

Anchoring Memory

The Growth Of Confederate Memorial Days

Editor's note: The following story was written by Eric Wilson, executive director of the Rockbridge Historical Society.

Earlier this summer, the first article in this series explored the evolving variety of memorial holidays through which Americans variously honored their Civil War and dead in the last third of the 19th century. Parts two and three will focus on how the aims, allegiances, and traditions of Rockbridge's white and African American communities both shaped and sharpened their distinct commemorative practices, over time.

New Cornerstones:

Confederate Memorial Day

In Rockbridge, the coming of Memorial Day in 1897 brought particular fanfare, along with a new courthouse. Built to replace the one that had recently burned, the edifice itself still stands at the corner of Main and Washington streets in Lexington. Staunton newspapers published envious accounts of the new building, and detailed the long list of speakers involved in the dedication: preachers, war veterans, educators, civic officials and "town fathers."

The chosen date would coincide with an increasing gravitation, through much of the South, to the observance of Confederate Memorial Day on June 3: the birthday of former U.S. Senator and CSA President Jefferson Davis. In the first decades after the Civil War, communities had gathered across a range of dates that were generally clustered in the spring, yet specifically selected to honor particular battles or locally relevant figures. Over time, the growth of regional organizations and Lost Cause traditions brought more uniformity.

Running next to the Staunton Spectator account of the dedication of the new courthouse was a more festive story chronicling "Confederate Day" in Rockbridge, with its run of spirited activities at the old fairgrounds (then off Houston Street).

To complement the more formal tones of law, politics, and wartime memory, the Stonewall Band set the stage for a "tournament" with a champion and crowned queen, as well as baseball, trap-shooting and potato races; a spinning jenny and horses' merry-go-round; and pie and apple eating contests (when "colored" contestants won the prize, they were noted as such). In what had evidently become a by-then-familiar ritual, a "sham battle" was enjoyed by all, as the old Confeds as usual captured the finely equipped blue coats."

New Market, New Traditions

On May 28, 1897 (only five days before that courthouse dedication, and surely mind-



ON CONFEDERATE Memorial Day, 1907, the VMI Band and Battalion of Cadets led a Main Street parade to the Lexington Presbyterian Cemetery, where they fired a salute and decorated soldiers' graves. (photo courtesy of W&L Special Collections)



WOMEN and men bearing flowers and Confederate flags gather at the VMI Cadet Cemetery, ca. 1900, just off the VMI parade ground. VMI Archives notes this may illustrate a Memorial Day celebration (June 3), or New Market Day (May 15), ceremonies that were at times complemented by each other or combined. (photo courtesy of the VMI Archives)

ful of its timing, and gathering luminaries), the New Market Memorial Association was formed by a group of prominent local women. Their founding history notes that "Since the glorious victory of the VMI cadets at New Market, May 15th, 1864, it has been the sad pleasure of the women of VMI to decorate the graves of those heroes. Only a few were doing this work, so it was decided to form an association and give all a chance to do them honor."

To amplify their goals, the new association's officers

"asked the Board of Visitors to let the day be a more notable one, which they granted, with directions that the following ceremonies, which are most beautiful and impressive, be carried out. That hereafter, as in the past, the 15th of May in each year be observed as Memorial Day."

For over three decades, then, May in Lexington had brought its own constellation of commemorative habits, along with some uncanny coincidences. On May 15, 1863, VMI cadets had marched as part of the funeral train for the burial of former VMI profes-

sor T.J. Jackson. A year later, to the day, the majority of those cadets would fight at New Market, May 15, 1864. Not least for that synchrony, their memorial services would be intertwined. (In later years, the date of Jackson's birth, rather than death, would more commonly draw crowds, alongside the neighboring January birthdays and holidays honoring Robert E. Lee and Martin Luther King Jr.)

As seen in Part 1 of this series, the flowering days of spring brought a spray of memorial holidays that would

Confederate Memorial Exercises Saturday

Arrangements for the observance of Confederate Memorial Day in Lexington next Saturday have been completed, and the occasion will be of interest. The formal exercises will be held at 11 o'clock a.m. in the Lee Memorial chapel at Washington and Lee, with an address by General James Buzgardner of Staunton. As on former occasions, the music will be a pleasant feature.

For two hours during the exercises academic duties at the University will be suspended. The pupils of the Lexington public schools will join the procession to the cemetery, and will carry flowers for the soldiers' graves.

Hereafter Liberty Hall Day at the University will be coincident with Confederate Memorial Day. This action was taken at a meeting of the faculty Monday afternoon.

The faculty and young ladies of the Southern Seminary at Buena Vista have been invited to take part in the exercises.

All persons who have flowers are requested to bring as many as they can, in order to decorate the graves of the soldiers. This request is made especially of county friends.

THIS LEXINGTON GAZETTE clipping from 1907 details plans for Confederate Memorial Day that year.

flourish most commonly in May, across the nation at large. Though they took different forms, and involved different types of participants, one such local gathering can be seen in the photo that accompanies this story, from ca. 1900. According to the VMI archives, the photograph may capture either New Market Memorial Day or Confederate Memorial Day (again, the dates still swirled and shifted in this period, before they honed and hardened on May 15, May 30, and June 3). Dozens of finely dressed women and men – along with an array

of flowers and Confederate flags – attend to the well-kept cemetery for the New Market cadets buried there, just down the western slope from VMI's central campus.

With the association's evident organizational push, and a rising civic tide, New Market observances and Confederate legacies more generally received further boost. Just six years later, in 1903, "Virginia Mourning Her Dead" was dedicated to watch over the cadets interred at VMI. It was sculpted by Moses Ezekiel, New Market veteran and the school's first Jewish cadet, who later designed the massive Confederate Soldiers' Memorial in Arlington National Cemetery, where he would himself be buried in 1917.

"Virginia Mourning" brought further resonance to institutional and communal ceremonies at VMI, in Lexington, and in the Lost Cause South. As a new, locally anchored addition to this expanding commemorative landscape, his allegorical bronze statue joined the 1856 statue of U.S. President George Washington, which had itself already been symbolically moved: taken by Union troops to West Virginia during its invasion of Lexington in 1864, before its return and rededication in 1866.

To further strengthen its site's situational meaning, Ezekiel's statue would be strategically relocated in 1912, assuming its current location on the parade ground. There, the seated, saddened figure would face the standing statue of Jackson, installed in 1911, the 50th anniversary of Virginia's secession and first Civil War battles. Not incidentally, this Jackson bronze was also crafted by Ezekiel, a replica of the original that still stands at the West Virginia state capitol. (VMI's copy was moved last year to its battlefield park at New Market.)

Parades and Public Authority

Gravesites and statues signal two key forms of memory, if generally not the most social or substantial ones. As post-war constraints about political speech began to loosen – as also with veterans' gatherings with military uniforms or symbols – a range of community expression continued to grow, particularly in the 1890s.

If the 1897 New Market Association had mourned a scarce enthusiasm and commitment, it was returning in force within a decade. Cadet-centered ceremonies coupling both New Market Day and Memorial Day brought different processional forms, and

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graveside rituals, with turn-of-the-century VMI newspaper entries highlighting the different forms of rifle salutes for their distinct occasions.

But by 1907, the public parades and events on Confederate Memorial Day had grown substantially. There, too, the VMI band leads the way, heading South up Main Street to the Presbyterian Cemetery. Detailed in the Lexington Gazette, that parade now followed the battalion of cadets with the faculty and students of Washington and Lee, the Lexington Fire Department, and several camps of Confederate Veterans and Sons of Confederate Veterans. Faculty and young ladies of Southern Seminary were featured in preliminary exercises, public schools were notably closed so that children could bring flowers to decorate graves, and a broad public appeal was made to help decorate graves: "the request is made especially of county friends."

Notably, 1907 was also the year when Washington and Lee announced that "Hereafter Liberty Hall Day at the University will be coincident with Confederate Memorial Day." Not incidentally, this was also the centennial anniversary year of President Lee's birth in 1807, honored widely and broadly. All these growing alliances — whether within institutions, or up and down Main Street — carried their own weight. Their new affirmations of power helped to raise a visible, ritual standard in Rockbridge, as increasingly through the Jim Crow South.

And yet, for all that assembly of authority, African American memorial services here had continued to stake their own ground just days earlier, publicly observing National Decoration Day on May 30, 1907. These cultural observances also were also coupled with a concert and fundraiser - jointly held with one

of the town's chief Confederate heritage groups.

Caroline Janney, the University of Virginia's director of the Nau Center for Civil War History, has written in "Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation" how memorial forms are neither uniform, nor stable. They vary across local circumstances, tested across racial as well as regional lines. As this range of Rockbridge examples similarly shows, the sites, the significance, and the standards of collective memory are inevitably re-visited, re-negotiated, re-placed: over time, and between groups.

Framed by these multiple, local options for Rockbridge residents, a parallel item in the 1907 Lexington Gazette complained that no consistent commemorative date for Confederate Memorial Day had been settled in Virginia, nor "all through the South."

Yet a final telescoping of the following years helps to see how those core terms and common dates were increasingly patterned, and publicly promoted through the first third of the 20th century. (See the June 3, 2020, issue of the News-Gazette for an extended account of Memorial Day 1937, as written for its author's high school English class.)

In 1917, the Richmond Dispatch looked to Lexington to broadcast to its wide readership the growing range of participants and audiences drawn to the ceremonial shrines of Lee's and Jackson's tombs. Familiarly now, after the lead of women's and veterans' groups, the VMI band and cadets and W&L "student battalion" joined the Main Street parade from Lee Chapel to the gravesites of Jackson and other veterans. The firing of "minute guns" echoed the day's thunderous nature, noted for the arrival of "a severe hailstorm, with stones the size of walnuts," before the heavens would clear to shine on the year's parade.

On June 3, 1920 (likely the first large-scale public gather-



MOSES EZEKIEL'S Virginia Mourning Her Dead statue was dedicated at VMI in 1903 to honor the cadets who died at the 1864 Battle of New Market, where the sculptor had fought as a cadet, himself. In 1912, the monumental bronze would be moved more centrally to face the statue of Stonewall Jackson, also sculpted by Ezekiel, and installed on the parade ground in 1911. (photo by Eric Wilson)

ing since the first local blasts of the 1918 Influenza pandemic), descendants were characterized as spiritual "pilgrims, many of whom tenderly placed flowers on the graves of those two Southern chieftains [Lee and Jackson]." The parade also featured the arrestingly modern "Lexington Fire Company, with truck, tractors, and big guns. Music was furnished by a special choir, who rendered Confederate and national airs."

This Staunton News-Leader account echoed that bridging of military and political alliance and allegiance from the outset: "Confederate Memorial Day opened appropriately in Lexington, today, Jefferson Davis' birthday. The military features were especially impressive, with Veterans of the Civil war, the Spanish American War, and the World war." The inclusion of men who fought under the stars and stripes (some whom may have previously fought for the Confederacy, themselves, decades earlier, even), suggests a national trend toward regional rather than racial "Reconciliation."

That sense of "Reunion" — imaged in the iconic "handshake of the Blue and Grey" — has been interpreted by many as one of the triumphs of the Lost Cause. But a number of community-centered studies, and explorations beyond veterans' reunions on celebrated battlefields have increasingly questioned the scale and consistency of that message.

Memory, after all, is shaped across many sites, through many means. Museums and archives play their role, in what they collect and display, how they organize and publicize. Beyond the familiar hallmarks of monumental sculpture, other visual and performing arts bring their emotional and memorable influence no less, as a 1907 Decoration Day concert at First Baptist church will show, in Part 3 of this series. Textbooks, indeed, function as their own memorial practice, continuing to evolve through this period, as through all eras, fronting some histories while obscuring others.

For other explorations of public memory and the histories of local holidays, see Rockbridge-History.org/rhs-essays.



IN 1897, the dedication date of the new Rockbridge County courthouse was chosen to coincide with Confederate Memorial Day. Formal ceremonies were complemented by races, pie-eating contests, a baseball game, pageants, and a "sham battle" where the "old Confeds as usual captured the finely equipped bluecoats." (RHS Collections)

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