



7-13-2015

Making a Statement: The Alabama Memorial at Gettysburg

Matthew D. LaRoche
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler>

 Part of the [Military History Commons](#), [Public History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

LaRoche, Matthew D., "Making a Statement: The Alabama Memorial at Gettysburg" (2015). *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History*. 100.

<https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler/100>

This is the author's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler/100>

This open access blog post is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

Making a Statement: The Alabama Memorial at Gettysburg

Abstract

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

Every generation has plenty to remember about its time spent shaping the human story. But despite this, some generations are better at writing their stories than others. Or perhaps some generations leave more unfinished work for their descendants to sift through. Either way, the legacy of the Civil War still lays heavy on our shoulders. Here at Gettysburg, in particular, the memory of the nation coalesces around a few days in a July long gone. The remembrance began the day after, with letters home, official reports, and raw thoughts scrawled across diary pages. But the years kept coming. New people and new events shaped the nation, while old people and past events faded, their specifics murky, and their significance uncertain. New generations *knew* the war meant something, but *what*? That is the question that every generation since has sought to answer in the style and sense of its time. The further time crept from the trial of the Civil War, the more new people with new interests and new agendas could proclaim their answers on old fields with new monuments and new speeches [*excerpt*].

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, Gettysburg National Military Park, The Alabama Memorial, monumentation

Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

Comments

This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Making a Statement: The Alabama Memorial at Gettysburg

July 13, 2015

By Matthew LaRoche '17

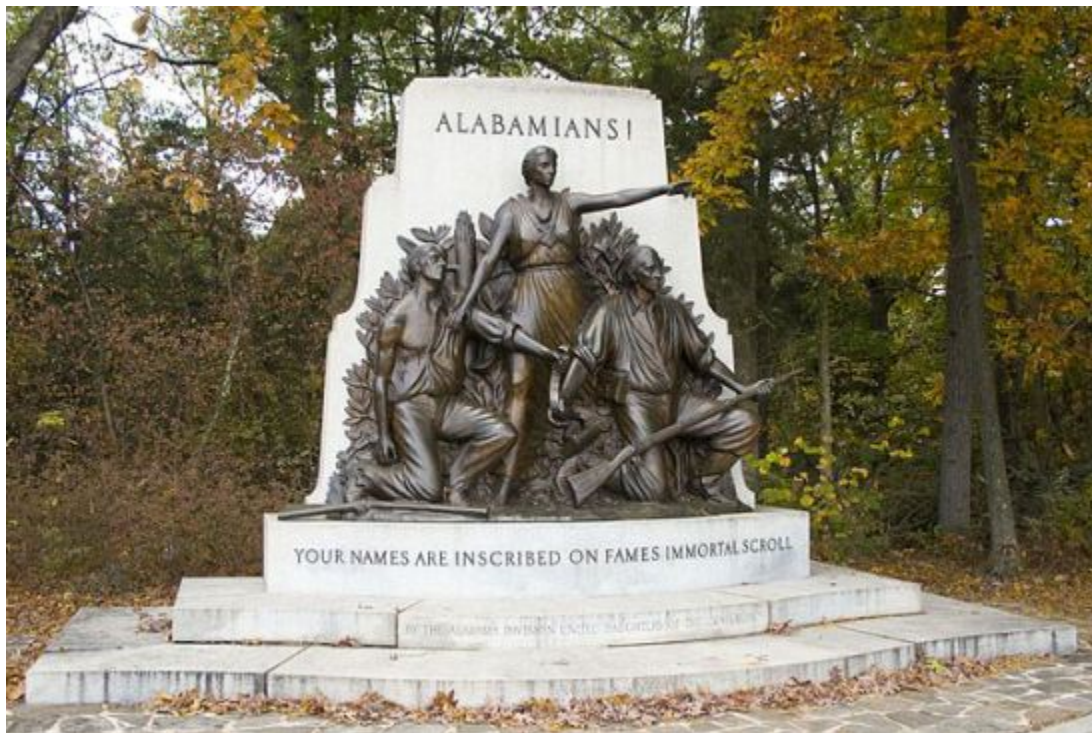
This post is part of a series featuring behind-the-scenes dispatches from our [Pohanka Interns](#) working on the front lines of history this summer as interpreters, archivists, and preservationists. [See here for the introduction to the series.](#)

Every generation has plenty to remember about its time spent shaping the human story. But despite this, some generations are better at writing their stories than others. Or perhaps some generations leave more unfinished work for their descendants to sift through. Either way, the legacy of the Civil War still lays heavy on our shoulders. Here at Gettysburg, in particular, the memory of the nation coalesces around a few days in a July long gone. The remembrance began the day after, with letters home, official reports, and raw thoughts scrawled across diary pages. But the years kept coming. New people and new events shaped the nation, while old people and past events faded, their specifics murky, and their significance uncertain. New generations *knew* the war meant something, but *what*? That is the question that every generation since has sought to answer in the style and sense of its time. The further time crept from the trial of the Civil War, the more new people with new interests and new agendas could proclaim their answers on old fields with new monuments and new speeches.

Kirk Savage's article, "The Politics of Memory: Black Emancipation and the Civil War Monument," examines how this trend shaped the immediate post-war years. By revealing how a template Civil War monument emerged to serve both sides after the war—a very select celebration of unbroken white manhood on both sides—Savage helps illustrate the fundamentally political nature of memorialization. After the war, both North and South began to enshrine the war in the most emotionally and politically efficacious ways possible. While monuments still reflected some level of sectional divide, they almost universally ignored the black perspective on the war and its significance, regarding it as irrelevant, if not outright toxic. Northern and Southern political interests could largely coexist so long as they both ignored this key dimension of the war years and their aftermath. People North and South could still take solace in knowing why their loved ones died by attaching any one of a number of explanations to the same stock pedestal, with the same marble soldier set to stand tall on that explanation for eternity. This tacit agreement left much unresolved baggage for later generations.

However, the discriminating hand that reshaped the nation with declarative monuments in cemeteries, battlefields, and town centers did not stop with the veterans, or even their immediate

families. Many waves of monumentation followed the first, including a massive one during the centennial celebration, long after the last veteran had passed. But later generations took over the responsibility for interpreting the war long before 1961. Gettysburg has plenty of examples of stone- and copper-wrought weapons that have been used in the many social wars in the battle's wake. One of the loudest monuments on the field literally *shouts* at you to see and accept its spin on the sacrifice. The Alabama Memorial, along West Confederate Avenue, greeted the American public in November of 1933. The memorial sports a female rendering of the Spirit of the Confederacy urging a wounded rebel to pass his cartridge box to an armed rebel, so as to continue the fight. The inscription comforts, "Alabamians! Your Names Are Inscribed On Fames Immortal Scroll."



The Alabama State Monument at Gettysburg was dedicated in November 1933, and eschews any mention of the causes or results of the war, focusing solely on themes of heroism and duty. Photo courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

The memorial's message is clear: to the descendants of the Alabamians who fought at Gettysburg, they need not question their ancestor's role in the war. There is no need to examine the causes or results; Alabamians fought as one, nobly, and regardless of the outcome their names are listed amongst the honored dead, and that's that. Generations of soul-searchers need not look elsewhere for a meaning to the madness of the war. As a political declaration, you cannot get much clearer.

But, to prove the rule, the next generation reversed the message of its predecessors. As Jennifer M. Murray explains in her book, [On a Great Battlefield: The Making, Management, and Memory of Gettysburg National Military Park, 1933-2013](#), "Beyond the fanfare, theatrics, and flag-waving, Gettysburg's centennial offered the nation's political leaders an opportunity and

platform to address prevailing political and social issues.” Despite waves of monumentation aimed at evading doubt and introspection, most Northern and Southern leaders in July 1963 asked their audiences to walk off the field resolved to improve the nation, rather than simply uphold the status quo. Interestingly, however, the Alabama Memorial hosted the big exception to this trend; Governor George Wallace, known for his segregationist politics, used the memorial as a soapbox to inspire his audience to “stand for defense of the Constitution of the United States,” and by the Constitution, he meant the right to segregate.

Surely future generations will see further fights over the meaning of this place, waged with more speeches and more waving flags, if not more monuments.

Sources:

Murray, Jennifer M. *On a Great Battlefield: The Making, Management, and Memory of Gettysburg National Military Park, 1933-2013*. (University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville, TN: 2014).

Savage, Kirk. “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

<http://gettysburgcompiler.com/2015/07/13/making-a-statement-the-alabama-memorial-at-gettysburg/>