

“As It Should Be Told”: The Denton Confederate Soldier and Public Memory

By Hunter Vermeer

The Denton Confederate Soldier was a monument erected on the lawn next to the Denton Courthouse, becoming a common sight at the heart of Denton’s civic and legal center. The monument itself was an archway, with a Denton soldier standing proudly on top, holding his rifle. Either side of the archway had drinking fountains (not functional) along with an inscription made when the statue was erected in the early twentieth century. The inscription pays respects to “our Confederate soldiers, who in heroic self-sacrifice and devoted loyalty gave their lives to the South in her hour of need.”¹ In recent years, many Dentonites have called into question the monument’s portrayal of Confederate history. In 2020, growing tension concerning the statue’s status resulted in county officials removing the Denton Soldier from the square, removing it from the public eye, and hoping to quell unrest.² The Denton Confederate Soldier is an informative case study of the wider debate raging about Confederate statues throughout the American South. The arguments for and against removing the Denton Soldier contain common themes present in the popular and academic debates involving Confederate monuments. In particular, this essay hopes to reveal a core disagreement between the two sides concerning Confederate monuments’ role as either passive reflections of history or an active creator of public memory.

To understand the significance of the Denton Soldier, it is helpful to first give a brief history and contextualization of the monument’s creation and removal. The Denton monument was erected June 3, 1918 through the fundraising efforts of the Katie Daffan chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy. The unveiling of the statue, conveniently performed on the regular anniversary of Jefferson Davis’s birthday, was “a big day in Denton.” “The grey beard and gray hair were in prominence everywhere” as surviving veterans along with local Dentonites turned out to see the monument unveiled.³ During the seventies and eighties, the Denton Soldier was recognized by a number of state and national historical committees—in 1970 it was named a Texas Historical Landmark, in 1977 a National Historic Registry landmark, and in 1981 a

¹ “Denton Confederate Statue.” *localwiki*, https://localwiki.org/denton/Denton_Confederate_Statue. Pictures of the statue, it’s arches, and the accompanying 2010 plaque can be read clearly on this webpage.

² Denton commissioners have expressed plans to relocate the statue to a more appropriate location. At the time of writing, the statue is currently housed in storage and more specific plans have not been made publicly available.

³ *Denton Record-Chronicle*, Vol. 18, No. 252, Ed. 1, June 4, 1918, Texas Digital Newspaper Program, The Portal to Texas History, University of North Texas Libraries, Denton, Texas.

Texas State Archeological Landmark.⁴ The recognition of the Denton Soldier as a historical landmark meant that years later, its removal was subject to approval by the Texas Historical Commission. In the late nineties, Willie Hudspeth, a Vietnam War veteran and president of the Denton NAACP, began a protest movement to remove the Confederate Statue that would last decades. Pressure against the statue's presence increased as more protestors emerged. The protests culminated in the removal of the Denton Soldier on June 25, 2020.⁵ The nature of the protests towards the Denton Statue reveals issues at the heart of the Confederate monument controversy.

The Denton Confederate Soldier is part of a broader trend in memorializing Confederate history. The earliest monuments erected in the American south were typically grassroots efforts organized by Ladies Memorial Associations, "many county chapters of which were established within a year after the war."⁶ Typically, these early monuments were predominately located in cemeteries and were plainly fashioned.⁷ From roughly 1890 through 1920, there was a notable shift in the construction and placement of Confederate memorials. The efforts of local Ladies Memorial Associations became consolidated under the United Daughters of the Confederacy which "dominated this activity by the late 1890s."⁸ Under the United Daughters of the Confederacy, Confederate monuments physically moved from the graveyard into public space—most powerfully into the Courthouse lawn.⁹ This move coincided with a shift from Confederate monuments mainly as symbols of mourning towards a closer association with Lost Cause mythology.¹⁰

The Lost Cause mythology justifies a pro-southern memory of the Civil War. Historian Caroline Janney has convincingly demonstrated that a distinctly Confederate version of Civil War memory was intentionally crafted immediately following Lee's surrender at Appomattox. According to Lost Cause proponents, the Civil War was not

⁴ "Denton Confederate Soldier Monument Draws Debate," *NBCDFW*, June 24, 2015.

⁵ Ryan Higgs, "Confederate monument removed from Square," *Denton Record-Chronicle*, June 25, 2020.

⁶ John Winberry, "'Lest We Forget': The Confederate Monument and the Southern Townscape," *Southeastern Geographer* 23, no. 2 (1983): 20.

⁷ Winberry, "The Confederate Monument," 22. Robert Harris and J. Michael Martinez "Graves, Worms, and Epitaphs: Confederate Monuments in the Southern Landscape," in *Confederate Symbols in the Contemporary South*, ed. J. Michael Martinez, Rom McNinch-Su, and William Richardson (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 135. In Winberry's statistical study nearly half of obelisk monuments were constructed before 1900, while 80% of more visually complex Confederate soldier statues were erected after 1900. Martinez places "more than 70 percent of Confederate monuments erected in the thirty years following the surrender at Appomattox... in rural Southern cemeteries."

⁸ Gulley, H. E., "Women and the Lost Cause: Preserving a Confederate Identity in the American Deep South," *Journal of Historical Geography* 19, no. 2 (1993): 128.

⁹ Harris and Martinez, "Graves, Worms, and Epitaphs," 128.

"The construction of new Confederate monuments inside cemeteries declined, while the appearance of monuments on city streets, courthouse lawns, and public facilities increased dramatically."

¹⁰ Benjamin Forest and Juliet Johnson, "Confederate Monuments and the Problem of Forgetting," *Cultural Geographies* 26, no. 1 (2019): 128.

fundamentally about slavery but rather southern state's rights. Slavery was morally justified—Lost Cause mythologists argue that slaves were happy and that the system brought economic prosperity. Secession was a legal, constitutional right that southern states employed due to tyrannic abuses of the federal government. During the war, the ever-increasing manpower and supplies of northern forces overwhelmed brave and heroic southern soldiers. As a result, material deficits are entirely to blame for the failure of Confederate forces rather than tactical or strategic failures. Following the war's conclusion, Reconstruction allowed for direct federal abuse and interference in southern politics through military occupation. These basic tenets of Lost Cause mythology allowed the formation of a distinctly pro-Confederate version of the war to take hold. The Lost Cause grew in popularity through the end of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. However, recent scholarship challenged the beliefs of the Lost Cause narrative. Academically, the Lost Cause has been discredited as a historiographic interpretation.¹¹

The second wave of monument building across the American South had increasingly political messages and implications. The second waves' close association with Lost Cause mythology is identified as a primary reason for modern-day removal by many academics. Historians Robert Harris and J. Michael Martinez credit the memorialization efforts of the United Daughters of the Confederacy as "instrumental in keeping the Lost Cause myth alive (despite the relative decline of the myth during the twentieth century)."¹² Additionally, as monuments physically moved from graveyards to public spaces, their new locations implied approval for the monument's messages. As Heather O'Connell writes in her study of the connections between Confederate monuments and modern social conditions, "public monuments are not only more visible to the community; their geographic positions sends a different message than those found in cemeteries, suggesting a stronger connection to public entities and daily life."¹³ The presence of Confederate monuments in official public spaces connects their inherent messages to the community at large. Thus, as communities have repudiated

¹¹ Caroline Janney, *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013). Janney's work does a splendid job tracking the formation of Lost Cause mythology in the aftermath of the Civil War. For an example of modern scholarship challenging tenets of Lost Cause mythology, see Charles Dew, *Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001). Gary Gallagher has convincingly argued that in attempts to correct Lost Cause mythology recent historians have distorted aspects of the southern war experience, see Gary Gallagher, *The Confederate War: How Popular Will, Nationalism, and Military Strategy Could Not Stave Off Defeat* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

¹² Harris and Martinez, "Graves, Worms, and Epitaphs," 150. For a comprehensive look at the UDC aggressive campaigning against textbooks that challenged a Lost Cause mythology, see pg. 150-152.

¹³ Heather O'Connell, "Monuments Outlive History: Confederate Monuments, the Legacy of Slavery, and Black-White Inequality," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 43, no. 3 (2020): 462.

the Confederate statues in recent decades, they have simultaneously rejected the message of the Lost Cause on the southern landscape.

Hostility towards the Denton Soldier targets the Confederate monuments associations with Lost Cause mythology and inherent racial bias. Protestors often explicitly point to the visual messages contained within monuments – as representing “living” history. Jonathan Vann, who in 2015 helped create a Facebook page calling for the statue’s removal, said, “we don’t want people to come here, visiting and then see this monument to a time when hatred and slavery were king.”¹⁴ To Vann, the Denton Soldier represents an ongoing message. Local UNT professor of vocal studies Jennifer Lane also pointed to the statue’s close association with the Lost Cause mythology. She additionally referred to the United Daughters of the Confederacy as an auxiliary group of the Ku Klux Klan, drawing a more direct connection to a message of systematic racial oppression.¹⁵ Willie Hudspeth, the most consistent and iconic protestor of the Denton Soldier’s presence, directly challenged the inscriptions portrayal of Confederate soldiers as heroic – “there is nothing heroic about giving one’s life to keep a race enslaved.”¹⁶ Hudspeth spent more than two decades campaigning against this portrayal of history, culminating in the Denton Soldier’s removal in 2020.

These protests clearly demonstrate how criticisms directed toward the Denton Soldier follow the trends of the wider debate. Due to the statue’s prominent location on the Courthouse lawn, the message of the Denton Soldier itself is still potent. To critics, the monument is not a passive representation of dead beliefs but rather a living symbol of an outdated ideology. This ideology – the Lost Cause and racial supremacy – is itself targeted as a problematic message for the wider community. In 2015, this sentiment was visibly displayed when locals marked the monument with the words “This is Racist” in bright red across the arch.¹⁷ However, the debate surrounding Confederate monuments is not one-sided, and across the American South locals, politicians, and historians have spoken in defense of the monuments.

As criticisms of the Confederate memorials have grown, a committed intellectual defense of the monuments has risen to answer them. Predominately, this has been done by focusing on the statues’ historical significance and minimizing the present-day implications. President Trump weighed in on the issue in 2017, defending a Charlottesville statue of Robert E Lee and asking, “I wonder, is it George Washington next week? And is it Thomas Jefferson the week after?”¹⁸ President Trump’s questions

¹⁴ “Denton Confederate Soldier Monument Draws Debate,” *NBCDFW*, June 24, 2015.

¹⁵ Christian Mcphate, “Denton Confederate Monument’s Fate Still in Doubt, Debate,” *Dallas Observer*, September 28, 2017.

¹⁶ Mcphate, “Fate Still in Doubt,” September 28, 2017.

¹⁷ Todd Davis, “Denton Confederate Monument Vandalized Overnight,” *NBCDFW*, July 20, 2015.

¹⁸ Jennifer Schuessler, “Historians Question Trump’s Comments on Confederate Monuments,” *The New York Times*, August 15, 2017.

imply that the attack on Confederate statues threatens their place in the history book. Some of the voices defending the monuments acknowledge their message while simultaneously defending the need to remember that message in a historical sense. Major Levar Stoney of Richmond says the monuments are “a shameful representation of the past we all disagree with,” yet “it’s about telling the complete truth. I don’t think removal of symbols does anything for telling the actual truth or changes the state and culture of racism in this country today.”¹⁹

Historians echo many of the same sentiments. Emphasizing his belief that “the Lost Cause concept... has collapsed,” historian Daniel Mallock draws a similar argument to President Trump and asks, “will Monticello and Mount Vernon and the Hermitage be shuttered as mere monuments to slavery?”²⁰ He proceeds to categorize recent events as “the road of history destruction, denialism, ignorance, and generational tyranny that we are on as a nation.”²¹ By presenting the Lost Cause argument as a defeated idea, already expunged from the American mindset, Mallock fundamentally presents Confederate monuments as passive structures, as we have seen in similar arguments.²² Other historians have taken different approaches, such as a thought-provoking essay by Benjamin Forest and Juliet Johnson, which compares Confederate monuments in the American South with Soviet monuments following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Forest and Johnson “welcomed the widespread calls to remove these anachronistic icons of White supremacy from the US public space.”²³ However, their experience in an undergraduate course discussing collective memory “forced [Forest and Johnson] to interrogate [their] reflexive desire to ‘take ‘em down.’” Through comparison to experiences in post-Soviet Union Europe, Forest and Johnson present a variety of alternatives for transforming the message of public monuments without destroying or hiding them.²⁴ While interesting, many of their proposed alternatives have been unexplored in the context of the American South, including Denton.

¹⁹ Alessandra Maldondo, “How Do Black Conservatives Feel About Confederate Monuments? It’s Complicated,” *Salon*, August 18, 2017.

²⁰ Daniel Mallock, “Attacking the Past: The Removal of the Confederate Monuments,” *New English Review*, May 31, 2017. Dr. Witt, Yale Professor, referred to the logic of Mallock and Trump’s warnings of a slippery slope “red herring[s].” in Schuessler, “Historians Question Trump,” August 15, 2017.

²¹ Mallock, “Attacking the Past,” May 31, 2017.

²² The presence of white Supremist groups at many pro-monument rallies calls into question if Mallock’s presentation of the Lost Cause as a defeated idea is truly accurate.

²³ Forest and Johnson, “Problem of Forgetting,” 127.

²⁴ Forest and Johnson, “Problem of Forgetting,” 129-130.

The local debate that raged over the Denton Confederate Soldier once again exemplified the major themes of the national argument. The origins of the Denton Soldier, in some ways, predicted the debate that would rage nearly a century later. On June 3, 1918, as the statue was unveiled, former Texas State Senator James Wiley gave a speech to the assembled onlookers:

Historians do not do [the Confederate soldiers] and their work justice. They have been forced to submit to teachings and doctrines unfavorable to themselves. I hope in the future a history will be written that will tell of their deeds as carefully and truthfully as it should be told. The Confederate soldiers were not traitors—the men who went out from the South were God-fearing, patriotic men who believed their cause was just.²⁵

Wiley demonstrates that the contest for the Civil War's legacy was ongoing as the Denton Soldier was created. As such, Wiley anticipated the current debate.

In recent decades, Denton's elected officials have directly and indirectly addressed the Denton Soldier. The 2017 Citizen's Report addressing aspects of the Denton Soldier's maintenance states that the "city of Denton's elected leaders have been largely silent regarding the Confederate Monument, relying on the fact that the courthouse is considered county property." Commissioners were also presented as pointing to the influence and control of the Texas Historical Commission as causation for the statue's continued existence.²⁶ If the Citizen's Report's portrayal can be trusted, the elected officials of Denton rely on the monument's status as a historical landmark as a defense for its existence. The commissioners' silence, in this context, draws on the logic present in the larger debate that focuses on the historical significance of the monuments.

While many of Denton's elected officials have not directly challenged the Denton Soldier's status, the action of the local government over recent years offers an additional resource for interpretation. In 2002, the Committee approved wording for a plaque resting next to the monument, designed to give context and give a new meaning to the Denton Soldier. In 2010, the plaque's wording was changed, demonstrating a continued interest in guiding the monument's message.²⁷ Members of the community have also

²⁵ Quoted in *Denton Record-Chronicle*, Vol. 18, No. 252, Ed. 1, June 4, 1918, Texas Digital Newspaper Program, The Portal to Texas History, University of North Texas Libraries, Denton, Texas.

²⁶ "Citizen's Report," *North Texas Daily*, September 25, 2017.

²⁷ "Citizen's Report," *North Texas Daily*, September 25, 2017. Transcript of the Commissioner's Court session discussing the original plaque can be read in "Exhibits 1," *North Texas Daily*, September 25, 2017.

weighed in to define the meaning of the Confederate monument for modern onlookers. Gary Clayton, who engaged in the online debate around the Denton Soldier, said, “I think the statue commemorates our ancestors...Most probably didn’t have slaves, they were family people, and I think a number of them were forced into fighting a war that came to them.”²⁸ Clayton’s portrayal of the statue is reminiscent of many of the Denton monuments constructed prior to 1890 in cemeteries primarily concerned with remembering the fallen. Both the plaques put into position by the county officials and sentiments like those expressed by Clayton attempt to distance the meaning of the Denton Soldier away from the legacy of the Lost Cause.²⁹ The plaques especially try to transform the monument into a passive rather than active piece of history by contextualizing the message and presenting it as a piece of history in and of itself.

The controversy surrounding Confederate monuments brings to light many questions concerning history, collective memory, and representations of the past. The monuments were created within a specific social and racial context of the early twentieth century. Interestingly, at the time of their creation, they were already being viewed as a tool through which collective memory could be molded. Robert Harris and J. Michael Martinez explain that “war memorials may create an environment for social and political conflict...because memorials are static, existing as physical structures in space and time, while the context in which those structures are interpreted changes.”³⁰ In an era following the social rights movements of the late twentieth century, the Lost Cause setting that gave birth to many of the Confederate monuments seems

The original wording for the plaque read “The Denton County Confederate Soldier Memorial was erected in 1918 by the Daughters of the Confederacy. The monument stands as a reminder of historical events. It is intended as a memorial to local citizens who sacrificed themselves for the community. It is a strong reminder of our past mistakes and a symbol of the problems our community still face. The negative chronographic role of the monument serves as a valuable educational tool and has a historical feature on the Courthouse Square. The monument is an exemplary piece of art and a rare example of its type.”

Before this wording was implemented, Willie Hudspeath submitted a revised wording that was approved by commissioners. The second half of the plaque (“It is a strong reminder of our...”) was changed to read “At one time only one race could drink from these fountains. Now let this be a testimony that God created all men equal with certain inalienable rights. We are all on citizens of Denton County.” This version of the plaque stood on the Courthouse lawn from 2002-2010.

In 2010, the commissioners again revised the plaques wording, omitting the section discussing the drinking fountains. The final version of the plaque read in entirety “The Denton County Confederate Soldier Memorial was erected in 1918 by the Daughters of the Confederacy. The monument stands as a reminder of historical events. It is intended as a memorial to local citizens who sacrificed themselves for the community. Now let this be a testimony that God created all men equal with certain inalienable rights. We are all on citizens of Denton County.”

²⁸ “Denton Confederate Soldier Monument Draws Debate,” *NBCDFW*, June 24, 2015.

²⁹ “Although some Confederate monuments have had informational plaques installed to provide historical context, our students observed that this practice represents a much more minimalist, even unobtrusive response.” In Forest and Johnson, “Problem of Forgetting,” 130.

³⁰ Harris and Martinez, “Graves, Worms, and Epitaphs,” 134.

increasingly out of place. Recent events such as the Charleston Shooting of 2015 or the George Floyd killing in 2020 reflect the continued struggle that the nation has in addressing its racial history and present-day inequalities and tensions. Confederate memorials are one such battleground in which these issues are being fought. One cannot help but wonder if the 1918 plea of James Wiley has been satisfactorily answered. Have we yet created “a history...that will tell of their deeds as carefully and truthfully as it should be told?”³¹

³¹ Quoted in *Denton Record-Chronicle*, Vol. 18, No. 252, Ed. 1, June 4, 1918.