection of the UDC's ideology; she had a hand in actually constructing the commemorative mission of the organization. Monuments erected by UDC chapters across the South mimic this narrative of the war.

The messaging attached to white Southern monuments reflects deep ties to the Lost Cause. The language of inscriptions and dedication materials glorifies the Confederate cause and the sacrifices made by those who fought and died for it. In this 1887 inscription on a monument erected in a North Carolina cemetery, the figure of the fallen Confederate soldier is evoked alongside the "lost cause" of his southern brethren: "To the soldiers of the Southern Confederacy, who sacrificed their lives in a cause which, though lost, will always remain dear to their countrymen."[15] Another inscription from a 1902 monument erected by the Tyrell County Monument Association suggests that the Confederate soldier fought a war for "honor" and "liberty," and that, in the hearts of the southern people, he was victorious: "The Confederate soldier won and is entitled to the admiration of all who love honor, and liberty." Yet another inscription on the same monument, "in appreciation of our faithful slaves," suggests the nostalgic recollection of a plantation society in which enslaved blacks were supposedly content and loyal to their masters throughout the duration of the war. [16]

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[14] Mildred Lewis Rutherford, "Wrongs of History Righted," (address, United Daughters of the Confederacy, Savannah, GA, Nov. 13, 1914): 6-8, 11, 15-16.

Southern whites commemorated neither the Civil War itself nor its aftermath, but an antebellum past to which they longed to return. The Lost Cause narrative was constructed, adopted, and repeated in white commemoration as a means of preserving an ideal Old South and shoring up a unified white southern society against the disruptive transformations wrought by the Civil War, including the emancipation and subsequent political empowerment of enslaved blacks. Southern whites did not construct hundreds of monuments over this period just because they had the political and economic capital to do so. In fact, they can only be said to have had that economic capital relative to the newly-freed black population. Coming out of the war, southern pockets felt the pinch of a persistent economic depression, and yet UDC chapters across the region managed to raise significant sums in their communities for their widely popular monument projects. [17] It appears that the sting of hard times only spurred on the efforts of white southerners to erect durable symbols of a lost golden era. The permanence of monuments reflected a white southern desire to make permanent the legacy of the Confederacy and the plantation society for which it fought and fell. Monuments to the Confederacy were meant to stand for centuries, ignorant of the fall of the Old South, and defiant against the violent tides of a changing world.

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[15] "Confederate Soldiers Monument, Smithfield" (monument inscription, Smithfield, NC, 1887).

[16] "Tyrell County Confederate Memorial, Columbia" (monument inscription, Columbia, NC, 1902).

Black Freedom Celebrations

For black southerners, the Civil War meant one thing undeniably: emancipation. The ink had hardly dried before black Southerners were organizing to celebrate the end of the long night of slavery, and yet black memorialization of the Civil War and its consequences was not just a matter of recreation. Among black Southerners, commemorative ceremonies were as much about looking back at and collectively remembering the past as they were about forging a place for blacks in the future of the nation. They gathered in large numbers every year for Emancipation Day, Juneteenth, July 4, Lincoln's Birthday, the anniversary of the ratification of the 13th and 14th Amendments, and many other public observances. These celebrations involved marching through cities in parades that usually ended up in a park or a black church, where public orations outlined the past, present, and future of black contributions to the U.S. These elaborate parades and booming speeches allowed black southerners to construct a memory of the Civil War and its consequences that centralized the black experience.

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[17] Gulley, “Women and the Lost Cause,” 129.

After the Civil War, black Southerners quickly developed an oratory tradition associated with commemorative celebration. Through speech, a narrative of the Civil War and its consequences was freely distributed to a wide gamut of black society. Brundage suggests that the development of this oral tradition was a result of widespread illiteracy among newly-freed blacks which would have limited the reach of a collective history to the black community.[18] One of the great ambitions of black commemorators was to construct and distribute a collective memory of the black past; however, I suggest that another element to the usefulness of oration as a commemorative strategy was its flexibility for evolving discussions of the present and future. Black commemorators wanted to create a collective memory of the past, but they also wanted to use that memory to inform a vision of the future and prescribe the conduct of blacks in the present to serve that vision. During an 1888 Emancipation Day oration, Rev. E. K. Love acknowledged his community's oratory tradition of "thinking of the dark past, [surveying] the present and taking as best we can, a peep into the future."[19] While black orators like Rev. Love were acutely aware of what commemorative speeches traditionally did for the audience, to the extent that Brundage describes the yearly consistency of the commemorative narrative as a "familiar spiritual drama," this unrelenting consistency only applied to narratives of the past. [20]

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[18] Brundage, *The Southern Past,* 60.

The past, however, was always the first order of business for black orators. During commemorative observances, southern black community leaders such as ministers, educators, businessmen, and politicians repeated familiar narratives of historical black excellence, inserting blacks into a central place as shapers of American history, fully capable of holding citizenship. Orators set about proving these claims by sharing stories of great African civilizations and heroic American blacks. The accomplishments of the Egyptian empire and the deeds of men such as Crispus Attucks and Frederick Douglass were part of a common refrain to highlight blacks as participants in progress, capable and deserving of the responsibilities of full citizenship.[21] With this motive, the black soldier also held a prominent place in black Southern commemoration, both in the words of orators and in the ranked order of celebratory parades.[22] In an article detailing Savannah, Georgia's 1892 Emancipation Day celebration, the *Savannah Tribune* placed the names and ranks of black servicemen at the top of a long list of organizations that marched in the day's parade.[23] The salient presentation of the black soldier was a way for Southern black commemorators to highlight black troops' contribution to the outcome of the Civil War, as well as to assign dignity and competence to the image of black citizenship.[24]

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[19] Rev. E. K. Love, "Oration Delivered on Emancipation Day, January 2nd 1888, by Rev. E. K. Love," *Savannah Tribune* (Savannah, Georgia), Jan. 2, 1888.

[20] Brundage, *The Southern Past,* 89.

[21] Clark, *Defining Moments,* 9.

Even as they insisted on the dignified past of black folk, orators never failed to acknowledge blacks' long enslavement in America and the miraculous deliverance of the Emancipation Proclamation. Brundage offers a valuable interpretation of black narratives around slavery and the Civil War. He describes the narrative as a "providential" one, in which blacks expressed the belief that slavery was just as much part of their destiny in America as was emancipation. This was a narrative couched in religious rhetoric, with slavery as the cause of the Civil War not in a political sense but in an apocalyptic sense. Slavery in America was the crucible through which Africans passed to attain Christian civilization, and at the same time the Civil War was a cataclysmic, divine punishment for the white sin of enslaving blacks, and the Emancipation Proclamation an intervening act of God.[25]

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[22] Brundage, *The Southern Past,* 72.

[23] "Twenty-Ninth Anniversary of Emancipation Day! The Day Honored by the Colored Citizens," *Savannah Tribune* (Savannah, Georgia), Jan. 2, 1892.

[24] Brundage, *The Southern Past,* 73.

Rev. E. K. Love's Emancipation Day oration deploys this traditional rhetoric of divine intervention to explain slavery to his audience, in the tradition of many other orators before and after him: "The mighty God said to the raging billows of slavery thus far shalt thou go and no further and in 1865 there was a great calm on his disturbed sea . . .I thank God for Mr. Lincoln for his election which had much to do with kindling the fire between the two sections which resulted in a bloody war whose crimson stream washed away the black stain of slavery."[26] Black commemorative oration in the South drew intimate connections between the Civil War and slavery, confident in the conviction that slavery was an evil institution destined to end in a cataclysm like the Civil War. Southern blacks spoke about emancipation not just as the salvation of enslaved blacks but as the redemption of the nation's moral heart. Most commemorative celebrations began with the reading of a hallowed document such as the Declaration of Independence or the Emancipation Proclamation.[27] In its 1866 report on Augusta, Georgia's first anniversary Emancipation Day celebration, the *Colored American* marks a recitation of the Emancipation Proclamation before "the oration of the day" commenced.[28] This rhetorical technique was part of black

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[25] Ibid, 91-94.

[26] Love, "Oration Delivered on Emancipation Day," 2.

[27] Brundage, *The Southern Past,* 89.

[28] "Celebration of the First Anniversary of Freedom," *Colored American* (Augusta, Georgia), Jan. 6, 1866.

Southerners' efforts to couch the legitimacy of their citizenship within the dominant chronicle of American freedom, painting emancipation as another victory towards America's destiny as a land of equality. From the end of the Civil War, blacks intended to progress along with the nation.

Oration and celebration as black commemorative forms were reflections of what motivated southern blacks after emancipation. The conclusion of the Civil War and the Reconstruction which followed saw Southern blacks gain unprecedented social and political freedoms, and they were quick to grasp onto that freedom. Through commemorative ceremonies, they were able to commune about what emancipation meant in the context of American history generally, and they concluded that emancipation was the most important step America had taken towards its destiny as a free and equal nation. Through patriotic and religious rhetoric, black commemorative orations painted a picture of black freedom as American freedom and constructed an historical framework in which the future of blacks in America would be an uninterrupted progression from the end of slavery onwards, towards full equality.

Whether black or white, commemoration is not history. Rather, it is a way of constructing meaning from history—of codifying and transmitting ideas about a community's relationship with the past. Likewise, whether black or white, Southern commemoration of the Civil War was not a matter of remembering the Civil War itself, let alone remembering the Civil War as it "was." As constructors of official culture, leaders in both communities had agendas that can be understood through the messages and modes they deployed to commemorate aspects of the war which served their particular interests. Those disparate agendas, derived from disparate relationships with the war and its outcomes, are the root of commemorative difference between black and white Southerners.

For white Southerners, the Civil War represented a devastating disruption of social institutions, and the Confederacy's military defeat in that war was also a cultural one. First as a means of mourning the southern dead, and then as an effort to counter northern narratives of southern guilt, and to mitigate the loss of a social order which had long allocated them enormous socioeconomic benefits, southern whites sought a permanent expression of nostalgia for an imagined past of noble southern folk and faithful slaves. They found that expression in the Lost Cause ideology, and, with the political and economic capital available to them in a white supremacist society, white Southerners, with white women at the forefront, erected an enormous number of monuments over the course of more than one hundred years, nearly all of them memorializing the Confederate cause. This commemorative tradition attempted to erase slavery as a principal cause of the Civil War and emancipation as its most remarkable outcome by constructing narratives of the war in which intolerable Northern abuses forced the South's hand, heroic Confederate soldiers fought and died for the honor of the region's people, and previously contented slaves mourned their forced emancipation after having benefited immensely from the civilizing paternalism of slavery. White Southerners chose monuments as their principal commemorative mode for their quality of permanence against the tides of time. By erecting monuments to the glory of the Confederacy and its loyal slaves, white Southerners sought to make permanent an image of the antebellum South lost to them forever.

Southern blacks' sense of history was distinct from that of Southern whites, and so the commemorative strategies they employed were distinct as well. Black southerners viewed their history in the nation as a logical progression from exploitation and oppression to a destiny of equality, and the Civil War fit nicely into a longstanding black narrative in which the cruelties inflicted on blacks by white society would one day be punished through an act of God. While the Civil War's result was a devastating loss for Southern whites, it was something to be celebrated as deliverance for Southern blacks. They asserted and defended the legitimacy of that deliverance by inserting themselves into the annals of American history from which whites were trying to erase them. Although it is true that Southern blacks were denied the resources to erect enduring monuments, they also didn't have much need to. White southerners erected monuments as a means of crystallizing an imagined past, but black Southerners didn't believe that the past was separate from the present or the future. In the black narrative, the past was intimately linked to the present and it informed the future. For Southern blacks, oratory and ceremonial traditions were better vehicles for the collective transmission of an ongoing history.

On university campuses, in public parks, in county courthouses, on main streets, in war-era cemeteries, white society has made the Confederate legacy a prominent facet of public life in the South. It is easy—almost unavoidable—to see Silent Sam on the University of North Carolina’s Chapel Hill campus, and similar specters across the region overshadow an opposing narrative of the Civil War’s causes and consequences. A black memory of the Civil War would not exist at all in the public imagination if monuments were the only way we measured the relevance of a commemorative narrative. However, as in the case of Silent Sam, a more public challenge to the white monumental legacy has come to the fore. Perhaps the region (and the nation) will begin to take notice of the alternative ways forward offered by the South’s black commemorative traditions.

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