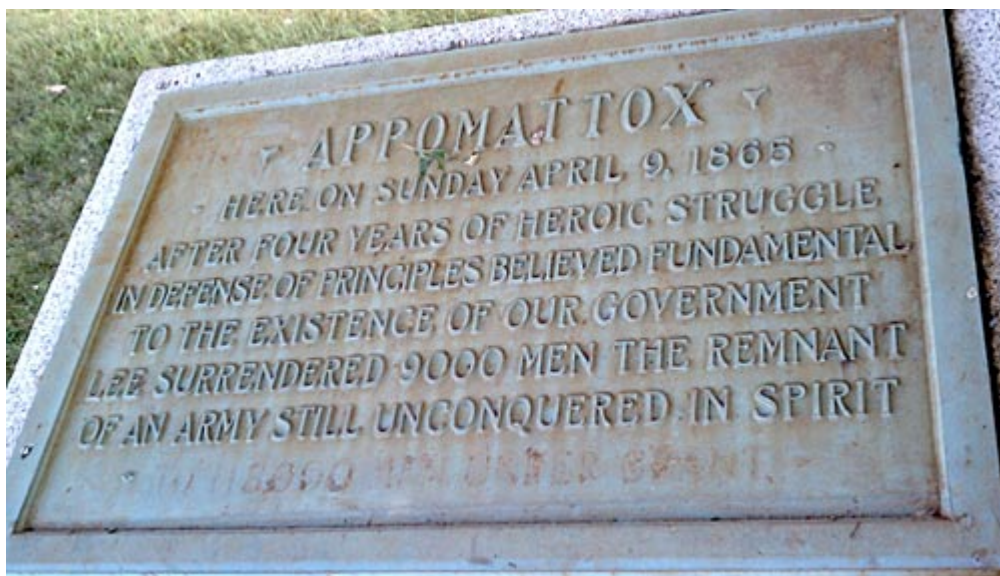


Back to the Battlefield



A Cultural Historian's View of Civil War Memorials at Appomattox, Fredericksburg, and Island Mound

When I go to the battlefields, I bring along my own Civil War.

Having grown up in San Diego, now teaching in El Paso and living in Los Angeles, and being a Civil War scholar who studies the conflict in the American West and in Canada, I operate on the margins of what most Americans think of as the heart of Civil War history and memory.

The election of Abraham Lincoln and the secession of South Carolina? The culmination of a political struggle reaching back a decade. The march of uniformed soldiers across the battlefields at Antietam or Gettysburg, and the huge numbers of injured and killed? Tragic, but ultimately smaller in scale compared with the deaths and displacements caused by the U.S. military and civilian settlers in the West, dispossessing American Indian nations and Spanish-speaking residents. The loss and recovery of U.S. territorial control in the border states? Interesting, but a faint echo of the monumental task of incorporating the vast western half of the continent into the United States.

It seems to me old-fashioned that the proper study of the Civil War requires deep engagement with the military conflict, with soldiers' motivations and regimental histories, and with statues in town squares. The current study of the Civil War is about examining how the priorities of slaveholders controlled politics, how Union and Confederate officials were bent on territorial expansion, how infrastructure and macroeconomics doomed the Confederacy, how environmental factors determined the outcome of battles, and how the war's lasting results were all played out beyond the 100th meridian. This is what the latest Civil War scholarship (mine included) suggests—and these are lessons that do not require leaving the house, or stepping outside the classroom.

My Civil War is still a national convulsion, a phenomenon of the politics, culture, and economics of slavery and territorial expansion. But those abstract ideas led to very real fights on this land.

But then there is the experience of going out and walking a Civil War battlefield.

From my vantage point in the far West, to visit a battlefield one first has to get on a plane, then rent a car, then drive out beyond the highway rings and the strip malls. For a San Diegan, the battlefield parks of the East are all so green, and so rural. Can those folks really be farming right alongside the park? And can its boundaries be marked by nothing more than a split-rail fence?

This mild sense of surprise is replaced by the shock delivered by these hallowed places in person. You are driving along and then you see it: The Deep Cut, at Manassas. Bloody Hill, at Wilson's Creek. Burnside Bridge, at Antietam. Seminary Ridge, at Gettysburg. The Crater, at Petersburg. Out of the classroom, away from the archives, standing where those soldiers stood, looking out at the rows and rows of graves, one can almost hear the drums and smell the smoke. The monuments and the flags command respect, and even the jaded can feel a bit of what draws people to the battlefields.

Despite these feelings of connection on battlefields, I don't get drawn into tactical rehashes, conversations with re-enactors, or detailed discussions of artillery specs. My Civil War is still a national convulsion, a phenomenon of the politics, culture, and economics of slavery and territorial expansion. But those abstract ideas led to very real fights on this land, 150 years ago, and I want to pay respect to their actions as well, and to observe carefully how history and memory, the fight and the cause, come together not on the field of battle itself but in the memorials on the battlefield.



When is missing text an edit, and when is it a political statement? United Daughters of the Confederacy plaque from Appomattox, 1893. Photograph courtesy of the author.

I am a cultural historian of the Civil War, gone back to the battlefields to seek out their importance, not in land and artifacts, but for how the battlefields have been marked, how memorials express how memories and meanings have been applied to these places.

In my travels to battlefields I have explored the mowing history at Petersburg, the monument to hot coffee at Antietam, the missing Robinson House at Manassas, and the shrine to Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson's arm at Chancellorsville. Here, I will consider how memorials can bring scholars back to the battlefield, and then reflect on three additional memorials I have visited, in this slowly

growing, still-continuing self-guided course in Civil War memory. I present them in the order of their construction: at Appomattox, Fredericksburg, and Island Mound.

The book that brought me to the battlefields is the art historian Kirk Savage's *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves*. As the title suggests, the book moves between formal and iconographic readings of Civil War memorials—why is it that sculptors chose to commemorate emancipation with kneeling African Americans?—and contextualized accounts of memorial design, placement, and dedications. Considering Richmond's Monument Avenue, Gettysburg's forest of obelisks, the Freedmen's Memorial, and the generic citizen-soldier memorials in many towns, Savage pointed the way to an engagement with the icons of memory that, depending on your point of view, augment or obstruct the historical vistas.

Academic and public historians have expanded their understanding of the Civil War by taking seriously the conflicts over its memory. In 1989, David Blight utilized the personal Civil War of Frederick Douglass to shape the first essay out of the material that would become his influential book *Race and Reunion*. The Civil War—"it was not a fight between rapacious birds and ferocious beasts, a mere display of brute courage and endurance," Douglass said in a Decoration Day speech in 1878, "but it was a war between men of thought, as well as of action, and in dead earnest for something beyond the battlefield." As Blight noticed, the details of battle and the gallantry of soldiers could easily overtake the larger questions of why men and women dedicated themselves to the Union or Confederate cause, and how history should judge those motivations and outcomes. As James Lundberg has written, the ever-present enthusiasm for Civil War courses is fanned by the vision of the war in Ken Burns's now-legendary 1990 PBS series that only feints toward a wider narrative.

Jim Cullen explicitly addressed the war as "a reusable past" in *The Civil War in Popular Culture* (1995), pointing toward the battlefields as a place to engage a more comprehensive history of slavery and the nation in war. In 1996, Dwight Pitcaithley, then chief historian of the National Park Service, wrote that "It is no longer acceptable to be satisfied with merely getting the facts right," as "history does not possess only one truth, but many truths ... The National Park Service has an obligation to present to the American public a history that promotes an understanding of the complexity of historical causation, the perils of historical stereotypes, and the relationship between past events and contemporary conditions." To truly engage these questions, as Pitcaithley has urged, we have to get beyond the stereotypes—regardless of how amusing Tony Horwitz's depictions of weekend-warrior re-enactors in *Confederates in the Attic* (1998) may be.



There are no photographs of Lee's surrender to Grant in the McLean House at Appomattox Courthouse; indeed, visitors today enter a replica of the house,

which was disassembled at the turn of the twentieth century. Photograph courtesy of the author.

In 1999, Congressman Jesse Jackson Jr. introduced language to charge the NPS with “documenting and describing the historical, social, economic, legal, cultural, and political forces and events that originally led to the war which eventually manifested themselves in specific battles,” including “the unique role that the institution of slavery played in causing the Civil War and its role, if any, at the individual battle sites.” The resulting NPS conference in 2000, *Rally on the High Ground: The National Park Service Symposium on the Civil War*, as well as Pitcaithley’s call in the *AHA Perspectives* and in James and Lois Horton’s *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory*, called for more research professors to engage with the NPS efforts. These efforts have borne fruit, as the official NPS sesquicentennial companion guide, with essays by many prominent Civil War historians, can attest.

As historian Kevin Levin noted in 2009, when he and I first began discussing the disconnect between scholarly and popular perceptions of the war and its causes, “I sometimes think that our colorful stories of Lee and Lincoln are more of a threat to our sense of national identity [than] no memory or connection with the war.” The public reception of the movies *Lincoln*, *Django Unchained*, and *Abraham Lincoln, Vampire Hunter* amidst the Civil War sesquicentennial commemorations has again revealed how varied—and unmoored from historical scholarship—the public engagement with the Civil War can be.

I hope for still more placards and tours, signs and questions along the trails that can point to the places where the culture and politics of the Civil War intersect directly with the battlefield narratives—and where the politics and culture of Civil War memorialization can be engaged. In the meantime, standing on the battlefield with smartphone in hand allows the visitor to have this fuller engagement with the history of Civil War memorialization and its cultural resonances. In the remainder of this essay, I analyze three battlefield markers, at times willfully ignoring the intent of these Civil War memorials in order to engage new perspectives on the Civil War through stories of subtraction, addition, and new questions in Civil War memory.

Appomattox: Editing History Before Wikipedia

Let us start at the end. The battle over the memory of the Civil War did not wait for the fighting to cease, but Appomattox is an appropriately symbolic place to consider how the war’s fights continued in words after the guns fell silent.

In a grove just west of Appomattox Courthouse, next to a small cemetery where Confederate veterans are buried, a metal plaque with raised letters calmly

explains the conclusion of the Civil War. It dates from 1893. "Here on Sunday April 9, 1865 after four years of heroic struggle in defense of principles believed fundamental to the existence of our government Lee surrendered 9000 men the remnant of an army still unconquered in spirit to 118000 men under Grant," it reads—or, rather, it once read. When it was moved to this site, the final line was chipped off, so it now reads only, "... an army still unconquered in spirit." And therein lie two stories, one imaginative and one far more prosaic.



Flags and gravestones stand as witnesses to the modern grappling with surrender. Confederate cemetery, Appomattox. Photograph courtesy of the author.

Surrenders are hard. As Robin Wagner-Pacifici noted in her study *The Art of Surrender*, there were no photographs taken of the surrender ceremony at Appomattox, at the end of "a much-photographed war." This choice reflected the agonizing work of surrender, she argued, for signatures in surrender commit the losing side to disappear: one participates in a surrender as a commander or a representative, but the act of signing or submitting makes that which you command or represent dissolve. And so it is understandably difficult to memorialize the moment when the cause is given up, when the winners and losers receive their labels. One can understand how someone who celebrates the Confederate cause might not be comfortable with naming those victors in their memorial to those who surrendered.

The erasure's incompleteness draws our attention to the edit. If the entire monument was removed, or the chipping away had been more complete, visitors would not even know something was missing. This complete erasure is common in many battles over the politics of history—the first battle in regaining such a memory is to be acknowledged as part of the historical scene.

The partially erased monument at Appomattox echoes others, and the causes they seek to hide or reveal. In 1973 in Santa Fe, an American Indian Movement activist chiseled the word "savage" off an 1868 Civil War monument "to the heroes who have fallen in the various battles with savage Indians." He defended his action as an attempt to remove the "racism and character assassination" he saw in the word. A newer plaque argues that the use of the words "savage" and "rebel" on the monument reflect the "temper" of "a period of intense strife." Such dueling plaques also now frame the Monument to the Faithful Slave erected by the United Daughters of the Confederacy in Harpers Ferry in 1931. The erasure of letters on the Appomattox plaque might suggest, then, the raw emotion still attached to the Confederate surrender to Grant.

These battles over memory occur on the ground, but their most common modern site is Wikipedia, the online, completely editable encyclopedia. You can write whatever you want on the Internet; to tell your version of events in cyberspace is far easier than doing so inside a national battlefield park. But on

Wikipedia, not just anything goes. Wikipedia, like any work seeking credible authority, has built-in standards to protect the accuracy of its pages and pass judgment on any changes. Despite being the work of mostly amateurs and enthusiasts, Wikipedia has become an increasingly accurate reference work—one where chiseled deletions, if meant to erase an accepted truth, would immediately be noticed and flagged for correction, or at least discussion.

Despite the possibility that the removed words at Appomattox were an act of vandalism fueled by a battle over Civil War memory, the truth is far less charged.

This plaque was placed on the site of the original courthouse by the United Daughters of the Confederacy soon after the building burned to the ground, in 1892. It was moved to its current location in preparation for the Civil War Centennial, when the Appomattox Courthouse buildings were reconstructed, in 1963-64. And as for the chiseling? The UDC numbers were way off—counting a very small Confederate force, and a far too large Union one—and so the last line was chiseled off “as a compromise between the National Park Service and the United Daughters of the Confederacy” in 1964, according to park curator Joseph Williams.

Here, as in Santa Fe, the editing of monuments brings us closer to the accepted truth. But the scar of that earlier, erroneous history remains.

Fredericksburg: Angels of the Battlefield

If the Appomattox case is about memory by subtraction, the sculpture at the base of Marye’s Heights at Fredericksburg demonstrates Civil War memory by addition. I toured Marye’s Heights soon after dawn one summer morning. The park was not yet technically open, but the warm light and the deserted hillside were irresistible. Birds fluttering around were all that disturbed the quiet, until I remarked aloud my surprise at this statue.

It is rather far down the road along the Stone Wall, and the statue is dramatically out of proportion with the site. An enclosure of low hedges creates a space for the monument alone, and visually cuts out some of its height when seen from a distance. The framing works much like that at the U.S. Marine Corps Memorial in Arlington, Virginia, which is best comprehended from afar, its massive reality cordoned off by circles of hedge, concrete, more grass, and then a circular road. These choices may be intentional, as both sculptures are the work of the same artist, Felix de Weldon.



The arresting, almost erotic statue of the “Angel of the Battlefield” at

Marye's Heights, Fredericksburg. Felix de Weldon, 1966. Photograph courtesy of the author.

When I first saw this statue, I was struck by what I thought I saw: one Civil War soldier reaching down to kiss another, lying in his lap. Homosexuality had no such name in the middle of the nineteenth century, but there are many recorded homosocial and homosexual relationships, from the gold mines to the battlefields and beyond. After the battle of Fredericksburg, Walt Whitman came to Washington to find his brother, who had been injured there. Whitman then spent the war years in the hospitals, witnessing and caring for wounded Union soldiers. After the death of Erastus Haskins, who had played the fife for a New York regiment, Whitman wrote addressing the dead man: "Poor dear son, though you were not my son, I felt to love you as a son,... So farewell, dear boy—it was my opportunity to be with you in your last rapid days of death—no chance as I have said to do anything particular, for nothing could be done—only you did not lay here & die among strangers without having one at hand who loved you dearly, & to whom you gave your dying kiss." With Whitman's emotions in mind, I approached the sculpture with an eye to how it added such a rarely spoken-about element to the battlefield tableau.

The statue was constructed in 1965 to commemorate the actions of Confederate soldier Richard Kirkland, remembered as the "Angel of the Battlefield" for risking his life to provide water and comfort to enemy soldiers in the no-man's-land on the second day of the battle of Fredericksburg.

A debate has erupted regarding whether Kirkland actually did this, and the extent of his heroic acts. Commentators have called the most extensive version of the story, recounted by his commander in the 1880s, "a Lost Cause fairy tale." But the power and form of the statue exist separate from the facts. Indeed, the presence of this monument does far less to commemorate Kirkland's actions than to highlight the nature of war memory at the time of the centennial, and to demonstrate how, as my twenty-first-century eyes had seen, a monument gathers a life of its own.

This centennial sculpture shows a man from the North and a man from the South locked in a life-giving embrace. As Nina Silber's *The Romance of Reunion* and David Blight's *Race and Reunion* suggest, the reunification narrative that dominated Civil War memory from the Jim Crow era until the triumph of the modern Civil Rights movement was about honoring the valor of white soldiers without much regard to which side they fought on. It steered clear of the role of slavery and the other causes of the war in order to celebrate moments that could bring the North and South together—whether a cross-sectional marriage, as was often depicted in literature, or a transcendent moment of humanitarian aid, as Kirkland displayed.

A closer look reveals that the soldiers are not lovers but enemies, men from opposite sides of the conflict—though they are brought together in an embrace. These moments may not be sexual, but they are intimate. The blood, the sweat,

the close quarters of the battlefield creates intimacies, whether desired or not. And we react to their embrace much as we might to the famous embrace of Alfred Eisenstaedt's *V-J Day in Times Square*, which has been recreated as a sculpture, John Seward Johnson II's *Unconditional Surrender*.

The Union soldier's eyes are mostly closed and his mouth begins to open, recalling the posture in Gian Lorenzo Bernini's *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, expressing the extremities of pain—or joy. With the Kirkland figure arching all the way over the stricken Union soldier and their hands clasped, the physicality of the sculpted men combine with the emotional pull to create a sense of eroticism in the mind of the viewer.

Since the centennial years, scholars of war have re-acknowledged the visceral nature of battle, the intimacy and even sexuality that might be aroused by such encounters. Nineteenth-century men might not have spoken of such feelings and experiences, and they were not the intent of the centennial commemorations and statuary. But the visceral and the sexual allusions add to the emotional impact of this statue—and thereby add something of the full human experience to our memorializations of the Civil War.

Island Mound: History Re-Emerging

For the past 149 years, no one could tell the history of the Civil War without discussing Appomattox and Fredericksburg. But the events of the Battle of Island Mound are just now reemerging, and the plaques and statues commemorating the battle reflect this sense of discovery.

The story of the Island Mound memorials begins in October 1999, when Larry Delano Coleman, pastor of the Brooks Chapel A.M.E. Church of Butler, Missouri, held a memorial service for the eight men who died in the battle. Butler is the seat of Bates County but a very small city, with a population of around 4,200 today. When you exit the freeway into Butler, the signs direct you to the home of Robert Heinlein, the science-fiction author of *Stranger in a Strange Land* and *Starship Troopers*—literally a world away from the Civil War. That is not to say that the Civil War does not hang heavily in the area, as Bates is one of the counties that was targeted in General Thomas Ewing's Order No. 11, which emptied a large swath of western Missouri in the effort to weed out Confederate sympathizers in August 1863. During the war, Butler found itself defended by such sympathizers in the state militia when "Kansas ruffians" set the town ablaze, in the back-and-forth of warfare along that border.

The Battle of Island Mound, on October 29, 1862, emerged from one of these raids. Kansas Senator James Lane commanded the 1st Kansas Colored Volunteer Infantry, a unit composed of escaped slaves from Arkansas and Missouri, to fight for freedom in western Missouri. The skirmish at Island Mound has a claim to fame as the first engagement between African American soldiers and Confederate-aligned troops. That these opposing men were Missourians, fighting

off an invasion from another Union state, demonstrates how fluid and complex the mix of allegiances were in Missouri, a state claimed throughout the war by both the Union and the Confederacy.



The statue of an African American soldier on the town square in Butler, Missouri, represents the emerging memory of the Battle of Island Mound, about a quarter-mile away. Joel Randell, First Kansas Volunteer Colored Infantry. Photograph courtesy of the author.

At the 1999 meeting, Coleman raised enough money to commission a sculpture of an armed black soldier, rising up into the fight, by the sculptor Joel Randell of Oklahoma. The Island Mound statue rises on a granite block in the courthouse square at the center of Butler, about a quarter of a mile from the battle site. There, a collection of signs installed by the Missouri Department of Natural Resources describes the path of the battle, and the plaque concludes, "Here, their bravery and determination helped our nation better understand the founding fathers' words 'all men are created equal.' Here, on October 27, 2012, we memorialize their victory and the American freedoms they fought for so bravely."

The plaque sits on a stout granite obelisk, on a small plaza with a park bench. The site looks mostly like an empty field—common enough among the preserved battlefields, but making it that much harder to conjure up the scene. As another of the Island Mound signs declares, "There are still many questions about the Battle of Island Mound, the Toothman farm and Fort Africa. Artifacts and other evidence provide clues that help to tell the story about what really happened at this site," and some of that archaeological work is ongoing.

Island Mound memorializes African American memories of the Civil War—highlighting not only the fighting of African American troops without reference to their white commanders, but also the growing acceptance of the centrality of slavery to the causes of the war, and the ways that the war would lead to emancipation for those held in loyal slave states such as Missouri as well as in the Confederacy. We have come a long way from the kneeling slave memorials that Kirk Savage analyzed.

Since there are so few actual photographs of African American soldiers, I find a certain homogeneity in the sculptures and memorials that exist: the same weapons and the same uniforms (which simply reflect Army order), but also the same facial expressions, the same postures, and some of the same facial features as well. Are the faces in *The Spirit of Freedom* (1992-98), by Ed Hamilton, at the African American Civil War Memorial in Washington, D.C., or Randell's work, based on individuals, or merely "types"?

The first memorial to African American troops was Augustus Saint-Gaudens's bas-relief sculpture dedicated to the commander of the Massachusetts 54th Infantry

Regiment, Robert Gould Shaw, on Boston Common, unveiled in 1897. The soldiers there, modeled from local members of the African American community, have individualized expressions as they march in profile in the background, behind their commander Robert Gould Shaw, who is front and center. Similarly, Ed Dwight's *Founder's Memorial* (2007) at Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri, draws upon images of the early soldier-scholars of that institution.

The movie *Glory* (1989), about the 54th Massachusetts, brought the African American soldiers' Civil War experience to prominence in American memory. And its iconography—a resolute Denzel Washington and a confident Morgan Freeman—overwhelms the soldiers these new memorials seek to recall. Perhaps we simply do not have enough images of these soldiers, nor the mental clues—Lincoln's long face, Sherman's haughty look, Grant's rounded visage—to instantly connect us to any good likeness. Anonymous white faces front so many local Civil War monuments, but somehow the anonymity of these black figures offends me more.

For the moment, a visit to Island Mound provides the chance to see both history being recovered and the memory of the site being shaped. It may take until the Civil War bicentennial to understand what the sesquicentennial emphasized, but this effort to include more of the war's participants, and to tell the story of smaller battlefields farther west than Gettysburg, demonstrates how the public memory and the new history of the Civil War is changing.

Appomattox, Fredericksburg, Island Mound—what are we to make of these three case studies? What is at stake in these readings and misreadings, these edits and additions? Every site tells its local story, but these memorials also become a window into the larger questions of the Civil War era regarding cause and consequences; the role of slavery; the geography of the war; and the participants in the conflict. Then there are the historical, political, and social circumstances of the memorial makers, and their agenda in these commemorations.

Effective war memorials engage eternal questions about human life and meaning-making. What is praised, and what is hidden? Who is included, and who is left out? Which human experiences are celebrated, and which are not? As we view memorials and battlefields, our views of courage, morality, and violence come into play. So do our thoughts about race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, about region and nation and destiny.

From the battlefield plaque to the Internet, from a descendant's pilgrimage to a tourist's vacation, a casual engagement with Civil War memorials is impossible. Memorials and battlefields ask for a response, and we give it, whether in a devotional, critical, or playful manner. Walking these grounds we are never far from the analytical and political questions that drive a national interest in the Civil War and its legacies for the United States. As we engage these memorials, we shape them with our own personal civil wars, our visions of the nation. And, during the sesquicentennial, we can share our personal civil

wars with the world.

Acknowledgments

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Further Reading

For earlier studies of memorialization on the battlefield, see Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton, N.J., 1997); Robert K. Sutton, ed., *Rally on the High Ground: The National Park Service Symposium on the Civil War: Ford's Theatre, May 8 and 9, 2000* (Fort Washington, Pa., 2000); David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001); and Paul A. Shackel, "Heyward Shepherd: The Faithful Slave Memorial," *Historical Archaeology* 37:3 (2003):138-148.

On recent Civil War memorialization events and struggles over them, see Jim Cullen, *The Civil War in Popular Culture: A Reusable Past* (Washington:D.C., 1995); Tony Horwitz, *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War* (New York, 1998); James Lundberg, "[Thanks a Lot, Ken Burns](#)," *Slate* (June 2011), and Ari Kelman, *A Misplaced Massacre: Struggling Over the Memory of Sand Creek* (Cambridge, Mass., 2013).

For my additional musings about memorialization on Civil War battlefields, see Adam Arenson, "[Manassas: The Missing Robinson House](#)," *Civil War Memory* (July 21, 2011); "[Back to the Battlefield: Field Notes from a Cultural Civil War Historian](#)," *Civil War Memory* (August 3, 2011); "[On Antietam and Hot Coffee](#)," *Civil War Memory* (August 11, 2011); "[Petersburg: Mowing History](#)," *Civil War Memory* (September 7, 2011); "[Stonewall Jackson's Arm Lies Here: What a memorial for an amputated limb can teach our society about wounded veterans](#)," *The Atlantic* (May 2, 2012).

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