

The Civil War at 150: Memory and Meaning – Special Issue of Commonplace



The making of Civil War memory did not begin only after the war ended. Americans began shaping their memories of the war in camps, on battlefields, and in homes across the nation as early as the spring of 1861. Officers wrote battle reports and soldiers jotted down diary entries, describing their experiences and shaping the war's many histories. They picked up cotton bolls and shards of trees, bullets and buttons, and sent these souvenirs home as records of what they lived through during the war. After 1865, veterans and their families pondered these relics and thought about their wartime experiences, telling stories and sharing memories of those who had fallen in battle.

In the 1880s and 1890s, the war generation began to publish memoirs, letter collections, and other accounts while both Union and Confederate veterans' groups erected monuments on town greens and in cemeteries across the nation, creating the war's public histories. These texts and objects offered competing versions of the war's events and ideologies: the North's won cause, with its assertion of the perpetuity of the Union and the moral victory of emancipation; and the South's lost cause, with its twin themes of defeated valor and noble sacrifice in defense of states' rights. In the first decades of the twentieth

century, white northerners and southerners began to reconcile their war memories and craft a shared narrative of white, martial manhood that ignored the contributions of black soldiers and denied the centrality of slavery and emancipation to the conflict. This new narrative of reconciliation and reunion was not uncontested, but it was strong, and it endured.

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Fifty years ago Americans commemorated and celebrated the centennial of the American Civil War. On the surface, the centennial reflected a broad consensus among white Americans that had changed little since the turn of the twentieth century. The war was remembered through battle reenactments and in museum exhibits as a gallant struggle between soldiers who fought for their respective – and equally legitimate – causes. The war's consequences were minimized and often ignored entirely. Below the surface, however, cracks appeared and widened. The civil rights movement, gaining ground in the late 1950s and early 1960s, transformed the nation politically and socially. African Americans challenged the nation's collective Civil War memory by drawing its attention to the war's legacy of emancipation and Reconstruction.

As Americans have marked the Civil War's sesquicentennial over the past few years, the cultural impact of the civil rights movement on the dominant narrative has been clear. The anniversary's events have emphasized the story of slavery, emancipation, the service of black Union soldiers to the war effort, and to the cause of freedom. Although this is the most salient shift in how Americans are currently remembering and commemorating the war, it is far from the only one.

A range of historical topics that take us beyond the traditional narrative of battles and leaders can now be found in public events, museum exhibits, and classrooms from Georgia to Massachusetts to California. The scholarly output on the Civil War has burgeoned, while Civil War enthusiasts of all stripes are making use of social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to share perspectives that do not easily fit into the standard narrative of Civil War memory.

We find ourselves at a critical moment; at the sesquicentennial's midpoint, we can assess how Americans have remembered the war, and how we might commemorate it in the future. To this end we have assembled essays for this special issue of *Common-place* that examine war memory produced from the 1860s to the present, in unexpected places and with surprising results. While each essay focuses on a specific "site" of memory – battlefield parks, for example, or the published memoirs of abolitionists – what brings them together is a shared interest in challenging ingrained assumptions and established dichotomies. Like recent sesquicentennial events, they emphasize the important roles that race, slavery, and emancipation played in the war and its memory, but they also reveal that

this narrative has been and continues to be contested. The essays also suggest that the war and its memory-making did not only occur only in the “North” and “South,” but also in Kentucky and Missouri, in Wisconsin and Colorado. And it not only occurred in the pages of published letters, diaries, and memoirs, but also at veterans’ events and memorial dedications. The future of Civil War memory is currently being shaped in classrooms and movie theaters, in government agencies and cultural institutions, and by individuals across the nation.

With this special issue of *Common-place*, we hope to illuminate the myriad ways that Americans have wrestled with our Civil War past and why we continue to return to it to bring meaning to our own lives.

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