Fighting Civil Rights and the Cold War: Confederate Monuments at Gettysburg

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Fighting Civil Rights and the Cold War: Confederate Monuments at Gettysburg

Abstract
It's been interesting and instructive to see the ongoing debate over Confederate iconography unfold from the vantage point of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, one of the nation's premier centers of Civil War memory. Many of the conversations taking place in town are similar to ones happening around the country, but a few elements have been noteworthy. In Gettysburg, flag debates have by and large revolved around First Amendment rights, honoring ancestors and their cause, and the demands of heritage tourism, and not around civic identity or the appropriateness of the flag's use as a symbol of the state. [excerpt]

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RECONSIDERATION OF Memorials and Monuments
Features

7 Reconsideration of Memorials and Monuments
By Modupe Labode

12 Fighting Civil Rights and the Cold War: Confederate Monuments at Gettysburg
By Jill Ogline Titus

20 Finding Meaning in Monuments: Atlanta History Center Enters Dialogue on Confederate Symbols
By F. Sheffield Hale

26 Redefining History and Heritage at Virginia’s Colleges and Universities
By Kelley Fanto Deetz, Bradley Lynn Coleman, Jody Allen, and Thomas E. Camden

Departments

3 On Doing Local History
By Carol Kammen

5 The Whole is Greater
By Dina Bailey

32 Award Winner Spotlight
By Terri Blanchette

34 Book Reviews
By Bonnie Stacy and Elizabeth P. Stewart

ON THE COVER
In 2002, the State of Colorado reinterpreted its original Civil War monument to include a plaque acknowledging the Sand Creek Massacre. From 1909-2002, Sand Creek was listed among “Battles and Engagements” in which Coloradans fought during the war. Photo Max van Balgooy

INSIDE: TECHNICAL LEAFLET
How to Make a Podcast
By Marieke Van Damme and Dan Yaeger
As keepers of community history and memory, history organizations provide contemporary context. It’s one of our most important roles, and one of the seven core values of history: “By bringing history into discussions about contemporary issues, we can better understand the origins of and multiple perspectives on the challenges facing our communities and nation.” The remembered past through public monuments provides an opportunity to “clarify misperceptions, reveal complexities, temper volatile viewpoints, open people to new possibilities, and lead to more effective solutions for today’s challenges.”

This History News highlights considerations about monuments of the Civil War era. I can think of no other event in American history whose memory is as hotly contested. As communities continue to grapple with the war’s legacies, they are turning their attention to its public memorials. This, in turn, brings to the fore conversations about the motives of those who created them. Simply, they are not artifacts of 1861-1865 but are instead a reflection of the specific time period in which they were erected. This is an important distinction, one our organizations can help make.

Other questions follow. Does leaving them in situ officially sanction the activities of the honoree(s)? Does displacement allow future generations to gloss over the negative aspects of the past—namely these very public reminders gone? How does removing these monuments affect preservation of the built environment? And what role should history institutions play in discussions of what to do?

Charlie Bryan, President and CEO Emeritus of the Virginia Historical Society, provided an answer to the latter. The best historians are revisionists, he wrote, “looking at familiar subjects from unique perspectives to come up with new ways of describing the past.”

Monuments and memorials offer an opportunity for history organizations to do just this, while also educating the public about the processes of our discipline. There is no prescriptive answer, but moments like these are where we can provide one of our most valuable services: a convener of dialog about how history impacts the present. This entire conversation ultimately comes down to the issue of relevance. And relevant history is inclusive history. This is something Dina Bailey discusses in the inaugural entry of a new quarterly History News column, “The Whole is Greater.” We are grateful to Dina for being our first contributor to this feature.

Bob Beatty

1 History Relevance Campaign, “The Value of History: Seven Ways it is Essential,” www.historyrelevance.com/value-statement.
It’s been interesting and instructive to see the ongoing debate over Confederate iconography unfold from the vantage point of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, one of the nation’s premier centers of Civil War memory. Many of the conversations taking place in town are similar to ones happening around the country, but a few elements have been noteworthy. In Gettysburg, flag debates have by and large revolved around First Amendment rights, honoring ancestors and their cause, and the demands of heritage tourism, and not around civic identity or the appropriateness of the flag’s use as a symbol of the state. But interestingly enough, monuments, which we have in abundance in Gettysburg,
The Virginia Memorial dominates the landscape along Seminary Ridge, shaping visitors’ perceptions of the assault popularly known as Pickett’s Charge.

A mid-twentieth century postcard features Gettysburg statues of Union Generals John Buford and John Reynolds.

have only infrequently factored into the discussion. The main reason for this is because the vast majority of our Confederate monuments aren’t located in traditional civic spaces like courthouse lawns or town squares. They’re on the battlefield, on land preserved for its historical and commemorative significance. I’ve had my ear to the ground on this, and as far I know, there have been no significant calls for removal of any battlefield monuments, or even demands for broad-scale contextualization, new signage, or reinterpretation. But that doesn’t mean that we should do nothing.

As we all know, “ownership” of historical symbols such as monuments is a complicated topic. They have many stakeholders—ranging from the descendants of the people who erected them to the people who walk past them every day. A monument that fills some with a sense of pride and belonging can stir in others feelings of anger, hurt, and humiliation. As historians, we know monuments are powerful teaching tools. When read not as timeless symbols but as artifacts of the period in which they were dedicated, they have much to tell us about the complex and sometimes contradictory motivations of previous generations. Confederate monuments help us understand the scope and power of the Lost Cause interpretation of the war, and the myriad ways that Confederate heritage has been mobilized over generations to institutionalize and defend white supremacy.

But does educational worth trump all of the arguments for removal? Does the fact that a monument can help us understand something important about our history mean that members of a present-day local community surrounding it should be required to live with it indefinitely—even if they interpret it as a symbol of oppression or a rallying point for racism? As professional historians, is it enough to just encourage dialogue, reinterpretation, and additions to the memorial landscape? And when space and funds are at a premium, shouldn’t removal be on the table as well?

It seems to me that each of the conversations playing out in local communities across the nation right now is different enough that a whole range of responses can and may be appropriate. It also seems clear that so long as the principles of democracy and the ideals of the common good are
Association was already acquiring land. Monumentation followed quickly on the heels of land acquisition. By 1887, there were more than ninety monuments on the field. Only two were Confederate in origin. Confederate monuments didn’t begin to proliferate at Gettysburg until the first half of the twentieth century, and when they did, they generally took the form of state monuments commemorating all the troops from that state that fought in the battle. Of the eleven southern state monuments on the battlefield today, four were erected during the Civil War centennial, and two, Florida and South Carolina, were dedicated during the centennial anniversary commemoration of the battle.¹

Because my research interests lie in the modern civil rights era, these centennial monuments have always gripped my attention. The two dedicated during the battle anniversary offer a uniquely effective platform for exploring, in a site-specific way, historical events that otherwise have little concrete presence on the battlefield: the connections between Civil War memory, the Cold War, and the Civil Rights Movement.

The dedication of the monument to South Carolina troops who fought at Gettysburg took a defiantly anti-federal tone, which is unsurprising given its inscription: “That Men of Honor Might Forever Know the Responsibilities of Freedom, Dedicated South Carolinians Stood and Were Counted for Their Heritage and Convictions. Abiding Faith in the Sacredness of States Rights Provided Their Creed Here. Many Earned Eternal Glory.” This inscription was a source of friction between the National Park Service and the group that financed it, as it was very clearly a violation of Gettysburg National Military Park’s “no praise, no blame” policy on monument inscriptions. However, the extent to which the inscription contains highly charged, highly political language doesn’t register with most visitors today because people associate states’ rights so directly with the language of 1863. What gets missed is that states’ rights also had a very specific meaning in 1963, and the two dedication

East Cavalry Field, Confederate Cavalry Avenue, Gettysburg National Military Park.

upheld, local communities and the stakeholders who interact with particular monuments on a daily basis are best situated to make the final decisions. Given the context of their placement, I don’t envision that Gettysburg’s Confederate monuments will ever be removed. They are part and parcel of both the battlefield’s historic and its commemorative landscape. But I do hope that we can find new ways to use them as springboards for conversation about the political (and personal) uses of history.

Preservation of the Gettysburg battlefield began almost immediately after General Robert E. Lee’s retreat. Within a year of the battle, the Gettysburg Battlefield Memorial

President John F. Kennedy and his family visited the Gettysburg battlefield in 1963, three weeks after he announced his plans to send a civil rights bill to Congress.
speakers, the aforementioned Alabama governor George Wallace and Congressman John May, seized every opportunity to drive that point home. With its provisions forbidding states, municipalities, and business owners to engage in racial discrimination, the civil rights bill was a direct challenge to conservative concepts of states’ rights. So when John May stood at this monument in the summer of 1963 and linked the South’s right to resist “tyranny from Washington” to the Confederate cause and the Constitution, he was not only forcefully criticizing the bill but directly challenging Kennedy’s authority to propose it and Congress’s authority to pass it.

Many white South Carolinians shared May’s views. In the weeks leading up to the dedication ceremony, a large anti-integration march at the South Carolina statehouse occurred. The courts had ruled to close all state parks in response to a federal court order to integrate them, and a black student who had successfully sued for admission to the University of South Carolina had his house fire-bombed. In inviting Wallace, the leading symbol of southern white resistance, to dedicate this monument, the group spearheading the effort made it clear that they saw a direct connection between the Confederate cause and southern resistance to the Civil Rights Movement.

In many ways, the South Carolina monument is more a testimony to the way a group of twentieth-century segregationists wanted the world to remember their own defense of states’ rights than a tribute to the soldiers who fought at Gettysburg. But the dedication ceremony reminds us that this interpretation of states’ rights wasn’t just limited to the South. George Wallace was a celebrity during the battle anniversary. Crowds mobbed him in the lobby of the Gettysburg Hotel and trailed him around the battlefield begging him to sign their anniversary programs. Even as early as 1963, Wallace had political ambitions outside of Alabama, and he saw his trip to Gettysburg as an opportunity to begin cultivating a national political following. Standing next to this monument, Wallace argued that “South Carolina and Alabama stand for constitutional government. Millions throughout the nation look to the South to lead in the fight to restore constitutional rights and the rights of states and individuals.”

The crowd, many of whom were not southerners, gave him a standing ovation, foreshadowing his later success on the presidential campaign trail with similar language—race-neutral on the surface, but carefully coded. The popular response to Wallace’s role in the Gettysburg commemoration challenges some of the easy North-South divisions we tend to fall into when we talk about segregation and civil rights activity. The causes Wallace fought for, limited government, states’ rights, white supremacy, and a strict interpretation of the Constitution, had national appeal in the 1960s.

But Wallace and May did not have a monopoly on how memory of the Confederate soldiers who fought at Gettysburg would be deployed during the anniversary. The group that gathered to dedicate a monument to troops from Florida the day after the South Carolina dedication interpreted the legacy of the battle quite differently. The inscription on this monument echoed the themes of courage and devotion to ideals (left undefined) that featured so prominently in the Palmetto State’s monument, and similarly violated the “no praise, no blame” policy. The Florida monument added a Cold War twist, proclaiming: “They Fought With Courage and Devotion for the Ideals In Which They Believed, By Their Noble Example of Bravery and Endurance They Enable Us to Meet With Confidence any Sacrifice Which Confronts Us As Americans.”
By 1963, it had become clear to millions of Americans that the embarrassing record of the United States regarding race relations damaged the nation’s image abroad and was becoming a liability in the battle between democracy and Communism. At the height of Cold War competition between the U.S. and the Soviet Union for the loyalty of non-aligned nations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, Soviet media channels beamed stories of voter disfranchisement and footage of beaten protesters and screaming white mobs to every corner of the world. This was a way of saying, “Don’t trust the Americans—democracy is hollow when it comes to protecting the rights of racial minorities.” The stakes were indeed high. Racial discrimination was alienating potential American allies in critical regions of the world, and if the trend continued, the consequences for the balance of power between the west and the Soviet bloc could be serious.8

The group that sponsored the placing of this monument shared these concerns about America’s image abroad with good reason. They were Floridians, residents of a state that only one year earlier had a front-row seat to the Cuban Missile Crisis. It was also a major center of the aerospace industry, an industry that was deeply rooted in Cold War politics. Both ordinary Floridians and the people who represented them in Congress were particularly sensitive to international politics and national security concerns. They did not want more missiles in Cuba, and they did want to do everything they could to help ensure that the U.S. would have the allies it needed to guard against Soviet expansion.

In his speech at the monument’s dedication, Florida Congressman Sam Gibbons drew upon the experiences of Florida troops at Gettysburg to argue for a vision of civil rights reform profoundly shaped by foreign policy imperatives. Gibbons called on his countrymen not to squander the sacrifice made by their ancestors at Gettysburg. “The effects of the battle that we mark now with this ceremony were largely confined to this country,” he argued, “but such is not the case today; for now America’s racial conflicts have immediate worldwide significance. We cannot hope to win men’s minds in the battle with communism if America becomes a land in which freedom, equality, and opportunity are reserved only for the white man.”9

Few NPS interpretive programs take place on this part of the Gettysburg battlefield, so visitors to this area rarely encounter these two monuments in the company of a ranger or guide. Most visitors who interact with them do so as part of the battlefield self-guided auto tour, which includes many stops along the Confederate lines on Seminary Ridge. Very little of the broader historical context is immediately obvious to anyone disembarking from a car to examine the monuments located along the road. Despite all they have to say about midcentury politics and the malleability of historical narratives, without contextual information it’s almost impossible to read beyond the surface.

What can we, as history professionals, do to rectify this? Whenever possible, we can interrogate these spaces with visitors and students, providing the primary sources and interpretive framework necessary to contextualize these monuments. When in the area, many rangers and guides do their best to provide background context. We can also encourage contextual additions to the landscape. This coming fall, a few Gettysburg College students and I will be partnering with Gettysburg National Military Park to develop content for a contextual wayside for the South Carolina monument. We’re very excited about this opportunity to interpret the civil rights subtext of the monument and bring attention to the way the monument draws on the Civil War past to make a statement in and about the present.

We could also flesh out the landscape in non-physical ways—perhaps through developing a Behind the Monuments app for the auto tour or a series of podcasts accessible from the tour loop. Another possibility (potentially more contentious than the others) could be to develop counter-monument installations challenging the perceived authority of the centennial monuments, such as an evening slideshow of images of civil rights protests in South Carolina projected across the backdrop of the monument, or an installation of the outlines of nuclear missiles in the space in front of the Florida monument. I freely admit that I’ve yet to meet anyone who wants to partner with me on the last idea, and I don’t underestimate how very difficult something like that would be to pull off. But my point is that although our contextualization efforts are beginning with an interpretive wayside, other approaches would also—at least theoretically—be possible.11

On a national scale, many of the conversations surrounding the future of Confederate monuments keep circling around to the question of whether removing some of these pieces from their current places on the landscape is tantamount to erasing history. Spatial context is certainly very important, and from a historical point of view, I believe something important does get lost in the transfer of a monument from its place in the public sphere to a museum setting. But are monuments and memorials “history” per se, or are they specific interpretations of history that were at a certain time in the past preferred and honored enough to be etched into the landscape? Would removing them from public display really erase history itself?

Christopher Phelps argued several months ago in the Chronicle of Higher Education that changes to the memorial landscape should be seen as a natural part of the constant process of historical reinterpretation and reevaluation. Phelps wrote, “Our understanding of history changes over time, often as dramatically as that history itself. To recontext, to recast, is the essence of historical practice. It follows that altering how we present the past through commemorative symbols is not ahistorical. It is akin to what historians do.” He concluded, “To remove [symbols of overt white supremacy] does not vitiate history; on the contrary, it
represents a more thorough coming to terms with the past and its legacies, a refusal to forget.”

While the analogy isn’t perfect, the concept of the public sphere as a form of public historiography, a landscape that should be constantly subject to the same kind of revision and reinterpretation that characterizes historical writing (within reason, given the limitations of cost, labor, and public resources) offers a way forward out of circular conversations about erasing history.

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4 Civil Rights Timeline, “Our Story Matters: Columbia SC 63.”


6 Cook, 908-99.

7 Kittridge A. Wing, Superintendent, Gettysburg National Military Park, Memo to Regional Director, Northeast Region, NPS, June 10, 1963, Vertical Files Collection, Drawer 17, Folder 43, Gettysburg National Military Park Library.


10 For a full definition of counter-monuments, see James Young, “Memory and Counter-Memory: The End of the Monument in Germany,” Harvard Design Magazine, No. 9 (Fall 1999): 3.