

# ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

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## Ladies Memorial Associations

By **Anderson R. Rouse**, University of North Carolina, Greensboro

The Civil War and Reconstruction gave elite white women in the South new opportunities to expand their public roles. Ladies' Memorial Associations (LMAs) throughout the South—in all the states of the Confederacy and in the border states of Missouri and Kentucky—organized women not only to commemorate the Confederate dead, erect monuments, and celebrate the Lost Cause, but also to challenge men's control of Confederate memory. In the months and years immediately following Appomattox, Ladies' Memorial Associations multiplied across the South. Between seventy and a hundred LMAs were founded, “almost everywhere there were concentrations of Confederate bodies,” from Richmond, Marietta, Georgia, and Petersburg to Nashville, Vicksburg, and Chattanooga.<sup>1</sup> As Caroline Janney observes in her study of LMAs in Virginia, at least twenty-six memorial associations were founded in Virginia by 1868, and Richmond alone possessed three LMAs—the Hollywood Memorial Association, the Ladies Memorial Association for the Confederate Dead of Oakwood, and the Hebrew Ladies Memorial Association (for fallen Jewish Confederates).<sup>2</sup>

The first Ladies Memorial Association was founded in Winchester, Virginia in May 1865. Mary Dunbar Williams, who had led soldier relief efforts in Winchester during the war, learned that local farmers, who were plowing their land in preparation for planting corn, were unearthing the remains of Confederate soldiers. With the help of her sister-in-law, Eleanor Williams Boyd, Williams organized a memorial organization formed from women who had volunteered in Confederate hospitals during the war. As with the Winchester's Ladies' Confederate Memorial Association, wartime ladies' associations, which furnished supplies for Confederate soldiers, nursed the wounded, and provided relief on the home front, served as the foundation of Ladies' Memorial Associations after the war. As Caroline Janney observes, “women ... adapted their wartime organizational skills to postwar memorialization projects.”<sup>3</sup> The Ladies, as members of the LMAs referred to themselves, had two main aims: to care for the bodies of Confederate soldiers, through disinterment and reburial efforts, and to honor the Confederate Dead, and, by association, commemorate the Lost Cause, by organizing

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<sup>1</sup> Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 2008), 244.

<sup>2</sup> Caroline Janney, *Burying the Dead but Not the Past: Ladies' Memorial Associations and the Lost Cause* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 8.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

memorial days and erecting monuments. A history of Ladies' Memorial Associations in the *Confederate Veteran* captures this dual focus in a brief history of the organizations that appeared in March 1916: "Ladies' Memorial Associations were . . . organized . . . for the purpose of collecting the bodies of fallen heroes . . . so that the grass should be kept green and flowers lovingly placed upon them."<sup>4</sup>

LMAs' first, and primary, goal was to disinter and rebury Confederate remains from nearby battlefields. Like Winchester's LMA, which was founded with the goal of "prevent[ing] . . . the further desecration of . . . graves," Ladies across the South organized in the immediate post-war period to remedy a practical problem—across the South, and, indeed, on battlefields dotting the whole United States, the bodies of Confederate soldiers were poorly buried, often in shallow graves, where erosion, animals, and farmers' plows could unearth their remains.<sup>5</sup> While Congress had initiated reinterment campaigns and established national cemeteries to catalogue and provide a final resting place for Union soldiers' remains, War Department burial efforts deliberately ignored the Confederate dead. Therefore, as Drew Gilpin Faust observes, "in the South care for the Confederate dead was of necessity the work of the people."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the War Department's decision to exclude Confederates may have contributed to the rapid growth of LMAs in 1865 and 1866; Janney proposes that "the intensified Union practices of expressly ignoring the Confederate dead during elaborate reburial efforts incited the further organization of LMAS and the cult of the Lost Cause during the spring of 1866."<sup>7</sup>

Effort spearheaded by LMAs resulted in the reinterment of thousands of Confederate dead. In Virginia, LMAs reburied nearly a quarter of the 260,000 Confederate soldiers who died during the war. Faust contends that the "activities of the ladies memorial associations, undertaken in considerable measure as a direct response to the exclusion of Confederates from congressional measures establishing national cemeteries, were. . . explicitly sectional."<sup>8</sup> Ladies' Memorial Associations sponsored Confederate cemeteries in their communities, such as Hollywood Cemetery and Oakwood Cemetery in Richmond, the Fredericksburg Confederate Cemetery (still owned and maintained by Fredericksburg's LMA), and Oakwood Cemetery in Raleigh, essentially, as Janney points out, "creating *national* Confederate cemeteries," acting as surrogates for the defunct Confederate governments.<sup>9</sup> Proper burial of the Confederate dead became LMAs' primary responsibility, as Ladies disinterred and reburied, with appropriate honors, dead Confederates from nearby battlefields.

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<sup>4</sup> "Why the Ladies' Aid Societies, Ladies' Memorial Associations, Daughters of the Confederacy?," in *Confederate Veteran* 24, no. 3 (March 1916): 110.

<sup>5</sup> Confederated Southern Memorial Association, *History of the Confederated Memorial Associations of the South* (New Orleans: The Graham Press, 1904), 315.

<sup>6</sup> Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 241.

<sup>7</sup> Janney, *Burying the Dead but Not the Past*, 46.

<sup>8</sup> Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 247.

<sup>9</sup> Janney, *Burying the Dead but Not the Past*, 88, 90.

LMAAs also sponsored the recovery and reburial of Confederate remains from northern battlefields. Richmond's Hollywood Memorial Association, along with other LMAAs in South Carolina, North Carolina, and Georgia, contributed funds for the recovery of nearly 3,000 Confederate dead from Gettysburg and their reburial in Hollywood Cemetery.

The Ladies' work reburying Confederate soldiers killed in the war meshed with southern men's expectations of women's roles—as H. Rives Pollard observed in his *Southern Opinion*, “woman – ‘last at the cross, and earliest at the grave’ – has been foremost in memorial work.” Nevertheless, the Ladies were able to co-opt gender norms for a political purpose. Since, as Faust observes, “women were regarded ... as apolitical in their very essence,” and because of the “long tradition of female responsibility for mourning”—a fact testified to by contemporaries like Pollard— members of LMAAs across the South were able to use mourning, memorialization, and commemoration of the Confederate dead as “a means of perpetuating southern resistance to northern domination” without being accused of inciting rebellion.<sup>10</sup> One should not overlook, however, the personal dimensions of LMAAs' reburial efforts—members of LMAAs, even when they themselves had not lost a male family member in the war, were grappling with loss. Faust acknowledges “for all the politics that inevitably surrounded the care and reinternment of the Confederate dead, the movement was also profoundly personal, for it provided bereaved families with bodies and graves on which to fix their sorrow.”<sup>11</sup> The Ladies grieved and honored the dead and the Confederacy, and, in the process, challenged Reconstruction and cultivated Confederate nationalism.

The second focus of LMAAs' activity was the memorialization of the Confederate dead and the Lost Cause. In these efforts to commemorate the Confederacy and the men who died for it, Janney asserts that “LMAAs ... fostered a residual Confederate nationalism.”<sup>12</sup> The Ladies' commemoration efforts were expressed in two main ways—creating and celebrating memorial days and erecting monuments. A wide array of Memorial (or Decoration) Days were celebrated by LMAAs on different dates. For example, Ladies in Fredericksburg, Lynchburg, and the members of the Oakwood Memorial Association chose the anniversary of Stonewall Jackson's death, May 10, while other LMAAs selected May 31, June 6, and June 9. The Columbus (Georgia) Memorial Association held its first Memorial Day celebrations on April 26, 1866, the anniversary of Johnston's surrender at Bennett Place, as the “maturity of the vernal season, when flowers . . . are most abundant.”<sup>13</sup>

Beyond this practical reason and the historical meaning of the dates chosen by LMAAs to celebrate Memorial Day, there may also have been religious significance to the Ladies' selection. Ladies' Memorial Associations may have chosen April 26 and other

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<sup>10</sup> Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 242-3.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>12</sup> Janney, *Burying the Dead but Not the Past*, 55.

<sup>13</sup> Lucian Lamar Knight, *Georgia's Landmarks, Memorials, and Legends* (Atlanta, GA: Byrd Printing Company, 1914), 156.

dates in the spring season to link the commemoration of the Confederate fallen with the celebration of Easter and the death and resurrection of Christ.<sup>14</sup> This association, though, would have less meaning for Jewish southerners. Though Jewish women in Richmond celebrated Confederate Memorial Day, the Confederate Jewish dead were buried in the Soldier's Section of the Jewish cemetery at the top of Shockoe Hill in Richmond.<sup>15</sup> The women of the Hebrew Ladies' Memorial Association founded the organization in 1866 to care for the graves of Confederate Jewish soldiers, and used their commemoration efforts to promote pride within the Jewish community in Richmond and to answer critics who questioned Jewish war-time service, who were "ever so ready to assail Israel."<sup>16</sup> For Jewish southern women, commemoration of the Lost Cause through the memorialization of the Confederate dead was a way to demonstrate their loyalty to Judaism and to the Confederacy. The celebration of the Lost Cause contributed to the distinctiveness of southern Judaism in the post-Civil War South.<sup>17</sup>

Memorial Days, and similar events, generally followed the same format—after a procession to the cemetery, women and children decorated Confederate graves with flowers and evergreens, and listened to speeches, music, and prayers. Even though men served as orators, these events, unmistakably, were organized and controlled by Ladies' Memorial Associations; as Janney observes, "women of the LMAs were not puppets of the South's men."<sup>18</sup>

Ladies' Memorial Associations also used Memorial and Decoration days to inculcate respect for the Confederate dead and the Lost Cause in southern children. As Karen Cox notes in *Dixie's Daughters*, Ladies trained children to be loyal to the Lost Cause as "they instructed southern girls and boys to maintain the graves of the region's fallen heroes and to place flags and flowers on those graves."<sup>19</sup> Even though some northern observers were critical of this form of commemoration—as the *New York Times* asserted, Memorial Day appeared to be designed to "keep alive the rancors of hate" and "to annoy the Yankees"—Memorial and Decoration Days became the most prominent way of honoring the Confederate Dead in the postwar years. And as Janney observes, thanks to this observance instituted and controlled by the Ladies, "Confederate sentiment

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<sup>14</sup> Lee Ann Whites, *The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender: Augusta, Georgia, 1860-1890* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 183.

<sup>15</sup> Rebekah Kohut, *My Portion: An Autobiography* (New York: A.C. Boni, 1925), 21, 26.

<sup>16</sup> Beth S. Wenger, "War Stories: Jewish Patriotism on Parade," in Jack Wertheimer, ed., *Imagining the Jewish American Community* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2007), 93-119, 105; Marcie Cohen Ferris, *Matzoh Ball Gumbo: Culinary Tales of the Jewish South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 99.

<sup>17</sup>Ferris, *Matzoh Ball Gumbo*, 99.

<sup>18</sup> Janney, *Burying the Dead but Not the Past*, 67.

<sup>19</sup> Karen L. Cox, *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 119.

continued to thrive for decades in the South's cities of the dead."<sup>20</sup> Foster notes that "Memorial Day became an integral part of the Confederate celebration," and, even into the twentieth century as the LMAs were replaced by the Daughters of the Confederacy, "surviving LMAs . . . continued to sponsor the service. In communities without an LMA or where the LMA had become a UDC chapter, the Daughters of the Confederacy accepted responsibility for Memorial Day services."<sup>21</sup>

Ladies Memorial Associations led the movement to build monuments to the Confederate dead and were among the first organizations to erect these monuments. In 1867, the Hollywood Memorial Association (HMA) of Richmond built the first Confederate monument, a ninety-foot memorial pyramid in Hollywood Cemetery. Gaines Foster observes that "once they had cemeteries in proper order, most LMAs sought to provide a monument to the Confederate dead," noting that "the earliest monuments incorporated themes of ceremonial bereavement: over 90 percent of them had some funereal aspect, either in placement or design."<sup>22</sup> Thus mourning, rather than celebration, became the main motivation for LMAs' first monuments. In the first twenty years after the Civil War, seventy percent of Confederate memorials—most of them erected by LMAs—were in cemeteries.

Nonetheless, these memorials could have political significance. Caroline Janney argues that "the Ladies' efforts to alter the southern landscape were indeed powerful . . . political statements during Congressional Reconstruction."<sup>23</sup> In contrast, Foster argues that "memorial ventures genuinely expressed southern attitudes and were not a clever subterfuge for celebrating the southern cause without incurring federal wrath."<sup>24</sup>

The Ladies' monument building efforts proved to be the theater for a struggle between men and women for control of Confederate nationalism. After the end of Congressional Reconstruction in the 1870s, LMAs struggled to assert their claim on the Confederate traditions against men's attempts to control the commemoration of the Lost Cause by directing the erection of a monument to Robert E. Lee. After Lee's death in October 1870, two opposing monument organizations in Richmond, the Lee Monument Association, led by the Association of the Army of Northern Virginia's (AANVA) Jubal Early, and the Hollywood Memorial Association's Ladies' Lee Monument Committee competed to build a monument to Lee. The Ladies' resisted Early, the AANVA, and controlled the commemoration of Lee's death, eventually succeeding in erecting their monument to Lee. Leaders of LMAs challenged men's efforts to dictate the way that the Confederacy was remembered, thus, as Janney observes "ensuring that women would remain central to the Confederate traditions (and transmission of those traditions to the

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<sup>20</sup> *New York Times*, June 17, 1866, quoted in Janney, *Burying the Dead but Not the Past*, 77; Janney, *Burying the Dead but Not the Past*, 58.

<sup>21</sup> Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South, 1865 to 1913* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 127.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>23</sup> Janney, *Burying the Dead but Not the Past*, 98.

<sup>24</sup> Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*, 44.

next generation).”<sup>25</sup> Preserving Confederate nationalism remained, to a large extent, the role of women, from the LMAs of the 1860s and 1870s to the United Daughters of the Confederacy in the 1890s.

Despite the prominence of women’s organizations committed to maintaining Confederate memory, like LMAs and the UDC, white southern women were not unified in their support for the Lost Cause. Varina Howell Davis herself, as historian Joan Cashin notes, “did not enthusiastically support the Confederacy” and she remained pessimistic about the Confederacy’s prospects throughout the war.<sup>26</sup> Varina Davis was attacked by the UDC for her refusal to commit wholeheartedly to the Lost Cause; in particular, they took umbrage at her decision to live in the North. As Cashin observes, “the militant, anti-reconciliation wing” of the UDC, which “embraced the Lost Cause as a secular religion,” had the former Confederate First Lady “in their crosshairs.”<sup>27</sup> Davis’s relationship with Confederate organizations in Richmond eventually became so contentious that, in 1891, the staff of Hollywood Cemetery threatened that would not be enough room to bury her in the Davis plot (though she was buried with her family after her death).<sup>28</sup> To an even greater extent than Varina Howell Davis, women who were Unionists and remained loyal to the United States during the war challenged LMAs and UDC chapters’ attempts to establish a Lost Cause mythology that would resurrect southern nationalism. Even though, as Margaret Storey observes, “Unionism has never been the principal story of the Deep South’s Civil War’s narrative,” southerners loyal to the Union disputed the collective memory cultivated by groups like Ladies Memorial Associations by commemorating their support for the Union and creating their own kind of “Lost Cause.”<sup>29</sup> Not all southern white women supported the LMAs and UDC’s version of collective memory, and black women throughout the South, through celebrations of holidays like Lincoln’s birthday and the Fourth of July, nurtured and conserved their own memory of this contested past.<sup>30</sup>

In the 1870s and 1880s, LMAs saw their numbers decline as middle-class and elite white women became involved in an array of causes, from temperance to overseas missions. Janney argues that “the Ladies had been so successful at mobilizing middle- and upper-class white southern women to join their efforts that they had depleted their own ranks.”<sup>31</sup> By the beginning of the twentieth century, LMAs had largely been replaced by the Daughters of the Confederacy. The UDC’s ability to attract younger women, who were born after the Civil War, and its national organization allowed it to become the most important organization preserving the Confederate tradition.

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<sup>25</sup> Janney, *Burying the Dead but Not the Past*, 107.

<sup>26</sup> Joan E. Cashin, *First Lady of the Confederacy: Varina Davis’s Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 6.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 293.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.

<sup>29</sup> Margaret M. Storey, *Loyalty and Loss: Alabama’s Unionists in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 233.

<sup>30</sup> See W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 55-104.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

Ladies' Memorial Associations, created from women's grief over the loss of their husbands, sons, brothers, and fathers, and the end of the Confederacy, became one of the most important groups in the campaign to honor the Confederate dead and celebrate the Lost Cause. Through Confederate cemeteries, Memorial and Decoration Days, and monuments, LMAs kept the Confederate tradition alive. In part because of traditional gender expectations, most importantly the belief that women were apolitical, women were able to foster Confederate nationalism in the face of defeat. Rather than rejecting the Confederacy, women embraced the Lost Cause and the Confederate dead, and, through the LMAs, created the observances, practices, and monuments that would define the civil religion of the Lost Cause.

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