NICHOLASVILLE CONFEDERATE MEMORIAL, KENTUCKY

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In the wake of the American Civil War, Confederate memory and identity in Jessamine County, Kentucky, did not predominate. A border state with many enslavers and enslaved people that initially declared neutrality and never seceded, Kentucky seemed to personify the maxim that the Civil War pitted brother against brother. Indeed, during the conflict, roughly the same number of troops enlisted on each side. Camp Nelson, a federal supply depot and emancipation center on the southern edge of the county, pushed identity toward the Union side. This enormous military installation left a large footprint. For many decades it conspicuously remained in local memory, especially in the Black community. Each Memorial Day, Camp Nelson's giant American flag, perched on a hill and visible for many miles on the turnpike, beckoned citizens to honor fallen Union soldiers who lay beneath hundreds of gleaming granite gravestones. Festivities began with members of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), an enormous organization of Union veterans, forming a line and firing volleys from 150 muskets. Given the over 100,000 soldiers who passed through the army depot—and the thousands of soldiers from 117 regiments and 16 states who lay in the cemetery—Camp Nelson had a vast reach in Union memory, both locally and nationally.

In contrast, dead Confederates were generally excluded from the national cemetery built on the grounds of Camp Nelson. As federal money buried Black and white Union soldiers with full honor, Confederate bodies lay neglected, isolated, and far from home. Grounded in acrimony as much as in mourning, Confederate memory built slowly. In the 1860s and 1870s rebel-sympathizing southern civilians, strapped for resources, did their best to mark and tend rebel graves. In Jessamine County these quiet acts of mourning and respect took the form of memorials at Nicholasville's Maple Grove Cemetery, where about two dozen fallen soldiers from Georgia, Alabama, Florida, Tennessee, Virginia, Mississippi, and North Carolina lay.

Surviving Confederate soldiers curated a different kind of war memory. Wanting to renew deep friendships formed on the picket lines, veterans began to attend reunions in the 1870s. Jessamine men quickly became enthusiastic participants in informal gatherings of the Orphan Brigade and Morgan's Men, especially those who served time in northern prisons. They also joined formal associations such as the United Confederate Veterans (UCV), the Confederate Veterans Association, and the Sons and Daughters of the Confederacy. Jessamine's UCV chapter, one of over 800 nationally, organized balls, barbecues, burgoo dinners, and lectures. They also attended regional events and national reunions that sometimes drew tens of thousands of men. While it took some time before veterans were willing to relive the trauma, many eventually visited battlefields.

Over time Confederate culture spilled into nearly every white social space in the county. Rebels filled many of the pulpits in town. They ran many of the businesses. They populated most political offices. They served as trustees of public and private institutions. They established an Auxiliary Aid Society to help disabled Confederate soldiers and their needy orphans and widows. Even three decades after the war, they continued to call their military superiors general, colonel, and captain.

The cultural foundations of the county's statue were laid in these decades. In May 1880, about fifteen years after the war and about fifteen years before the statue was ultimately erected, a group of Confederate veterans met at a drugstore on Nicholasville's Main Street. Sharing stories of their wartime trials and exploits, they groused about "the generation coming after us" that did not truly appreciate the "triumphant valor and transcendent glory" of the "crumbling bodies lying yonder" a few blocks north at Maple Grove. Deciding to resurrect their fallen comrades' memory in a more substantial way, they organized themselves into the Jessamine Confederate Memorial Association (JCMA). In their constitution they proclaimed that "it is the duty of man to care for his dead—and the higher privilege of friends to honor those who fall in the defense of what they deem right." These proud Confederates pledged to "honor them and ourselves by erecting a suitable monument to their memory." They would place it over the graves of these "quiet sleepers" in the cemetery who had been devoted to the "Lost Cause."

The JCMA grew quickly at first. By the end of the first year, the roll of members numbered forty-two. The majority were Confederate veterans themselves, though at least one Union veteran joined too. He was a "noble foeman" named J. M. Mattingly, a local Republican politician and former quartermaster in the 37th Kentucky Infantry whose bitterness, it was said, had dissipated along with "the smoke of battle." Most members, contributing one dollar a year, were not "very wealthy men." Consequently, the JCMA's bank account only inched upward. As was usual in most memorial associations of the era, women assumed significant leadership—even signing the organization's constitution, which was less usual—of the JCMA. They organized variety shows, musicals, and lectures to raise money. One typical event featured a "grand dinner" at the courthouse, complete with strawberries, ices, and speeches by prominent local men.

JCMA finally got traction a full ten years after the drugstore meeting of Confederate veterans. Several factors explain why the association finally began to surge in the 1890s. First, Jessamine was feeling outclassed by its neighbors. A flurry of statues went up in nearby towns, including Lawrenceburg, Lexington, and Frankfort. Second, many veterans were dying. "One by one," a local minister lamented, "our members were dropping and taking their places in the bivouac of the dead." Jefferson Davis's 1889 death jarred Jessamine County, but it was local deaths that felt even more pressing, if the length and intensity of obituaries were any indication. Of the

sixty-three members who had signed the association's constitution, twelve had died by 1893. Energized by competition and death, the JCMA accumulated about $1,400 by 1895. The final fundraising event, an ice cream social and cake walk, which involved couples parading through the courthouse in hopes of being the "most graceful walkers" and the winners of a large white cake, drew a large crowd just a week before the statue's installation. Netting $56.66, the event put the fund over the $1,500 mark.

Fascinatingly, the county's seven-foot soldier, clutching a rifle and bayonet with both hands and with a knapsack slung across his shoulder, arrived by train from the Louisville factory with a trans-sectional identity. That's because this statue was originally cast with a Union identity that included a belt buckle with "U.S." The market for Union statues, however, was so depressed that the Jessamine Confederate Memorial Association purchased it at a deep discount and regalvanized the statue into a Confederate identity. This kepi hat-wearing soldier had transformed—but only partly—from Union to Confederate. To the locals watching the statue installed on the southeast corner of the courthouse lawn, in front of the county clerk's office and facing the town pump, over the course of four days in early June 1896, this figure must have seemed bizarre. At the dedication several weeks later, a JCMA member would confess that the process had "taxed the taste, the energy, and the wisdom of those in charge to their fullest extent."

Monday, June 15, 1896, was the big day. Trains on the Queen & Crescent railroad, which ran from Cincinnati to New Orleans, brought spectators from Georgetown and Lexington to the north and from Somerset to the south to attend "the great Confederate meeting." Excitement jumped at 11:24 a.m., when a passenger train on the Southern railroad from Louisville arrived with 135 veterans. Met by their former comrades at the station, it was a big rebel reunion. All together they marched in formation down Main Street toward the courthouse. Wearing gray jackets that looked as though they "had faced many a hard-fought battle," the men passed by Maple Grove Cemetery, several churches, a furniture store, a hotel, a bicycle repair shop, a steam laundry, the drugstore, and dozens of other businesses and civic buildings. Nearly all of them displayed the Confederate colors and hung signs that read "Welcome, Rebels."

By the time they finished an elegant dinner in the courthouse served by the women of the Baptist church, the crowd had swelled to between 3,500 and 5,000, about double the size of the city. At 1 p.m., the "Confederates and their friends," as one publication described the throng, gathered around a large platform in front of the courthouse doors. Nicholasville, said one observer, "had on her best bib and tucker." In the context of Jessamine County's ambivalent Civil War identity, this commitment to Confederate memory marked a stunning reversal.

Bennett Young, a Confederate veteran and son of Jessamine County, rose to give the primary oration. It began with a heartrending description of loss. Not all men returned home with whole bodies, and to demonstrate his point, Young called forward R. T. Haley, who had lost his right leg to a cannon ball. Haley was both representative—one in thirteen soldiers returned home with one or more missing limbs—and fortunate. As the statue's inscription—"Our Confederate Dead"—made clear, many in fact did not return at all. Some perished from disease. Some died from the thrusts of bayonets. Still others were struck down by rains of bullets, a fate apparent on the stage, from which an old gray jacket, pierced by two bullets, hung. Industrialized methods of war, said Young, had resulted in "the most dreadful carnage that has ever been known to men."

A monument, he said, would resurrect the memory of the dead young warriors. "We come," declared Young, "to bless the soil that garners their dust, and to declare by this monument which we trust will remain forever, that the memories of the virtues, of the courage, of the chivalry, of the bravery, of the sacrifices, of the sufferings, of the renown of our departed comrades shall be as deathless as their deeds were illustrious." It was not right that their deaths be anonymous in the pits of Perryville and the carnage of Chickamauga. Monuments, said a correspondent to the *Jessamine Journal* a week later, "rescue their names from oblivion." Honored for their heroism and sacrifice, they would live on in the permanence of granite and bronze. Mourning could turn to meaning.

In choosing a common soldier, Jessamine's statue committee was also making a political point: that the best government was "of the people." As Young put it, "America's highest and noblest call of God" was to model to the world "the grandeur and dignity" of democracy. Confederates understood themselves as solid and humble citizens of the republic—and the true heirs of 1776. The *Jessamine Journal* even described how John Wallace, one of Jessamine's early pioneers, had served in "the rebel army" under General Washington. As Young spun a narrative about "freemen fighting for the holiest and grandest cause" at the dedication of a statue, he was contending that authority be fashioned from the bottom up.

For ex-Confederates, this was an important intervention. Military service had felt like the opposite of individual empowerment. They had submitted to superior officers. They had to carry passes when leaving camp. They had felt like a cog in a very complex machine. With little agency and high levels of vulnerability, life in the army felt uncomfortably like slavery. Jessamine County's statue recast that reality of military life. Standing alone, it was set apart from his unit and "thereby rescued from the undifferentiated, synchronized mass of a modern army," as historian Kirk Savage has said about other monuments. It represented a man of action, not a submissive slave. As disingenuous as it must have seemed to Black residents suffering

under Jim Crow, Young's speech, which chronicled masculine soldiers filling volunteer companies, and the statue, which embodied individual action, served to emancipate Jessamine County's men from their slave-like service during the war. It flipped the reality of lost agency to a narrative of noble citizenship.

Key elements of Bennett Young's speech have not aged well. Critics have noted that it represents the Lost Cause, an historical interpretation of the war recalling a bygone civilization in which faithful slaves, virtuous women, and chivalrous patriarchs presided over a bucolic South destroyed by the cold industrial North. This description of antebellum race relations erased the violence of slavery: the hard labor, poor conditions, rapes, and separation of families common in Jessamine County. The statue, which fleshed out this false narrative of the Lost Cause, did not reckon with race. Indeed, it sometime seemed to mock the Black population. The cakewalk fundraiser that helped build the statue had associations with minstrelsy, and the statue was located just across the street from Herveytown and functioned, as one man said, "as a deterrent" to the Black population. The statue embodied just how unrepentant the builders were.

Nor did the statue narrate persistent racial violence. Its builders tolerated the lynchings of over one dozen Black men. Nor did the statue acknowledge Jim Crow indignities. Black children could not attend white schools. George B. Taylor, the vice-president of the Jessamine Confederate Memorial Association, barred blacks from sleeping at Hotel Nicholas or eating ice cream at Fugazzi & Benedetti across the street from the statue. The nation affirmed these practices. Just three weeks before the dedication, the Supreme Court delivered *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which legalized Kentucky's racial codes. Still, the *Jessamine Journal* asserted, "As a rule, however, the Southern negroes are as well treated as any laboring population in the world. The feeling of the whites toward them is friendly and the relations between the two are now generally respectful and considerate." No markers in Jessamine County remember the ghosts of segregation—or the visage of Tom Brown, a Black man whose lynching took place on the courthouse lawn, swinging in a sycamore tree just feet from the statue.

Nor did the statue tell the rich history of Black culture and accomplishment. Located at the center of civic life, it completely eclipsed the stories of James Priest, who rose to the highest ranks of politics in Liberia; of Gabriel Burdett, a courageous Baptist preacher and Republican politician; of Spencer Wake, who turned the traditionally Black Nicholasville neighborhood of Herveytown into a big party; of the Fletchers, a family of educators that taught Black children to read and write. Nor did the statue tell the story of Union soldiers, who comprised at least half of Jessamine's recruits—and more than two-thirds of Kentucky's recruits. As the Confederate statue rose, these emancipationist memories disappeared. In curating these

selective memories, Jessamine County committed narrative violence by silence. The statue was a cultural symbol that excluded African Americans.

A less subtle indication that the Confederate statue meant to bolster white supremacy was timing. Most localities built Confederate monuments between 1890 and 1915, exactly the era when Jim Crow laws were codified and when lynchings were used to enforce those codes. Moreover, their locations shifted from cemeteries to civic spaces. Jessamine's statue, for example, was originally intended to be installed at Maple Grove Cemetery, where the Confederate graves lay. The chronology suggests that Kentuckians erected statues not only to honor the Confederacy but also to control the narrative, reinforce a racial hierarchy, and stifle Black political participation. Though race was not mentioned a single time at the statue's dedication, both time and place linked racial suppression to Confederate memorialization.

The battle over Civil War memory and race persists. In June 2020, Black Lives Matter protests over the killings of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd began in front of Jessamine County's courthouse. Over the next year, the Confederate statue on the front lawn became the object of a contentious debate among local residents: a sixteen-year-old homeschool student who launched a campaign to "destroy" the statue; a Confederate sympathizer who stood by the statue, a handgun on his left hip, in an attempt to "guard history"; a local Republican operative who used the statue controversy to flip Democratic voters into re-electing President Donald Trump; an interracial ministerial committee determined to bring it down; and a county judge-executive caught in the middle. When the judge installed a temporary sign that read, "Jessamine County is addressing options so this statue will reflect our values of today, which is justice in unity," the 125-year-old statue seemed vulnerable.

But most residents backed the Confederate monument. To remove it, they said, would be to "erase history." The Black Lives Matter protests died out after a month, and the anti-statue movement died out after a year. Sometime in late 2021 the sign quietly disappeared. As of 2024, this statue in the heart of the Bluegrass remains standing, its Confederate identity still intact—and its eyes still staring defiantly at the North.

Sources and Further Reading

Jessamine Journal

Issues of the Jessamine Journal provide contextual detail for the monument's creation and the conditions that made its creation and maintenance possible.

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