Another “Lost Cause”
The Irish in the South Remember the Confederacy

by David T. Gleeson

In 1877 a group of prominent Irish Americans met in Charleston to commemorate the Irish Volunteers in the Confederate States of America. The original volunteers, Company C of the Charleston Battalion, later Company H of the 27th South Carolina Infantry, had participated in all the major battles around Charleston between 1861 and 1864 before being sent to the trenches of Petersburg, Virginia, in the summer of 1864. Confederate and Union dead side-by-side, the siege of Petersburg, June 1864–April 1865, courtesy of the Collections of the Library of Congress.
In 1877 a group of prominent Irish Americans met in Charleston to commemorate the Irish Volunteers in the Confederate States of America. Two companies of that name had served during the American Civil War in South Carolina, Virginia, and North Carolina. The original volunteers, Company C of the Charleston Battalion, later Company H of the 27\textsuperscript{th} South Carolina Infantry, had participated in all the major battles around Charleston between 1861 and 1864, including Secessionville and Battery Wagner, before being sent to the trenches of Petersburg, Virginia, in the summer of 1864. The other company, which took the name Irish Volunteers for the War (after dropping Meagher Guards when namesake Thomas Francis Meagher organized regiments for the Union Army), became Co. K of the 1\textsuperscript{st} South Carolina (Gregg’s) Infantry and took part in most of the famous battles of the Army of Northern Virginia: Second Manassas, Antietam, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, Spotsylvania, and Petersburg. The attendees planned to build a permanent memorial to these Carolina Confederates in the local Catholic cemetery.\textsuperscript{1}

From the first meeting the organizers wanted to highlight that their memorial would combine both Irish and southern causes. In a pamphlet published to promote collection of funds they reminded potential supporters of the parallel struggles of Irish and southern independence by including a piece from an 1861 Charleston newspaper. The report described a ceremony at the local Cathedral of St. Finbar and John the Baptist, where the bishop, Patrick Neison Lynch, a native of County Monaghan, welcomed the troops of the original Irish Volunteers into his church. The Volunteers, who were just about to muster into Confederate service, were to receive their company flag, which had been made by the students of the local Sisters of Mercy. The other company of Irish Volunteers, already serving in the Confederate Army, were to be sent their new flag in Virginia. Bishop Lynch told the soldiers that “The banner I present . . . gives to the breeze and the light of the sun the emblems of Erin—the Shamrock and the Harp—with the Palmetto of Carolina and Stars of our Southern Confederacy.” He reminded the Volunteers of the company’s history of service in every American war since its founding in 1797 and concluded, “Receive [the flag] then—rally around it. Let it teach you of God—of Erin—of Carolina. Let it teach you your duty in this life as soldiers and as Christians, so that fighting the good fight of Christians you may receive the reward of eternal victory from the King of Kings.” Captain Edward Magrath, leader of the Irish unit, thanked the bishop and the “young ladies of the Institution of the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy for this beautiful present at their hands.” Magrath vowed to protect the flag’s honor and that of the ladies who had made it. He then lined up his soldiers in front of the altar before the packed cathedral and reminded them of the pledge they had made to the cause of their “adopted State” and the symbolism of the flag under which they would fight. “Dear Harp of their

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Country!” he exclaimed. “What associations does the sight not give rise to in the bosoms of Irishmen . . . True, the sons of Ireland are scattered every where. Yes, like the children of Israel, they had sent forth a prayer for a blessing on the land of their birth.” Magrath then spoke that this quest for Irish freedom matched that of South Carolina’s.

While affirming the continued importance of Irish nationalism in the lives of
Irish Americans, this effort to erect a Confederate monument in a cemetery also had a southern purpose. Since the Civil War’s end, all over the region, white southerners had sought to reinterpret the war effort to their own advantage. Led by organizations such as ladies’ memorial associations dedicated to maintaining Confederate cemeteries, they wanted to preserve the memory of the dead, but also their cause, even if it had been a “lost cause.” The Southern Historical Society, founded in New Orleans in 1869, through “scholarly essays” published in its journal, promised to give a true interpretation of Confederate valor and honor and the justice of their fight—a fight for liberty, constitutionalism, and state rights, not slavery.

From the beginning, the memory of the Confederacy had religious overtones that would develop into a type of civil religion. As with any religion, the “Lost Cause” (now capitalized) developed its own elaborate ceremonies (parades and memorials), icons (statues of Confederate heroes), and “saints,” especially its “blessed Trinity” (generals Robert E. Lee and Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson; and President Jefferson Davis). Confederate cemeteries became places of pilgrimage on the various feast days—to use a Catholic term—of the Confederacy, which included Lee’s birthday and the anniversary of Jackson’s death. Clergy played a central role in all the events and were key in transforming historical commemorations into quasi-religious events.3

Gaines Foster, a noted historian of the Lost Cause, sees two major spurts of permanent Confederate memorializing. During the first one, from 1865 to 1885, the majority of memorials were placed in cemeteries. Over 75 percent “incorporated themes of ceremonial bereavement” rather than “the later ones which featured a Confederate soldier atop a tall shaft on the Courthouse lawn.” These memorials could, however, still speak of the greatness of the buried soldiers in the cemetery. In 1869 the Ladies’ Memorial Association of Richmond, Virginia, erected perhaps the most famous memorial in the Hollywood Cemetery of that city: a forty-five foot granite replica of an Egyptian pyramid. Other memorial associations chose Victorian funerary statues, but the most common, as Foster puts it, “was some form of a classical obelisk . . . that featured simplicity, even dignity . . . .” By 1877, the end of Radical (Republican) Reconstruction, South Carolina was in a triumphant mood (having elected anti-Radical “Redeemer” and Confederate hero Wade Hampton governor in 1876) and was ready to celebrate in more public and permanent ways its “glorious Lost Cause.” These celebrations often had more political overtones, giving anti-Radical conservatives a chance to emphasize unity in the face of Republican/black opposition.4

Thus it was not coincidental that the Irish of Charleston wanted their version of Confederate respectability and had gathered in the latter part of 1877 to collect money for an Irish Volunteer memorial. In 1878 they unveiled their permanent memorial—an obelisk typical of the early Confederate memorials as described by
Foster. But, at the same time, the monument was an expression of their Irishness. They unveiled it on March 18, the day after St. Patrick’s Day. (The feast day had fallen on a Sunday that year.) After their traditional parade in the morning, they reassembled in the afternoon at the great symbol of Irish Charleston, Hibernian Hall, and then processed through the city to the railroad station. From there they took the short train journey north to the Catholic cemetery of St. Lawrence.5

Judge A. G. Magrath, the son of an Ulster Presbyterian refugee of the 1798 rebellion, was the keynote speaker. Magrath’s father had commanded the Irish Volunteers during the Nullification crisis of 1832–33, and he himself led the unit later that decade in the Seminole War in Florida. His brother Edward (who had received the flag in the Cathedral) was the first Captain during the Civil War. Magrath was prominent in all Irish organizations and a confirmed Irish nationalist who became a strong southern nationalist. Appointed to the Federal bench by President Franklin Pierce, he achieved infamy when he overruled the application of the piracy laws to slave traders illegally importing slaves from overseas in 1860. He was a member of the South Carolina Secession convention and signatory to the secession ordinance. Too old to serve in the Confederate Army, he worked as a Confederate judge and in 1864 became the last governor of South Carolina to serve under Confederate rule. Captured by Federal forces, he served time in prison in Savannah before returning to the law practice after his release. The other honored guest was Irish native Fr. D. J. Quigley, of St. Patrick’s Church, which had been constructed in the late 1830s specifically for the first wave of poor Irish immigrants.6

The event received copious coverage in the local newspaper, the News and Courier, one of the more prominent periodicals in the state and region. Its editor, Francis W. Dawson, English-born and a Confederate veteran, wrote of the ceremony and its cause, “The Irish Volunteers [were] true patriotism personified . . . fighting and dying for the Southern Confederacy with all the ardor and devotion of knights of fair renown, they stand before the people of Carolina the representatives of all that is great and brave and true.” The Irish, it seemed, had proved their Carolina patriotism.7

How had they done it? They had intertwined very successfully their Irishness with their Confederate experience. It was explicit on the monument itself. At the top stands the Palmetto tree, symbol of South Carolina, surrounded by shamrocks, with the muskets stacked to the side, and the harp of Erin hanging on this tree of Carolina. Ireland’s symbols are entwined with the symbol of South Carolinian independence. But this plaque also reflects the lost cause of Ireland. As Edward Magrath had observed in 1861, the Irish were, like the sons of Israel, a diaspora. The symbolism is from Psalm 137:1–4 in the Old Testament: “By the Rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung our lyres. For there our captors required of us songs,
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and our tormentors, mirth, saying ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’ How can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” The Irish Volunteers had stacked their muskets and hung their Irish harps in South Carolina, perhaps waiting to return to a free Ireland.

The Irish did express the rhetoric and aesthetic of exile, but such feelings brought them closer to their new home rather than isolating them. Magrath had recognized as much at the organizational meeting in 1877. Speaking there, he first gave a history of the Volunteers, particularly their origins in the men of 1798, “who had been told that their love of country was treason.” He listed the litany of wrongs against Ireland at English hands and then made this explicit connection: “Of all the forms of tyranny the worst is that of a nation over a nation. And hackneyed as is the phrase, ever true is it, that history will repeat itself, and the tale of one age is told in another. We have lived to see how possible it is, that even in our own land, no bitterness excelled that felt by populations locally intermingled, but estranged politically.” Here he was referring to that recent era of Reconstruction, when “carpetbaggers” from up North had come South to stir up political

Along with extolling the parallels between the Irish and southern lost causes, Judge A. G. Magrath and others re-imagined their Confederate experience in a more positive light. As Susannah Bruce has pointed out in her recent analysis of the Irish in the Union army, memory of the war was as important as the actual participation itself. General Robert Nugent and staff of the Irish Brigade, Washington, D.C., 1865, courtesy of the Collections of the Library of Congress.
trouble—that is, fight for the civil and political rights of African Americans. However, Magrath continued, the “United States chief magistrate” (the recently elected Rutherford Hayes under the Compromise of 1877) came to his senses and restored “to the citizens of South Carolina the rights and privileges of the citizens of Massachusetts or Ohio.”

The Irish Volunteers had played their role in this standing up for equal rights—for the white South, at least. Magrath continued, “To the adopted citizen who had fled from persecution at home [i.e., Ireland] the land to which he came [i.e., South Carolina] . . . where belief was free, opinion unquestioned—excited an admiration and devotion which he could only fully understand.” Thus, Irishmen, Magrath believed, understood the importance of the southern cause better than any natives because of their Irish experience. Irishmen were always aware that Carolina had recognized the contrast between America and Ireland and had attempted to mitigate it. Magrath added, “With high and noble emotion, either deep-seated and heart inspiring sympathy, the distinguished sons of [South Carolina] have ever raised their voices in behalf of the rights and for the redress of the wrongs of the people of Ireland.” The Civil War gave Irish immigrants, who again recognized the parallels better than anyone, an opportunity to pay the state back. “The day came when the exiles from Ireland testified how well [they] remembered the justice done to their native land. The Irish immigrant sealed with his life’s blood the covenant between his people and the land in which he lived and for which he died.” There it was, in Biblical imagery: the Irish exile spilled his blood for his new country, covenanting his relationship to it forever. Another noted historian of the Lost Cause, Charles Reagan Wilson, titled his groundbreaking 1980 book on the subject, *Baptized in Blood*. The Lost Cause had been baptized in the blood of the Confederate soldier, just as all Christians are baptized in the blood of Christ. So, too, the Confederate soldier had died to redeem the South, and the blood of the Irish Confederate soldier was part of the southern salvation story.

Along with extolling the parallels between the Irish and southern lost causes, Magrath and the main speakers re-imagined their Confederate experience in a more positive light. As Susannah Bruce has pointed out in her recent analysis of the Irish in the Union army, memory of the war was as important as the actual participation itself. The great memorializer of the Irish Volunteers was the commander of Company K, Captain Edward McCrady Jr. Before the War, McCrady had been an attorney and an active member of one of Charleston’s elite Episcopal churches. He had shown little interest in his long-lost Irish heritage (perhaps his great-grandfather had come from Ulster to South Carolina in the 1700s), but he took command of what was known as the Meagher Guards in 1860, later the Irish Volunteers for the War. McCrady saw his Irish unit as a way to earn military fame and glory. After the War he emerged as a great literary exponent of the Lost Cause. He was something of a serious amateur historian, writing a history of
South Carolina and becoming President of the South Carolina Historical Society. A very conservative politician, he also wrote for the Southern Historical Society Papers, the publication that served as the first major literary exponent of the Lost Cause.

McCrady thus sealed the evidence of Magrath’s covenant with the specific experiences of his Company K in Virginia. McCrady covered their actions from Fort Sumter to the end of the War, but he liked to focus on his favorite soldier. McCrady reminded the attendees that Private Dominick Spellman, who was in the audience, had saved the day at the first real action the unit saw at the Battle of Gaines’s Mill in June 1862. After five men had fallen carrying the flag, Spellman picked up the colors and “carried them through the terrific battle.” As a result, Spellman was mentioned in Colonel D. H. Hamilton’s report and he was made regimental color Sergeant. At Second Manassas, where McCrady himself was wounded in the head, Spellman again carried the flag, where, after carrying it all day,

the rest of the regiment thought that the way he had borne them was enough for the share of one man in that fight. But in the evening, as the regiment was lying down under a heavy fire of sharpshooters, who had possession of a wood in our front, Spellman caught a glimpse of some of the [enemy] in the bushes and turning over the colors to the corporal next to him and seizing his musket

*After five men had fallen carrying the flag at the Battle of Gaines’s Mill in June 1862, Private Dominick Spellman picked up the colors, was mentioned in Colonel D. H. Hamilton’s report, and was made regimental color Sergeant. In later conflict, the story goes, Spellman would again carry the flag and then singlehandedly face down sharpshooters. Lee’s headquarters at Gaines Mill, courtesy of the Collections of the Library of Congress.*

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he quietly walked out in front of the line . . . deliberately taking aim he fired and turned to the regiment, calling out “I dropped that one” and, then to the astonishment of his comrades, proceeded to reload his musket, standing in full view of the sharpshooters, who soon turned their entire attention to him. Again he fired and again called that he had hit his man.

The Union troops, at first shocked at Spellman’s audacity, then returned fire and hit him. The Irish Volunteer thus missed most of 1863 recovering but returned in January 1864 and served until he was captured at the end of July of that year.11 What McCrady may not have known, however, was that Spellman, upon being captured in 1864, wanted to take the Oath of Allegiance to the United States and get out of the war for good. His request for the oath, had it become public, would have been a severe stain on his Lost Cause record. Clearly Spellman’s story was more complicated than the undaunted heroism trotted out on all Lost Cause occasions.

The same was true for his unit. Company K had a fairly high casualty rate, with twenty-two of the original 103 volunteers killed in action and another thirty-three wounded at least once. Six died from disease; a few were discharged for disability, and a few transferred to other units. The memorial brochure published from this meeting recognized these men, but neither McCrady nor the program acknowled-
edged the thirty-three volunteers who had deserted to the enemy. Most of their names are listed, but what happened to them is omitted. Ironically, McCrady spoke of what excellent memory he and the Irish Volunteers shared. He concluded his speech by saying, “Some amongst ourselves seem to think that by forgetting we can remedy the consequences of the great convulsion through which we have passed . . . Forget the past! Forget all our old comrades whose bones whiten the fields where they fell beside us . . . Forget the State for which we so freely offered our lives! . . . No! my friends, we cannot forget the past if we could, and thank God we cannot.”

Selective amnesia combined with permanent memorial was the order of the day. This use of the Lost Cause was not just an Irish Charleston story, however. Other Irish throughout the South participated in the new civil religion. The Irish in Memphis, for example, embraced a great opportunity to participate in one of the South’s first major Lost Cause commemorations in 1870. On April 28 of that year General Patrick Ronayne Cleburne, who had been killed at the Battle of Franklin, Tennessee, in 1864, was to be removed from his original burial place in Spring Hill, Tennessee, and reinterred in his longtime home of Helena, Arkansas, on the banks of the Mississippi River. The reburial took place at the instigation of the Ladies’ Memorial Association in Helena, which saw Cleburne as their locality’s greatest Confederate. The County Cork–born and raised Cleburne had retained a strong Cork accent, and anyone who met him recognized him as an Irishman. This foreigner, however, reached the rank of Major General and gained such a military reputation that he became known as the “Stonewall of the West,” thus directly compared to one of the blessed Trinity of the Lost Cause. His coffin would travel to Arkansas through Memphis, where a number of Irish (including Irish from Mississippi and Arkansas) had shared some of Cleburne’s laurels as members of his “model” division, the best in the Army of Tennessee. Cleburne was also greatly admired by Irish immigrants. Although Cleburne was an Anglican, many Irish Catholics in the South saw him as one of their own. It was no wonder, then, that an Irish Fenian recruiter on his travels through the South in 1866 noted that Cleburne’s name had a “talismanic” effect on the Irish in the region.

The Irish of Memphis were prominent in the procession of Cleburne’s coffin through the city. Sixteen pallbearers, all veterans of Cleburne’s division, met the body when it arrived at the train station. And outside the station, the Emmet Guard (the Irish militia unit named for Irish national hero Robert Emmet) formed a guard of honor. The procession then made its way to the Mississippi River, where the casket would be put on a steamboat to make the final leg downriver to Helena. Ex-Confederate President Jefferson Davis rode in an open carriage, led by a military band and a number of militia units. Then came over one hundred veterans, followed by the Cleburne Circle of Fenians from Memphis. Other Irish participants included the Hibernian Benevolent Relief Society and the Irish Literary
Association. When the cortege reached the wharf, an Irish veteran of Cleburne’s division approached the coffin and kissed it. Then, crying, he knelt and prayed for the dead general. His personal tribute reportedly brought many others to tears. The Emmet Guards had the final honor of escorting the coffin to Helena.¹⁴

Funeral processions were the first major element of the Lost Cause. From as early as 1866, interment (and re-interment of those who had died away from home) of Confederate dead occurred throughout the region. Cleburne’s re-interment gave Irish immigrants an opportunity to participate in what, by 1870, was a common southern occasion. Only four years earlier, Irish Memphians’ full integration
as southerners had been challenged by their acceptance of Union military occupation and cooperation with the occupying authorities. The Lost Cause occasion of Cleburne’s removal to Helena gave them an opportunity to emphasize again their integral place as solid citizens of the South who subscribed to the region’s racial codes.

One individual, more than any other, proved to many white southerners in Memphis and throughout the South that Irish American Catholics could be southerners. Maryland-born Vincentian priest Father Abram Ryan, the son of Irish immigrants, had been a Confederate chaplain and had lost a brother in the Civil War. Ryan’s record as a Confederate, like many Irish, was a limited one. He had spent much of the war serving as a priest in Peoria, Illinois, and in Union-occupied Nashville, Tennessee. Always pro-southern, his brother’s death in Confederate service awakened in him an even more strident Confederate nationalism. He served in an unofficial capacity as a chaplain and witnessed the bloody battles of Franklin and Nashville in November and December 1864. In early 1865 he published the first of his “national” poetry and this fairly obscure chaplain was on his way to becoming the “Poet Priest of the Confederacy.” His poems, such as “The Sword of Robert E. Lee” and “The Conquered Banner,” became standards for every white southerner. He still retained, however, a strong Irish sensibility, able to condemn with equal gusto England’s misrule in Ireland with poems such as “Erin’s Flag”: “Lift it up! lift it up! the old Banner of Green! / The Blood of its sons has but brightened its sheen; / What though the tyrant has trampled it down, / Are its folds not emblazoned with deeds of renown?” Eventually, he also published his work in his bitterly anti-Reconstruction newspaper, *The Banner of the South*. Ryan reserved particular disdain for Radical Republicans, and his newspaper was on occasion virulently racist.

*The Banner of the South*, operated in Augusta, Georgia, served as the voice of Catholics in that state, but also enjoyed a broader readership among Irish Americans, and offered a mouthpiece for unreconstructed white southerners. (One of the paper’s publishers, Patrick Walsh, who had immigrated with his Irish parents to Charleston, was a Confederate veteran.) Ryan strongly supported the move to Papal Infallibility pushed by the ultramontane supporters of Pope Pius IX. (This stance distanced him from the more liberal bishop in Savannah and precipitated his removal to the diocese of Mobile in 1870). But Ryan and his southern supporters did not find it incongruous to be ultramontane Catholic, Irish American, and southerner. His embrace of the Lost Cause made Ryan’s religious views tolerable to Protestant southerners. When he died in 1886, his local newspaper, the *Mobile Register*, commented, “In that dark hour of lamentation, when the South was transformed into one vast cathedral, in which a whole people knelt in silence and in sorrow around the coffins of the slain, there came an unknown voice so strangely
sweet, so deep, so clear, so grand, that every heart felt thrilled by its pathos and power.” “Every heart,” apparently, had “thrilled” to the voice of an Irish American priest.”

During the postwar period this unifying nature of the Lost Cause helped paper over the serious divisions within the white community through their common opposition to Reconstruction. With the victory of Redemption, however, divisions along class and geographical lines reemerged. Proponents of a “New South,” who embraced an industrial and urban future for the region within the growing United States, upset some diehard unreconstructed southerners, as well as those, particularly farmers, who would have to suffer the transition from an agricultural to an industrial economy. In the 1880s these New South advocates turned again
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to the Lost Cause to achieve political unity. Henry Grady, editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, was the New South’s greatest exponent and he, for example, used the reputation of former Confederate President Jefferson Davis to great effect in Georgia’s 1886 gubernatorial election. The New South candidate, John B. Gordon, faced a tough campaign. Gordon had been a famous Civil War general who became a leading attorney for northern-owned railroads. He needed to re-establish his southern authenticity. Grady invited Davis to visit Atlanta, ostensibly for the laying of the cornerstone of a monument to Confederate general Benjamin Hill, and gave the ex-Confederate president copious coverage in his newspaper. Of course, Gordon was constantly at Davis’s side, and this fact, too, was duly noted. The visit was a triumph, attracting large crowds, and helped Gordon win the election. The Lost Cause had become a valuable tool in promoting the New South and was now more about the present and the future than it had been about the past.  

Thus, a second great wave of Confederate memorializing occurred between 1885 and 1915. This time, however, the driving force came from the bottom up rather than the top down. Grady had definitely promoted this new interest in the Lost Cause, but large numbers of people embraced it and made it their own. The Cause was no longer the exclusive purview of grieving widows, former generals, and Irish American priest poets, but of lawyers, merchants, and artisans—the men who had been common soldiers. In very Victorian fashion the movement was becoming bourgeois. In a search to reassert their own southern authenticity among an increasingly “Yankeefied” South, the rising middle classes demanded recognition of their role in the war. The focus shifted to the living from the dead and became more celebration than memorial. Veterans’ groups, such as the Association of the Army of Northern Virginia (*AANV*) and the Association of the Army of Tennessee (*AAT*), emerged to replace in importance the elitist Southern Historical Society. Most of these veterans groups would unite under the banner of the United Confederate Veterans (*UCV*) in 1889. (Governor John B. Gordon would be the *UCV*’s first president, a position he retained until his death in 1904.) The *UCV* promoted camaraderie among, and charity for, veterans. They also sponsored a series of reunions around their annual meetings, which, by the mid-1890s, attracted tens of thousands, and on a few occasions, over 100,000 visitors to the host cities. Southern towns and cities competed to attract the *UCV* reunions, and by the early 1900s, the reunions attracted far more non-veterans than actual Civil War participants. By then over 75 percent of southern counties had a *UCV* camp, and its magazine, *The Confederate Veteran*, was a major seller. This new popular Lost Cause endorsed reconciliation with the North, but as historian Edward Ayers observes, this “reconciliation helped to heighten the South’s distinctiveness and to buttress the forces of reaction.”  

The Irish in the South actively participated in this new demotic phase of the Lost Cause. Living predominantly in urban areas, they were close to the events
of this reinterpretation of Confederate memory. Also, as there had been only two prominent Irish generals—and only one, Cleburne, had had a very distinguished record—the story of the common soldier was the story the Irish Confederate. Irish veterans joined the AANV, AAT, and UCV. New Orleans, in particular, which had provided the largest number of Irish soldiers for service, had active members of both the AANV and AAT. These groups provided opportunities for Irishmen to meet with their native-born neighbors and reminisce about the old days, but they also could, on occasion, provide money to poor veterans. The Association of Confederate Soldiers from Tennessee, for example, provided annual pensions of between $50 and $300 or could secure a place in a Confederate Veterans Home. Irish veterans also used the pages of the Confederate Veteran to tell their stories, seek out old comrades, or announce the passing of former soldiers.20

In Georgia’s 1886 gubernatorial election, the New South candidate, John B. Gordon (here, ca. 1862), faced a tough campaign. Gordon had been a famous Civil War general but became a leading attorney for northern-owned railroads, and he wanted to re-establish his southern authenticity. Photograph courtesy of the Collections of the Library of Congress.
There were no specific Irish veteran groups as there had been Irish units in the War. Thus, participation in these activities increased the southernness of Irish veterans, and indeed native soldiers often remembered their Irish comrades with fondness. This integration of the Irish into native Confederate veteran organizations contrasts sharply with the experience of Irish Union veterans in the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR). The GAR was by far the largest veterans’ group in the United States and a very influential lobby in Washington, D.C. Its strong links to the Republican Party, however, along with its oft-militant Protestantism, discouraged Irish vets from joining. When they did, they often formed their own distinctive Catholic camps.21

Thanks to the efforts of Father Ryan, Protestant boosters like Edward McCrady and A. G. Magrath, and prominent Irish American Catholic Confederates like Patrick Walsh of Augusta and Anthony Keiley of Richmond, Irish veterans did not have issues with the UCV that their compatriots in the North had with the GAR. Ryan’s former partner Walsh, after the Banner, became editor of the Augusta Chronicle, another major propagator of the “New South.” He had served on the Augusta City Council and in the Georgia Assembly. He also served briefly as a United States Senator in the 1890s and became mayor of Augusta in 1897. As a New South advocate he was a strong supporter of the Lost Cause until his death in 1899 and central to its political use in Georgia for the furtherance of the Democratic party.22

The American-born son of County Cork parents, Keiley became the Redeemer mayor of Richmond, Virginia, in 1871. A teacher and then lawyer, Keiley always saw himself as a representative of “middling sorts.” He had been a reluctant secessionist but an ardent Confederate. Indeed, he believed that the non-planter’s backbone of Confederate nationalism, not the planters. “Property always timid followed its instincts,” he noted, and “slaveholders” were “eager to avail themselves of legal exemptions.” After the war, then, he was keen to honor the experience of the common soldier. He republished a memoir of his time in Union prisons at Point Lookout, Maryland, and Elmira, New York, and sent a copy to Robert E. Lee. Passionate in his opposition to Radical Reconstruction and a virulent racist, Keiley became a nationally prominent Democrat.23

It was natural that former Confederates eager to create a monument to the common soldier in Richmond turned to Keiley for support. In 1890 veterans had raised a massive statue to Robert E. Lee, marking the former Confederate capital as the place to memorialize the Lost Cause. Keiley responded eagerly to the new effort, making the first major speech on behalf of the common soldier’s monument to, as one correspondent put it, “one of the largest audiences ever gathered in Richmond.” Having seen many ancient columns while on government service in Europe and Egypt, Keiley helped pick a style for the monument. He also endorsed the location on the prominent Libby Hill, which overlooked the James
The American-born son of County Cork parents, Anthony Keiley became the Redeemer mayor of Richmond, Virginia, in 1871. When veterans raised a massive statue to Robert E. Lee, marking the former Confederate capital as the place to memorialize the Lost Cause, Keiley responded eagerly to the new effort. He also endorsed the location on the prominent Libby Hill, which overlooked the James River on the city’s east side, close to the docks and a working-class neighborhood that had boasted a sizable Irish population. Civil War-era view from Libby Hill to the James River, courtesy of the Collections of the Library of Congress.
River on the city’s east side, close to the docks and a working-class neighborhood that had boasted a sizeable Irish population. (Lee’s statue was placed in a more salubrious and genteel suburb west of downtown.) There, he believed, would be the perfect spot for the “Confederate Infantry man whose face and form should tell that story of that immortal epoch.” He ultimately described himself as “the monument’s friend—whatever its form.”

Keiley’s endorsement was important because the Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Monument, as it became known, had generated opposition from some elite Lost Cause practitioners. During the first discussions of the project in the late 1880s, former general Jubal Early, a major leader in the Southern Historical Society and the keeper of the official Lee memory, objected that this new proposal would distract from the Lee statue. In a reply to a solicitation for support he wrote, “I think it is very unfortunate to start your scheme . . . at this time.” He went on to impugn the motives of the organizers: “Richmond seems to look on this [scheme] for monuments to Confederates as a means of bringing money into the pockets of her merchants and hotel keepers.” He would not contribute until Lee was up, and thus the organizers knew that they would have to solicit lots of small contributions from regular folk. In that effort they made sure to receive the blessing of Catholic Bishop John J. Keane of the Diocese of Richmond, who offered “best wishes for the success of the good cause.”

In May 1894 the memorial was unveiled on Libby Hill, and over 100,000 turned out to see it. This special public event—and hundreds like it, if on a smaller scale, throughout the South—represented to southern whites what Gaines Foster describes as “a sense of community, that being outside the normal order of things, transcended the usual social and economic divisions of society.” The fact that after 1885 these monuments, parades, and speeches came to be held in the public square, and usually commemorated the common soldier by putting a likeness of him in his Confederate prime on the top of a classical column, “reversed the order of society, as the common man became the focus of attention and praise.” Foster continues, “When the ceremony ended and people resumed their daily lives, when the ritual time closed, the order of society returned. But the temporary establishment of a special sense of community and the town’s and its leaders’ testimony of respect to the common man served to enhance the bonds of unity within society.” Through the Lost Cause, Irish and Irish Americans in the South felt that unity.

The classic case of this Irish inclusion occurred in Houston, Texas, in 1905. Here one can see all the elements of the new more public and booster-oriented Lost Cause coming together with a strong and overt Irish influence. The city had never had a large Irish population in the antebellum era (the whole state of Texas only had about 3,500 Irish-born residents in 1860), but it did produce a very prominent Irish Confederate in the person of Lieutenant, later Major, Richard “Dick”
Dowling. Dowling, born in 1838 in Tuam, County Galway, came to America as a child and by 1860 had become a prominent tavern keeper in Houston. When Texas seceded and war broke out he recruited Irish workers from Houston and Galveston into the Davis Guards. In September 1863 he had helped stop a Union invasion of Texas. Ordered to evacuate Sabine Pass, at the mouth of the Sabine River, east of Houston, he and the forty-five Irish gunners of the Davis Guards, Co. F of the 1st Texas Heavy Artillery, refused and stayed to fight with a motto, according to Dowling in his report, of “Victory or Death.” With some accurate and lucky, but most importantly, rapid firing, the Irish artillerymen drove back five thousand Union invaders on navy transports coming up the Sabine River. This victory of forty-odd versus five thousand impressed both President Davis and the Confederate Congress immensely. Coming soon after the Confederate disasters at Gettysburg and Vicksburg the previous July, Dowling and his men’s actions cheered a flagging Confederacy. Dowling and the Davis Guards received the commendation of both the President and Congress.27

Dowling died of yellow fever only a couple of years after the war, but he became Houston’s most famous Confederate, and the local ucv camp named themselves in his honor. It was this group of veterans who first came up with the idea in the early 1890s of a monument to Dowling, which would be Houston’s first public statue. The city was growing and would take off in the first decades of the twentieth century with the discovery of oil in East Texas and the construction in 1911 of the Ship Canal, which made Houston accessible to ocean-going vessels. Every new city needs public memorials, and every southern city in the 1890s needed a Confederate memorial in a prominent place. The idea, however, was slow in taking off until the veterans had the bright idea of exploiting Dowling’s Irishness. By including the local Ancient Order of Hibernians divisions as well as other Irish groups, such as the Emmet Council, in 1901, the Dick Dowling Monument Committee raised the funds for a prominent memorial. The city responded with a prime location in the well-traveled Market Square. There had been talk of unveiling the statue on September 8, the anniversary of the Battle of Sabine Pass, but such was the Irish involvement that the organizing committee chose St Patrick’s Day 1905 for the unveiling.28

When the big day arrived, the Houston Chronicle declared, “‘God Save Ireland’ and ‘Dixie’ were blended in one harmony today.” The celebration began with a parade led by a carriage containing the four survivors of the battle. Groups of marching veterans and Irish association members followed. Schoolchildren sang, and “a jam of humanity” observed the proceedings. Dowling’s daughter brought huge cheers when she unveiled the statue made of Italian marble. Dowling in his artillery uniform was placed on top of the monument, and the names of Davis Guards were inscribed on the pedestal. Both the governor of Texas and mayor of
In May 1894 the Confederate Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument (here, in 1908) was unveiled on Libby Hill, and over 100,000 turned out to see it. After 1883 these monuments, parades, and speeches had come to be held in the public square, and usually commemorated the common soldier by putting a likeness of him in his Confederate prime on the top of a classical column. Photograph courtesy of the Collections of the Library of Congress.
Houston made speeches praising the patriotism of the Irish and touching on the usual themes of Lost Cause speeches. Some locals felt strong enough to recognize the occasion with poetry. One Ellen R. Croom wrote in the *Chronicle*, “Remember that September Day [when] / Just forty-one men with the Texas yell; / But they scattered the Yankee ships pell-mell / Oh! But they fought right nobly and well / Those heroes with brave Dick Dowling / They were sons of Erin, and never were found / Grander knights of ‘The Table Round.’”

Dowling and his unit were “sons of Erin” but also Texans and upholders of the South’s honor. In another newspaper, one J. M. Lewis remembered the past, but in keeping with the new Lost Cause, also recognized its importance for the present and the future in his poem “Dick Dowling.” Lewis wrote, “Now which of ye,”
[Dowling] cried in sport ‘would like to spoike a gun?’ / ‘And where’s the Irishman at all who ever learned to run? / I’ve a few words I’d loike to say To that Spalpeen this very day! / Now who wid me will fight?’ They stepped out everyone.” “And,” Lewis continued, “we have builded a monument and told of it in stone! / But, nay, Dick Dowling, not to you, but to ourselves alone / To show that the deed your heart dared dare, found echo in our own / For what availeth a stone to you whose fame shall outlast stone.” Lewis expressed well, even in his stage “Oirish” dialogue. The monument was not just about Irish bravery but was also one “to ourselves alone.” The whole occasion told, and tells us, as much about Houston in 1905 as the Battle of Sabine Pass in 1863, as well as the place of Irish in that city. Houston had finally arrived with its first public Confederate memorial to an Irish immigrant and his Irish unit. There was nothing incongruous, it seemed, in this connection of Irish, Texan, and Confederate.30

Like the Irish, white southerners examined the past to cope with a changing present (as the line in “Dixie” states, “Old times there are not forgotten”). The fact that conservative politicians often exploited the Confederate past to dissipate class tensions meant that not every white southerner was totally enamored with it. “Pitchfork” Ben Tillman of South Carolina and many of his supporters, for example, had no respect for Lost Cause niceties when it came to challenging opponents with distinguished Confederate records. Nevertheless, the tradition commanded broad respect, and it did help unite white southerners. Through their engagement with Lost Cause rituals Irish immigrants and their offspring overcame a mixed war record and suspicions of their foreignness, becoming part of what it meant to be southern in the New South. The fact that they had known well a “lost cause” in Ireland and were familiar with the very Catholic trappings of the one in their new home made it easy for them to participate. The cost of this lasting memory was the perpetuation of “myths” and Irish acceptance of them. For example, the Irish supported a benign view of slavery and in the process helped maintain white supremacy. Historians of the South such as Foster and Wilson, as well as others, such as Fitzhugh Brundage and James Cobb, show us that these myths have haunted the South for generations and indeed the region still deals with them.31

For all of its cultural and social significance, the Lost Cause also had major political implications. The Irish in the South thus remained “unreconstructed” with their Lost Cause colleagues and, for the most part, tied to the dominant conservative definition of the New South, one that would last until World War II and the subsequent rise of the Civil Rights Movement. Lost Cause memory had indeed sealed Irish immigrants’ place in the New South, but it also sealed their place in its major unresolved issue: race.
NOTES


2. Charleston (SC) Daily Courier, September 17, 1861.


5. Irish Volunteers Memorial, 9–10.


8. Irish Volunteers Memorial, 7.

9. Ibid., 11.


12. Irish Volunteers Memorial, 16–17; Compiled Service Records of Confederate Soldiers, First South Carolina Infantry (Gregg’s) Regiment, micro., NARA.


25. Jubal Early to Carlton McCarthy, December 7, 1888, and Bishop John J. Keane to D. C. Richardson, December 17, 1887, Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Monument Association Papers, MC.


30. Ibid.

31. For more on Ireland’s and the South’s similar obsession with the past, see Kieran Quinlan,