

Civil War Canon: Sites of Confederate Memory in South Carolina

Eldred E. Prince

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

Recommended Citation

Prince, Eldred E. (2015) "Civil War Canon: Sites of Confederate Memory in South Carolina," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 17 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.17.3.17

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol17/iss3/16>

Review

Prince, Eldred E.

Summer 2015

Brown, Thomas J. *Civil War Canon: Sites of Confederate Memory in South Carolina*. University of North Carolina Press, \$39.95 ISBN 9781469620954

Confederate Commemoration in the Palmetto State

First, this book is not about artillery. Nor is it a visitors' guide to Civil War sites in South Carolina. Rather, *Civil War Canon* examines the evolution of Confederate memory and commemoration in the Palmetto State from the 1850s to the 2000s. The author visits some notable places of Confederate memory such as Charleston's Magnolia Cemetery, Fort Sumter, and the State House dome. The author suggests that South Carolina's Civil War memory is unique owing to the state's unsurpassed wartime commitment to the Confederacy and its singularly long and intense engagement with southern nationalism.

South Carolinians began commemorating secessionist sentiment even before the Civil War. Soon after the death of John C. Calhoun in 1850, Charlestonians launched a campaign to memorialize him. It took rather longer than anyone would have predicted, however. Personal rivalries, dissatisfaction with early attempts, and, of course, the Civil War and Reconstruction, delayed completion of the familiar 97-foot Calhoun monument in Marion Square until 1896—46 years after the subject's death. (One wonders how many of the original committee members saw the project through to completion.) An important feature of the Calhoun memorial experience was the leadership of women. Indeed, well into the twentieth century, women continued to dominate commemorative projects in South Carolina.

The South Carolina Monument Association (SCMA), a commemorative group centered in Columbia, organized in 1869 to memorialize the state's Confederate dead. The author suggests the timing was no coincidence. A Republican-dominated state government—elected by newly enfranchised black voters—had recently moved into the State House. The SCMA formed, at least in part, in opposition to “carpetbag” rule. Like the Calhoun monument group in

Charleston, the SCMA was headed by women. The hostile political situation forced them to bide their time, and the monument was temporarily placed at Elmwood Cemetery until it could be permanently installed in front of the State House after Reconstruction.

The author makes short work of the notion that Confederate commemoration was somehow a reaction against modernity. Indeed, the peak years of Lost Cause veneration coincided with vigorous industrialization and railroad expansion in South Carolina. Apparently, many of the same individuals attending Confederate memorial events on Sundays were meeting in local boardrooms on Mondays to underwrite stock subscriptions for textile mills and railway spur lines. Indeed, one Upstate industrialist, Samuel E. White, a co-founder of Springs Mills, constructed a multicultural Confederate Park in Fort Mill complete with monuments honoring Confederate veterans, Confederate women, faithful slaves, and pro-Confederate Catawba Indians.

The author discusses literary “monuments” to the Lost Cause, as well. He emphasizes the long-term value of Mary Boykin Chestnut’s writings through its various iterations. Edmund Wilson—a critic not known for his generosity—compared Chestnut to Chekhov and Tolstoy. Biographer Julia Stern places her in the tradition of Homer and Virgil. But other Reconstruction era writers do not fare so well. Predictably, many such novels are somewhat formulaic and feature a stock set of characters: Yankee villains, white southerners defeated but unbowed, faithful slaves, and corrupt Republican officials. White elites view the Ku Klux Klan as regrettable but needful resistance against alien misrule. These novels typically reach catharsis through Redemption, the restoration of white Democrats to power. By the turn of the twentieth century, southern fiction was becoming more polished and reaching audiences outside the region. Philadelphian Owen Wister’s *Lady Baltimore* (1906) at once mourns and celebrates Charleston as “the last citadel of good breeding,” and views Reconstruction as an indignity that still lingered into the twentieth century. Perhaps the most enduring (and most appealing) legacy of *Lady Baltimore* is the popular cake of the same name that the novel introduced to a generation of cooks.

By the 1920s, Charleston was becoming a popular tourist destination, and the city’s history was attracting an increasing share of visitors’ attention. Charlestonians preferred to focus on non-controversial themes such as the Colonial, Revolutionary, and Early National periods. But Fort Sumter was

simply too prominent to ignore and gradually assumed its place as a centerpiece of Confederate memory in Charleston. At first, the fort was presented as an artifact of blameless sectional strife long since overcome by reunion and reconciliation. American victory in the two world wars doubtless helped to put this message across.

As the Civil War Centennial approached, public interest in the monument's history increased substantially. Plans were made for the national Civil War Centennial Commission to meet in Charleston in April 1861 for a reenactment of the bombardment concurrent with the launch of the four-year Centennial observance. But the politics of race drove the Palmetto State to secede yet again. Because Charleston hotels refused to accommodate black members of northern states' delegations, the events were moved to the Charleston Naval Base. Southern states formed a rival group, the Confederate States Centennial Conference. The division, based upon the persistence of racial discrimination, undermined the effort to commemorate the Civil War in a national rather than a regional context.

By the late twentieth century, revisionist historical scholarship and changes in political realities were compelling reinterpretations of Confederate history in public spaces. One of these was Fort Sumter's Visitors Center, where the history of slavery in the lowcountry assumed a prominent place in the legacy of secession and war. Another place was the state capitol in Columbia where a Confederate flag still flew atop the capitol dome beneath the American and South Carolina state flags. The debate crystalized over the meaning of the flag: heritage or hate? Pressure to remove the flag increased when the NAACP imposed a boycott of South Carolina. Gender differences were evident in the flag controversy, as well. Notably, South Carolina women were less inclined to support Confederate symbolism than their mothers and grandmothers had been. Opinion polls revealed women were far more likely than men to favor removing the flag. A compromise was reached in 2000: the flag was removed from the dome and a smaller version installed beside the Confederate monument on the capitol grounds. Despite promises to end their boycott when the flag was removed from the dome, the NAACP continued the boycott and thus snatched defeat from the jaws of victory.

The discovery, recovery, and preservation of the Confederate submarine *H. L. Hunley* in Charleston provided a stage for a modern passion play as Confederate memorialists enjoyed a favorable rebound in public opinion. The

considerable media attention lent needed legitimacy to the Civil War reenactments, parades, and events that followed in the wake of the *Hunley* and its doomed crewmen. That the *Hunley* succeeded in sinking an enemy ship added a patina of victory to the vessel's otherwise tragic fate. Confederate partisans tended to exaggerate the technical innovations the *Hunley* represented while the author tends to minimize them. Relatively little is said of the scientific inquiry focused on the *Hunley* by a score of specialists from anthropologists to zoologists. The author reserves his harshest judgment for reenactors attending the crewmen's funeral in Magnolia Cemetery. They did not don uniforms to appear more authentic; they used the crewmen's remains as an excuse to play dress-up.

Professor Brown has given us much to think about. His gendering of Confederate memory through the decades is especially praiseworthy. But some questions remain. Much has been written about the role of southern women in Confederate commemoration. But was this unique to the Civil War and the south? For example, were southern women active in commemorating earlier wars? The War for Independence? The Mexican-American War? What part did South Carolina women play in commemorating later wars? After all, the Spanish-American War and World War I took place within the classic period of Confederate commemoration. Lastly, what roles did northern women play in commemorating Federal veterans in the postbellum decades?

Eldred E. "Wink" Prince is a Professor of History and Director of the Waccamaw Center for Cultural and Historical Studies at Coastal Carolina University.