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# The Virginia Monument's Meaning in Memory

## **Abstract**

In the early 1900s, many people began to advocate for Confederate monuments on the battlefield at Gettysburg. However, different motivations were present. Many Northerners saw Confederate monuments as a way to further unity, while Southerners instead used the monuments to preserve a separate identity. The Virginia Memorial is a clear case of this.

## **Keywords**

Memory, Lost Cause, Virginia memorial, Gettysburg, Confederate monuments

## **Disciplines**

Political History | United States History

## **Comments**

Research paper written for Civil War Era Studies 320.

## The Virginia Monument's Meaning in Memory

The Virginia Monument, one of the earliest and largest Confederate monuments on the Gettysburg Battlefield, has a dramatic history. Ever since its origins in a Committee in 1908, the Monument has been a strong symbolic figure. But what, exactly, does it symbolize? From its inception to its dedication to more modern periods, it has meant vastly different things to different groups. To Northerners, the inclusion of Southern monuments appeared to be a compromise to promote unity. However, as evidenced in initial debates about what the monument would portray, dedication speeches, and rededication, Southerners saw the monument not as a symbol of unity but rather as a way to state their separate identity.

In the early 1900s, many people began to debate the idea of placing Confederate monuments at Gettysburg. In 1903, an article entitled "Memorial to Lee" appeared in the *Gettysburg Compiler*. Thomas Cooper introduced a bill to the Pennsylvania legislature requesting \$20,000 dollars for a monument of Robert E. Lee, provided that Virginia match that sum. Although this bill certainly faced opposition, the article explains some of the background desire for Confederate presence in stone. "A ride along Confederate avenue, with the Union lines with their hundreds of markers in sight, gives a striking expression of the absence of all confederates(SIC) memorials," the article states.<sup>1</sup> It then asks "Are the men who fought here still unforgiven rebels, who must remain unnamed as a punishment? Have we taken back their country as part of an indissoluble union but have not taken back the men?"<sup>2</sup> Although this bill failed due to opposition by Union veterans, it shows that even Northern citizens were beginning to feel a desire for Confederate memorials. Northern people saw those monuments as a proof of reconciliation, but Southern citizens had a different idea.

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<sup>1</sup> "Memorial to Lee." *The Gettysburg Compiler*. January 28, 1903.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

In 1908, Virginia began to toy with the idea of a state monument. In a speech to the General Assembly, Governor Claude Swanson made a case for it, stating:

A more glorious exhibition of disciplined valor has never been witnessed than that shown by the Virginia troops at the Battle of Gettysburg. The heroic achievements of our troops in that fierce battle have given to this Commonwealth a fame that is immortal, a lustre that is imperishable. I recommend that an appropriation be made to erect on this battlefield a suitable monument to commemorate the glory and heroism of the Virginia troops.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the wheels began to move in earnest for the preparation for a monument to Virginia.

One week after this speech, bills were proposed in both the House of Delegates and the Senate. These bills appropriated up to fifty thousand dollars and formed a committee, which would be composed of the Governor and four men who ended up all being Confederate veterans, to select “a location, design, and inscription for said monument.”<sup>4</sup>

There was not a unified national memory of the Virginia and Lee Monument before it started. As shown in the *Gettysburg Compiler* and the rules of the Gettysburg National Park Commission, the Virginia Monument was to serve a purpose of unification. It was to show that although they had fought against each other they were now friends, and Confederate monuments would “be emblematic of a reunited nation” and would “show the same generosity which inspired Gen. Grant at Appomattox.”<sup>5</sup> To Southerners, however, it meant something radically different. To them, the monument was not a reminder of unity, but rather a reminder of separation and the glory of their cause and soldiers. The mention of the “heroic achievements of our troops” that earned “a fame that is immortal” hardly sounds like the words of a people acknowledging defeat and reunion.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Message of Hon. Claude A. Swanson Governor of Virginia to the General Assembly January 8, 1908*, (Richmond: Davis Bottom, Superintendent of Public Printing, 1908), 10.

<sup>4</sup> *Virginia's Memorial to Her Sons at Gettysburg*, (Richmond: The Colonial Press, undated), 3-4.

<sup>5</sup> “Memorial to Lee.” *The Gettysburg Compiler*. January 28, 1903.

<sup>6</sup> *Message of Hon. Claude A. Swanson Governor of Virginia to the General Assembly January 8, 1908*, (Richmond: Davis Bottom, Superintendent of Public Printing, 1908), 10.

Nearly immediately after a state commission was appointed, differing ideas of the monument came to conflict. According to one source, the first location the committee suggested was at the Angle on Cemetery Hill. Obviously, the government refused that selection, and instead a location near Spangler's Woods that faces towards Cemetery Ridge was chosen, allegedly the spot where Lee had met the survivors of the failed charge.<sup>7</sup> This was likely the easiest resolved issue. In July, 1910, an issue developed with the proposed design of the statues of Confederate soldiers that were to be placed along the base of the pedestal. Initially, the soldier carrying the flag was to hold a Confederate battle flag. This was not approved, and the committee ultimately assented to replacing the Confederate flag with the Virginia state flag.<sup>8</sup> This was chosen as better representing Virginia, as it was a state monument, but the initial flag choice and denial likely had other political meaning. Perhaps the committee had chosen the more generic flag so that the monument could serve as a more universal Confederate monument, and perhaps the Commission had vetoed it because they did not want the battle flag flying as if it was victorious.

The final controversy was the one that was the most difficult to solve. In 1912, Virginia submitted the inscription for the monument, reading:

VIRGINIA  
TO HER SOLDIERS AT GETTYSBURG  
THEY FOUGHT FOR THE FAITH  
OF THEIR FATHERS

John Nicholson, Chairman of the Gettysburg National Park Commission, refused to accept that inscription. The laws pertaining to monuments demanded that inscriptions be without "censure, praise or blame," and he believed that stating "they fought for the faith of their

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<sup>7</sup> Short, James R. "Citizen Soldiers at Spangler's Woods: A Sculptured Tribute to Virginia's Sons at Gettysburg." *Virginia Cavalcade: History in Picture and Story* Volume 5, Number 1 (Summer 1955): 45.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Smith, letter to L.L. Lomax, July 31<sup>st</sup>, 1910.

fathers” opened the inscription to “not a little adverse criticism” and “weakens the Memorial tribute.”<sup>9</sup> Instead, he proposed two potential options for the inscription:

V I R G I N I A  
TO HER SOLDIERS WHO FOUGHT AT GETTYSBURG

V I R G I N I A  
TO HER SONS WHO FOUGHT AT GETTYSBURG

Nicholson believed that the new inscriptions would “appeal to every soldier.” He repeated that there is no use “opening the doors of criticism” and stated, “let us... agree to a fact and not to an opinion.”<sup>10</sup> L.L. Lomax quickly responded, agreeing that there was no need for the line “fought for the faith of their fathers,” though he also stated he needed to confer with Thomas Smith.<sup>11</sup> Smith was clearly not in agreement with Lomax, as on March 29, 1912, he submitted the inscription again, still including the offending line, though he also wrote that he hoped “they are not in the least infringement in any way of the Regulations of the War Department.”<sup>12</sup> Nicholson was furious. He repeated that the inscription was not in accordance to the guidelines and continued on a frustration filled correspondence with Lomax hoping he would reign in Smith.<sup>13</sup> This frustration was compounded by the fact that Nicholson needed Smith’s signature, and although Smith claimed that he may have sent it, Nicholson never received it. Nicholson wrote that he had no confidence whatsoever in Smith’s memory and reiterated that “the Virginia Commission are making a great mistake in insisting upon an expression of opinion upon their memorial.”<sup>14</sup> Thomas wrote that he believed he had received approval for the inscription, to which Nicholson immediately replied that Thomas had received approval for the design and location, not the inscription.<sup>15</sup> Finally, Smith assented,

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<sup>9</sup> John P. Nicholson, letter to L.L. Lomax, February 7, 1912.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>11</sup> L.L. Lomax, letter to John P. Nicholson, February 8, 1912.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Smith, letter to John P. Nicholson, March 29, 1912.

<sup>13</sup> John P. Nicholson, letter to Thomas Smith, April 1, 1912.

<sup>14</sup> John P. Nicholson, letter to L.L. Lomax, April 4, 1912.

<sup>15</sup> John P. Nicholson, letter to Thomas Smith, April 6, 1912.

and the final inscription was agreed to be “VIRGINIA TO HER SONS AT GETTYSBURG.”<sup>16</sup>

Following this comedy-of-errors-like correspondence, the construction of the monument continued. The base was placed in 193, but the statues and inscriptions were not finished until 1917. On June 8th, 1917, the Virginia Monument was dedicated.<sup>17</sup> At the program, several speeches were given by various important individuals, and these dedication speeches further showed the split opinion on the memory of the war and purpose of the monument even further. First was the invocation, a prayer to begin the ceremony, given by Reverend James Powers Smith who had been on Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson’s staff. As one might expect from a speech given by Smith, it was not one of reconciliation. He described the battle as “a great story of warlike power and skill, of unselfish devotion of life and every sacrifice to great ideals of rights and liberties.” The South still saw their war as a fight for personal liberty, ignoring the fact that it was fought as a war to prevent giving liberty to others.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, he described the monument as one dedicated to “the memory of an army of patriot soldiers and their great Captain.”<sup>19</sup> This was certainly not a prayer to call for unity, but rather one that called for the remembrance of brave southern soldiers who had simply fought for a just cause, ignoring the fact that he had called soldiers who fought against their own government “patriots.”

The official dedication, given by Henry Carter Stuart, Governor of Virginia, was no more willing to speak about unity than Smith was. Although he admitted the South had lost and the nation was politically reunited, saying that “destiny decreed that one unbroken republic under one flag should reach from Canada to the Rio Grande,” he still asserted a

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas Smith, letter to John P. Nicholson, April 12, 1912.

<sup>17</sup> *Virginia’s Memorial to Her Sons at Gettysburg*, (Richmond: The Colonial Press, undated), 1-2.

<sup>18</sup> “Address at the Dedication of the Virginia Memorial at Gettysburg, Friday, June 8, 1917 By His Excellency Henry Carter Stuart, Governor of Virginia,” [civilwarhome.com](http://www.civilwarhome.com)

<http://www.civilwarhome.com/address1gettysburgvameorial.html> (accessed February 28, 2018), 1.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

separate Southern social identity.<sup>20</sup> He stated the war's cause was "divergent views of the Constitution of the United States," and called it "a battle between rival conceptions of sovereignty rather than one between a sovereign and its acknowledged citizens."<sup>21</sup> Through this, he thinly admitted the defeat, but also firmly asserted that the Confederacy had been a sovereign nation rather than a rebellion, and dismissed slavery as a cause of the war. Finally, he termed the monument an "undying expression of the high ideals in which we of the South would this day sanctify."<sup>22</sup> The Virginia Monument was not dedicated as a symbol of a reunited United States of America; it was dedicated to permanently enshrine the Lost Cause ideals of virtue, heroism, and the righteousness of the Confederate cause. Rather than reuniting the nation, it firmly established the South as a separate social entity, even if the country was politically united.

In 1987, the Virginia Monument was rededicated by Mills Godwin, former Governor of Virginia. Rather than remedying the divisive, Lost Cause narrative of his predecessor in a post-Civil-Rights-Era age, Godwin doubled down. In his description of the battle there is no indication that the South lost the battle; there is no indication that the South lost the war and was now fully reintegrated. Instead he discussed how on July 1<sup>st</sup>, Lee "crushed a Northern corps," and how Pickett's Charge was forced "to yield to superior strength," harkening back to Lee's General Orders No. 9 after Appomattox.<sup>23</sup> He states that Virginia was fully justified in "erecting a memorial to the valor and courage of her fighting men...and it was altogether appropriate that Robert E. Lee should be immortalized in bronze."<sup>24</sup> Again, Southerners used

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<sup>20</sup> "Address at the Dedication of the Virginia Memorial at Gettysburg, Friday, June 8, 1917 By His Excellency Henry Carter Stuart, Governor of Virginia," [civilwarhome.com](http://www.civilwarhome.com).  
<http://www.civilwarhome.com/address1gettysburgvameorial.html> (accessed February 28, 2018), 1.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>23</sup> "Remarks by Mills E. Godwin, Jr., Former Governor of Virginia, Gettysburg National Military Park, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, April 25, 1987, 3:00PM", 2.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

the monuments to push their Lost Cause-inspired narrative of heroism and glory rather than as a symbol of unity.

Northerners had hoped that allowing Confederate memorials, such as the Virginia Monument, to be erected at Gettysburg would help bring the nation together through compromising and admiring valor of their foes. Instead of reconciliation, the debates about flags, location, and description showed that Southerners were very reluctant to allow Northerners to push them towards a reconciliationist narrative. The dedication speeches and the rededication only show further that Southerners used this monument to push their own Lost Cause narrative, deifying Lee and his soldiers. Even in the face of the First World War, Southerners were not yet ready to fully reconcile with the North, instead preferring to use monuments to permanently enshrine their version of Civil War memory in bronze and granite. Rather than bringing the nation together, the first monument to a Confederate state at Gettysburg instead emphasized the divisions that still remained.

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