Chapter 3

Negotiating the Memory of the American Civil War

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ABSTRACT

The American Civil War, which occurred over 150 years ago, changed the social, economic, and political nature of the United States. Over the past century, the United States commemorated the Civil War with the development of many national historical battlefield parks. However, the struggle between the different interest groups continue to plague a unified vision of the event. It became clear that commemorating the Civil War is not only about the past but also about the present and the future. Identifying the events that shape the dominant memory and recognizing the undercurrents that challenge the official memory of any event are important for understanding the dynamics in memorialization. What we see on the commemorative landscape today is only one frame of a long filmstrip of changing memory and meaning – one that will be very different a decade or two from today. Understanding the concept of memory is an important vehicle for answering this question.

INTRODUCTION

The American Civil War, which occurred over 150 years ago, changed the social, economic, and political nature of the United States. About 75% of eligible southern men and more than 60% of eligible northerners served in the war. More than 1 million soldiers were killed or wounded. Nearly one in three Confederate soldiers died (McPherson, 1982). The death rate was so high that a comparable rate today would be the equivalent of claiming 6 million American lives. How we remember and how we forget some aspect of this monumental event is an indication of how we develop as a nation and struggle with racism today. While the northern states won the war, the conflict between the different perspectives of the war continues today.

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Over the past century, the United States commemorated the Civil War with the development of many national historical battlefield parks. However, the struggle between the different interest groups continues to plague a unified vision of the event. It becomes clear that commemorating the Civil War is not only about the past, but also about the present and the future.

Following are several case studies that show the long-term contested meaning of the American Civil War. One is the Robert Gould Shaw Memorial, which stands on the Boston Commons in the city of Boston, Massachusetts. Shaw commanded the 54th Massachusetts, the first African American regiment mustered in the north. While the memorial was erected to honor the individual, Robert Gould Shaw, its meaning has transformed and it is now officially renamed to honor the entire regiment. Another example is the faithful slave memorial that was erected in Harpers Ferry by Confederate organizations to memorialize a free African American who was killed by an abolitionist insurrection. They claim that the African American railroad porter was carrying out his duties faithfully under the conditions of a slave society. Pro-Confederate and African American organizations continue to fight over the placement and meaning of the monument. Another example is found at Manassas National Battlefield, a national park that commemorates two Confederate victories. There has been a consistent movement to remove the presence of African American history from this battlefield, although archaeology has helped to challenge this momentum. All of these case studies provide an example of the changing and conflicting meanings associated with monuments, and landscapes. These case examples provide an array of symbols created by very different interest groups. The Shaw memorial was created by the white Brahmin elite of Boston. The Shepherd memorial was created by southern sympathetic groups. While Manassas National Battlefield Park was developed by the federal government, which reinforced the memory of two southern victories. The original meanings of these symbols have been contested and shifted over time, and there continues to be a constant struggle and a call for social justice to create a different and more inclusive past.

MEMORY

Immediately after the Civil War Confederate sympathizers began to create memorials to mourn the dead. Confederate cemeteries were established and monuments were erected in them. The “Confederate dead became powerful cultural symbols within the New South -- gave power, in other words, to the ghosts of the Confederacy” (Foster, 1987, p. 37). Many of these early Confederate memorials contained funerary designs (Foster, 1987, p. 41; Shackel, 2003b). Decoration Day, where the graves of the fallen are marked with a flag, became a national tradition in both the north and the south (Kammen, 1991, p. 103; Shackel, 2003b).

By the late nineteenth century, southern towns increasingly placed Confederate monuments in places like public squares and courthouses. Memorialization in the south was no longer about morning, but rather it was about upholding the Confederate tradition. Monuments of a soldier with a rifle resting on the ground were being mass-produced and found their way into northern and southern communities (Foster, 1987, p. 129). The majority of Civil War monuments erected in the United States occurred between 1900 and 1913, many for the preparation of the 50th-anniversary commemorations of the war (Foster, 1987, p 158; Shackel, 2003b).

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