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# To Liberty, Honor, and ... Cufflinks?: The Grand Army of the Republic

Savannah Labbe  
*Gettysburg College*

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# To Liberty, Honor, and ... Cufflinks?: The Grand Army of the Republic

## **Abstract**

Borne of the Civil War, one fraternal organization quickly assumed such great authority that it re-shaped cultural prescriptions of manhood, dictated the northern public's memory of the war, and even influenced presidential elections. This organization, the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), was formed in Illinois in 1866 by veteran Benjamin Franklin Stephenson and its number of posts in the United States quickly increased. In order to be a member, one simply had to be a Union veteran. By the 1890s, there were 7,000 GAR posts around the country; approximately 1.3 million men, half of all Union veterans, were group members. Members would have worn these cufflinks, or more commonly, the badge with the same image on it, as status symbols. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

Grand Army of the Republic, Memory, Treasury of Virtue

## **Disciplines**

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

## **Comments**

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# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

### To Liberty, Honor, and...Cufflinks?: The Grand Army of the Republic

By Savannah Labbe '19



*Grand Army of the Republic cufflink.  
(via [Special Collections](#) at Gettysburg College)*

Borne of the Civil War, one fraternal organization quickly assumed such great authority that it re-shaped cultural prescriptions of manhood, dictated the northern public's memory of the war, and even influenced presidential elections. This organization, the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), was formed in Illinois in 1866 by veteran Benjamin Franklin Stephenson and its number of posts in the United States quickly increased. In order to be a member, one simply had to be a Union veteran. By the 1890s, there were 7,000 GAR posts around the country; approximately 1.3 million men, half of all Union veterans, were group members. Members would have worn these cufflinks, or more commonly, the badge with the same image on it, as status symbols. They purchased

these cufflinks and badges not merely so that they could have another piece of jewelry, but so they could show everyone that they were one of the heroes who fought for the Union, one of the brave soldiers who were now part of the most powerful veterans' organizations in the United States. Being a member of the GAR meant one had participated in one of the greatest wars of modern times (so they thought). In addition, these accessories indicated that one had not only participated in that war, but that he had fought on the right side— the side of liberty and freedom. These cufflinks became a symbol of one's martial manhood, proving that one had served with courage and honor while fighting for a just cause. In this way, the GAR promoted its own history of the war— what is now known as the Treasury of Virtue. Similar to the Lost Cause narrative, it promotes a biased interpretation of history, in this case from the northern perspective. According to this narrative, all northern soldiers were noble, honorable, and heroic men who triumphed because they fought for the righteous goal of emancipation.

The imagery on the cufflinks also served to highlight the ideas of moral righteousness and martial fraternalism that the GAR tried to foster within its members. Lady Liberty can be seen in the background—yet another concrete reminder that Union veterans had fought for a virtuous cause. A soldier and a sailor clasp hands in front of Lady Liberty, which symbolizes fraternalism, one of the goals of the GAR tried to promote. These cufflinks would have made it easier for men to recognize each other as fellow brothers-in-arms: They would know immediately that the man they had just met had gone through the same experience they had and would understand it as no one else could. It is hard to relate the horrors of war to someone who has never been through it, and the GAR provided an outlet for former soldiers to express these horrors and know that those around them would understand and empathize, instead of simply pitying them. Amidst the fraternal comfort of the GAR, that strict veil of 19th century manliness could be pulled aside; veterans could realize that they were not the only ones who had felt scared in combat or had been wracked with guilt over killing a man. To help facilitate these connections between veterans, the GAR held local, regional, and national meetings in which they would sit around campfires singing war songs and telling stories. Not only did this serve as a sort of therapy for the men, but it also allowed them to reminisce and be proud of their actions and the fact that they were part of so great a cause at so important of an historical moment.

Two figures kneel before the soldiers on the cufflink. Scholars debate over who these figures are supposed to represent. Some believe they are two orphan children, while others believe they are slaves. Either one would make sense. The GAR set up a fund to help widows and orphans and they also helped set up many homes for orphans. These activities went hand-in-hand with another goal of the GAR— that of charity. The GAR believed that those who had fought and died for the Union deserved proper care for their families. The government was hard-pressed to provide pensions for veterans, let alone to provide for the families of the fallen, so the GAR took this task upon itself. By doing so, members set an example, showing that veterans and their families deserved to be rewarded for their sacrifice, and thereby declaring them members “worthy of charity.” It is also equally plausible that the figures in front are slaves because GAR members liked to promote an image of themselves as the liberators of the oppressed.

The GAR used its moral authority of being on the side of righteousness to try to control the memory of the war. The GAR funded many Civil War memorials and monuments in order to promote its version of history. For example, in Arkansas, a state divided in its loyalties and with many more Confederate monuments than Union ones, the GAR made sure to make its presence known. The inscription on one of the three GAR monuments in Arkansas proudly proclaims that the Union soldiers' "sacrifices cemented our union of states and made our flag glorious forever." Not only did the GAR remember the Civil War through monuments, but it also started the official tradition that came to be known as Memorial Day, (though many others, particularly Southern women, had been observing similar days since the war ended). Originally known as Decoration Day, the commander-in-chief of the GAR designated that May 30, 1868, would be a day for the decoration of Union graves. 31 states adopted Decoration Day as an official state holiday by the next year. This ensured that those who had sacrificed their lives for the Union cause would never be forgotten. In addition, it also served as a reminder that those living veterans who would proudly wear their cufflinks to these events to publicize their fraternal identity, deserved to be rewarded for their services.

In order to fight for what they believed veterans deserved, especially pensions, the GAR became a very political body. After the Civil War, it was difficult for a president to be elected or even win a primary without the endorsement of the GAR. The GAR became a political arm of the Republican party, lobbying for certain presidents and political candidates. It was not until 1885 that a Democrat, Grover Cleveland, was elected president. However, Cleveland was not able to win immediate reelection because he vetoed a pension bill, which made members of the GAR angry. The GAR was very concerned with the welfare of veterans, and because of this they focused their lobbying efforts on obtaining pensions for veterans and their families. When politicians vetoed or opposed pension bills they were sure to feel the wrath of the GAR. Before the formation of the GAR, soldiers did not really take a large role in politics. Americans held that the ideal soldier was first and foremost a citizen and as such they should not take a role in government affairs. Americans were all too familiar with the unruly armies in Europe who did not protect the citizens but instead fought for money and power. American soldiers tended to return quietly to private life after they were done fighting because of this fear. The GAR, in contrast, was openly political and fought for what they believed they were owed.

This cufflink was much more than just a piece of jewelry. It was a way for comrades to identify each other and immediately bond over shared wartime experience. As such, it promoted camaraderie, friendship, and healing among veterans. Those who wore it were immediately identified as a member of a heroic class, and the white, northern veteran became the new model of honorable manhood. This cufflink also helped the GAR shape the memory of the Civil War. Its symbolism reinforced the idea that the Union had fought a just war that had saved global democracy and liberated an entire race of people. Additionally, the monuments and the traditions that the GAR started helped to promote a distinctly northern memory of the war, its causes, and consequences. As is evidenced by the actions of those who proudly wore these cufflinks, the post-war years were not, contrary to popular belief, all about reconciliation and a "forgive and forget" attitude;

both sides tried passionately, and for many decades, to assert their own particular memory of the war. While the GAR was a veterans' organization, it also became a political lobbying group. For the first time since the American Revolution, citizen soldiers became a tightly organized interest group dedicated to reshaping the political life of the country. No longer retreating back into their post-war private lives, these veterans but became directly involved in national politics, fighting for the material benefits and respect they believed they deserved in return for their sacrifice.

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