

Vigil of silence: the Civil War memorials

The commemorative history of battlefields deserves thoughtful interpretation

Richard West Sellars

At Antietam battlefield the monument honoring the State of Maryland's men who fought there stands in a quiet grove of maples near the Dunker Church. At Vicksburg the towering Wisconsin column pays tribute to the sacrifices that state's soldiers made on the surrounding battleground. And at Shiloh the dark and grieving figures on the Confederate Memorial testify to the tragedy of the battle and the Civil War.

These are only three among hundreds of memorials that stand about the woodlands, fields, and towns that are America's Civil War battlefields. Despite their great numbers, their beauty, and their artistic and symbolic variety, memorials receive only casual interpretation at most battlefield sites. The lack of meaningful interpretation holds true at sites containing hundreds of monuments scattered over extensive acreage, on fields with only a few memorials, and at crossroads or city parks punctuated by a lone Civil War figure. Without much interpretation, visitors must rely on their own knowledge of the memorials' significance and of the historical contexts in which they were created.

Important features of many Civil War battlefields, memorials represent an aspect of history almost ignored—the commemorative development of historic landscapes over time. Successive generations have memorialized the battlefields. Union soldiers occupying Vicksburg erected one of the early memorials, a small marble obelisk, in July 1864, one year after the Southern troops' surrender there. The State of Tennessee placed a monument on the Gettysburg Battlefield in 1982, 119 years after the battle. Representing a long commemorative aftermath that has added richness and variety to the battlefield's history and appearance, the memorials, themselves, are historical phenomena worthy of the public's attention and understanding.

Historical perspectives

Several important trends influenced the proliferation of Civil War memorials on the battlefields, on hundreds of courthouse squares, and in city parks. These trends include an increasing interest in memorials, the stylistic evolution of commemorative architecture and sculpture, and early developments in landscape architecture. Political and economic factors, as well, sanctioned the commemoration of the Civil War. To

foster a greater appreciation and understanding of the memorials, they should be interpreted within the broad contexts of 19th-century memorialization, landscape design, and politics and economics.

To begin with, not only was the Civil War the most traumatic conflict this nation has endured, but it occurred during the Victorian era, a time of extensive monumentation. During the mid- and late-19th century, memorials became a popular expression of public sentiment. For the first time, the nation took pride in erecting many large, impressive monuments, including the Yorktown Victory Monument (completed in 1884), the Washington Monument (begun in 1848 but not finished until 1885), the Statue of Liberty (dedicated in 1886), and Grant's Tomb (dedicated in 1897).

Concurrently, the Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago and the "City Beautiful" movement following the exposition inspired memorialization throughout the country. Especially important were developments in civic planning and design, including urban parks, frequently with monuments. Also widely reproduced photographs of the Civil War and, later, of the newly erected monuments further instilled in the public's mind the idea of memorialization. Thus, given the Victorian interest in monumentation, the Civil War battlefields of the 1860s became natural targets for an outpouring of sentiment expressed in granite, marble, and bronze.

Victorian cemeteries contain the most pervasive evidence of the era's fascination with monuments. These cemeteries, with their ornate and frequently ostentatious monuments expressing elaborate sentiments about death and affection for the dead, contrast dramatically with burying grounds of both earlier and later times—the relatively plain graveyards of the 18th century and the architecturally bland cemeteries of recent years.

The rural cemetery movement, an important aspect of Victorian cemetery development, appears to have been a forerunner of the monumented battlefield parks. Beginning in the 1830s, many American cities established landscaped burying grounds in somewhat rural areas on the city outskirts. The designers, some of America's first landscape architects, intended these cemeteries to replace overcrowded churchyards as the chief burying places



The Confederate Memorial at Shiloh Battlefield.

for the inhabitants of the growing cities. The Victorians extensively and ornately monumented the new rural cemeteries, such as Mount Auburn in Cambridge and Watertown, Massachusetts, and Cave Hill in Louisville, Kentucky. Also known as "garden cemeteries," the burying grounds were designed to serve as parks and became popular in this regard, remaining so today. The result was monumented countryside—rural cemetery-parks and hallowed ground in areas of pastoral beauty, with memorials inviting a contemplative response by the visitor. The rural cemeteries, except for their greater concentration of memorials, presented an overall appearance and ambiance similar to those the monumented battlefields would later assume. On the battlefields, however, the memorials to the sacrifices of war more than ever heightened the elegiac qualities of the surrounding pastoral landscapes. Memorialization in park-like settings, such as Gettysburg, Vicksburg, Shiloh, and Antietam, has a precedent in the rural cemetery movement; the presence of national cemeteries in these battlefield parks makes the precedent more evident.

Political and economic factors

A second set of influences on memorialization included favorable political and economic conditions after the Civil War. By the last decades of the 19th century, governments at every level—federal, state, and local—had become well established. Great corporate and individual wealth existed as well. A catastrophic war had concluded, and a political and economic framework enabled commemoration of the conflict.

By comparison, the American Revolution—the event in American history prior to the Civil War with the greatest potential for widespread memorialization—inspired the creation of relatively few monuments during the decades immediately after the war. The new nation lacked the necessary political cohesion and economic strength for a large-scale memorialization effort. The Victorians, however, memorialized the Revolution during the centennial years in the 1870s and 1880s. But with a century having passed, the intensity of feeling about particular battles had diminished, and none of the Revolutionary War battlefields was extensively memorialized.

Veterans' groups and other patriotic organizations, adept at lobbying federal and state governments, encouraged the memorialization of Civil War battlefields. Except for Grover Cleveland, every president from Ulysses S. Grant through William McKinley was a member of the Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.), as were many congressmen. The G.A.R. and the United Confederate Veterans, whose membership included Southern congressmen, found an ally in the railroads. Eager to promote tourism and fired by patriotic zeal, the railroad companies lobbied for battlefield preservation and memorialization. The War Department encouraged these private efforts not only for patriotic reasons, but also as a means of securing selected battlefields for the army to use for on-site study of the tactics employed during the historic battles. The efforts of these varied interests culminated in legislation in the 1890s, when Congress established Chickamauga, Chattanooga, Antietam, Shiloh, Gettysburg, and Vicksburg as military parks.

The legislation establishing these parks called for memorialization, which had, by this time, already begun. The impulse to memorialize intensified during the decades following the war and carried strongly into the 20th century, spurred on by special anniversaries including the 50th, 75th, and the centennial.

Memory and elegy

Americans in their homes, schoolrooms, and workplaces have contemplated and recalled the details and consequences of the Civil War battles countless times—beginning on the battlefields before the troops moved out, then throughout the country for the remainder of the 19th century and into this century, even to the present day. The memorials and the preservation of battlefields reflect the enduring power of this remembrance. Recollection of the battles is institutionalized in the monumented parks, the remembrance



The "Surrender Monument" at Vicksburg Battlefield.



The Wisconsin Memorial at Vicksburg Battlefield.

reinforced through preservation, commemoration, and recurring ceremony.

The majority of the Civil War battlefields, however, have only a few memorials or obscure bronze plaques or nothing at all. Yet preservation, even without monuments, is an act of memorialization. Preservation acknowledges that something so important has happened that it must be remembered and at least some terrain set aside.

Battlefield preservation alone does not present specific perspectives of a battle. Memorials, however, interpret a battle by highlighting certain aspects of the conflict to be remembered. Marking the location of important encounters and recalling acts by individuals, regiments, or entire armies, the memorials embody memory and legend: stories officially chronicled and perhaps those never recorded—recollections of the grandfathers, fathers, and sons told and retold until finally passing out of folk memory.

Moreover, memorials suggest how a battle is to be remembered. They rarely portray the horrors of battle, nor do they question the morality of war. Rather, they ennoble memories of a battle to recall the tragedy and sacrifice in a heroic and elegiac way, and they seek to justify and reaffirm the causes for which the war was fought.

Aside from the fumbling march of armies to victory or defeat, what do visitors sense while on battlefields with

memorials scattered about the landscape? In fact, Civil War battlefields and memorials may still evoke deep feelings of empathy within those visitors who are able to grasp the appalling tragedy and grief engendered by these conflicts. Perhaps in the finest way, while standing on ground where men once fought and died and surrounded by tributes to their sacrifices, visitors may have a greater sense of the communal bonds of generations. Then, despite the intervening years, they might be moved by a personal sense of loss to say (borrowing from Walt Whitman's elegy for Abraham Lincoln), "Comrades mine and I in the midst, and their memory ever to keep."

Dick Sellars is Chief, Southwest Cultural Resources Center, SWRO.

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