MEMBERS of the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows, Lexington Lodge No. 2461, gather on Memorial Day, May 30, 1917, outside their large two-story building that formerly stood at the junction of Jefferson and North Main streets. Note the instruments, flags, ribbons, and banners signaling their readiness to parade. (courtesy of First Baptist Church, Lexington)

The Reach Of Memory:

A Look At Lexington's African-American Memorial Day Traditions

Editor's note: This is the final article in a three-part series about the evolution of local Memorial Day traditions; the first two were published on June 9 and Aug. 18, 2021. It is written by Rockbridge Historical Society Executive Director Eric Wilson.

Since 2017, the streets of downtown Lexington have staged two large community gatherings, bracketing one commemorative weekend in January.

Depending on who's participating – or who's watching from the sidewalks or in the cemetery – the events and their aims might be variously understood as complementary, counter-pointed, or contradictory.

This coupling might seem relatively new here, centered around three notable birthdays that happened to be constellated within one week. In 1983, Congress passed legislation declaring the third Monday in January to be a federal holiday honoring Martin Luther King Jr. In Virginia, the state holiday observing Robert E. Lee's birthday began in 1889 – the joint tribute to Thomas J. Jackson was added in 1904 - before the General Assembly ended the state holiday in 2020, establishing Election Day as the new civic alternative.

And yet, while some may praise or protest the turns of "innovation" or "cur-

See **Memory**, *page B4*

THIS IS THE SCORE to the three-act choral cantata, "Jephthah and his Daughter," composed by Phineas Hull in 1883 and performed for a Memorial Day fundraiser at First Baptist Church in 1907, its themes highlighting national military triumph, family loss and spiritual hope. The titular daughter is one of the five heroines of the Order of the Eastern Star (one of the local Black Masonic associations for women).

THE CHARITY NIGHTINGALES (studio of Michael Miley, ca. 1920s, Library of Virginia) was a Lexington singing group that likely contributed to the 1907 Memorial Day performances. Along with other family members and friends, Eliza Bannister Walker sits in the front (third from left). Three men in the back (Perry Robinson, left; Albert Morrison, second from right; and William Dock, right) can also be seen in the top photo seated with their instruments.

FEDERAL MEMORIAL DAY.—Tuesday last was generally observed throughout the United States as a memorial day among the friends of the North during the war. In this city it was observed by the colored population. They formed in procession, men, women, and children, and marched to the National Cemetery, near the city limits, and strewed flowers and evergreens over the graves of the Union soldiers there buried.—The Post-office was closed from one to four o'clock, P. M.

ONLY A FEW YEARS after Appomattox and Emancipation, the 1871 Staunton Spectator notes the leadership of local Black residents in decorating the graves of the 753 Union soldiers buried in a military cemetery east of Staunton.

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THE "EMANCIPATION DAY" parade in Richmond on April 3, 1905, commemorated the 40th anniversary of the arrival of both white and Black Union troops to liberate and occupy Richmond, one week before the war's end. (Library of Congress).

Colored Memorial Services

The colored Knights of Pythias, Odd Fellows and Courts of Calanthe held memorial services last Friday afternoon, May 29th. The members of the various orders met at Drummond's Hall and from that point marched in regalia to the Randolph Street M. E. Church, where formal religious services were held. Addresses were made by Rev. J. L. Brown, R. R. Alexander, Marcellus Lewis and Dr. A. W. Pleasants and a paper was read by Miss Lucy Styles. The music by the choir was a feature, under the leadership of Ernest Pettigrew.

The services at the church concluded, the march was taken up to the colored cemetery, where the graves were strewn with flowers. Addresses were made by Rev. J. L. Brown and R. R. Alexander.

At the conclusion of the services the members of the various orders marched back to the hall.

THE LEXINGTON GAZETTE chronicles events organized by Lexington's Black leaders and organizations for Memorial Day, 1908, ahead of Confederate Memorial Day, June 3.

Memory—

continued from page B1

rency," there is a much longer and shifting history than commonly realized here. And even in this small but culturally distinctive town, a diverse range of memorial gatherings have been shaped by the particularities of its local histories. Exactly 100 before Lexington's first Martin Luther King Jr. Community Parade, a striking photograph provides one glimpse of how such tributes kicked off other commemorative weekends, long ago.

The 64 men pictured on the top of page B1 were members of Lexington's African-American Grand United Order of Odd Fellows, Lodge No. 2461. Backed by U.S. flags – and bearing their fraternal banner and ribbons and instruments – they gathered in annual, ritual tradition on Memorial Day, May 30, 1917. The group was photographed outside their meeting hall at the junction of Jefferson and Main streets. No longer standing, the large two-story wooden building can be seen in a few surviving photographs, capped by a distinctive cupola, that rose midway between the spire of First Baptist Church, and that of Washington and Lee's chapel.

Four days later, on Confederate Memorial Day in 1917, even larger, largely white gatherings would march up Main Street to the cemetery on the southern edge of town, rather than the African-American cemeteries on its eastern slope, featuring their own heritage groups, charitable orders, religious speeches, and festive events.

This article is the final installment of a series illustrating the evolution of local Memorial Day traditions in Lexington and Rockbridge, largely centered in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The series' opening issue offered a broader overview of the often-overlooked origins and ever-evolving traditions of Memorial Day since the Civil War. The second feature honed in on the local and regional hardening of Confederate Memorial Day traditions around June 3 (the birthday of Jefferson Davis) as the gravesites of Lee and Jackson became a more and more popular shrine for visitors from afar.

This final piece spotlights local observances by Lexington's Black residents.

When?

In the decades after the Civil War, different Southern cities and states drew from a wide range of dates to commemorate figures and events that mattered most locally, or most profoundly, to their heritage and politics. Dates of battles and notable birthdays, political pronouncements and even final defeats all marked different calendars. Well before the January push to honor Lee and Jackson, local conditions in Rockbridge had steered such events toward May 15: the uncanny conjunction of Jackson's burial here in 1863, and VMI's participation in the Battle of New Market, the following year.

Apart from the vehicles of Confederate memory, however, an array of commemorative dates provided other inviting choices to a broader sweep of American families, churches, and veterans groups. In 1868, Union veterans leader Gen. John Logan had designated May 30 as a National Day of Remembrance. But other battles (the July victory at Gettysburg, or April surrender at Appomattox) provided their own logical military cues, when flowers had also arrived in bloom.

Some African-American remembrances were more community-specific. March 3 marked the arrival of Union troops in Charlottesville, where "Liberation and Freedom Day" was proclaimed a city holiday in 2017. Illustrating another locally distinctive date, a 1905 photo shows a large parade on Richmond's "Emancipation Day": April 3, when the capital of the Confederacy fell, and United States Colored Troops (USCT) helped lead Union forces into the burning city.

Locally, the closest dates of the similar significance might be June 11-14, when the 1864 arrival of Union forces under Gen. David Hunter brought the opportunity for many free and enslaved Black residents in the area to depart with the army train or take more independent initiative to leave. But that signal moment in local history has not garnered notable commemorative sway.

More broadly, Black Americans – Southern, Northern, and increasingly Western – often celebrated Jan. 1 to recognize the arrival of the Emancipation Proclamation. Juneteenth would slowly gain momentum, spreading from Texas, with its own blend of wartime witness and cultural celebration. And over the course of the 20th-century, July 4 parades would become nationally preeminent, as large Memorial Day observances tended to temper.

Where?

To be sure, Rockbridge County's population of Black citizens was smaller than many others; with the liberation of Richmond, 30,000 residents became freedmen, according to one military account. Nor is there a notable cluster of gravesites holding the remains of native Union soldiers, or others who died in battles nearby.

By comparison, a federal cemetery two miles east of Staunton invited postwar observances for its U.S. soldiers. Notably, ceremonies were led by the town's "colored population," whose neighboring freedmen's community had come to be known as Uniontown. An 1871 account in the Staunton Spectator noted the "procession of men, women and children [who] marched to the National Cemetery, near the city limits, and strewed flowers and evergreens of the graves of the Union soldiers there buried."

Indeed, none of the 60-plus Rockbridge-born Black men who fought for the Union appear to be buried here, their lives lost elsewhere in battle, or lived elsewhere after the war, as upcoming articles by Cinder Stanton and Larry Spurgeon will detail.

And yet, the warrant of "National Memorial Day" (distinguished in local papers from the neighboring and implicitly Confederate "Memorial Day") provided the occasion for Rockbridge area Black churches, fraternal orders, and families to use May 30 as a day of collective remembrance, both for patriotic and spiritual tribute, as well as more personal, graveside visitations.

For Lexington's African-American community and descendants, no local cemetery memorial ground was dedicated to this campaign. Those would grow ahead, on different terms, through interments of World War I and World War II soldiers and veterans, in Evergreen Cemetery and other plots across the county and in Buena Vista.

But on that chosen date for remembrance, a common ritual path does develop. With the collective pull of national narratives, local conditions and traditions offered their own opportunities to negotiate degrees of cultural autonomy and authority. Annually on "National Memorial Day," speeches and ceremonies tended to launch events at First Baptist Church and Randolph Street Methodist Episcopal Church. From there, many local Black residents would walk east up Green Hill, to and past "the old burying ground" at the corner of Washington and Lewis streets and, in time, onward to Evergreen Cemetery. In 1960, Lexington Town Council named its access road New Market Place; 60 years later, City Council renamed it as Evergreen Place, in 2021.

Who? And How?

Some of these published accounts note the roles of specific individuals. In 1908, "formal religious services" included a sermon by the Rev. J.L. Brown, complemented by a paper read by Miss Lucy Styles, choral music conducted by Ernest Pettigrew, and an address by prominent physician Dr. A. W. Pleasants Sr.

Tellingly in these contexts, Pleasants led a group of fellow citizens before City Council the next year, "with the request that proper steps be taken to turn over to them the old colored cemetery on Washington street, that it may be properly cared for and beautified."

Still of evident care and concern in 1909, the "old burying ground" remained not only a focus of ritual community attentions, but of civic assertion and activism. Funding and political will would be vital for the work of community memory. "The matter," the newspaper reported, "was continued for further investigation."

Beyond the range of individuals and families that would gravitate downtown, the Odd Fellows Lodge was also complemented by other fraternal and charitable groups, such as the Knights of Pythias and the Order of the Eastern Star (which offered its own Masonic association for women). Funding by these groups, no less than their organizational acumen, would prove important in these events, and their frequent notice shows their vitality in this era.

As with most memorial and festival traditions, music brought its own emotional chords. Several of the sharply dressed Odd Fellows seated on the ground with their instruments were also members of the celebrated local choral group, the Charity Nightingales: Perry Robinson, Albert Morrison, Perry Robinson, Albert Morrison and William Dock (who ran a local Tea Room on Main Street, in a building owned by the Odd Fellows).

Another member of Nightingales was the multi-talented and ever-formidable Eliza Bannister Walker, singer and poet, educational leader and political activist. She wrote and sold hymn-like poems to raise money to build an orphanage and elderly home for local Black citizens; they may well have been sung in communal events like this.

The Nightingales likely appeared in the most elaborate of these known performances, the fundraiser that capped National Memorial Day, the night of May 30, 1907. "Jephthah and his Daughter," an operatic, Biblically based three-act cantata, was staged in full choral force performed at First Baptist Church. Specific appeals were made and priced for both Black and white audiences. Tickets were advertised for purchase at McCrum's, one of Lexington's best-known stores.

Strikingly, the event was announced as a joint fundraiser not only for the "colored cemetery," but also the Jackson Memorial Hospital, opened that same year by the United Daughters of the Confederacy. This may seem a curious conjunction – another of the parallels and counterpoints that chart community development. Then again, the musical narrative of a sacrificed daughter – variously known as Adah (or in the score, Iphigeneia, that tragic mythic echo further underscoring the cost of her father's national military triumph) – seems its own strange figure from the past.

Interestingly, Adah is also one of the noted heroines for the Order of the Eastern Star, perhaps its own spur in choice to local organizers. Whatever audiences may have sensed on that warm May night, various modes of memorialization – whether focused on an old cemetery, a newly named hospital, or Biblical history and music – would seem to have hovered, hauntingly, together.

How communities remember is never simple, and rarely as quiet as reflection often seems. Community memory is a complex function that extends well beyond who organizes or participates in those acts and assertions, and who is individually or collectively remembered, or honored. Where and when these events are enacted, what is featured, how these various elements are highlighted, inherited, and evolved, all of these are critical elements, if sometimes less visible in a more singular, monumental moment.

Lexington and Rockbridge have been distinctive if hardly unique in their own commemorative commitments that have evolved through four centuries. As with most all historical understandings and community identifications, they best operate with a more patient ear and respect for the local circumstances, conditions, and experiences that ground future conversations, priorities and decisions.