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“A Company of Gentlemen”: Confederate Veterans and Southern Universities

In April 1911, James Metts received an unexpected letter. Written by history professor Joseph Gregoire de Roulhac Hamilton, the letter informed him that the Board of Trustees of the University of North Carolina had decided to award bachelor’s degrees to all students who had matriculated at the university, but had abandoned their studies to fight for the Confederacy, and invited Metts to that year’s commencement exercises, where he would be honored with other former student-soldiers. The letter arrived fifty years after he left campus to enlist in the Wilmington Rifle Guards, one of the first companies raised in North Carolina after the attack on Fort Sumter. Wounded and captured at Gettysburg, Metts had spent over a year at the Johnson’s Island POW camp in Ohio before being exchanged and rejoining his regiment in December 1864. Surrendering at Appomattox Courthouse, Metts returned to his native Wilmington, where he established himself as a merchant. An active participant in Confederate veterans’ organizations, Metts did not know what to make of the letter or the university’s decision to grant him a degree. Having studied at Chapel Hill for less than a year, he did not believe that he deserved a diploma. “Having been at the University only a short time and not having gone through the course,” Metts wrote back to Hamilton, “I do not feel I am entitled to it.” Ultimately, Metts did not make it to graduation that May, though 31 students of the “War Classes” received their diplomas in person.¹

¹ James I. Metts to Hamilton, 26 April 1911, UNC Papers Commencement 1911, SHC-UNC; James Isaac Metts Papers, SHC-UNC; William E. Mickle, *Well Known Confederate Veterans and Their War Records* (New Orleans: William E. Mickle, 1915), 171; *University Record* (1911): 50-51.

Between 1911 and 1914, four major Southern universities – those of North Carolina, Virginia, Georgia, and Alabama – conferred honorary degrees upon former students who had abandoned their studies to join the Confederate military. Some 400 Confederate veterans received this tribute a half century after their enlistment, during a critical moment in the development of Lost Cause commemoration, of Southern Progressivism, and of Southern higher education. This essay explores how the decision to honor former Confederates at these four state universities not only reflected the desire to recognize the patriotic sacrifices of aged Confederate veterans, but also helped to solidify a political order based on white supremacy and progressive social reform. It argues that these graduation ceremonies brought together three generations of Lost Cause advocates: the veterans themselves, who both created and personified the ideology, Progressive educators, politicians, and heritage activists, who saw value in honoring them, and the students, who would carry the creed into the Civil Rights era.

The University of North Carolina initiated this form of Lost Cause commemoration, conferring degrees on its septuagenarian former students in 1911. The University of Virginia followed suit in 1912, with the University of Georgia and the University of Alabama following in 1914. Two factors distinguished these four schools among Southern universities and colleges. First, they had, on the eve of the Civil War, among the largest enrollments in the country – only Harvard and Yale boasted more students than UNC or Virginia. In 1860, the University of North Carolina had 450 students, while Virginia had approximately 400. Georgia and Alabama had considerably fewer students, with 123 and 120 enrolled in 1860 respectively, but these figures still put them in the upper echelon of universities in the nascent Confederacy. Second, (and possibly more significantly), each of these four schools remained open for some part or all of the war. Most Southern men's colleges and universities shut their doors in 1861, as students left en

masse to join the Confederate ranks. This included large state universities like the University of South Carolina and the University of Mississippi, both of which shuttered for the duration of the conflict. These four universities that remained open did so facing declining enrollment, as students abandoned their books for the rifle, and outside pressure. The University of Georgia suspended operation in September 1863, its few remaining students called up for militia duty, and Alabama remained open until the war's final month, when Union forces took Tuscaloosa and set campus buildings aflame. Virginia and North Carolina remained open throughout the war (though North Carolina did close between 1871 and 1875).²

The idea of granting degrees to Confederate student-soldiers appears to have originated with J.G. de Roulhac Hamilton. A North Carolina native, Hamilton had studied under William Archibald Dunning at Columbia University before taking a post at Chapel Hill in 1906. Elevated to the rank of department head within two years after his arrival, Hamilton would become a fixture at UNC for more than four decades. Today, he is best remembered as the founder of the Southern Historical Collection, one of the most important archival repositories for Southern history, and as the author of *Reconstruction in North Carolina* (1914), a richly documented book

² Ervin Jordan, *Charlottesville and the University of Virginia in the Civil War* (Lynchburg, Va.: H. E. Howard, Inc., 1988); Wayne Flynt, "Southern Higher Education and the Civil War," *Civil War History* 14 (1968): 211-225; James B. Sellers, *History of the University of Alabama* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1953), 1:226-262; F.N. Boney, *A Pictorial History of the University of Georgia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 45; Michael David Cohen, *Reconstructing the Campus: Higher Education and the American Civil War* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 6; *American Almanac* (Boston: Crosby, Nichols, Lee & Co.: 1861), 232-235.

which offered scholarly legitimacy to a racist “Lost Cause” interpretation of the era. The building that currently houses the History Department at UNC is named for him.³

Hamilton raised the issue of granting diplomas to Civil War-era students in a faculty meeting in the autumn of 1910. Receiving his colleagues’ unanimous approval, Hamilton approached the University’s Board of Trustees, who likewise assented to the plan. Hamilton spent most of the next two months trying to identify and locate eligible former students. He found the enrollment records from the Civil War era woefully incomplete – many records had been lost when the school closed during Reconstruction – and tracking down student-soldiers fifty years later profoundly challenging. “The task was therefore very difficult,” Hamilton complained, “and it was sometimes necessary to write fifteen letters concerning one name, and in all over a thousand were sent out.” In the end, Hamilton identified 106 eligible former students. In February and March 1911, Hamilton formally invited these men to attend commencement and receive their degrees. Aiding Hamilton in his efforts was a young undergraduate, E. Merton Coulter, who would, like his mentor, become a leading apologist for the Lost Cause. More than a dozen years later, Coulter would pen *College Life in the Old South*, inspired in part by his experience as Hamilton’s assistant in this project.⁴

³ John Herbert Roper Sr., “Ransack Roulhac and Racism: Joseph Grégoire de Roulhac Hamilton and Dunning’s Questions of Institution Building and Jim Crow,” in *The Dunning School: Historians, Race, and the Meaning of Reconstruction*, ed. John David Smith and J. Vincent Lowery (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013), 179-201.

⁴ J.G. de Roulhac Hamilton, “The Return of the War Classes,” *University of North Carolina Magazine* 29 (1911): 16; Fred Arthur Bailey, “E. Merton Coulter and Southern Historiography,”

In their correspondence with Hamilton, some veterans said that they did not deserve a degree. Some, like James Metts, claimed that they had not attended the university for long enough to warrant the award. Most, however, graciously accepted. One former student summed up a common sentiment: “Although I do not deem myself worthy of this honor, nevertheless I appreciate the action of the university beyond measure.” Another echoed this opinion, claiming that while he had “done nothing to deserve this honor[,] I certainly will do nothing to disgrace it.” Many of the former students wrote to Hamilton that, while they were deeply honored by this recognition, they could not attend commencement because of age and ill health. One claimed that his “extreme feebleness” would likely prohibit his attendance. Another informed Hamilton that “it is altogether probable that I will not be able to be present to receive the degree. I have recently had an attack of LaGrippe [flu] and it has shattered me considerably. I am over 70 years of age, and must begin to be prudent.” Another wrote that “I am afraid that all whom I knew are now dead. My room mates are all dead ... This being the case I would be very lonely at the reunion.”⁵

in *Reading Southern History: Essays on Interpreters and Interpretations*, ed. Glenn Feldman (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001), 34-36; “Random Observations and a Thought Continuation of the Petty and Personal Reminiscences of the Author,” E. Merton Coulter Papers, UGA; E. Merton Coulter, *College Life in the Old South* (New York, Macmillan, 1928).

⁵ B.S. Johnson to Hamilton, 10 March 1911, Jno. T. Rankin to Hamilton, 5 March 1911, William M. Davies to Hamilton, 10 April 1911, T.S. Webb to Hamilton, 27 April 1911, John E. Donelson to Hamilton, 2 February 1911, UNC Papers Commencement 1911, SHC-UNC.

UNC's commencement in 1911 inspired other institutions to follow suit. UVA's President Edwin Alderman announced a plan to honor former students in the autumn of 1911. As a former student, professor of education, and president at UNC, Alderman remained deeply connected to his old institution. According to his colleague Louis Round Wilson, Alderman had fallen under the spell of Cornelia Phillips Spencer as an undergraduate. A historian and journalist, Spencer had lived through the Civil War in Chapel Hill and had become the community's leading proponent of the Lost Cause in its aftermath. In college, Alderman also formed live-long friendships with Charles Brantley Aycock and Locke Craig, future Democratic governors of North Carolina, who crafted a particularly Southern version of progressivism that paired white supremacy, black disenfranchisement, and segregation with an expansion of public schools and road construction. One of the South's foremost educational reformers, Alderman believed in a progressive vision of higher education, molding UVA into a modern university, transforming "an aristocratic University to a democratic University" that would use its expertise to benefit "a great region entering into an industrial democracy." During his long tenure as UVA's president, Alderman helped to inscribe the Lost Cause onto Charlottesville's landscape, giving dedicatory addresses at statues of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson.⁶

Positive media coverage of the graduations at UNC and UVA appear to have inspired Georgia and Alabama to similarly honor their student-soldiers. The *Raleigh News & Observer* described UNC's commencement as "perhaps the most unique, and certainly the most inspiring

⁶ Sarah Brandes Madry, *Well Worth a Shindy: The Architectural and Philosophical History of the Old Well at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill* (Bloomington: iUniverse, 2004), 49-51; Michael Dennis, *Lessons in Progress: State Universities and Progressivism in the New South* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press), 217-239.

event in the whole history of the University,” while the Richmond *Times-Dispatch* called UVA’s the “Greatest Commencement in the History of the Institution.”⁷ In April 1913, Frank Boland, an Atlanta physician and Georgia alumnus, wrote to Clark Howell, the influential editor of the *Atlanta Constitution* and a member of the University of Georgia’s Board of Trustees. Boland inquired whether the University should consider granting honorary degrees to student-soldiers, noting that “several Southern colleges have taken this course.” Howell endorsed the idea, passing the idea along to the Board’s chairman. After briefly considering the matter, in June 1913 the Board approved granting “diplomas to such students now living as were in attendance upon the University from 1861 to 1865 and who left the University to enter the Confederate Army, or who were deprived of their diplomas because of the closing of the institution during the war between the states.” In March 1914, the University of Alabama announced that it too would honor its former students at the upcoming graduation.⁸

As at UNC, the task of documenting and locating former students a half century later proved challenging. While UVA and Georgia followed UNC’s model of trying to contact former students via a postal campaign, Alabama placed advertisements in local newspapers and Confederate veterans’ publications to alert former students to the upcoming commencement exercises. Not all former students, however, were invited to join the commencement festivities.

⁷ Raleigh *News & Observer*, 1 June 1911; Richmond *Times-Dispatch*, 7 June 1912.

⁸ *Alumni Bulletin of the University of Virginia* 5 (1912): 231; Frank K. Boland to Clark Howell, 4 April 1913, UGA Board of Trustees, Correspondence & Reports, UGA Special Collections; Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 17 June 1913, UGA Special Collections; Matthew C. Edmonds, “Honorary Degrees for the Alabama Corps of Cadets,” *Alabama Heritage* 90 (2008): 19.

At Alabama, they qualified the offer of honorary degrees to those “who were soldiers in the War between the states” who had “subsequently lived a worthy and honorable life.”⁹ A larger omission was small number of students who halted their studies to fight for the Union. Unlike many of his classmates, George H. Williamson did not receive an invitation to UNC’s graduation because the Cincinnati native stopped his studies to enlist in the U.S. Navy.¹⁰ Shortly after UVA granted degrees to its Confederate student-soldiers, a Staunton newspaper editorial noted that Virginia’s universities “have paid much attention to collecting the data in regard to those of their alumni who served in the Confederate service, but they have almost entirely overlooked their sons who were in the Federal forces.” The UVA alumni magazine responded to the editorial, admitting that “The News must confess that no complete list has been made of the University alumni who saw service in the Union army. The roster of Confederate veteran alumni has been carefully compiled; the names of those who fell on the field of battle or died in hospitals have been inscribed on the bronze scroll on the south face of the Rotunda.” In the spirit of sectional reconciliation, it admitted that “There must have been many former students who could not in honesty follow the Stars and the Bars but responded to another call, equally as patriotic and heroic.” However, the university made no effort to identify its Union student-soldiers or confer

⁹ Jordan, *Charlottesville and the University of Virginia in the Civil War*, 104-105; Edmonds, “Honorary Degrees,” 18-19.

¹⁰ Adam H. Domby, *The False Cause: Fraud, Fabrication, and White Supremacy in Confederate Memory* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2020), 48.

degrees upon them. Indeed, none of the four universities attempted any kind of recognition for Union veterans, preferring to forget that any of their students fought in blue.¹¹

Across the South, state university graduations formed an important part of the political calendar, with governors and legislators in regular attendance. The presence of dozens of former Confederates only amplified their political significance. On all four campuses, commencement exercises stretched over several days, providing multiple opportunities to recognize, celebrate, and reflect on the lives of the aged former student-soldiers in attendance. One journalist noted that the Georgia graduation would attract “many prominent [figures] in public life ... governors and former governors, congressmen and senators.”¹² In Charlottesville, young and old graduates were treated to four full days of commencement exercises, including speeches, concerts, and banquets, including lengthy orations about the University during the Civil War and the life and career of Robert E. Lee, notable in part because the general’s son, Robert E. Lee, Jr., was among those former students honored. In addition to a diploma, UVA’s honorees received a bronze medal, inscribed with a passage from the Roman poet Horace.

¹¹ *Staunton Daily News*, 14 October 1913; *University of Virginia Alumni News*, 29 October 1913; William B. Kurtz, “‘Neglected Alumni’: UVA’s Union Soldiers and Sailors,” <http://naucenter.as.virginia.edu/blog-page/676>.

¹² *Atlanta Constitution*, 7 June 1914.



Figure 1. Bronze Medal, Reunion Letter, and Printed List, UVA Special Collections. The quotation is from Horace's Odes 4:9. One modern translation reads: "Not afraid to die for his dear friends or native land." *Loeb Classical Library*, 33: 246-247.

Despite their age, many observers claimed that the former students regained their youthful energy when they returned to campus. At UNC, Hamilton noted the “happiness which their faces radiated” when walking through their old haunts. While the university had grown in the intervening half century, the core of campus remained the same: Old East and Old West, New East and New West, Person Hall, Gerrard Hall, Smith Hall, and South Building all dated back to their college days. For some, it marked the first time that they had seen many of their former classmates since they had left school. One former Alabama student noted that “nothing would afford me greater pleasure than to meet with and be with my boyhood’s [sic] associates, some of whom I have not seen since ... we were hustled out of our beds and marched out of town” to confront the approaching Yankees. A journalist noted that the past half century had left the 25 former Alabama students “stooped and with whitened hair,” who nonetheless “proudly marched to the front as their names were called.”¹³

On all four campuses, graduation speakers mixed advice to the young graduates with commentary on the current political climate and praise for the wizened former Confederates. In Athens, Colorado Senator Charles S. Thomas contrasted the civic virtue of the Confederate generation with what he viewed as the greed and self-interest of the younger generation. A Georgia alumnus and Confederate veteran himself, Thomas urged the new graduates to emulate the 18 former rebel soldiers graduating alongside them. In Tuscaloosa, graduates heard from a series of speakers, including the local United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) division president, who told them that “any time you may falter ... turn your eyes to past and behold again the lives and the conduct of the man who went out from this institution in the ’60s.” To this, the University’s president George Denny added that the veterans’ “love and loyalty” would

¹³ Edmonds, “Honorary Degrees,” 20-21.

inspire the “imagination of youth.” At UVA, Professor Lewis Chamberlayne praised the veterans, claiming that “no man with blood in his veins could help wanting to join in honoring these men. . . . We younger men speak from the heart . . . when we pay reverence and honor to you, our fathers and the friends of our fathers, who fought through the war and rebuilt the shattered South.” Yet, Chamberlayne argued, this graduation was also about looking forward. “We are living right now in a South that is new and in [the] process of reconstructing itself.” He embraced the Progressive political ideas, including women’s suffrage, that would draw the South “more and more strongly into the mighty current of the life of the world.”¹⁴

The most significant commencement speech may have been given at Chapel Hill, where Woodrow Wilson, the former Princeton University president and recently elected governor of New Jersey, addressed the graduates. A native of Staunton, Virginia, Wilson had long articulated Lost Cause sympathies in his academic writings, though his assessment of the Confederacy demonstrated greater complexity and nuance than most of this ideology’s proponents.¹⁵ Wilson touched on many topics during his address: the willingness of young men to enter politics, the differences between the Republican and Democratic parties, and the evils of big business. Only in the speech’s final moments did Wilson turn his attention to the aged former Confederates.

¹⁴ *Atlanta Constitution*, 18 June 1914; “Honorary Degrees Given to Old Confederate Cadets,” *Crimson White*, 13 May 1914; *Alumni Bulletin of the University of Virginia* 5 (1912): 288-294.

¹⁵ Gary Gerstle, “Race and Nation in the Thought and Politics of Woodrow Wilson,” in *Reconsidering Woodrow Wilson: Progressivism, Internationalism, War, and Peace*, ed. John Milton Cooper (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 94-96; Kristofer Allfeldt, “Wilson’s Views on Immigration and Ethnicity,” in *A Companion to Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Ross A. Kennedy (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 154-156.

“Gathered here today is a company of gentlemen,” Wilson noted, “who did something that could by no conceivable chance benefit their private fortunes.” He praised their “self-abnegation” and “self-sacrifice,” arguing that the young graduates should look to their example of civic sacrifice.¹⁶ Local newspaper editor Josephus Daniels, who would two years later become Wilson’s Secretary of the Navy, praised the speech, noting that “Governor Wilson held up their example of devotion to conviction and patriotic loyalty to the State as an example to the young men of this generation to be equally as loyal to their convictions and to serve their generation in the way that the State demanded.”¹⁷

¹⁶ *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Arthur S. Link et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), vol. 23: 104-110.

¹⁷ Josephus Daniels, “The ‘Old Boys’ and the Spirit of Progress,” *News & Observer*, 1 June 1911.

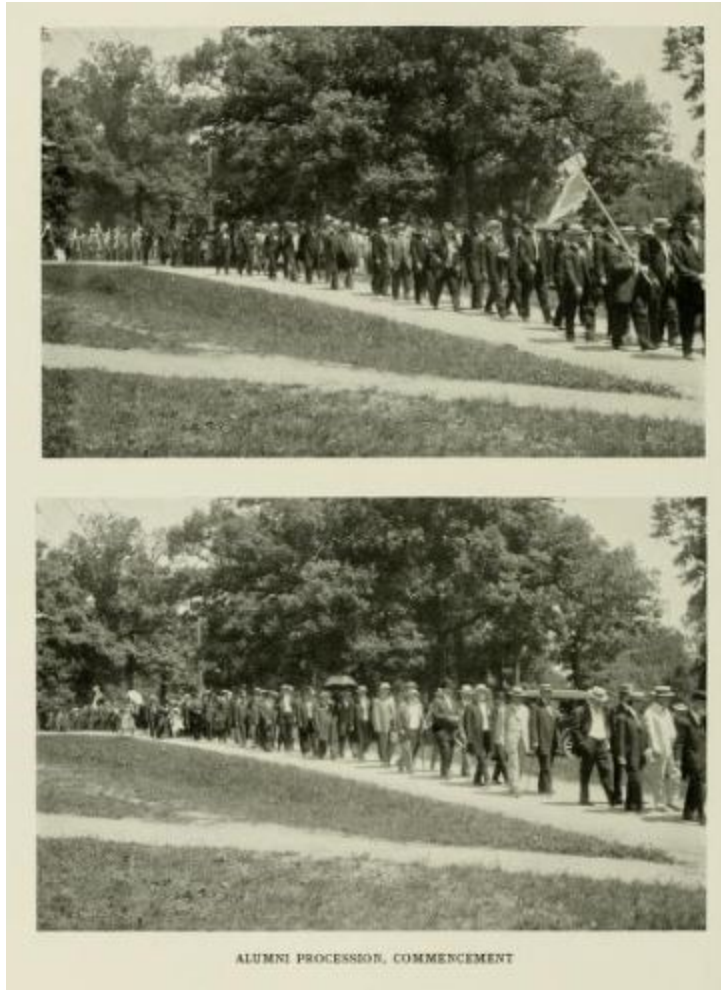


Figure 2. *Yackety Yack* (1912), 148.

On three of the campuses, the ceremonies honoring Confederate student-soldiers coincided with the introduction of new monuments to the Lost Cause. The most modest of these was at UVA, where President Alderman announced that the University would erect a marble plaque on the chapel to “commemorate these sons of the University, both those who came not back and those who are our guests today.”¹⁸ In Chapel Hill and Tuscaloosa, plans for much

¹⁸ *Alumni Bulletin of the University of Virginia* 5 (1912): 328. I have not been able to find documentation that the promised plaque was ever installed.

larger monuments were unveiled. At UNC, commencement attendees saw a model of a proposed soldiers' monument, a statue that would eventually receive the nickname "Silent Sam". The idea had originated with state chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, which had passed a resolution in 1907 to erect "on the campus of the State University ... a monument to the students and faculty, who went out from its walls in 1861 to fight and die for the South."¹⁹

Josephus Daniels praised the idea: "these women wish to have some memorial out under God's clear sky that will be seen by every visitor and that will be the first vision of every freshmen as he enters college to serve as an ideal and inspiration."²⁰ According to the student newspaper, it would commemorate the "more than 1000 University men" who fought "in the great struggle between the States." Designed by Canadian John Wilson, the bronze sculpture depicted "a young soldier, the soft felt hat pushed back from his brow, enthusiasm in every line of his face." On the granite pedestal, a bronze plaque showed the image of "a woman – the state entreating a young student to take up arms for his commonwealth."²¹ To erect the statue, the University administration lobbied the student-soldiers for donations. The largest donation, one tenth of the statue's price, came from Julian Shakespeare Carr, who had attended UNC from 1862 to 1864 before joining the Army of Northern Virginia. After laying down his arms at Appomattox Courthouse, Carr became one of North Carolina's leading industrialists, Democratic power

¹⁹ *Minutes of the Twelfth Annual Convention of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, North Carolina Division* (Newton, N.C.: Enterprise, 1909), 72-77.

²⁰ Josephus Daniels, "The 'Old Boys' and the Spirit of Progress at the University," *News & Observer*, 1 June 1911.

²¹ "Monument for Campus," *Tar Heel*, 1 April 1911; "To Be Erected at Chapel Hill," *News & Observer*, 3 March 1911.

brokers, and Lost Cause advocates. When Carr dedicated the monument two years later, commentators explicitly linked it to “the granting of degrees in 1911 to the living students who left the University for the battle front.”²²

²² “The Soldiers’ Monument Unveiled,” *University North Carolina Alumni Review* 1(1913): 184; Domby, *The False Cause*, 15-16, 46-50; John K. Chapman, “Black Freedom and the University of North Carolina, 1793-1960,” (Ph.D dissertation, University of North Carolina, 2006), 209-212

MONUMENT FOR CAMPUS.



Figure 3. *The Tar Heel*, 1 April 1911.

While the veterans at UNC only got to see a model of the proposed monument when they received their degrees, at Alabama the dedication of the Confederate monument occurred during the commencement ceremony. Erected on the site of the old rotunda, destroyed in the 1865 Union raid, the monument consisted of a granite boulder with a bronze plaque describing the contribution of Alabama students to the Confederate military effort. As had been the case at Chapel Hill, the UDC played a prominent role in the creation of the new monument. In 1911 Alabama Division UDC President Marielou Cory proposed building a memorial to “the boy-soldiers who defended the city of Tuscaloosa.”²³ As well as financing the memorial, the Alabama UDC had been an early supporter of granting degrees to veterans, receiving the praise of University President George Denny for initially bringing the issue to the attention of the Board of Trustees.²⁴ Unveiled immediately after the commencement exercises, the boulder was formally presented to the University by Cory’s successor as UDC Division President, Elizabeth Burfort Bashinsky, who praised the aged veterans’ nobility while decrying the “Yankee devastation” and the “vindictive spirit of the ruthless invader.” President Denny adopted a more conciliatory tone in accepting the monument, claiming that “it matters not who was vanquished on the battlefield,” but rather that “the verdict of history will be based on moral values.”²⁵ These new installations superficially resembled the ubiquitous monuments that had been erected across the South over the previous twenty years. Yet, in one aspect, they marked a significant departure from the mainstream of Lost Cause commemoration. Whereas most monuments had been

²³ Euba Eugenia Dubose, “The History of Mount Sterling,” *Alabama Historical Quarterly* 25 (1963): 350.

²⁴ “Honorary Diplomas by the University of Alabama,” *Confederate Veteran* 22 (1914): 185.

²⁵ Edmonds, “Honorary Degrees,” 22-23.

dedicated to the Confederate dead, these new monuments explicitly recognized living Confederate veterans.

Of the four commencement exercises, the United Daughters of the Confederacy played its most prominent role at the University of Alabama, where they took credit not only for the monument, but for the idea of honoring former student-soldiers. In their report to the national organization, the Alabama UDC chapter reported that “the University [of Alabama] consented to confer honorary diplomas upon its war students, living and dead, who, because of their service to the Confederacy, were prevented completing their course of study” at the “request of the President of the Alabama Division [of the UDC].”²⁶ At the other graduations, the UDC had a significant unofficial presence. In Chapel Hill, UDC representatives collected funds for the proposed student-soldier monument. One of the South’s foremost Lost Cause advocates, UDC Historian-General Mildred Lewis Rutherford attended the University of Georgia’s commencement in 1914. An Athens native and resident (her father taught at the university), Rutherford saw the need both to honor aging Confederate veterans and to instruct the youth in the “true history” of the South. As the principal of Athens’s Lucy Cobb Institute, Rutherford trained generations of young women, daughters of Georgia’s elites, to revere the Old South. As the UDC’s Historian-General, she railed against textbooks that she believed did not paint the Confederacy in a favorable light.²⁷

²⁶ *Minutes of the Twenty-first Annual Convention of the United Daughters of the Confederacy* (Raleigh: Broughton, 1915), 337-338.

²⁷ Sarah H. Case, “The Historical Ideology of Mildred Lewis Rutherford: A Confederate Historian’s New South Creed,” *Journal of Southern History* 68 (2002): 599-628; Fred Arthur

These graduation events brought together three generations of Lost Cause advocates: the elderly Confederate veterans, the politicians and university administrators who organized and orchestrated the ceremonies, and the graduating students who would carry on the tradition well into the twentieth century. Each of these generations used these commencement events for its own purposes and reflected a broader transition in Lost Cause commemoration. By 1913, the rolls of the United Confederate Veterans had started to wane, declining from its apex of 80,000 members in 1903. When thousands of Confederate veterans attended the Blue-Gray Reunion at Gettysburg in 1913 to commemorate the battle's fiftieth anniversary, most of them admitted that it marked the twilight of veterans' reunions. With the decline of veterans' organizations, descendant organizations such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy (and, to a lesser extent, the Sons of Confederate Veterans) assumed the primary responsibility for the Lost Cause's mantle. By 1914, membership in the UDC eclipsed that of the UCV, symbolizing that the torch had been passed to a new generation.²⁸

Bailey, "Mildred Lewis Rutherford and the Patrician Cult of the Old South," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 78 (1994): 509-535; Grace Elizabeth Hale, "'Some Women Have Never Been Reconstructed': Mildred Lewis Rutherford, Lucy M. Stanton, and the Racial Politics of White Southern Womanhood, 1900-1930," in *Georgia in Black and White: Explorations of the Race Relations of a Southern State, 1865-1950*, ed. John C. Inscoe (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994), 173-201.

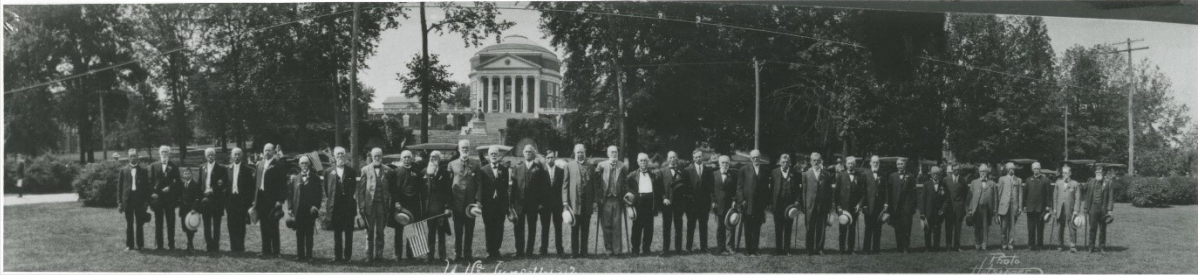
²⁸ Caroline E. Janney, *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 180, 266-269, 282-283; Gaines M.

For the student-soldiers, these events marked the capstone of their careers as living symbols of the Confederacy. It allowed them to meet with former classmates and comrades in arms one last time. For some, the commencement amounted to one final Confederate reunion. Like the well-documented Gettysburg reunion in 1913, many attendees knew that these commencement exercises marked the end of a long series of reunion events.²⁹ Yet they also recognized that these events were different in nature. “Let’s remember that this is not a Confederate reunion,” noted one former soldier at UNC, “but the occasion of our graduation. We come here to visit the University and get our degrees and don’t let us spend the time on a war that is past, but on a University of the present and what we can make of her in the future.”³⁰

Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 104-112; David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 7-15, 383-391; Karen L. Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 49-92; Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980), 139-181; Catherine W. Bishir, “Landmarks of Power: Building a Southern Past, 1885-1915,” *Southern Cultures* 1 (1993): 5-45.

²⁹ Thomas R. Fligel, *War, Memory, and the 1913 Gettysburg Reunion* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2019). Several of the student-soldiers also attended the Gettysburg reunion, including Julian S. Carr.

³⁰ Hamilton, “The Return of the War Classes,” 17.



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Figure 4. Confederate veterans at the 1912 University of Virginia Commencement.

Politicians and university administrators saw the commencement exercises as an opportunity to impress Lost Cause values upon the next generation, and as vehicles for cementing the Southern Progressive agenda. Woodrow Wilson, Josephus Daniels, Edwin Alderman, George Denny, and J.G. Hamilton shared a broadly common vision of the Southern past and the Southern future, one that could be cemented through the use of Confederate symbols. They were aided in this quest by the leaders of Confederate heritage groups, such as Elizabeth Bashinsky and Julian Shakespeare Carr, who saw these events as opportunities to further inscribe Lost Cause memory onto the campus landscape.

For the graduating generation, the significance of the experience is somewhat harder to gauge. Speaking on behalf of his peers, UNC graduate William T. Joyner said that “we are glad that the class ... will go down in history linked with the names of these patriots and heroes ... We are glad that we have had this opportunity of personal touch with these sons of the University who have been tried in the fire and not found wanting.” Joyner claimed that this

experience would fundamentally transform his class. “The past and the present meet today on the threshold of the future,” he noted, “bound together by this golden link of gray.”³¹ Raised to venerate the Confederacy and its veterans, many of these graduates helped to maintain the Lost Cause for the next half century. Many of them enlisted in 1917 to fight in the Great War, including Joyner, who abandoned a lucrative law practice for the uniform, rising to the rank of Major in the 45th Field Artillery. After the war, he remained in the North Carolina National Guard until 1932. He also actively participated in Democratic politics, becoming one of the party’s moderate voices for maintaining segregation throughout the 1950s and early 1960s. By the end of the 1960s, Joyner, along with his protégé Jesse Helms, left the Democratic party because of its stance on school desegregation. To be sure, Joyner’s commitments to military service and white supremacy were typical for Southern white men of his generation, and not all of those who graduated alongside former Confederates became Lost Cause proponents. For instance, after graduating with honors from the University of Georgia in 1914, Aaron Bernd became a progressive newspaper editor in Macon, who defended the NAACP and participated in the Commission on Interracial Cooperation.³² While the commencement ceremonies probably did not have a lasting legacy or influence on most young graduates, they did represent an important transitional moment in Lost Cause memory.

³¹ “The One Hundred and Sixteenth Annual Commencement,” *University of North Carolina Record* 93 (1911): 60-61.

³² William Thomas Joyner Papers, SHC; William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 64-65; Sarah Gardner, *Reviewing the South: The Literary Marketplace and the Southern Renaissance, 1920-1941* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 126.

A century after granting degrees to former Confederates, all four universities are wrestling with their legacies of slavery, white supremacy, and the place of Confederate iconography on campus. In 2005, UNC erected the Unsung Founders monument, a memorial to “the people of color bound and free—who helped build the Carolina that we cherish today.” Intended as a site for racial discourse and healing, the monument took the form of a black granite table, supported by bronze sculptures representing antebellum African American laborers who had worked for the university, and circled by five squat stone stools. Dwarfed by the nearby Silent Sam monument, the Unsung Founders sat in uneasy juxtaposition to the looming Lost Cause icon. Many visitors mistook the monument for a picnic table.³³

³³ Domby, *The False Cause*, 166.



Figure 5. Unsung Founders monument.

In 2014, UVA's President's Commission on Slavery and the University recommended that the university partner with other institutions to document how they had exploited and profited from enslaved labor. Over the next six years, the resulting consortium -- Universities Studying Slavery (USS) -- has provided a network for scholarly discussion across more than four dozen institutions, including some in the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Canada. UVA has also begun construction on a Memorial to Enslaved Laborers, a monument that will made a substantial footprint on the campus landscape. Located near the Rotunda, the monument will be formed two concentric granite rings, the larger of which will bear the "the known and unknown names of the

estimated 5,000 persons who worked on grounds.”³⁴ In 2015, Prof. Hilary Green started the Hallowed Ground project to document history and legacy of slavery on the University of Alabama’s campus. Intended to educate the university community and the public, the project includes both a digital archive and a campus walking tour, which includes a stop at the UDC Memorial Boulder.³⁵

Not all universities responded to these initiatives with equal enthusiasm. The University of North Carolina repeatedly rebuffed calls by students, faculty, and activists to remove Silent Sam, citing a state law that protected historical monuments.³⁶ In 2015, renovations at UGA’s Baldwin Hall led to the discovery of 105 antebellum skeletons. DNA testing identified the bodies as predominantly African Americans, presumably enslaved people who had lived and worked on campus. In 2017, UGA administrators rejected a plan put forward by faculty from the History and African American Studies departments to create a working group to study the University’s history of slavery. The following year, it erected a memorial plaza to the enslaved next to Baldwin Hall, which many in the University and African American communities found inadequate. “The university needs to acknowledge its role in slavery and the ways it continues to uphold white supremacy by not acknowledging that history making amends for it,” noted one

³⁴ Lynn Rainville, “Roots and Remembrance: The Role and Legacy of Slavery in Higher Education,” *Phi Kappa Phi Forum* 99 (2019): 14-17; “Memorial to Enslaved Laborers at the University of Virginia,” <https://www2.virginia.edu/slaverymemorial/design.html>.

³⁵ James F. Brooks, “Heritage, Refracted,” *Public Historian* 41 (2019): 7-9; Hilary N. Green, “The Hallowed Grounds Project,” <https://hgreen.people.ua.edu/hallowed-grounds-project.html>.

³⁶ Domby, *The False Cause*, 1-3.

protester. “This gesture, while nice, is not enough. It’s not going to bring justice to the descendants of the folks who are buried here.”³⁷

Culminating in the murder of 32-year-old protester Heather Heyer, the violence of the August 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville brought new energy to the debate over Confederate iconography and the legacy of slavery on campus. In Charlottesville, university administrators took down the bronze plaques on the Rotunda honoring the Confederate dead, and in Chapel Hill, students and activists toppled Silent Sam from his pedestal. UGA reconsidered its decision about studying slavery on campus, appointing a 21-member taskforce in November 2019 and joining USS the following month. In Tuscaloosa, students, faculty, and staff held open discussions about the myriad ways in which slavery, the Confederacy, and white supremacy informed the campus landscape. “One of the things is being honest about its past, being honest about its campus, being honest that not everyone experiences campus the same,” Hilary Green observed. “And if they are truly invested in diversity, equity and inclusion, they will consider the experience of those who feel harmed by this landscape and develop new building names, moving stuff that will help there because we are the UA campus of today. We are not defined by the

³⁷ Tiffany Stevens, “Resisting History?” *Scalawag*, 4 March 2019, <https://www.scalawagmagazine.org/2019/03/uga-slavery/>; Eric Stirgus, “Amid Criticism, UGA Looks Closer at its Slave History,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 5 October 2019, <https://www.ajc.com/news/local-education/midst-criticism-uga-begins-exploring-its-slave-history/aOPvDvUq2B4efDzhxHaxkI/>; Stephan Barr, “Baldwin Hall Memorial Dedication Overshadowed by Protesters,” *Red & Black*, 16 November 2018, <https://www.redandblack.com/uganews/baldwin-hall-memorial-dedication-overshadowed-by-protesters-including-an-athens/>

campus of the past, so by really listening to its current stakeholders, how they experience this campus, and developing solutions according to them. But it requires talking to students, asking what they want, and then coming together.”³⁸ In June 2020, in the aftermath of George Floyd’s murder, the nationwide Black Lives Matter protests, and the removal or toppling of Confederate statues across the country, the University of Alabama Board of Trustees voted to remove the UDC Memorial Boulder erected in 1914. However, its removal, warned Hilary Green, did not mean that the university had reckoned with its Confederate past and the legacy of slavery and racism. “This is the start, not the end, of the conversation,” she noted.³⁹

Southern universities’ decision to confer degrees upon Confederate veterans more than a century ago sheds light on the current debates about the monumental landscape and calls for reparations. As historian Fitzhugh Brundage has argued, monuments and memorialization say more about the people who erected them than about those they purportedly honored. University administrators understood that, by conferring degrees on Confederate veterans and commemorating the event on the landscape, they were signaling to future generations their conception of the role of higher education and the proper structuring of Southern society. At the nadir of race relations, they believed that they owed former Confederates a debt. Now,

³⁸ Brynna Mitchner, “Professor Emphasizes Need for Conversations Regarding Confederate Monuments,” *Crimson White*, 9 March 2020, <https://cw.ua.edu/64520/top-stories/professor-emphasizes-need-for-conversations-regarding-confederate-monuments/>

³⁹ Chris Joyner, “As monuments tumble, are we ‘erasing history? Historians say no,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, 11 July 2020.

universities in the United States and around the world need to reassess their debts and how they can repay them.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 1-11. The author would like to thank Hilary Green and Cecelia Moore for their assistance with this article.