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War and Remembrance: Walter Place and Ulysses S. Grant

Article submission for *Primary Source*

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Introduction

In 1862-1863, General Ulysses S. Grant conducted military operations in the state of Mississippi, culminating in the siege and eventual surrender of the city of Vicksburg. During part of this time, Grant's wife, Julia, took up residence at Walter Place in Holly Springs, Mississippi. In the years after the Civil War, Walter Place became known not just as an antebellum home, but also as a place with a strong connection to Grant and his family during the Civil War. When Mike and Jorja Lynn purchased the property, they began collecting Grant-related items for display in the home, including modern and historic decorative artifacts, cartes-de-visite, and ephemera. In 2013, Jorja Lynn donated this collection to the Ulysses S. Grant Presidential Library at Mississippi State University Libraries for display and preservation purposes. This article will address the historical background of the collection, the preservation and access plans in place, and the complexities of Civil War memory that create a more nuanced portrait of how the Civil War is represented in the South.

Historical Background

In late November of 1862, Union forces under the command of Ulysses S. Grant began advancing through north Mississippi en route to Vicksburg. This advance brought Grant and his troops into the town of Holly Springs, Mississippi, where Grant established his headquarters on November 29, 1862, quickly moving on from there to Oxford, Mississippi, by December 4.¹ As Grant's advance into Mississippi continued, Holly Springs became an important supply and

¹ John Y. Simon, introduction to *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant, Volume 6: September 1-December 8, 1862* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977), xii-xv; John Y. Simon, introduction to *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant, Volume 7: December 9, 1862-March 31, 1863* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1979), xii-xv.

munitions depot.² Holly Springs would prove to be a place in Mississippi with lasting connections not only to General Grant and Union forces under his command, but also to the Grant family.

Because of the supplies for Grant's advancing forces stored at Holly Springs, the town became a perfect target for Confederate troops intent on stopping—or at least slowing down—the Union campaign against Vicksburg.³ Early on the morning of December 20, 1862, Confederate cavalry under the command of General Earl Van Dorn rode into Holly Springs, catching the Union garrison there by surprise and capturing the town with relatively little resistance.⁴ The Confederates carried off what supplies they could and destroyed the rest, resulting in a major setback for Grant's ambitions to push his army further into Mississippi and the eventual dismissal from the service of the Union commanding officer at Holly Springs on that day.⁵

This disastrous event for the Union advance would have been enough to establish Holly Springs firmly in General Grant's memory, but the personal connections tied to that event went even deeper. The General's wife, Julia, arrived in Holly Springs from La Grange, Tennessee, in early December of 1862. According to her memoirs, Theodore S. Bowers, an officer on Grant's staff, had arranged for Mrs. Grant, her son Jesse, and her slave Jule to stay at a home in Holly

² Ulysses S. Grant, *Memoirs and Selected Letters*, eds. Mary Drake McFeely and William S. McFeely (New York: Library of America, 1990), 286.

³ Michael B. Ballard, *Vicksburg: The Campaign that Opened the Mississippi* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 121.

⁴ J.G. Deupree, "The Capture of Holly Springs, Mississippi, Dec. 20, 1862," *Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society* 4 (1901): 54-56; *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (4 series, 70 vols. in 128 vols., Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series One, 29.1: 515 [hereafter cited as *O.R.*, with all citations referring to Series One].

⁵ Ballard, *Vicksburg*, 126; *O.R.* 29.1: 515.

Springs. She refers to this home as “belonging to a Mr. Walker.”⁶ However, further investigation indicates that she may have been mistaken in referring to the owner as “Walker.” According to an account published in 1901 by J.G. Deupree, a member of Van Dorn’s raiding party, Mrs. Grant was actually staying in a home in Holly Springs owned by Harvey W. Walter.⁷ In addition, a contemporary news account from the *Memphis Daily Appeal* one week after the raid on Holly Springs identifies Mrs. Grant’s place of residence in Holly Springs as the home of “Col. Walter, who is now on the staff of Gen. Bragg.”⁸

As Van Dorn’s troops made their way to Holly Springs, Mrs. Grant received notice from her husband that his men had completed repairs to the railroad between that town and Oxford, and that she could now come to meet him there. Mrs. Grant, her son, her slave, and her close friend Anna Rankin Hillyer (the wife of William S. Hillyer, aide-de-camp to Grant) set out for Oxford on December 19, 1862. After their arrival in Oxford, they learned that just a short time before Colonel T. Lyle Dickey had brought word to Grant that Van Dorn and his men were moving north. By the next morning, the news had arrived in Oxford of Van Dorn’s raid on Holly Springs.⁹

Some accounts—such as the 1862 *Memphis Daily Appeal* article and Deupree’s reminisce—state that Mrs. Grant was present at the Walter home during the raid, but her own memoir and the unpublished account of Mary Hillyer Clarke indicate that she was not in Holly

⁶ Julia Dent Grant, *The Personal Memoirs of Julia Dent Grant [Mrs. Ulysses S. Grant]*, ed. John Y. Simon (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1975), 105.

⁷ Deupree, “Capture of Holly Springs,” 58.

⁸ “Grenada Correspondence: Result of the Surprise at Holly Springs,” *Memphis Daily Appeal*, December 27, 1862.

⁹ John Y. Simon, *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant, Volume 7: December 9, 1862-March 31, 1863* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1979), 75, note 1; Julia Dent Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 107.)

Springs when Van Dorn and his men arrived.¹⁰ Mrs. Grant did lament the loss of certain property: she learned while in Oxford that the carriage she left in Holly Springs had been burned and the horses captured by the Confederate troops. However, she also learned that some Confederate officers had approached the Walter home in search of her during the December 20 raid. When she was not found at the home, the officers sought to take her baggage, but they were prohibited from doing so by “the kind and noble lady” who was in charge of the home.¹¹ This was likely Mrs. Pugh Govan, who was the caretaker of the Walter home during the war. In addition, a claim filed with the Southern Claims Commission in 1874 by Cato Govan, a former slave of the Govan family, references Mrs. Govan’s actions to preserve two trunks owned by Mrs. Grant during the raid on Holly Springs.¹²

The Collection

Although the Civil War raged on for over two full years after the events of December 1862, Walter Place survived. The home continued to be owned by the family of H.W. Walter, even after his death in a yellow fever epidemic in 1878. One of Walter’s daughters, Irene, and her husband Oscar Johnson used the house as a second home and undertook renovations on the house around 1901. Upon the death of her husband Oscar, Irene sold the home, only to re-purchase it years later. Irene’s heirs oversaw another renovation of the house, including changes made to the grounds. By the 1990s, Mike and Jorja Lynn had purchased the home.¹³ The Lynns embraced the rich history that the house represented, including its connection to the Grant family. The Mike and Jorja Lynn Ulysses S. Grant collection consists of over one hundred items

¹⁰ John Y. Simon, *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant, Volume 7: December 9, 1862-March 31, 1863* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1979), 24, unnumbered note.

¹¹ Julia Dent Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 107.

¹² John Y. Simon, *Personal Memoirs of Julia Dent Grant*, 117, note 36.

¹³ Robert Mottley, “Holly Springs, Mississippi,” *Colonial Homes* 20 (1994): 91.

from the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries, including political cartoons, cartes-de-visite (CDVs), cabinet cards, busts, lithographs, figurines, commemorative plates, political memorabilia, and books. According to Mrs. Lynn, the collection began when a relative gave her husband a framed Grant lithograph for Christmas. The Lynns then began to collect materials relating to Grant to put on display in the drawing room of Walter Place. The collection highlights the life of Grant as a general and president, as well as containing materials relating to the Civil War in general, such as framed lithographs of Confederate generals and Confederate and Union figurines. Many of the lithographs, as well as the *Harper's Weekly* political cartoons, were professionally matted and framed, while the CDVs were placed in antique frames. The collection also includes a number of commemorative plates, issued after Grant's funeral in 1885, in a variety of styles and colors, most decorated with Grant's famous words "Let us have peace."

The collection varies in terms of content, consisting of imagery which conveys Grant positively as the hero of the Civil War, yet the political cartoons provide commentary on scandals in his presidency. Many of the lithographs depict portraits of Grant, conveying the strength of his role as commander of the Union Army or President of the United States. Others depict Grant and his family, either posing in their drawing room or on horseback riding through the streets of Washington, DC. Still others present Grant with his fellow Union officers, such as William T. Sherman, Ely S. Parker, and Orville E. Babcock in a council of war.

Upon its arrival at the Ulysses S. Grant Presidential Library, archivists immediately cataloged this collection. They measured and described items, giving each one a unique identifier. They also undertook conservation efforts to clean and preserve the materials in the collection. When this work was complete, Presidential Library staff placed the materials on

display in the Grant Library Exhibit hall for a reception honoring Mrs. Lynn and for public viewing.

Civil War Memory

The idea that the savior of the Union, Ulysses S. Grant, would become the main focus of an antebellum home in the heart of the old Confederacy seems antithetical to what is known about historical memory. Town squares across the South are adorned with monuments to Confederate soldiers, and annual pilgrimages celebrate the supposed splendor of the Old South. Antebellum homes are open to visitors, and hoop-skirt wearing docents lead tours through the luxurious mansions once owned by some of the wealthiest Americans during the mid-nineteenth century. Often overlooked is the story of the enslaved persons held in bondage on these plantations and the occupation of Union forces in the cities. In these towns, the Civil War is often remembered with pageantry and fondness for the Confederacy; however, towns such as Holly Springs, Natchez, Port Gibson, and others across Mississippi also benefit from their connection to Grant. Rosalie, the antebellum home located atop the bluff in downtown Natchez, Mississippi, is often billed, erroneously, as Ulysses S. Grant's headquarters. Port Gibson, Mississippi, located between Natchez and Vicksburg, bills itself as "The Town Too Pretty to Burn," a statement attributed to Grant.

The unique nature of Walter Place, a home in which the Grant family indeed did reside while in Mississippi, shows that the town of Holly Springs, and the Lynns in particular, were willing to embrace the legacy of the former Union commander. By collecting artifacts and ephemera relating to Grant, the Lynns assembled a collection which sought to memorialize the former general and president in one of the most unlikely areas of the country to do so.

Historians and sociologists have begun to embrace the importance of historical memory and material culture that helps to convey the collective memory of people, places, or institutions. “We can never know what objects mean to individuals;” sociologists Barry Schwartz and Howard Schuman have written, “we can only know how these objects relate to one another and to institutional structures. We thus enter a new age in which archives, statues, and other material objects are no longer the instruments but the embodiments of memory.”¹⁴ Objects have been referred to by sociologists as “Commemorative symbolism.” Schwartz and Schuman note that, “the job of the commemorative agent is to designate moral significance by lifting from the historical record the events that best exemplify contemporary values.”¹⁵

The commemoration of Ulysses S. Grant began in earnest even before the war had ended. Indeed Grant’s reputation during the nineteenth century made him the most popular American of his day. According to historian Joan Waugh, “Ulysses S. Grant became the embodiment of the American nation in the decades after the Civil War.”¹⁶ Waugh states that Grant’s legacy, in the years immediately after his death, “symbolized national reconciliation as well as embodying the Union victory.”¹⁷ Americans’ desire to heal the wounds of the Civil War often looked to Grant and his legacy as an example of the Union Cause. “When citizens looked at Grant’s Tomb,” Waugh writes, “they saw a legacy preserved. More than that, they desired and expected that legacy to be preserved for future generations as well.”¹⁸ However, that legacy was not to last throughout the twentieth century. Lost Cause historians consciously challenged Grant’s legacy

¹⁴ Barry Schwartz and Howard Schuman, “History, Commemoration, and Belief: Abraham Lincoln in American Memory, 1945-2001,” *American Sociological Review*, 70, no. 2 (April 2003), 184.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 185.

¹⁶ Joan Waugh, *U. S. Grant: American Hero, American Myth* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 2.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 303.

in an effort to downplay the successes of the Union Army and to salvage the legacy of Grant's principal antagonist, Confederate General Robert E. Lee. To this day, Vicksburg residents decry Grant and the damage he inflicted upon the Gibraltar of the Mississippi in the summer of 1863. Yet his visit to the city in 1880 was warmly received by the populace of Warren County, as the town's black and white citizens alike cheered the former President's arrival in the city.¹⁹ "No living person in the postwar era symbolized both the hopes and the lost dreams of the war more fully than Grant," Waugh writes.²⁰

The presence of a collection of commemorative ephemera and artifacts as was compiled by the Lynns and displayed in Walter Place represents both the unique nature in which Grant has been remembered in the century since his death, as well as the unique position the Walter home has held in Holly Springs. It is an antebellum mansion owned by slave-owners which has become most well-known for its association with the conquering Union General.

¹⁹ "Grant in Vicksburg," *Salt Lake Herald*, April 14, 1880; "Gleanings from the Mails: Gen. Grant in the South," *New York Times*, April 29, 1880.

²⁰ Waugh, 307-308.