

# FINDING MEANING IN MONUMENTS:

## Atlanta History Center Enters Dialogue on Confederate Symbols

★ BY F. SHEFFIELD HALE ★

### RECONSIDERING THE LOST CAUSE

Confederate monuments have long been public reminders of the resilience of white racial supremacy. Naturally, they, as well as flags and other symbols of the Confederacy, have been the subject of controversy as a result.

At the Atlanta History Center we believe these monuments can be valuable educational tools as tangible signs of the Jim Crow era. Adjacent interpretive signage and educational programming can help convert Confederate monuments into historical artifacts by

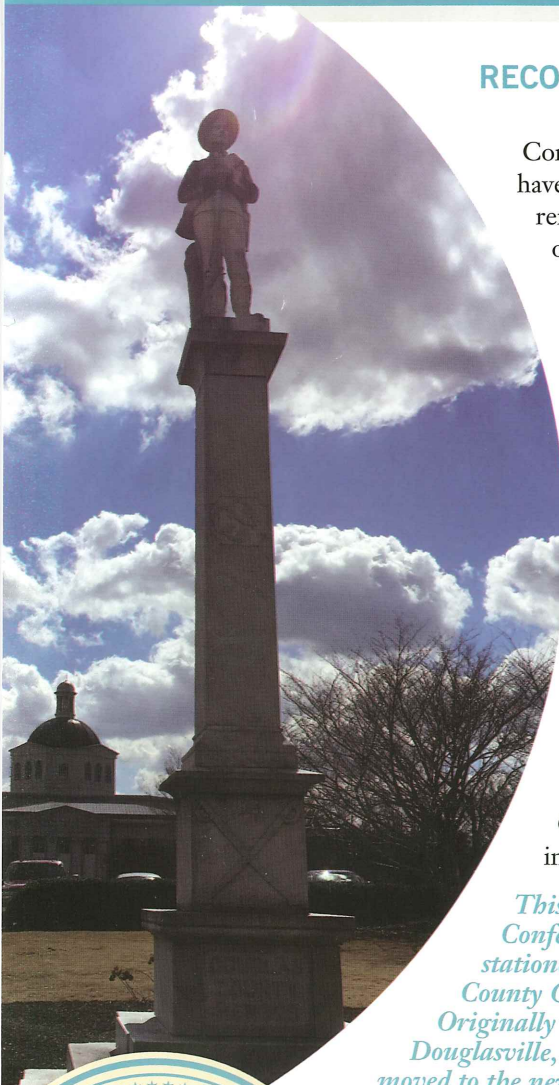
*This monument of a Confederate soldier is currently stationed in front of the Douglas County Georgia Courthouse. Originally erected in downtown Douglasville, Georgia, the statue was moved to the new Courthouse in 1998.*

talking honestly about who erected the monuments and why, and, most importantly, by telling the stories of the people monuments were intended to diminish.

If all you do is read the inscriptions, it would appear that most Confederate monuments simply honor the sacrifices of brave soldiers who fought for a decentralized southern republic founded on the ideals of the Founding Fathers. There is truth in these inscriptions. But they also ignore one salient fact: the Constitution of the Confederate States of America explicitly protected African American slavery and, by logical extension, a traditional vision of the American Dream meant only for white men. Further, upon the confederacy's defeat, nearly 39 percent of its entire population—some 3.5 million southern souls—were freed or freed themselves from bondage.<sup>2</sup>

Immediately after the war, the sense of shock and grief among many white southerners was profound. At least one-fifth of all white men of military age in the Confederacy died during the war. From the 1860s through the 1880s, most monuments were erected to commemorate Confederate dead. Often placed in cemeteries, these memorials usually took the form of obelisks, arches, or fountains, often adorned with funeral drapes.<sup>3</sup>

The majority of Confederate statues in the South today are of a different character. Erected between 1890 and the 1920s, these monuments were placed in public locations—town squares, courthouse lawns, college campuses. They tend to be more elaborate and celebratory, depicting soldiers at attention or generals atop horses, and their inscriptions are usually focused more on justifying the Confederate cause than mourning its dead. An equestrian statue of a Confederate general is not an expression of personal loss.



These monuments are the products of an era defined by Jim Crow, which affirmed a white supremacist worldview through veneration of the Lost Cause myth. As physical reflections of that mythology, monuments of this period helped to create a stronger sense of Confederate identity than had ever existed during the Civil War, all the while ignoring slavery as the war's main cause.<sup>4</sup>

Over time, some came to view Confederate monuments as noble gestures, while others came to see the same monuments as painful reminders of America's reestablishment of white supremacy after both northern and southern whites chose national reconciliation over racial equality in the 1870s. As a result, the present debate over Confederate monuments is a deeply personal and emotional one. It is about our ancestors, our fathers and mothers, our grandparents, and great-grandparents. And all of us have a stake in it.

### STARTING SOMETHING

After a lifetime of involvement with the Atlanta History Center, I became its president and chief executive officer in 2012. Well aware of the ninety-year-old institution's traditional strengths and weaknesses, my top priority has been to shake off the public's dusty impression of the Atlanta History Center (and of history in general) and to transform it into a more welcoming place for all Atlantans. I believe the key to expanding our mission is expanding our reach—getting beyond the boundaries of our campus and showing up in places where we are least expected.

I was sickened by the tragedy in Charleston in June 2015. Could this really be happening today? But, like everyone else, it also made me think. I began to see how the Atlanta History Center could make a difference in a way we had never done before. I saw a way to marry my own historic preservation experience and the center's staff expertise and collections resources (especially Civil War collections) with the larger vision of becoming more relevant and community-driven. And as a former chairman of the Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation and current trustee for the National Trust for Historic Preservation, I adhere to an ethos of adaptive reuse and community engagement. All the ingredients were there to begin engaging in a broader discussion of Confederate monuments, the Lost Cause, and how history is never as simple or painless as you think.

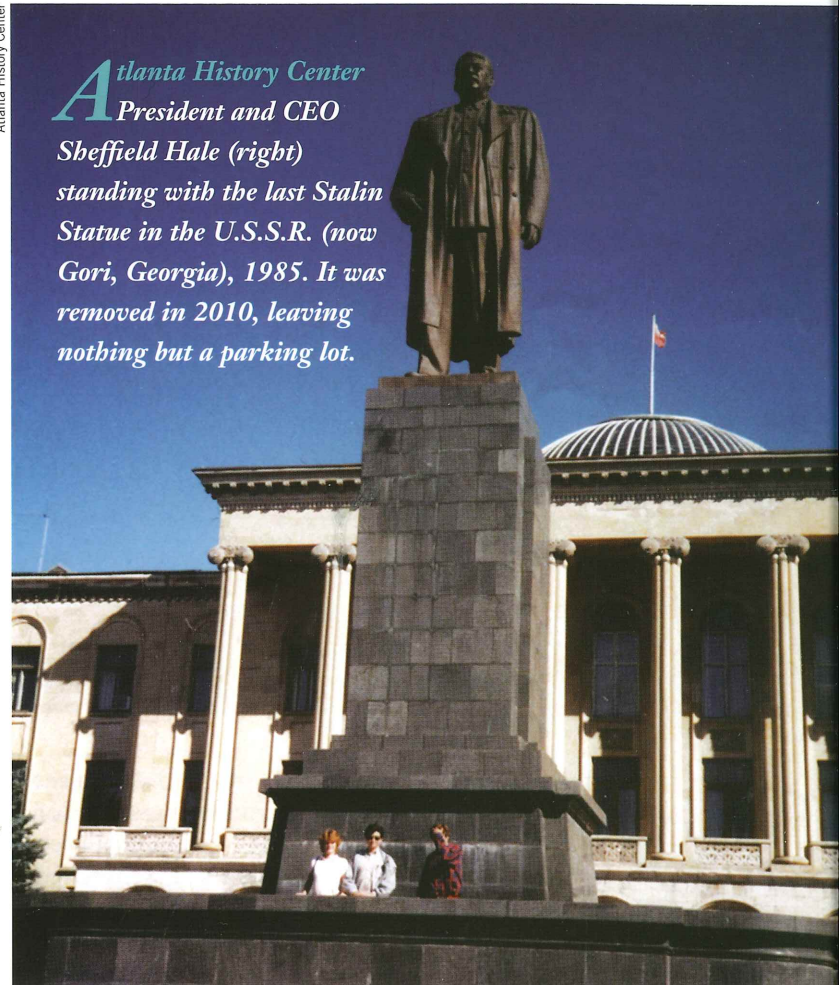
As a committed grassroots preservationist, I believe the removal of historical objects from the landscape almost always serves to diminish us and our collective story. I think it's much better to keep these monuments. But, if we keep them, we cannot maintain the status quo. *We must* transform them from objects of veneration into historical artifacts that tell the story of why so many of them were erected. Quite simply, they served as a vehicle to celebrate the Confederacy during the time of Jim Crow segregation. Confederate monuments are among our last tangible links to that disturbing era in American history.

Our desire to address these issues followed on the heels of the Georgia Historical Society's success in its historic marker program, especially during the Civil War sesquicentennial commemoration. The society has filled in many gaps in public historical interpretation and formal recognition

by adding markers addressing slavery, the United States Colored Troops, the myths of Sherman's March to the Sea, and many other topics.<sup>5</sup>

But let's not be naïve. This is tough emotional ground where passions rule and logic hides. We dare not tackle it alone or uninformed. The first thing we did was an old-fashioned literature search, seeking out news articles, blog discussions, academic writings, and examples of similarly focused interpretive efforts. Most importantly, we talked

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*Atlanta History Center  
President and CEO  
Sheffield Hale (right)  
standing with the last Stalin  
Statue in the U.S.S.R. (now  
Gori, Georgia), 1985. It was  
removed in 2010, leaving  
nothing but a parking lot.*

*When the historian comes to count the monuments builded [sic] to perpetuate the memories of heroes of the Confederate States, he will pause and question if his figures be really correct. He may visit other lands and make calculations as to what other peoples have done; but in the end the sentiment, the loyalty, that marks those who constituted the Confederacy stands out as the most remarkable instance of love and gratitude and devotion of which human annals give an account.*

—Confederate Veteran, August 1914

top left: The Cecil Rhodes statue which adorns Oriol College at Oxford University. It became the subject of controversy in early 2015 as part of the larger “Rhodes Must Fall” movement.

below left: The Buddhas of Bamiyan were erected in Afghanistan between the sixth and seventh centuries. Viewing them as blasphemous, the Taliban destroyed the statues in 2001.

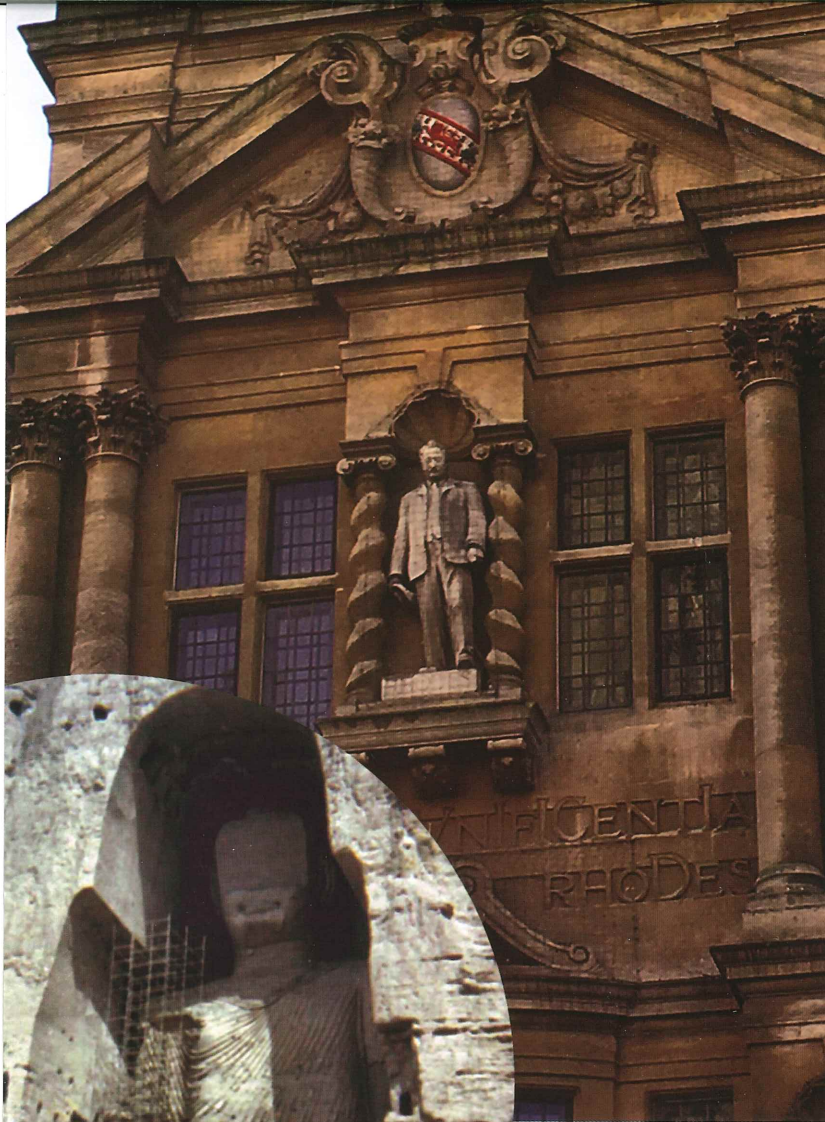
altered for a variety of reasons: from politics, to traffic congestion, to lightning strikes. A number of books catalog such monuments in certain states, but only one statewide online database exists: the University of North Carolina’s *Commemorative Landscapes of North Carolina* website. Hence, one thing historical agencies and local communities can do to aid this effort is to simply inventory and document local monuments, however defined.<sup>7</sup>

## SEPARATING HERITAGE FROM HISTORY, AND OTHER MONUMENTAL CHALLENGES

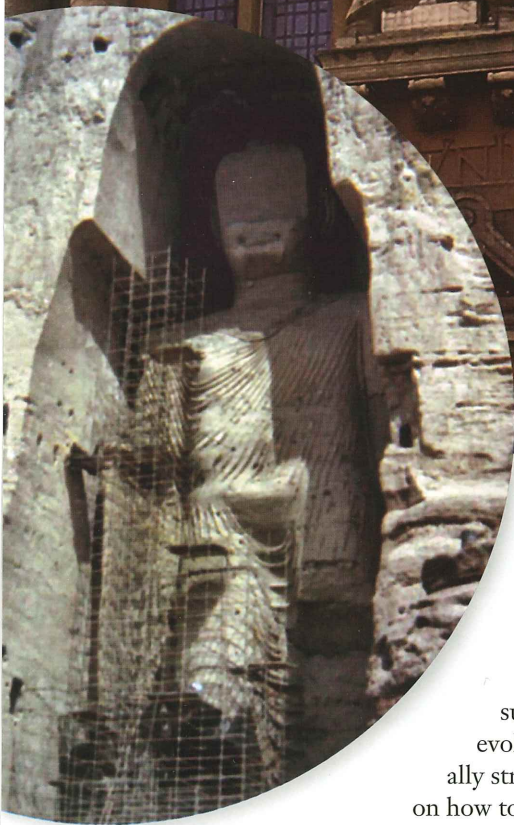
As a means of beginning the discussion—and also as a trial balloon—we created a presentation intended for local civic organizations. I started the presentation not by considering Confederate monuments *per se*, but by considering the fate of other supposedly permanent monuments around the world. That includes the wholesale eradication of Joseph Stalin statues in the Soviet Union (in 1985 I traveled to Stalin’s hometown of Gori, Georgia, just to see the last one), the destruction of the sixth-century Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan, and the relocation of monuments venerating colonial rulers in India and communist leaders in Eastern Europe into semicommemorative parks. (I prefer to call them “memorial ghettos.”) I moved on to contemporary debates, including those over Cecil Rhodes in England and South Africa, Woodrow Wilson at Princeton, and John C. Calhoun at Yale.

I also tackled the heritage argument. In this parlance, heritage is “history without all the unpleasant parts.” Common expressions of heritage are St. Patrick’s Day celebrations, beer toasts at Oktoberfest in campy Bavarian theme park towns, or tossing the caber at Scottish heritage festivals. I wanted the audience to consider the ways people—including many of those who believe they are protecting Confederate heritage—so often set aside the more difficult-to-confront facts of history in favor of a more palatable narrative.

We leavened the presentation with appropriate humor, an unexpected tactic when discussing the Confederacy and racial segregation. For example, when covering additive solutions to controversial monuments, I used a doctored image that had recently gained local notoriety. Etched into the granite of Stone Mountain beside Confederate leaders riding on horses was the Atlanta hip-hop duo OutKast riding in a Cadillac. We noted the ironic twist of a Ukrainian artist altering a statue of Vladimir Lenin into Darth Vader, complete with a Wi-Fi hotspot embedded in his head. Using a bit of creative animation, we also considered the hypothet-



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Marco Bonavoglia (Wikimedia Commons)

with our own staff and trustees. From local and national historians we approached, we received supportive comments coupled with thoughtful suggestions. As our thinking evolved internally, we occasionally struggled to reach a consensus on how to approach the issue—and we still do. That ongoing internal and external dialogue is essential.

One of the problems we encountered when we began was an astonishing lack of basic historical data. Scholarship over the last decades has been inconclusive as to the exact number of Confederate monuments that stand, where they are located, or even what constitutes a monument, a memorial, a marker, or a tablet. Renewed attention on Confederate symbols has resulted in new studies of the issue, most recently the Southern Poverty Law Center’s April 2016 report cataloguing Confederate iconography, “Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy.”<sup>6</sup>

Confederate monuments come in all shapes and sizes and are placed in all manner of locations. Some have been moved, replaced, and

ical removal of statues of Tom Watson, Eugene Talmadge, Richard Russell, and other Georgia leaders from the grounds of the state capitol. As they were whisked away to that great “segatory” (segregation purgatory) in the sky, only the statues of President Jimmy Carter and General John B. Gordon’s riderless horse remained.

As exaggerated as some of these examples may seem, they make a serious point. A top-down cleansing of the landscape of all Confederate monuments (even if that were practical or feasible) would not cleanse our personal or collective historical palettes of their unpleasant taste. Indeed, mass removals probably would have the opposite effect. Those who defend the status quo on Confederate monuments would feel compelled to cling even harder to their uncompromising views.

## EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES

Whatever solutions there are undoubtedly will emerge from well-informed local action. The Atlanta History Center’s role in this discussion is to spark a grassroots conversation, providing information and historical context to local communities so they can decide what to do with their own monuments—whether that culminates in a decision to retain, reinterpret, relocate, or remove them.

As we rolled out our test-balloon, we also introduced an educational portal online (see [go.aaslh.org/AHCmonuments](http://go.aaslh.org/AHCmonuments)). Its purpose is to provide historical context and to offer a place people can turn to for reliable information. The website is the cornerstone of our overall initiative, allowing us to support local conversations without coming off as an intrusive outsider. With the educational tools we provide, anyone—high school students, educators, politicians, citizens—can make informed decisions on the future of these Lost Cause vestiges.

The key feature of our page is the downloadable *Confederate Monument Interpretation Template* that offers sample text describing the creation of these monuments and their close relationship to the Lost Cause and to Jim Crow segregation. The template also encourages communities to document and describe a given memorial’s unique history (who built it, when, unusual characteristics, etc.) within that broader context.

One place to use this sample text is on reader rails—standing interpretive panels (also known as wayside markers) near and around existing monuments. This is a relatively inexpensive way to reframe a monument as something other than a voice of authority, just as putting a label in front of a museum object signals viewers to think of that object as a historical artifact. By turning monuments into artifacts, you can tell the story of their origins and varied meanings over time. QR codes on these panels and other internet linkage could connect readers to additional information.

Another tool is a page dedicated to research. Here visitors can access the latest articles, blog entries, and books addressing Confederate monuments, memory, and controversies. We have also created a brief guide with tips for researching monuments, determining who exercises legal authority over them, and in general how to get started.

Since its launch, the *Confederate Monument Interpretation Template* has become the primary draw of the monuments

webpage. In April 2016, thirty-three members of the University of Mississippi history faculty proposed borrowing text from the template to help reinterpret the most contentious monument on campus. Following much criticism of a previous attempt to contextualize the statue, the history faculty pulled language from our model to link the university’s monument to the legacy of the Civil War, the Lost Cause narrative, and the Jim Crow era. Adopting the suggestions of the history faculty and other university groups, the University of Mississippi installed the revised plaque in October 2016. The new panel informs readers that millions of enslaved people were freed as a result of the war and better explains the Lost Cause doctrine, discussing both its flawed understanding of the causes of the war and the way it was used to fight integration in the 1950s and 1960s. But as history shows, meaningful progress is controversial and often resisted. Indeed, the Mississippi Division of the Sons of Confederate Veterans filed a lawsuit seeking the removal of the new plaque.<sup>8</sup>

## ENGAGING THE MEDIA

In the past, the Atlanta History Center has rarely engaged the media as an active platform to promote public dialogue. One notable exception (presaging today’s monuments debate) was my 2013 op-ed piece for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* arguing that a statue of racist Georgia legislator Tom Watson should be retained on the Georgia state capitol grounds. The position I articulated then was not so different from our institution’s position today. I advocated we shift attention from the person being venerated to the people who erected the monument and their reasons for doing so.<sup>9</sup>

Since summer 2015, we have taken any opportunity we can to speak up. From international publications such as the *Economist* and *Time*; to local newspaper, radio, and television outlets; and in websites, we have worked to stimulate community dialogue on monuments. To accompany an *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* column about our initiative, we produced an educational video—filmed on location in front of a towering Confederate monument in metro Atlanta—to introduce viewers to the monuments issue.<sup>10</sup>

By reaching out through the media, the History Center has been able to extend its educational reach—promoting the reexamination of monuments on a national, even international scale. The effect has been positive, prompting further requests for interviews and information. Overall, media attention has gleaned much-needed public consideration of our initiative.

## IT’S WHAT WE DO

Today more than ever, history institutions have a responsibility to address the history-related issues that arise daily outside their walls. Though the Atlanta History Center rarely weighed in on contemporary issues before, we viewed the debate over Confederate monuments as one we could not ignore. Our institution has staff, collections, and knowledge to contribute to this debate. We are willing to expose ourselves to controversy, and the public (not just our usual audiences) will respect us all the more for at least speaking out, no matter how successful we are in the long run.



*In response to simmering controversy over the conspicuously large Confederate memorial on the side of Atlanta's Stone Mountain, Brooklyn-based artist Mack Williams suggested that the Atlanta hip-hop group OutKast be added to the carving of Confederate leaders.*

Mack Williams

If you install wayside markers will anybody really read them? We don't know. But without them, we know there would be no context provided and nothing to challenge the authority of that monument. Sometimes, it's just making the effort, being the first to step forward, that counts. And you never know where that will lead.

The debate over Confederate symbols will not go away any time soon. And of course this is not the only such debate. If we as an institution are not willing to inject our resources into these debates and become involved with our communities, then who will? History has a vital place in public discourse, or it should. Without public engagement, we allow ourselves to slide toward irrelevance. No one will be asking for our help unless they know we are willing to give it.

The future of public history will require historical institutions to move away from traditional comfort zones and engage more fully with local communities. So let's concentrate on doing what we do best: use our collections, information, and expertise, as well as our willingness to engage the past in new and unexpected ways. Let's enable communities to make informed choices about their own present and future.

As public historians, it's what we do. ☉



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<sup>1</sup> "The Monumental Spirit of the South," *Confederate Veteran* 22, no. 8 (August 1914), 339.

<sup>2</sup> For example: "No bill of attainder or *ex post facto* law, or law denying or impairing the right of property in negro slaves shall be passed" (Article I, Section 9); "The citizens of each State . . . shall have the right of transit and sojourn in any State of this Confederacy, with their slaves and other property; and the right of property in said slaves shall not be thereby impaired" (Article IV, Section 2); "In all such territory the institution of negro slavery, as it now exists in the Confederate States, shall be recognized and protected by Congress and by the Territorial government" (Article IV, Section 3). According to the 1860 census, the total population of the eleven states that would form the Confederacy was 9,103,332, of which 3,521,110, or more than 38 percent, were enslaved. The Confederacy also recognized Kentucky and Missouri, which would bring the figures to 11,441,028 and 3,861,524, respectively, or nearly 34 percent enslaved.

<sup>3</sup> This is based on estimates of approximately 620,000 military deaths. Maris A. Vinovskis, "Have Social Historians Lost the Civil War? Some Preliminary Demographic Speculations,"

*Journal of American History* 76, no. 1 (1989); Darroch Greer, *Counting Civil War Casualties, Week-By-Week*, for the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum (BRC Imagination Arts: Burbank, 2005); See also Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (Knopf: New York, 2008). J. David Hacker has recently estimated a total between 650,000 and 850,000; see "Recounting the Dead," *New York Times Opinionator*, September 20, 2011; See examples in Gould B. Hagler, *Georgia's Confederate Monuments: In Honor of a Fallen Nation* (Mercer Press: Macon, 2014). See also J. Michael Martinez, William D. Richardson, Ronald L. McNinch-Su, editors *Confederate Symbols in the Contemporary South* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 154-7; Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South, 1865 to 1913* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1987), 273.

<sup>4</sup> Martinez, et al., 59-63. See also Southern Poverty Law Center, "Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy," [go.aash.org/SPLCforHN](http://go.aash.org/SPLCforHN).

<sup>5</sup> "Explore Georgia's Historical Markers," Georgia Historical Society, [go.aash.org/GHSmarkers](http://go.aash.org/GHSmarkers).

<sup>6</sup> In April 2016, the Southern Poverty Law Center reported more than 700 Confederate monuments exist in thirty-one states and the District of Columbia. Though the SPLC cataloged a broad inventory of Confederate monuments erected from the end of the Civil War to the present day, they identified two peak periods of their construction: "The first began around 1900, amid the period in which states were enacting Jim Crow laws to disenfranchise the newly freed African Americans and resegregate society. This spike lasted well into the 1920s, a period that saw a dramatic resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, which had been born in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. The second spike began in the early 1950s and lasted through the 1960s, as the civil rights movement led to a backlash among segregationists." See also Karen L. Cox, *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (University Press of Florida: Gainesville, 2003), especially 49-72.

<sup>7</sup> See "Commemorative Landscapes of North Carolina," [docsouth.unc.edu/commland](http://docsouth.unc.edu/commland). See also Hagler; Timothy S. Sidor, *An Illustrated Guide to Virginia's Confederate Monuments* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press 2011); and Robert S. Seigler, *A Guide to Confederate Monuments in South Carolina: Passing the Cup* (University of South Carolina Press: Columbia, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Bracey Harris, "UM History Faculty Seek Confederate Plaque Revision," *Clarion-Ledger*; April 4, 2016; "UM Takes Key Steps to Address History and Context," *University of Mississippi News*, June 10, 2016. After subsequent revisions, the final plaque text reads: "As Confederate veterans were dying in increasing numbers, memorial associations across the South built monuments in their memory. These monuments were often used to promote an ideology known as the 'Lost Cause,' which claimed that the Confederacy had been established to defend states' rights and that slavery was not the principal cause of the Civil War. Residents of Oxford and Lafayette County dedicated this statue, approved by the university, in 1906. Although the monument was created to honor the sacrifice of local Confederate soldiers, it must also remind us that the defeat of the Confederacy actually meant freedom for millions of people. On the evening of September 30, 1962, this statue was a rallying point for opponents of integration. This historic statue is a reminder of the university's divisive past. Today, the University of Mississippi draws from that past a continuing commitment to open its hallowed halls to all who seek truth, knowledge, and wisdom."

<sup>9</sup> Sheffield Hale, "We Can Learn from History," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, October 30, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> "Recast in Stone," *Economist* February 6-12, 2016; James C. Cobb, "Confronting the Future of New Orleans' Confederate Past," *Time*, January 14, 2016; and Gracie Bonds Staples, "Confederate Monuments: Should They Stay or Should They Go?," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 4, 2016.