



2-10-2011

Lee Chapel: Lost Cause Artifact and Culture Shock

John M. Rudy
Gettysburg College

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Rudy, John M., "Lee Chapel: Lost Cause Artifact and Culture Shock" (2011). *Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public*. 221.

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Abstract

I had the privilege to accompany a group of undergraduate students recently on a whirlwind tour of the Wilderness, Richmond and Appomattox. Our tour took us along the I-81 corridor on the way back to Gettysburg, so why not stop in Lexington for a Civil War two-fer. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Robert E. Lee, Lost Cause

Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Public History | Social History | United States History

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Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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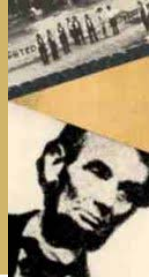
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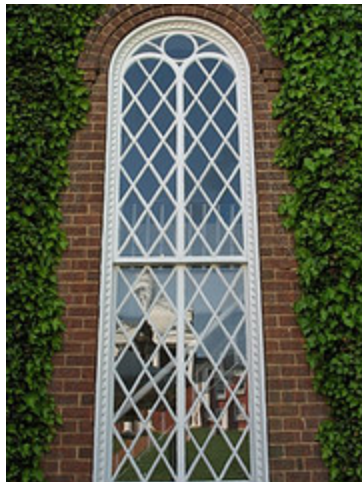
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Lee Chapel: Lost Cause Artifact and Culture Shock

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 2011

I had the privilege to accompany a group of undergraduate students recently on a whirlwind tour of the Wilderness, Richmond and Appomattox. Our tour took us along the I-81 corridor on the way back to Gettysburg, so why not stop in Lexington for a Civil War two-fer.



Lexington is home to both Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson's grave site. Stonewall deserves a blog post all his own some other time, so I'll focus on "Marse Robert" today. And what a focus it will be.

Walking into Lee Chapel on the campus of Washington and Lee University (formerly Washington College), you feel like you are stepping into a bank vault which has been sealed for years, dusty and musty and old. It felt like I was Geraldo Rivera, peering into a vault locked under a Chicago hotel. Like Geraldo, my gut fell at what I saw.

For the first time in my life, I have a clear image of the Lost Cause. It is the Lee chapel. Thomas Connelly did great justice to unfolding the space's meaning in his 1977 work *The Marble Man: Robert E. Lee and his*

CC / "[Reflection](#)" by Claire McDonough

Image in American Society. I am not going to do nearly as much justice today, but that'll never stop me.

Lee's cenotaph within the chapel sanctuary lies at the head of the church, atop the altar. I grew up Catholic. I find it interesting that Lee sits where the tabernacle typically lives in a Catholic church, holding the sanctified body of the Christian savior. The giant white marble statue is imposing, placed there in the 1880s along with an addition to the church to house the bodies of the Lee family. The guide was quick to note that it's not a dead Lee, it is simply the man resting on a camp cot. The entrance to the alcove featuring the napping Lee is flanked by a few flags, the American on stage right as is called for by custom. But within the alcove, the Confederacy reigns supreme. Reproductions of battle flags (the originals now in the Museum of the Confederacy) adorn the walls. Lee is lying tucked in under a blanket, his Officer's coat peaking above the blanket to show the three stars he wore during the Civil War. His hand lightly grasps a sword.



PD / Detail of Lee Chapel Cenotaph from [HABS/HAER](#)

I was shaking. I'm sure this is the reaction of many true Southerners when they enter the hall, humbled by the cold sleeping form of the great Confederate general. But I was shaking in anger and distress. As the docent rattled off interpretation which was decidedly pro-Lee, I leaned to one of the students and coldly noted that, "Oliver Cromwell did much the same thing, and he was exhumed and posthumously beheaded for the trouble." It's a gross simplification, I know, but one man tried to disrupt and destroy an entire country and had his head displayed on a pike for two and a half decades. The other, for the same act, gets a giant marble statue of him sleeping. [[see note 1](#)]

I've made a big point of his sleeping. The guide did too. Lee is NOT dead in the marble likeness, simply snoozing on a camp cot in his tent between battles. But what battles are left to fight? Why was Lee crafted in easily woken sleep and not interminable death in 1883?

The point was stressed by the docent, who inevitably had the point drilled into her head, that visitors should be told Lee is but sleeping on his cot. Was she aware of the implications of the artist's choice? Was she even thinking about its meaning? I looked at the statue and saw Lee, ready to spring to action once again, grasp his sword tightly in his hand and ride off to avenge a broken and battered South from the ravages of black rule and Reconstruction politics. Like the crucified Christ which traditionally hangs at the head of a church sanctuary where the marble man sits in Lexington, Lee only waits for resurrection and ascension to this plane, to judge the living and the dead. The Lost Cause waits for the day when Lee's kingdom shall have no end.

Now, of course, I am not talking about the historical Robert E. Lee. He died in 1870. By 1883, his opinions on the concept of Reconstruction and black equality were moot. Robert E. Lee does not lie in the Lexington Lee Chapel sanctuary, but instead what sits there is a base puppet of the post-war movement of memory. The South's constructed image of Lee as Lost Cause champion oozes from the pores of the Lee Statue in Lexington.

So, the biggest question is whether Washington and Lee University should interpret this fact or not. Right now, the chapel is memorial to Lee, a spot for veneration at the feet of the great (failed) liberator of the South. The museum exhibits laud the man as a paragon of the right. The reconstruction of his office is a historical freak show, there for staring, gape jawed wonderment and not reflection on the man's actions at all.

Yes, the chapel is part tomb. Yes, some respect should be shown, in spite of my personal judgments and northern sentiments.

But should Lee *cum* traitor be tackled? It certainly isn't to a great extent today. Should the action of resigning his commission in the United States Military *explicitly to raise arms against that very military* be given a deeper treatment? Should the museum and its staff discuss the chapel as tool of Lost Cause racism and hatred, as a rallying point for, to borrow a phrase from Frederick Douglass, the "blind, unreasoning prejudice," of post-Reconstruction America?

What is the burden of Public History? Do we as practitioners have a responsibility to take audiences beyond their comfort zone? Right now, those of us that view Lee as a traitor are challenged in our beliefs, shown Lee as a paragon of virtue. But do we as public historians have an inherent responsibility to offer those who view Lee as saint a moment to see him as demon?

1. To be honest, as an Americanist, most of my exposure to the Lord Protector's deposition of the English monarchy and subsequent reign comes from a combination of the Monty Python song named for Cromwell and the old children's rhyme ("Oliver Cromwell lies buried and dead / Hee-haw, buried and dead..."). Still, fighting perceived tyranny in the name of liberty, only intending to impose and buttress a tyrannical system yourself seems to be a common trait between Cromwell and Lee. But I digress.