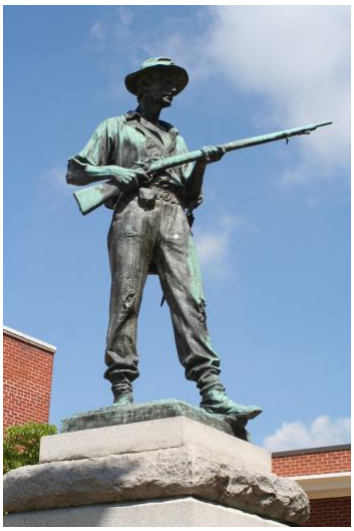
Monumental Culture/Culturally Monumental: the Abingdon Common Soldier Monument, Washington County, Virginia.

By Lou Selfridge



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On June 3, 1908, the 100th anniversary of the birth of Confederate president Jefferson Davis, residents of Washington county, Virginia, gathered for the unveiling of a new monument to those who died in the Civil War. Over a hundred years later, the county supervisors voted, on November 9, 2021, to remove the monument from its position, following a petition from local residents complaining about the racially divisive role of the monument within the community.

Researching this monument led to seemingly incongruous fragments of information, anecdotes, and numerous dead ends. This account of the monument, rather than seeking to bring together a singular argument or present a specific interpretation of the monument, instead presents a series of connected units of text. These chunks of information and commentary are an attempt to capture the multifaceted nature of the monument and its position in society, while threading together a narrative of the monument, its dedication ceremonies, and its life in the community.

Fully five thousand people, representing every age and condition commonly found in a thrifty county, flanked the streets of Abingdon to observe the unveiling of the handsome granite monument to the memory of the Confederate veterans of Washington county. With much cheering and waving of Confederate flags, the crowd celebrated the arrival of the orators for the occasion.

Upon the stage prepared for these distinguished ceremonies was displayed a flag with history, having been snatched from its staff at Appomattox on the occasion of the surrender. Standing proud beside this most revered of relics, Mrs. T. P. Triff led the chorus in singing 'The Bonnie Blue Flag,' 'My Old Kentucky Home,' and other melodies rich in southern spirit.

*After a speech by the Hon. Daniel Trigg, Elizabeth Stuart, daughter of the Hon. Alexander Stuart, representative of Washington County in the Virginia legislature, pulled the cord, which let the Confederate drapery fall from the figure on the monument, The removing of the veil by this bright little girl, who was attired in white, with red ribbons, revealed to the throng an ideal figure of a brave Confederate armed with a rifle and ready to go forth.**

The unveiling ceremonies in 1908 provide a useful way into understanding the monument itself, by suggesting the ways the local community chose to frame their new monument. By first looking at the songs "My Old Kentucky Home" and "The Bonnie Blue Flag," I hope to unpack some of the complex histories of these songs, and how they relate to questions of "southern spirit" and enslavement in the South – elements that may not be immediately apparent in this statue, but which, nonetheless, formed the foundations for its reception within the Abingdon community. Second, I want to turn to the "flag with history" mentioned in the newspaper report of the unveiling, in an attempt to trace exactly what that "history" is, and how it might inform our own interpretation of Abingdon's Common Soldier.

Lyrics of "My Old Kentucky Home, Good-Night" by Stephen C. Foster

The sun shines bright in the old Kentucky home,
'Tis summer, the darkies are gay,
The corn top's ripe and the meadow's in the bloom

While the birds make music all the day.

The young folks roll on the little cabin floor,
All merry, all happy and bright:
By'n by Hard Times comes a knocking at the door,
Then my old Kentucky Home, good-night!

Weep no more, my lady, oh! Weep no more today!
We will sing one song
For the old Kentucky Home,
For the old Kentucky Home, far away.

They hunt no more for the possum and the coon
On the meadow, the hill and the shore,
They sing no more by the glimmer of the moon,
On the bench by the old cabin door.
The day goes by like a shadow o'er the heart,
With sorrow where all was delight:
The time has come when the darkies have to part,
Then my old Kentucky Home, good-night!

The head must bow and the back will have to bend,
Wherever the darkey may go;
A few more days, and the trouble all will end
In the field where the sugar canes grow.
A few more days for to tote the weary load,
No matter 'twill never be light,
A few more days till we totter on the road,
Then my old Kentucky Home, good-night!

In 1926, two years before Mickey Mouse's debut in Steamboat Willie, the Fleischer brothers released an animated short film of "My Old Kentucky Home." In the cartoon, Ko-Ko the Clown bounces across the screen, sharpening his teeth and playing the trumpet. Following this skit is a four-minute singalong of "My Old Kentucky Home," with the lyrics shown on screen whilst a Black woman – described by reviewers as 'a little pickaninny' and 'a darky girl'– jumps above the words,

weeping. The short film ends with the woman boarding a cart attached to a Black man. She produces a fishing rod, to which is attached a slice of watermelon, and dangles it in front of the man, who salivates and begins to drag the cart forward.

Nicholas Sammond, in his book about racism and American animation, characterised the Fleischer brothers' trademark character Ko-Ko the Clown – who appears in the 1926 short film "My Old Kentucky Home" – as "modelled after minstrels." Under the same umbrella, he included Walt Disney's Mickey Mouse and Warner Bros.' Bugs Bunny.

Mickey Mouse and Bugs Bunny remain popular, both featuring in films and TV series in 2021. Ko-Ko the Clown has, for the most part, faded into obscurity.

A bronze soldier stands alone atop a granite plinth. His musket is drawn, held at waist level, pointing forward. His face is stern; his brow furrowed. His trousers are ripped at the knees. Over time, his bronze has oxidised, and a turquoise blueness drips over his shoulders.

In his autobiographical book *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), American abolitionist Frederick Douglass celebrated "My Old Kentucky Home" as an example of a song which proves that "the poets are with us." For Douglass, the lyrics of the song show that Stephen C. Foster – who wrote the song – was sympathetic to abolitionist causes. Douglass writes of how it "can call forth a tear as well as a smile," going on to declare that the song awakens "the sympathies for the slave, in which anti-slavery principles take root, grow, and flourish." If the song found a

dubious comic role in the Fleischer brothers' racially charged cartoon, it also remains open to an interpretation which emphasises the progressive nature of its lyrics.

In the *Virginia Republican* newspaper, the day after the dedication of the Abingdon Courthouse monument, "My Old Kentucky Home" was described as being "rich in southern spirit." Is the song's "southern spirit" best embodied by its emotive description of Black people parting – what Douglass considered to be the fertile soil in which anti-slavery principles could take root? Or is "southern spirit" better expressed by sentimentally singing of hunting "the possum and the coon" – with "coon" acting as both a shortened version of "racoon" and a highly offensive slur to refer to Black people? Is "southern spirit" what made a community come together to erect a monument to their lost fathers, husbands, brothers? Perhaps "southern spirit" is harder to pin down than that. Perhaps "southern spirit," just like the monument, can mean many things at once.

It doesn't seem entirely plausible to describe the choice to sing "My Old Kentucky Home" at the monument's dedication as racist in and of itself. Douglass' interpretation of the song shows that it wasn't exclusively viewed as being derogatory towards the people it presents, despite the Fleischer brothers' racially charged use of the song in their work.

The song was described by the historian Thomas D. Clark as "the property of music lovers the world over," and its being sung at a major event in the South says very little about the intentions behind its choice. Yet the lyrics do, perhaps, reveal the atmosphere of this event, one where Black people were unlikely to be made welcome as part of the communal act of remembrance. Like other towns across the United States that erected their own Common Soldier monuments, this one used its monument to celebrate white soldiers. Those who were being

remembered in Abingdon and across the South were white men. This monument, and this dedication, was designed by white Abingdon residents as a moment of mourning for the brothers, fathers, husbands, and sons lost. These men were white. The choice of this song shows the atmosphere of the event, where Black people would have been unlikely to feel welcome.

On the monument's granite plinth, two bronze bas-relief panels depict stoical women, one holding a sword and shield, the other draping a Confederate flag before her legs. The flag's stars and bars are only faintly visible, observable only by those who wish to see them.

Lyrics of "The Bonnie Blue Flag" by Harry McCarthy

We are a band of brothers, and native to the soil,
Fighting for the property we gain'd by honest toil;
But when our rights were threaten'd the cry rose near and far,
Hurrah for the Bonnie Blue Flag that bears a Single Star!

Hurrah! Hurrah! for Southern Rights Hurrah!
Hurrah for the Bonnie Blue Flag that bears a Single Star.

As long as the Union was faithful to her trust,
Like friends and like brothers, kind were we and just;
But now, when Northern treachery attempts our rights to mar,
We hoist on high the Bonnie Blue Flag that bears a Single Star.

[…]

And here's to brave Virginia! the Old Dominion State
With the young Confederacy at length has link'd her fate;
Impell'd by her example, now other States prepare
To hoist on high the Bonnie Blue Flag that bears a Single Star.

[…]

Then here's to our Confederacy, strong we are and brave,
Like patriots of old, we'll fight our heritage to save:
And rather than submit to shame, to die we would prefer,
So cheer up for the Bonnie Blue Flag that bears a Single Star.

If “My Old Kentucky Home” was a song which provided enough ambiguity to be adopted by both Confederate and Union supporters, “The Bonnie Blue Flag” seems the opposite. The song offers rousing lyrics about “our Confederacy,” listing off all the states that joined the Confederacy in a gleeful roll call. It’s not difficult to imagine the roaring cheers that would come from the Abingdon crowd at the lines “here’s to brave Virginia! the Old Dominion State / With the young Confederacy at length has link’d her fate.” The repeating chant of “for Southern Rights Hurrah!” is also unlikely to appeal to anyone with political affiliations outside the Confederacy.

“The Bonnie Blue Flag” has appeared in several twentieth and twenty-first century films about the American Civil War. In the 1959 war-western film *The Horse Soldiers*, the melody of the song is played while Confederate soldiers are seen marching. Its portrayal here is interesting, as the film primarily follows Union soldiers, with Hollywood heart-throb John Wayne playing the lead role as a Union cavalry colonel. The song is overheard across several scenes and becomes a hauntingly negative tune associated with the Confederate soldiers’ approach.

The song also appears in the 2003 film *Gods and Generals*, which portrays the career of Confederate General Stonewall Jackson during the American Civil War. Unlike in *The Horse Soldiers,* the portrayal of the song here is overwhelmingly positive, with dancing and laughter.

Flags are swung overhead, and hats are held in the air as the crowd joins in with the chorus, with jaunty fiddle music accompanying the song. Conservative activist Phyllis Schlafly, infamous for her campaign to oppose the Equal Rights Amendment in the U.S., wrote positively of the film, calling it a "must-see." The Southern Poverty Law Center, however, described it as "neo-Confederate," stating that it "whitewashes slavery and twists American history."

Exploring the events surrounding the unveiling of this monument, and the stories and songs bound up with it, is a process that throws up more questions than answers. Both songs can be seen to marginalise Black residents of Abingdon within their community, whilst also being weighty with meaning for the white Virginians who fought for the Confederacy. This meaning can be found in uncomfortable references and symbols, but as "My Old Kentucky Home" shows, a more nuanced history can be unravelled which resists categorisation with words such as "good" and "bad." "The Bonnie Blue Flag" does, however, present a more singularly Confederate narrative, and highlights how the unveiling events themselves are involved in constructing and sustaining such narratives in the local community – acts of cultural resistance which are likely to have made Black people feel unwelcome at the unveiling.

The Historical Society of Washington County, Virginia is happy to answer one or two specific questions for a fee of $25.

Power (synonymous at times, with knowledge) is not always equally distributed, and information does not always come free. In researching this essay, many resources were used which required access to money: books, archives, and websites behind paywalls were all accessed through the university. Many more resources were not accessed: pen drives containing newspaper scans were not purchased; $25 questions were not asked.

Alongside the songs that tapped into the rhythms of this community and the "spirit" Abingdon's new monument would enshrine, spectators' imaginations were captured that day by the "flag with history" presented as part of the dedication ceremony. The history of this flag is at times difficult to trace, but the *Virginia Republican*'s newspaper account of the dedication gives us somewhere to begin.

FLAG WITH HISTORY

> Conspicuous in the stage decorations was a large Confederate flag with a history. This flag cut with bullets and showing the mutations of war and time, was snatched from its staff at Appomattox on the occasion of the surrender of David Lowry, a veteran of the Confederacy, now residing at Green Spring, this county. In order to protect this prize of war and insure its keeping, Mr. Lowry concealed it in his shirt bosom and thus brought it to his home.

The loss of a flag on the battlefield was a "disaster" for troops on both sides of this conflict, and Lowry's act of resistance seems to have become embedded in a local mythology of bravery. The flag crops up in several accounts of commemorative events in Abingdon: it was carried by Lowry

himself at a reunion of the First Regiment Virginia Cavalry and draped over the coffin of Conley T. Litchfield when he was laid to rest in Abingdon.

Lowry's act of bravery and resistance illuminates the very act of monumentalization Abingdon participates in. Building a monument to commemorate the bravery of those who lost the Civil War itself suggests an act of resistance, not simply one of commemoration. The Abingdon monument takes this a step further, with the soldier shown in an active, threatening pose, his musket drawn and pointed forward. Rather than accepting defeat, Abingdon locals constructed a monument to celebrate their men's bravery in the war. Given Lowry's status in Washington County as a local hero, the commemoration of the County's dead with a confrontational figure seems connected to his mythical loyalty and refusal to accept defeat.

We find, in harsh lettering on the cold granite base of the monument:

TO THE
CONFEDERATE SOLDIERS
OF
WASHINGTON COUNTY
VIRGINIA.

David Lowry's flag is referenced in the Minutes of the Thirty-Second Annual Convention of the Virginia Division of the United Daughters of the Confederacy. These minutes tell of Lowry's daughter, Mrs. Edgar P. Miller, presenting the flag to the United Daughters of the Confederacy. After this point, the whereabouts of the flag becomes hard to pin down. It seems to have vanished into the town's mythology.

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Q. – Where is David Lowry's flag now?

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Ellen Glasgow was born and died in Richmond, Virginia. In her 1902 novel, *The Battle-Ground*, Glasgow writes of a fictionalised soldier, Dan Lightfoot, as he and his comrades face defeat and surrender. He makes a dash for the regiment's flag, and seizes it, saving it from capture by the enemy troops:

> At the instant he held his life as nothing beside the faded strip of silk that wrapped about his body. The cause for which he had fought, the great captain he had followed, the devotion to a single end which had kept him struggling in the ranks, the daily sacrifice, the very poverty and cold and hunger, all these were bound up and made one with the tattered flag upon his arm.

Lightfoot's and David Lowry's acts of flag-grabbing are closely linked. It doesn't seem difficult to imagine Glasgow having come across Lowry's story, being a Virginian herself who researched extensively for her novels. This scene in *The Battle-Ground* may well be part of the fictional afterlife of Lowry's act of defiance, feeding off of and contributing to the mythological status that Lowry's actions achieved in Abingdon, and perhaps more widely across Virginia. Reading Glasgow's fictionalised flag story sheds some light on the deep emotional connection of troops to their flag and goes some way towards showing why Lowry made the risky decision to save his own troops' flag. Lowry's flag's central role in the monument dedication suggests the values that the community and the monument itself valorised – bravery, resistance, and loyalty.

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In Ellen Glasgow's novel, Dan Lightfoot's treatment of the flag departs from David Lowry's engagement with his infamous flag:

> Dan unfastened the flag from the hickory pole on which he had placed it, and began cutting it into little pieces, which he passed to each man who had fought beneath its folds. The last bit he put into his own pocket.

Lightfoot's act of destruction and distribution allowed for each individual to hold and preserve a reminder of their loyalty and service. Yet keeping the flag intact, as Lowry did, enforced a more communal form of remembrance: his flag became a symbol for an entire community, who treated it as a relic of the war and a token of defiance. The courthouse monument, like the flag, seems to have become an object of communal remembrance connected to the war, a site where locals came together to feel connected to the sacrifice of those who died in battle.

An iron chain surrounds the plot of the monument. The soldier looks out over visitors to the courthouse, towering above them on his nine-foot plinth. Weeds are growing from the patch of land surrounding the monument, encroaching on the granite base.

At the monument's dedication, Judge John A. Buchanan gave a speech accepting the monument on behalf of the local chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy. In his speech, he twice referred to the monument as being erected to commemorate those of "our own blood and race" who fought in the Civil War, remembering their "heroic virtues" and "heroic achievements."

In 1936, the monument was moved from its original location at the intersection of Main Street and Court Street. Its new location was on the grounds of the Washington County Courthouse. Before its relocation to the courthouse grounds, “the monument had been hit by automobiles” while it was situated in the road, “and was considered a traffic hazard.” In a very literal way, the monument became a site of confrontation and conflict, facing up to motorists. With increasing motorisation in the early twentieth century, the monument in the road ceased to be a sensible element of the urban landscape of Abingdon, and as a result, was moved.

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Q. – At what financial cost was the movement of the monument to the courthouse grounds carried out, and who funded it?

On June 5, 2020, Abingdon police chief Tony Sullivan took early retirement after a social media post he made about white supremacy raised a public outcry. In the post, he joked about how “white supremacists are clean and will pick up the trash once they assemble,” ultimately concluding that Northern Virginia may need to “secede from the Commonwealth” in order to protect the right of white supremacists to assemble. In mirroring the language of the Civil War, during which the Confederate states “seceded” from the United States, Sullivan suggested the need for another, similar act to protect the rights of white supremacists in his county in the twenty-first century. What Sullivan wrote provoked some Abingdon residents, leading him to apologise for any damage he may have done to “the credibility of our agency, my employer, or the reputation of the community that I love.” The response to and consequences of his words

showed that the community had become intolerant of the language of succession and racial supremacy.

In Summer 2020, as Black Lives Matter protests sparked a reckoning with the state of racism and police violence across America, some of Abingdon's citizens called for the removal of the courthouse monument. Heather Evans started a petition on the website change.org, which raised over 2,000 signatures. The petition states that "monuments should serve to unite us as a community and inspire us." One person, after signing the petition, left the following comment:

> I have always been embarrassed that our Courthouse has had such a divisive and unwelcoming symbol [...] in a place that should encourage justice for ALL.

At a meeting of the Washington County Board of Supervisors on November 9, 2021, a resolution was adopted which would see the monument removed. The resolution to remove the monument makes no mention of the petition started by residents, instead stating that the decision was made "in the interest of maximizing space available for the new construction and renovation of existing facilities for courthouse operations."

As required by Virginia law, Washington County is now accepting offers for relocation and placement of the Abingdon monument. After the close of a 30-day offer period, the Board of Supervisors may resolve in open meeting to accept an offer or offers submitted to the County or may otherwise direct disposition of the memorial.

If you or your organization is interested in the Abingdon monument, you may complete and submit the Monument Interest Form or submit a Letter of Intent that includes all of the

required information. Letters of Intent may be delivered by US mail or hand-delivered to the address below

Lucy E. Phillips, County Attorney

Washington County Government Center

1 Government Center Place, Suite A

Abingdon, VA 24210

*Offers received by close of business on or before Friday, December 10, 2021, will be presented to the Board of Supervisors at its meeting on December 14, 2021. The County reserves the right to reject any and all offers and to extend the offer period as may be determined by the Board of Supervisors.**

On December 14, 2021, the Board of Supervisors unanimously voted to relocate the Civil War monument to a location to be established on the grounds of the Washington County Government Center building in Stonemill Park for Business and Technology. The reasons behind the decision to relocate the monument to a site which, although less prominent, is still on government land, remain unclear.

* Two of the italicized sections, each marked with an asterisk, draw on factual sources listed in the 'Reading and Research' section below, but make slight alterations to better suit the style and flow of this essay. The first of these draws together a range of details from a much longer newspaper article. The second uses bureaucratic language from a Washington County website; it is edited to refer only to one monument, whereas the original wording refers to two monuments. Changes were only made where they would clearly benefit the flow of the essay. The changes made do not alter or fabricate any of the factual information about the Abingdon monument.

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