

### Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture

Jennifer Ritterhouse

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Ritterhouse, Jennifer (2004) "Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 .  
Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol6/iss1/11>

## Review

Ritterhouse, Jennifer

Winter 2004

**Cox, Karen L.** *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture.* University Press of Florida, \$55.00  
ISBN 813026253

Caretakers of the Cause

History of organization outlined

In January 2000, when controversy erupted over the Confederate battle flag flying atop the South Carolina state capitol, the United Daughters of the Confederacy were there. June Murray Wells, president-general of the UDC, defended the flag in discussions with state officials, but she also felt as though she had to defend herself. "In a public statement, she complained that the media had taken her comments about the flag issue out of context," Karen Cox explains on page 159 of **Dixie's Daughters**, noting that, in Wells's estimation, local and state media had been the worst offenders. "Several decades earlier, Wells would have been lauded for her efforts to defend the flag," Cox goes on. "The region that had once embraced the Daughters now regarded them as out of step with the times."

One of the strengths of Cox's new book is to show just how influential the UDC had been a century before. From page one, Cox argues "that women were longtime leaders in the movement to memorialize the Confederacy, commonly referred to as the 'Lost Cause,' and were active participants in debates over what would constitute a 'new' South." She documents women's leadership by tracing Lost Cause ideology back to its roots in Ladies' Memorial Associations and the observance of Confederate memorial days in the 1860s and 1870s. By the 1890s, elite white women who had participated in memorialization efforts were recognizing the need to expand their work and focus on a new generation of white southerners. The founding of the UDC on September 10, 1894 brought these women together, and with nearly 30,000 members by 1902, the UDC quickly became the most important of the Confederate organizations. Its rapid

growth indicates that, like other voluntary associations, the UDC offered white southern women a much-needed "social and cultural outlet" but, as Cox argues on page 29, it also offered "something unique—the opportunity to vindicate the Confederate generation and simultaneously uphold the values of their race and class."

Women's desire to "vindicate" the men and women of the Confederacy is crucial to Cox's argument. As she puts it on page one, the UDC "raised the stakes of the Lost Cause by making it a movement about vindication as well as memorialization." That raising of the stakes is, she suggests, what made "Confederate culture" so powerful, pervasive, and (as the on-going South Carolina controversy illustrates) long-lived. Cox's argument about the long-term relevance of the UDC's efforts at vindication is *merely* suggestive, but it should give readers much food for thought.

Most of Cox's book is devoted to examining the UDC's activities on various fronts in its peak period between 1894 and 1918. One well-illustrated chapter surveys the UDC's role as "monument builders," describing the fund-raising efforts and political negotiations behind the thousands of Confederate memorials unveiled—in highly choreographed celebrations—in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Another chapter tells the less familiar story of "Confederate progressives:" in keeping with the least-known of its official organizational objectives—benevolence—the UDC lobbied state governments and raised private funds to provide homes for needy Confederate veterans and their widows and to offer college scholarships to men and women of Confederate descent. As Cox, who teaches at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, notes in the preface, it was curiosity about this aspect of the UDC's work that got her started on her research.

Of all of the UDC's objectives, though, its educational mission distinguished it most from other Confederate organizations. "Lost Cause women believed that it was their duty 'to instruct and instill into the descendants of the people of the South a proper respect for . . . the deeds of their forefathers,'" Cox writes on page 20, quoting from the minutes of the UDC's first annual convention. Their educational goals led them to promote the teaching of "true" and "unbiased" history—that is, history that favored the white South—in the public schools and to develop programs for children both within their own organization and through auxiliary Children of the Confederacy groups. Cox's chapter on "Confederate Motherhood" is a helpful contribution to the history of childhood in the South

and includes a number of striking photographs that vividly illustrate how Confederate culture was preserved and passed on from one generation to the next.

Cox's emphasis on the "preservation" of Confederate culture is, however, somewhat problematic. Whereas Jacquelyn Hall, Fitzhugh Brundage, and a number of other scholars have focused on the political uses of Lost Cause ideology in recent work on the turn-of-the-century South, Cox perhaps takes UDC women too much at their word that theirs was not a political organization. Although she acknowledges on page 14 that "the Confederate celebration was enhanced by Jim Crow politics and provided a cultural outlet for honoring states' rights and white supremacy," she nonetheless accepts that "the primary activity of the movement was to honor veterans, especially former Confederate leaders." Yet to honor veterans or celebrate the Confederate past was not simply to preserve a tradition, but also to create one. Like all acts of remembering, UDC memorials were shaped by the needs, including the political needs, of the present.

Knowing more about the present of the 1890s and early 1900s, when the UDC was most influential, might also help to explain why women were more committed to the goal of vindicating the Confederates than their male peers. Although it does not address this important gender question directly, Cox's book does suggest explanations for why it was *women* who "raised the stakes" of the Lost Cause. One possible explanation looks backward—to the growth of the UDC from the Ladies' Memorial Associations and their concern for their personal dead. Another explanation looks forward—to the reality that, as Confederate veterans and their widows passed on, white southern women had to find new ways to maintain their organization's relevance in a region that tolerated *conservative* women's associations such as the UDC far better than any other kind. Both of these explanations relate to white women's status and roles within the South, and attention to the question of why women wanted vindication more than men might have allowed Cox to develop her book's significance as gender history much more fully.

Nevertheless, by focusing on women and the remarkable influence of the UDC, Karen Cox has filled in an important part of the story of the Lost Cause and its impact on southern society in the early twentieth century and beyond.

*Jennifer Ritterhouse is an Assistant Professor of History at Utah State University and is currently completing a monograph titled Learning Race: Racial Etiquette and the Socialization of Children in the Jim Crow South.*