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“Epic Poems in Bronze”: Confederate Memorialization and the Old South’s Reckoning with Modernity in the Early Twentieth Century

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**Abstract**

Scholars of the American South generally end their studies of Confederate memorialization just before World War I. Because of a decline in the number of physical monuments and memorials to the Confederacy dedicated in the years immediately following the war, scholars appear to regard the interwar era as a period separate from the Lost Cause movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, to fully understand the complexity of developing Southern identities in the modern age, it is essential to expand traditional definitions of Confederate memorialization and the time period in which it is studied. This paper explores different mediums of Lost Cause memorialization, including art, literature, and architecture, in Charleston, South Carolina order to assess how nostalgic public memory reflected political trends and cultural development as the city moved into the modern age. In response to the needs and moods of Southern society after the end of the Civil War, Lost Cause memorialization in Charleston took three forms: mourning memorialization, vindication memorialization, and commercialized memorialization. Through a study of these three periods, this paper connects the development of historic preservation and the early tourism industry of the interwar period with earlier examples of physical memorialization in order to assess how Confederate memory transformed in response to a forced modernization in Charleston. Confederate memorialization changed forms just as the city itself did; however, its intent to perpetuate carefully orchestrated mythology venerating a strict social and racial hierarchy never wavered.
Introduction

In 1899, the United Confederate Veterans (UCV) held their annual reunion in Charleston, South Carolina. Charleston, a city built on slave labor as well as the birthplace of the Confederacy, seemed like a natural choice for a meeting location. In Charleston, “local Lost Causers had spent the better part of three decades touting the righteousness of the Confederacy and all for which it stood”.1 Unfortunately for the UCV, the city had been decimated after the conclusion of the Civil War, and had been struggling to rebuild ever since. However, its citizens rallied behind the old banner to create a welcoming environment for the former soldiers of the Cause. The city built an 8,000 seat event space in anticipation of the meeting. When the city’s hotels filled up, citizens loyal to the Cause opened up their homes to UCV members.2 In total, the event was a success. In an ironic twist, however, the city of Charleston had both endorsed postwar modernity and reinforced a belief in the righteousness of the past. The city had grown and changed to support the convention, but their overwhelming endorsement of the UCV demonstrated their obsession with honoring the Lost Cause and maintaining the Antebellum status quo. The city’s preparations for the convention would serve to highlight the value Charleston placed on memorializing the Lost Cause, even well into the twentieth century, while simultaneously foreshadowing the city’s later emphasis on a commercialized Confederate memory.

2 Kytle and Roberts, *Denmark Vesey’s Garden*, 126.
Confederate memorialization in Charleston is not, and never has been static. Rather, it changed over time to reflect shifting societal concerns and needs as the South moved forward into modernity. Nevertheless, it always was intended to venerate a fictitious portrait of past valor and imagined successes in order to perpetuate pre-war social hierarchies.\(^3\) In response to the needs and moods of Southern society after the end of the Civil War, Confederate memorialization in Charleston took three forms: mourning memorialization, vindication memorialization, and commercialized memorialization. Confederate memorialization changed forms as the city moved towards modernization; however, its intent to perpetuate carefully orchestrated mythology venerating a strict social and racial hierarchy never did.

Extensive scholarship has focused on the Civil War and Reconstruction, but many times the period after Reconstruction in the South has been overlooked. Examination of Confederate memorialization after Reconstruction tends to focus mainly on the period between 1876 and 1918, when the US entered WWI. Scholars see the drop in physical memorialization as the end of the era of the Lost Cause, and cease to examine Confederate memorialization between 1918 and 1941 in the same way that they do for the pre-war period. This research, focusing on the interwar period, is an attempt to fill this gap in the literature by expanding the definition of Confederate memorialization.

The vast majority of research on Confederate memorialization in the South focuses exclusively on physical monuments.\(^4\) Karen Cox’s study of the specific impact of the United Daughters of the Confederacy on Confederate memory steps out of this mold by focusing on the work of a single

\(^3\) For more information on Southern conceptions of the Lost Cause, see Connelly, Thomas L., and Barbara L. Bellows. *God and General Longstreet: The Lost Cause and the Southern Mind*. Baton Rouge: The University of Louisiana Press, 1982.

group, rather than analyzing specific monuments or trends of monumentalization, and provides an example of how to study non-physical memorialization. Additionally, Thomas J. Brown’s study of Confederate memory in South Carolina also branches out slightly by including a case study of the H.L. Hunley Submarine and the Battle Flag of the Army of Northern Virginia, but his focus is still mainly on material expressions of Confederate memory. This study takes a different approach and seeks to understand how, as the South modernized during the period between 1880 and 1940, Confederate memorialization changed forms while still advocating for Lost Cause ideology and for a return to the patriarchal Antebellum status quo. It argues that Confederate memorialization is not exclusively physical, but that non-physical acts of remembrance can also serve to memorialize the Lost Cause in a similar way. Thus, it adds to the literature by providing a deeper understanding of the nature of memorialization and collective memory in the South.

This study focuses on Charleston, South Carolina. Despite Charleston’s significance to the overall story of the Civil War, not a lot of scholarship on Confederate memorialization has focused on Charleston. When compared to Monument Avenue in Richmond or the large monuments of Confederate generals formerly in New Orleans, Charleston appears lack a large footprint expression of Confederate memory. Scholars see the comparative lack of massive physical monuments and memorials as an indication that Charleston accepted the postwar social changes. Ethan J. Kytle and Blain Roberts’ influential new book about the impact of slavery on Charleston after emancipation is one exception, however, even their extensive study pays little attention to memorialization in Charleston. This study fills the gap in the literature by making the connection between the Historic Preservation

7 Kytle and Roberts. Denmark Vessey’s Garden.
Movement of the interwar period and earlier examples of physical memorialization in order to assess how Confederate memory transformed in response to modernization in Charleston.

The First Wave of Memorialization

Memorialization in Charleston began in Magnolia Cemetery soon after the Civil War ended, and reached its peak in the late 19th century. Individual families or groups of families erected small memorials, usually in the form of a decorated grave marker. This practice began during the war on a small scale, and only expanded in scope during Reconstruction. It was a way for Confederate families to remember the Cause their loved ones fought for, both in a reflection collective societal grief and also in a reaction against military rule imposed on the South.

The Charleston Light Dragoons memorial, erected in 1886, follows this pattern of simple memorialization, just on a larger scale. The Light Dragoons memorial takes the form of an obelisk about ten feet high, carved on each side with small inscriptions. Its main inscription is taken from Thomas Babbington Macaulay’s “The Lays of Ancient Rome”, which reads “For how can man die better, than facing fearful odds, for the ashes of his fathers and temples of his gods”. The inscription represents the desire to link the Confederate cause to greater historical struggles. According to Macaulay’s poem, Publius Horatius uttered the lines to inspire his two comrades as they stood ready to defend the Roman Pons Sublicus against the oncoming Etruscan army. For champions of the Lost Cause, Horatius’ struggle is easily equated to the struggle of the Confederate army. They saw Confederates as noble warriors who were also willing to sacrifice everything to defend the home, even

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9 Image B
10 Image C
when facing impossible odds. The monument’s simple outward appearance and carefully chosen inscription are intended to convey tasteful appreciation for the soldiers’ sacrifice, while still respecting mourning tradition. As the dedicatory prayer declared, it was a “testimonial of our deathless affection for that heroic, melancholy past which can never be forgotten.”

The dedication of the monuments also allowed for a ritualized ceremonies of commemoration where communities could come together to grieve and to resolutely embrace the Cause of the Confederacy. Unveilings were grand ordeals, even in the smallest towns. They were a chance to re-affirm Confederate patriotism through songs, parades, and orations. Most times, children were the ones to physically unveil the statues by pulling down the tarps covering them. This was symbolic; it physically connected the next generation to the struggles and the Cause of their parents’ generation. The United Daughters of the Confederacy in particular focused heavily on incorporating children into their Lost Cause propaganda, and ritual unveilings were an excellent example of this. The dedications often took place on memorial days, in an effort add to the significance of the holidays in public memory and to create tradition that might be passed on to future generations.

The dedication of the Light Dragoons memorial, for example, took place on South Carolina’s Confederate Memorial Day, May 10, 1886. The dedication began with a solemn prayer, dedicated to the “memory of gallant comrades, who, amidst the thunder of battle, or in the suffering hospital, gave up their lives in patriotic maintenance of principle.” The religious opening served to further

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12 In a deeply ironic twist, the Dragoons memorial now faces the grave of Judge Julius Waties Waring, the federal judge who oversaw *Briggs v. Elliot* in 1951. That case formed the legal bedrock for *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954.
13 Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters*, 119.
14 Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters*, 121.
15 The May 10 date honors the death of Confederate General Thomas J. Jackson, who was killed at Chancellorsville in 1863.
venerate the Cause and make it an object of spiritual devotion. Interestingly, the devotion prayed for peace and reconciliation, a mission that would fade from dedication rhetoric later in the nineteenth and early twentieth century as the mission of monumentalization shifted from mourning to vindication. In the Charleston Light Dragoons dedication, orations about the bravery and sacrifice of the soldiers follow the opening remarks. Several former officers (including the state favorite General Wade Hampton III) describe in great detail the victories and defeats of the regiment. The ritual mirrors the ancient Greek traditions of lengthy orations upon the deaths of soldiers, which again allows the former Confederates to connect their cause to far more ancient endeavors, thus giving it further legitimacy.

The *Charleston Daily News and Courier* published an editorial on the Charleston Light Dragoons dedication reflecting on the messages that emerged from the ceremony. The editor again proclaims the “valorous endurance of the knightly band of Carolinians”, but changes the message slightly by declaring that “the sons of those who fought for the South in the days that are gone will be the stay and strength of the American Republic.” He focuses on the next generation as the heirs to their fathers’ bravery and dedication to the Confederate Cause. His tone appears to be conciliatory, yet he still emphasizes the superiority of the Southerners over other American soldiers. He makes it very clear in his concluding paragraph that while Southerners might turn their singular talents to the United States in the spirit of reconciliation, “the one thing, the only thing, they cannot descend to… is to profess a contrition which could not be sincere, or to admit, or feel, that they are… below those who fought or talked on the other side in the cruel war”. It is as if the editor is advocating that the

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sons of Confederates keep their heads high and bide their time until they can demonstrate their “knightly” authority once again.

The Second Wave: Vindication of Artificial Memory Through Monuments

The gradual political construction of the Solid South in the late nineteenth century would prove to be the moment of recaptured Southern authority that the Charleston editor was waiting for. The resumption of Democratic control over state legislatures gave Lost Cause enthusiasts the legitimacy and authority they needed to erect public monuments. Beginning after about 1890, and especially after the founding of the UDC in 1894, Lost Cause believers began to design monuments intended to create new narratives about the history and principles of the Confederacy rather than to mourn the Confederacy that existed. These new monuments, especially those erected by the UDC, were intended to vindicate the Cause. They were unapologetically triumphant, and were almost always placed in prominent public locations. In Charleston, the Washington Light Infantry monument in Washington Park is an excellent example of early triumphal monuments. Dedicated to a South Carolina regiment, just like the memorial in Magnolia Cemetery, the monument even has a similar style. However, its placement, size, and inscription indicate that the intention behind it was very different.

Within the city of Charleston, Washington Park is about the closest thing to a town square that one can find. It sits behind the City Hall and by the intersection of two main streets. Placing the Confederate obelisk in this location brought it into conversation with local politics; its placement so close to the center of government gave the impression the city’s endorsement. In fact, the Henry Timrod memorial, the P.G.T. Beauregard Shrine, the Washington Light Infantry monument, and a plaque

\[20\] Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters*, 135.
\[21\] Images H, I, J, K
with a prayer to the Confederate soldier (erected in 1968) are all placed in the 50 square yard park. The location’s centrality to the business of the city made it the perfect spot to broadcast Charleston’s defiant worship of the Cause. Anyone visiting City Hall, worshiping at St. Michael’s Church, or conducting business at the Courthouse would be forced to look on the monument and remember the soldiers and the slaveholders’ republic they fought for.

Charlestonians may have wished to firmly connect themselves to their own past, but they were forced to face modernity very quickly with the onset of the First World War. More than 1,900 South Carolinians were killed over the course of the war, including 88 from Charleston itself. In order to get Southerners to serve, the UDC appealed to their Confederate heritage, calling for “Dixie Volunteers”. Their emphasis on the valor and wartime contributions of Southerners aided their mission of vindication of the Confederate Cause. Through military service in WWI, Southerners were truly Americans again without having to compromise their Confederate ideology. Southern patriotism was by extension American patriotism when the whole nation was at war. However, the sectional unification garnered by the war ensured that the old manner of memorialization in which the Northern states were portrayed as the definitive aggressor was no longer en vogue. In the new modern age, Confederate apologists could no longer safely portray the Cause as specifically a fight to protect the rights of the South against the aggression of the North. For it to survive, the Confederate Cause had to represent universally sympathetic ideas of patriotism and military strength.

Erected in 1932, the “Confederate Defenders of Charleston” monument on the southernmost point of the Charleston B

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attery embodies this almost incongruous combination of sectional reconciliation and Confederate memorialization. The monument was unveiled by the Fort Sumter Memorial Commission in 1932, seventy-one years after the Civil War began. Andrew Buist Murray, the adopted son of a wealthy rice planter, made a bequest of $100,000 (almost $2 million in today's money) to the Memorial Commission to fund the statue’s creation. The reputable and popular sculptor Hermon A. MacNeil was hired to design and build the monument, which consists of a round concrete column about twelve feet in height topped with a bronze statue grouping of an archetypal female representation of Charleston and a nude youth armed for battle.

The inscription, wound around the entire base, reads, “count them happy who for their faith and their courage enjoyed a great fight”. These words tie the monument to both the Confederate Cause and also to more modern post-war themes of sectional unity. The inscription makes no mention of common Lost Cause quotations like the inscriptions of the Timrod monument. Rather it is a broadly generalized statement honoring the valor of the soldiers; the statue itself succeeds in conveying the necessary Lost Cause themes without the need for dramatic inscriptions.

Notably, the City of Charleston donated the land on which the monument was built and contributed funds to its construction. Lending their name and support to the Confederate Defenders Monument was a strategic choice. Just as with the placement of the Washington Square monuments, the city’s endorsement of the monument gave it further legitimacy. In turn, the style and composition of

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24 Image A
25 Brown, Civil War Canon, 175.
26 Brown, Civil War Canon, 174.
the monument gave legitimacy to Charleston’s mission to promote its own culture. The statue’s classical inspirations were intended as a sign of the city’s growing culture and sophistication, and its subject reminded visitors and locals alike of Charleston’s reputation as the birthplace of the Confederacy.

The specific focus of the monument, Fort Sumter, also represented the city’s rapidly developing emphasis on the preservation and promotion of historic sites, especially Civil War sites. In the 1930s the state of South Carolina was only beginning to cultivate its tourism industry, but the flashy new monument on the Battery served to highlight to visitors the city’s renewed focus on its past.

In his keynote speech at the monument’s dedication, Charleston mayor Burnet R. Maybank also attempted to modernize and Americanize the older ideas projected by the Defenders Monument. He declared that “those who fought for the Confederacy fought for the principles of true Americanism, namely the right to preserve their state’s rights and personal liberties… and to throw off the shackles of fanatical oppression.”28 The “true Americanism” that Maybank alludes to had been articulated on the global stage not fifteen years earlier when the United States entered the First World War in order to make the world safe for democracy; the War was recent memory for all present at the dedication.

In this manner, Maybank strove to fundamentally link the First World War’s defense of democracy to the Confederate Cause, thus rendering the Confederate Cause just by association. Along

28 Brown, Civil War Canon, 174.
with the use of heroic nudity more reminiscent of new WW1 memorials than previous Confederate monuments, MacNeil’s inscription remembering the “faith and courage” of those who participated in “the great fight”, invokes both Confederate and American valor and declares the righteousness of both causes.  

29 Through the monument, two generations are linked through a common fight, thus enabling the Confederate legacy to further endure and remain accessible through modern physical memorialization.

The Third Wave- Marketing the Past

By the onset of World War I, the “Generation of the Sixties” who had lived through the Civil War had died out. However, the next generation, enthralled by their parents’ stories of the idyllic pre-war South and educated with UDC-approved curriculum that venerated the Old South, eagerly took up their parents’ mission.  

30 The second generation had no memory of the society they were fighting to preserve, and as such, they created a tourism industry based on promoting their dream of life in the Old South. Thus, Confederate memorialization in Charleston changed forms. No longer was it about ensuring that the memory of “a storm-craddled nation that fell” survived or about honoring the sacrifices of Confederate soldiers, because that mission had been achieved.  

31 Confederate memory in Charleston had been established through the previous generation’s aggressive physical and ideological memorialization campaigns. The next mission was to preserve the efforts of the previous generation, and turn the identity Old South into a nationally recognized commodity. In the rapidly modernizing world, Confederate memorialization had to change with the times.

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29 Brown, Civil War Canon, 175.
31 lines on the back of a confederate note
The first step towards commercializing the city’s history was preserving that history. In an effort to save the city’s crumbling mansions, a new generation of ladies’ groups set out on a mission of preservation. Their choice to preserve houses, as opposed to other locations of historical significance, was strategic. The preservation of a house was by extension the preservation of the traditional feminine domestic sphere; the preservation of the domestic sphere allowed them to cultivate a heritage defined by gender, class, and race. In this carefully cultivated tableaux, African Americans were stereotyped in a modernization of the image of the faithful slave, which was popular within earlier Lost Cause mythology. Stephanie Yuhl, argues that these new women’s organizations were not precise copies of the Ladies’ Memorial Associations; instead they were “keeping with the fashionable Colonial Revival of their day, as well as the sectional reconciliation nurtured by World War I.”32

The focus on Colonial Revival architecture was a regional trend that reinforced the superiority of shared Anglo-Saxon heritage in a collective rejection of the post-war social order.33 Although it was not a movement specific to Charleston, the city’s heritage groups modified it to fit their own narrative.

By fixating on the preservation of the city’s rich antebellum and colonial past, Preservation Societies constructed a new identity for Charleston that was both “local and national, and that united elite white Americans across the country under a common aesthetic banner dedicated to their version of social order and racial harmony.”34 The new preservation groups’ carefully constructed images of Southern gentility and implied hierarchy were just as much focused on controlling the historical nar-

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rative as was their mothers’ memorial associations. However, their goal was not vindication of Confederate ideals but rather their sanitized and commercially appealing presentation to a wider audience.

The Society for the Preservation of Historic Dwellings began their mission in Charleston by first transforming their own homes into museums that reified the gentility and authority of the Old South. Alice Ravanel Huger Smith, one of the organization’s three founders, learned history primarily from her father, who took her on walking tours of the family’s elaborate former rice plantation at Middleton Place. Thus, Smith “absorbed the values and beliefs of a generation raised before the onset of the Civil War”, a generation that was loyal “to its own selective memory of antebellum culture.”

She viewed Charleston “through a golden haze of memory and association”, as a friend described. Her Society spread that “golden haze” on dwellings like the Miles Brewton House, which had been built before the Revolution and had housed generations of Charleston elite. As a result of their careful preservation of “all that was correct and worthy of protection in Charleston’s premodern past”, an interwar visitor observed that within the house, “the past was the present and future”. Thus, influenced by the bedrock of Lost Cause mythology that their parents’ generation had spent decades crafting, the women of the Society for Preservation created a physical landscape on through which to convey the Lost Cause memory to a wider national audience.

Transforming the city of Charleston from a beautiful city ruined by war to America’s “Most Historic City” allowed interwar Charlestonians to psychologically overcome the negative legacies of the Civil War. The First World War validated of the patriotism of Southerners. With this new na-

tional approval, Southerners and especially elite white Southern women, then sought to create a landscape that would preserve the most significant aspects of their heritage. The acute awareness of mortality garnered by WWI also served as an impetus for this preservation. The second Lost Cause generation “sought to create a visual record of the historic importance…of an extinct culture for future generations… of Americans to admire.” 38 They were still tangibly connected to the image of Antebellum prosperity through the Lost Cause memory cultivated by their parents. As Alice Smith declared, “when my generation is gone, there will be no one there to pass it on pictorially”. 39 Thus, the heavily commercialized image of the Old South, complete with elegant mansions, the mythology of faithful slaves and rolling fields of cotton, emerged powerfully within the national consciousness as a modernized wave of Lost Cause memorialization that endured well into the twentieth century. 40

**Conclusion**

Confederate memorialization in Charleston took three forms: mourning memorialization, vindication memorialization, and commercialized memorialization. All three were used in combination to justify the Southern Cause, and a return to an antebellum social order. The memorialization took different forms over the first 60 years after the Civil War; the physical memorialization in the form of monuments allowed groups like the United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Sons of Confederate Veterans to establish the mythology of the Lost Cause as material truth in the minds of the war generation and their children. The next generation, with a fundamental understanding of the Lost Cause as a part of their upbringing, sought to further solidify Confederate memory by preserving the remnants of the old South. They also sought to create a physical landscape of restored, commercial-

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ized, memory so that it would be accessible to outsiders. The combined efforts of these two generations solidified Confederate memory and the Lost Cause mythology within the Southern and American psyche, where it can still be found today.
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Memorial to Henry Timrod (1901), Washington Square

Memorial to Light Dragoons (date unknown), Magnolia Cemetery


Washington Light Infantry Monument (1881), Washington Square

**Secondary Sources**

**Books**


**Articles**


Appendix: Images

Confederate Defenders Gardens) (Image A)

Monument (White Point)

Charleston Light Dragoons Cemetery) (Images B, C, D)

Memorial (Magnolia)
Henry Timrod (Washington Square) (Images E, F, G)

Washington Light Infantry Monument (Washington Square) (Images H, I, J, K)