



8-2-2016

Yonder Stands Jackson Beyond Reproach

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Lavery, Kevin P., "Yonder Stands Jackson Beyond Reproach" (2016). *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History*. 205.
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Yonder Stands Jackson Beyond Reproach

Abstract

Yonder, he stands, a lone sentinel of stone amidst the fallow fields of Henry Hill. Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson, his *nom de guerre* earned here on the fields of First Manassas, rides tall in the saddle of his steed. The statue’s commanding presence on Henry Hill anchors a memory of that battle that emphasizes the triumph of Jackson, his brigade, and the Confederate army in the defense of Southern soil. It is an embodiment of idealized notions of Southern courage, honor, and martial spirit. At the same time, the monument serves to depoliticize Jackson and the Confederate war effort—yet in doing so, specifically projects its own politicized memory of the war that delegitimizes what the conflict meant to so many people.

[*excerpt*]

Keywords

Civil War, Gettysburg College, history, the Jackson monument, Confederacy

Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

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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

Yonder Stands Jackson Beyond Reproach

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 [Kevin Lavery '16](#)

Yonder, he stands, a lone sentinel of stone amidst the fallow fields of Henry Hill. Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson, his *nom de guerre* earned here on the fields of First Manassas, rides tall in the saddle of his steed. The statue’s commanding presence on Henry Hill anchors a memory of that battle that emphasizes the triumph of Jackson, his brigade, and the Confederate army in the defense of Southern soil. It is an embodiment of idealized notions of Southern courage, honor, and martial spirit. At the same time, the monument serves to depoliticize Jackson and the Confederate war effort—yet in doing so, specifically projects its own politicized memory of the war that delegitimizes what the conflict meant to so many people.



Photo credit Ryan Bilger

The idea for a Jackson statue was first put forth at the 75th anniversary reenactment of the battle by NPS official Branch Spalding. When the Sons of Confederate veterans donated the land to the federal government, that monument became one of the preconditions for the deal. The Commonwealth of Virginia brought on sculptor Joseph Pollia to design and craft the statute. His

first attempt came under fire for looking too much like Ulysses S. Grant, and because Jackson's horse apparently appeared less than impressive. Pollia overcorrected, perhaps intentionally. The statue thus became an exaggerated testament to Jackson's glory. Every muscle in the horse's body is seriously bulked-up, and Jackson is portrayed in winter uniform, giving him a much more powerful countenance than if he had been sculpted in the summer garments he actually wore in July 1861.

Jackson's is not the only monument that adorns Henry Hill, but in its size, design, and central location, it overshadows the other. Larger than the Bee and Bartow monuments, more impressive than the Union Bull Run monument, the statue projects a narrative in which Jackson features as the central figure of First Manassas. In doing so, the statue projects a sense that the story of Manassas is one of white Virginians saving the Confederacy.



Photo credit NPS/Kevin Lavery

In its majesty, moreover, the statue connotes a sense that Jackson himself is above reproach. Whatever his politics, it seems to imply, his military accomplishments have earned him a place among the highest circles of American heroes. Never mind that Jackson fought against the United States government, the very same entity that now preserves and interprets the park, or that his own cause was inseparable from the right of one person to own another. What matters, the statue suggests, is only what happened here on the battlefield—a Confederate victory at the first major land battle of the war. Jackson's statue stands tall and firm, but his posture is not aggressive. The monument projects a sense of his heroic stand against the aggression of the north. For those looking at the war from other perspectives, a very different narrative could arise: one of a passionately separatist nation determined to protect its peculiar institution. If such a memory were emphasized at Manassas, perhaps Jackson's statue would be flanked by others representing the slaves upon whose backs the Confederate wartime economy was built.

Some may wonder why any of this matters. The monument is, after all, merely meant to be tribute to Jackson's military prowess, right? Should it really be expected to convey such complicated matters as the politics of the war? Of course that's an unreasonable expectation, but it is only possible to treat it as politically-neutral by overlooking the full story of the Civil War. In context, the Jackson monument is part of a long battle over what the war meant, the identities of the belligerent nations, and what parts of the war are worthy of being remembered.

The Jackson statue has long been part of the fabric of MNB; I certainly do not advocate its removal. In its present position, the monument is a powerful example of how constructed symbols exert influence over our understanding of the past, both consciously and unconsciously. When approached thoughtfully, monuments can reveal even more secrets about history—and how it has been used or projected—than a superficial first glimpse.

Just as Jackson's brigade held like a stone wall on July 21, 1861, his monument continues to hold Henry Hill today, influencing the way visitors understand and interact with the site—and projecting a singular memory of what they should take away from Manassas. As the nation continues to wrestle with questions of what historical narratives should or should not be honored, we must remember the influential role of monuments. Key to this ongoing debate is the question of the degree to which we should have ownership over the past versus the degree to which our past has ownership over us.

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