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Warriors of Bronze: The Virginia Monument and Remembrance Day

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Abstract

Memory is a peculiar thing. To recall it is to remember, and there are two days dedicated to this activity in mid-November in Gettysburg. On November 18 and 19, reenactors and keynote speakers gather here to honor the sacrifices of millions of soldiers and sailors during the American Civil War. November 19 rings throughout the history of oration as the date of Lincoln's famous Gettysburg Address, itself an exercise in remembrance. The recent Remembrance and Dedication Days have encouraged me to think of my work on the Virginia Monument Wayside Project in light of the celebrations. Just as much as the parades and memorial wreaths, the monument speaks to a complex, ever-evolving memory of one of the defining moments in American history. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Memory, Reconciliation, Remembrance Day, Robert E. Lee, Virginia Memorial

Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Warriors of Bronze: The Virginia Monument and Remembrance Day

By [*Zachary Wesley '20*](#)

Memory is a peculiar thing. To recall it is to remember, and there are two days dedicated to this activity in mid-November in Gettysburg. On November 18 and 19, reenactors and keynote speakers gather here to honor the sacrifices of millions of soldiers and sailors during the American Civil War. November 19 rings throughout the history of oration as the date of Lincoln's famous Gettysburg Address, itself an exercise in remembrance. The recent Remembrance and Dedication Days have encouraged me to think of my work on the Virginia Monument Wayside Project in light of the celebrations. Just as much as the parades and memorial wreaths, the monument speaks to a complex, ever-evolving memory of one of the defining moments in American history.

On June 8, 1917, a crowd gathered in front of the veiled Virginia Monument. Politicians and ministers gave stirring speeches that celebrated the valor of Virginia's soldiers, especially Robert E. Lee. The date was a crucial moment in reconciliationist memory of the war. For the majority of the previous fifty years, Union veterans and Northern politicians vehemently opposed nearly every attempt to commemorate the Confederacy at Gettysburg. As the ranks of veterans' organizations thinned and new generations of Americans prepared to embark on ships bound for France, attitudes began to shift. The monument's design followed a rocky road as well.

The Battle Flag of the Army of Northern Virginia, perhaps the most recognizable symbol of the Confederacy, is notably absent from the monument. Instead, the gallant Virginia trooper along the monument's base carries the Virginia State Flag. This feature is no accident. The War Department and the Battlefield Commissioners strongly encouraged the use of the State Flag and the committee formed by Virginia's General Assembly complied. One suggested inscription containing the phrase, "They Fought for the Faith of Their Fathers" was rejected outright by the Commissioners. They wanted a politically neutral message in the monuments on the landscape. Regardless, the monument possessed, and continues to possess, a powerful message of the Southern – specifically Virginian – memory of the war.



This photograph shows one of Frederick William Siever's plaster studies of an early design for the Virginia Monument. The soldiers are replaced by women, children, and a grave. The image of Lee as the protector of the South's most vulnerable inhabitants presents a protector of virtue and innocence rather than a master of strategy. It is curious to think what message the Virginia Monument might show if this design were what we see today. Photo courtesy of Gettysburg National Military Park.

The romantic heroism of the soldiers on the Virginia Monument is evident, yet so too is a hint of anxious preparedness for an assault on the Union positions along Cemetery Ridge. Even before the monument's creation, many individuals in both the North and South embraced the attitude that Pickett's Division was a force comparable to Napoleon's Old Guard. Robert E. Lee epitomized the Christian, agrarian values of the Old South. Absent, however, was the specter of slavery. Lee became the silent spokesperson for a lost way of life. This message is not explicitly written on the monument, though the speakers at the unveiling understood this point well. Governor Henry Carter Stuart of Virginia stated that Lee "represents and embodies all that Virginia and her sister Southern States can or need vouchsafe to the country and to the world as the supreme example of their convictions and principles."

No doubt few visitors take the time to consider seriously the history of the layered memories associated with the Virginia Monument. The same, perhaps, can be said of the activities of Dedication and Remembrance Days. The November 19 festivities date only to 1938: the seventy-fifth anniversary of the National Cemetery's dedication. Congress formalized the day eight years later. At a time when only a handful of Civil War veterans remained, the occasion presented an opportunity for Lincoln's words to live on as those who carried their echoes passed away.

The messages of Union and liberty are still as apparent to modern audiences as they were to the crowds of 1863 and 1938, though the context has changed considerably. Initially a holiday that honored only Union veterans, Confederate sacrifices, too, are now part of the festivities. As debates about the display of Confederate imagery continue to swirl, the meaning of both Dedication and Remembrance Day and the Virginia Monument will continue to change, as well. Memory is shaped by these same currents, evolving with each subsequent generation until the amnesia of time obscures fact into fantasy. Memory is complex. For instance, memory makes some of the most gruesome events of history – the Civil War, for example – appear rosy and grand. The grim realities of slavery, and its role in the countless political debates before and during the Civil War, was one of the first casualties of this amnesia, as were the horrors of the battlefield. How else were the worlds of *Gone with the Wind* or *The Blue and the Gray* born? On other occasions, however, memory may summon the pains of the past, and encourage us to think critically about wounds that continue to plague us. Indeed, memory is a peculiar thing.

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