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THE TENNESSEE MONUMENT TO THE WOMEN OF THE CONFEDERACY: A STUDY IN CONFLICTING IDEAS OF PUBLIC COMMEMORATION AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY, 1895-1926

Suzanne Woolley Smith Middle Tennessee State University

In the southwest corner of Legislative Plaza, overlooking the Tennessee Vietnam Memorial Wall and Sculpture, downtown Nashville, there is a bronze sculpture with three forms -- a large female figure holding smaller male and female figures in her lap. This enigmatic monument is the Tennessee Monument to the Women of the Confederacy and its simple plaque reads:

Erected by the State of Tennessee to commemorate the heroic action of the women of Tennessee during the War Between the States. Dedicated October 10, 1926, Belle Kinney Sculptor. Plaque placed by the Tennessee Historical Commission.

Behind this public attempt to honor the role of the women of the South in the Civil War lies a surprising series of controversies and ironies. A look at this debate will illustrate the processes and issues involved in the interactions between collective memory and public commemoration. What is being commemorated, how something is best remembered and whose version of collective memory will be used are all problematic issues. Any memorial is more a reflection of the group and era in which it is constructed than it is of the history it commemorates.

The collective memory of a group is their history as they remember and interpret it. What becomes crucial is not the reality of history, but the perception of reality by the group. Historian David Thelen states, "People depend on others to help them decide which experiences to forget and which to remember and what interpretation to place on that experience. People develop a shared identity by identifying, exploring, and agreeing on memories."

Collective Memory is more than an aggregate of shared recollections in that it is decidedly selective. Identifying the experiences that a group chooses to forget will reveal as much about that group as identifying what it remembers. A group's collective memory does not reproduce history but, rather, reconstructs it. Thelen states, "In each construction of a memory, people reshape, omit, destroy, combine and reorganize details from the past in an active and subjective way. They mix pieces from the present with elements of the past."

In other words, their collective memory interprets the past in such a way that the needs of the present are fulfilled.

After the Civil War, Southerners who were faced with total disruption of their economic, political, and social system coped by creating their own interpretation of the war and those who fought it. This was, of course, the Lost Cause of the Confederacy. In their memories, many Southerners looked back to the years before the war as a golden agrarian period peopled by aristocratic planter families and their contented slaves. The war had been fought valiantly to preserve this way of life which was culturally and spiritually superior to that of the industrializing

North. The ideologies which had caused such bitter debate about slavery and secession faded from both nation and southern consciousness as the nation celebrated reunion.

Reconciliation was further enhanced as the collective memory of the South downplayed the outcome of the war and celebrated the bravery and nobility of those who had fought in it. Thus, they could become heroes in a land which celebrated victory. The cost of the war in human life was enormous. It is estimated that as many as a million men had served in the Confederate aries, of whom 250,000 died and another 150,000 became disabled. Southern women had played a significant role in the war effort as they nursed the troops, clothed the soldiers, and formed soldiers' aid societies, at the same time that they ran farms and businesses. After the war, the southern woman was praised not only for her grace and gentility, but also for her strength and determination. She, too, was a survivor.

Confederate memorial associations were formed immediately after the war to aid needy veterans and their widows, to celebrate the heroism of local military units, and to erect public monuments to the valiant fighters of the South. 5 Almost seventy percent of the public monuments were placed in cemeteries immediately after the war, reflecting the need to signify the sense of loss felt by the survivors. 6 But as the turn of the century approached, the glorification of the Lost Cause, coupled with efforts to impart this collective memory to a younger generation, led to the erection of monuments in courthouse squares and public parks.

The role of southern women in shaping the collective memory of the Confederacy had undergone significant change by the turn of the century. Woman had moved from being the chief mourners to being the chief custodians of the Memory of the Lost Cause under the auspices of the United Daughters of the Confederacy. Caroline Meriwether Goodlett of Nashville and Anna Davenport Raines of Savannah are credited with being the founders of the U.D.C. in 1894. It had evolved from the local memorial associations and veterans' auxiliaries. As the veterans died (estimates are that survival rates of veterans in 1890-1910 were about forty-four percent), it was their daughters who carried on the fight to preserve the Memory of the Lost Cause. The U.D.C. was an organization which gave women of the middle and upper class a domestic arena. Members raised money for monuments, cared for needy veterans, tended cemeteries and promoted textbooks which would tell the war from the southern viewpoint. The rapid growth of the U.D.C. was testament to its popularity. By 1900 there were 17,000 members in 112 chapters. Ten years later, there were 44,000 members in 1014 chapters. 10 The United Confederate Veterans, the Sons of the Confederate Veterans, and the United Daughters of the Confederacy shared the publication of the Confederate Veteran magazine. During their 1895 convention, the United Veterans of the Confederacy proposed building a series of monuments to Confederate women, setting off a surprising round of controversy which exploded in the pages of the Confederate Veteran. General Irwin C. Walker of Charleston, South Carolina, led the fight to have a monument erected in every state of the Old Confederacy. 11

The ensuing debate revealed divisions between the U.C.V. and the U.D.C. and within the U.D.C. itself. Since 1895, letters and opinions had been sent to the *Confederate Veteran* which suggested that the money would be better spent on practical assistance to living women. Several correspondents suggested a university for women. 12 Others supported scholarships for southern women. For instance, Sada Foute Richmond of Memphis wrote in 1907 to support the establishment of an endowed scholarship in each southern state to be called "The Southern Mothers Scholarship" for "Southern girls of true Southern parentage and ancestry." She stated, "This would prove Southern chivalry has still the lead in civilization." Another writer suggested a building for southern female students in New York to provide a "Dixie Home" in that northern city. 14

Women were proud of the roles that they and their mothers had played during the war, but many were also mindful of the continuing changes that the war had wrought in their lives. Many women were forced to become self-supporting after the war. The 1870 Census records many more women than men in the South, ranging from 1,000 more women than men in Mississippi to over 34,000 more women than men in North Carolina. Many women entered teaching and literary occupations out of necessity as well as personal choice. And women were becoming increasingly involved in progressive activities through missionary societies and clubs.

This disagreement over the most appropriate way to honor the memory of the sacrifices that women had made during the war illustrates conflicting versions of collective memory. As the veterans sought to pay tribute to the ladies, they remembered how southern women had endured hardships and had demonstrated compassion and strength during the war. But many women in the South remembered not only their past activism, but that it had been continued into the present.



Fig. 1. The original design, later rejected by the U.C.V.

Source: Confederate Veteran

The U.C.V. rejected proposals for the university or scholarships as too expensive, and an even more lively debate ensued over the design for the monument. The original design chosen by the Nashville U.C.V. in 1909 featured a female figure in a Greek robe holding aloft an upraised sword in one hand and a flag in the other. The figure stood on a small platform inscribed with the words, "Uphold Our States' Rights." (See Fig. 1) Letters to the *Confederate Veteran* protested this war-like representation. One critic, Dr. H.M. Hamill, wrote in 1909 object that the statue

had not a line of womanly grace or modesty or tenderness, not a hunt of the dear old home keeper and home builder of the southland, not a reminder of the sweet and gentle minister of mercy and comfort who bent over the hospital cot and soothed the pain of the wounded soldier and left in his heart of gratitude forever the true picture of that noblest of all memories of the Confederacy, the patient, self-sacrificing, unwearied helper and comforter of the boys in gray. 17



Fig. 2. Belle Kinney's design, as erected in Nashville Author's photo

In the face of such stinging opposition, the original design was rejected at the 1909 reunion of the United Confederate Veterans. A contest was begun to find a new design. The U.C.V. selected a model for a bronze statue executed by a young sculptor from Nashville, Belle Kinney, who had been studying at the Chicago Institute of Art. (See Fig. 2) Her design was explained as follows:

It represents Fame supporting the wounded and exhausted Confederate soldier with her left arm while with her right hand she is placing a wreath upon the head of the Southern Woman, whose every nerve is vibrating with love and sympathy for the soldier and his cause, as expressed by the palm she is trying to place upon his breast, thoroughly unconscious that as her reward a crown is being placed upon her own head. 18

Once again, the difference in these design illustrates competing versions of collective memory. Once could postulate that the veterans who chose the original design were still fighting the war. The military posture of the female figure symbolically holding a sword and flag indicates that they perceived the women as their cohorts in battle. This reflects combat memories of veterans who remembered the glory days of on the battlefield. Those who favored the Kinney design remembered the roles of women not in the fight, but in support of the fighters. It could also be said to reflect the postwar roles that women continued to fill in their support activities and as keepers of the cultural traditions.

In 1915, the Tennessee legislature appropriated the money to erect the monument. Placed in a sunken garden on the grounds of the Tennessee War Memorial, the bronze sculpture was finally dedicated in a grand ceremony on October 10, 1926. Because of a steady downpour, the ceremony, attended by about 800 people, was held inside the War Memorial Auditorium. Participants included the United Confederate Veterans, Sons of Confederate Veterans, Daughters of the Confederacy, and Governor Austin Peay. The festivities included several speeches and a volley in salute from the muskets of six aged veterans.

19 Another monument with the same design is on the grounds of the state capitol in Mississippi.

In some way, the disagreements over the best way to commemorate the contributions of southern women to the Civil War has parallels to the controversy which raged when the Vietnam Memorial was proposed for Washington, D.C. Again, the questions to be answered were: How are memories best commemorated? Is a monument the best way to do this? We have seen that many southern women preferred a "living memorial" to a monument. In the Vietnam Memorial controversy, the dispute was not over whether to build a monument, but over what kind of monument should be erected. This leads to the other fundamental question: Just whose memories are being publicly commemorated? In the case of the monument to the Women of the Confederacy, there were differences between the memories of the veterans and the women. In the Vietnam Memorial there was intense competition between those who wanted to commemorate the patriotic aspects of the war and those who wanted to emphasize the sense of loss engendered by the conflict. This competition revealed different "collective memories" of the war. In neither of these monument are the military and political issues of the war being remembered.

Ironically, the sunken garden in which the Tennessee Monument to the Women of the Confederacy once sat has since been changed into the Tennessee Vietnam Veterans Memorial Plaza. Belle Kinney's statue presently overlooks this tribute to a later war which spawned as much conflicting ideology as did the War Between the States. Unfortunately in this setting, the Confederate Monument has lost most of its meaning. It is now totally disconnected from its surroundings. (See Fig. 3) The

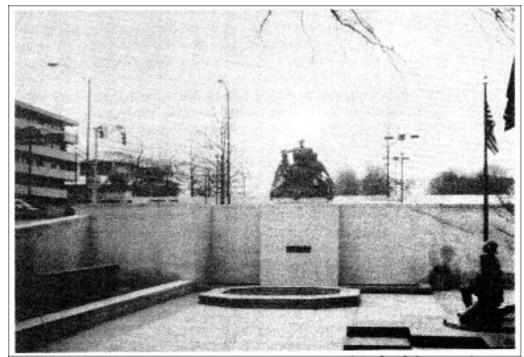


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Historian Michael Frisch points out that in English the noun "history" has no corresponding verb. In contrast, the noun "memory" presumes the active verb "to remember." There is a leap across time from the "then of happening" to the "now of recall." 20 Perhaps this is the problem with the setting for the monument. It was originally conceived by and for those who actively remembered the war, but it has ceased to be a vehicle for remembering and has become a static piece of history. Additional

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21 James Mayo, War Memorials as Political Landscape (New York Praeger, 1988), 58-59.

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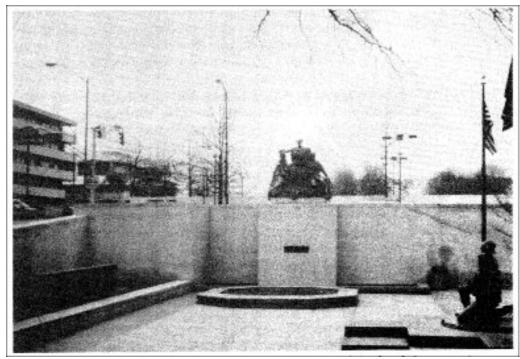


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