“The Great Weight of Responsibility”: The Struggle over History and Memory in Confederate Veteran Magazine

Steven E. Sodergren

Southern Cultures, Volume 19, Number 3, Fall 2013, pp. 26-45 (Article)

Published by The University of North Carolina Press
DOI: 10.1353/scu.2013.0026

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/scu/summary/v019/19.3.sodergren.html
The perspective of history presented in the Confederate Veteran can be seen as one reflecting not only that of the editors and contributors (almost all of whom were also subscribers), but also those of a Confederate veteran community that labeled the magazine its “official organ” by 1905. May 1896 edition, courtesy of Duke University Libraries.
In the July 1900 edition of *Confederate Veteran* magazine, readers discovered that a “sensation” had occurred at a recent reunion of Union and Confederate veterans. Designated as the “official organ” of the United Confederate Veterans (UCV), the largest veterans’ society in the southern states, it was no surprise that the July edition of the *Veteran* included details of a veteran’s reunion among its usual collection of soldier narratives and historical editorials. The “sensation” involved comments from a Commander of the Grand Army of the Republic named Albert D. Shaw, a Union veteran and politician who attempted to build upon the feelings of reconciliation at the event. Despite giving a speech described “in the main of excellent spirit,” the *Confederate Veteran* noted that Commander Shaw “made significant statements with which Southern men will never concur.” Stressing that American schoolchildren should be taught “one idea of American citizenship,” Shaw concluded, “[i]n this view the keeping alive of sectional teachings as to the justice and rights of the cause of the South, in the hearts of the children, is all out of order, unwise, unjust, and utterly opposed to the bond by which the great chieftain Lee solemnly bound the cause of the South in his final surrender.”

Rising immediately in response to Shaw was General John B. Gordon, Confederate hero, former governor of Georgia, and then Commander-in-Chief of the United Confederate Veterans. Gordon’s comments were clearly emotional as he proclaimed, “In the name of the future manhood of the South I protest. What are we to teach them? If we cannot teach them that their fathers were right, it follows that these Southern children must be taught that they were wrong. Are we ready for that? For one I am not ready! I never will be ready to have my children taught that I was wrong, or that the cause of my people was unjust and unholy.” The article went on to note that Gordon “spoke as seemed he never did before in a defense of the traditions and principles of the South,” and his speech was printed in its entirety in the July edition of *Confederate Veteran*, compared to only one paragraph from Shaw’s “sensational” address. (A promise that Shaw’s original speech would be printed in its entirety in the following edition of *Confederate Veteran* was never fulfilled.)

Though presented in a theatrical manner, this depiction of how former Confederates viewed the legacy and memory of the Civil War was common in the pages of *Confederate Veteran* magazine during its nearly forty year publication run from 1893 to 1932. One finds within its pages almost continual repetition of the concept of the “Lost Cause,” first enunciated by journalist Edward Pollard in 1866 as a southern, or Confederate, view of the war. The methods and writings of subsequent “Lost Cause” historians receive appropriately harsh criticism from modern academics; it is not unusual to see their ideas labeled as “sheer craziness” and a “caricature of the truth” in recent literature on the subject. Historian Alan Nolan seems to express the dominant view by claiming that “[t]he victim of the Lost Cause
has been *history*, for which the legend has been substituted in national memory.” As Fred Arthur Bailey has shown, this “legend” served a purpose, providing the means by which southern elites preserved their authority in the region following the war. Other historians have sought to explain why even professional academics in the decades following the Civil War were willing to accept such an intellectually problematic interpretation of the past. Gaines Foster, in his powerful book *Ghosts of the Confederacy*, lays much of the blame at the feet of academics, stating that while most wanted to be critical of the southern historical view during the formative years of the Lost Cause, they ultimately “failed to live up to their ideal in the face of hostile public opinion.” Yet, while modern historians can repeatedly point out the flaws in the methods and biases behind the Lost Cause interpretation, the question remains why the general public was willing to believe what is today considered such a controversial interpretation of history.3

**THE CONFEDERATE VETERAN AND LOST CAUSE HISTORY**

The answer reveals not only how southerners interpreted the past and the practice of history following the Civil War, but also illuminates the divide, persistent to this day, in how the public and the academy differ in their approaches to revealing the past. The *Confederate Veteran*, a periodical that few historians have examined in great detail despite its lengthy run and popularity among southern veterans and their associates, offers illumination on this issue. While the periodical has been mined as a historical source for Lost Cause rhetoric of the Confederate veteran community at the turn of the century, few historians have assessed the distinctive content found within. Instead, the focus tends to fall on works like the *Southern Historical Society Papers*, which were founded in the late 1870s and heavily influenced by prominent veterans like Jubal Early, a founder and president of the Southern Historical Society. Perhaps the most important element of the *Papers* was the quasi-academic nature of the publication, which sought “historical authenticity” for its effort at constructing the memory of the Lost Cause. Gary Gallagher accurately notes that other southern periodicals “never approached the *Southern Historical Society Papers* in terms of influencing historians,” a condition which persists to this day.4

While the historical community may have been swayed by the *Papers*, certainly the widespread readership of *Confederate Veteran* demonstrates that it had the greater cultural impact on the southern public. David Blight, in his work *Race and Reunion*, is one of the few historians who recognizes the impact that the magazine had upon the reading public. He sees the *Confederate Veteran*, along with veterans groups like the United Confederate Veterans and the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), as steering the Lost Cause movement by the turn of the century. Blight argues that the *Veteran* “became the voice of the UCV, the clearing-
house for ‘Lost Cause’ thought, and the vehicle by which ex-Confederates built a powerful memory community that lasted into the 1930s.” The magazine expressed traditional Lost Cause ideas while blending them with a newly forming “reconciliationist vision” of the war that fed into the shifting perspectives of the veterans’ community, no doubt contributing to the magazine’s popularity in those circles. Ultimately, the forty-year run of the Veteran represents a period when southern memory of the war was being molded into a new vision of the past that reconciled some of the inconsistencies that had plagued the Lost Cause for decades. The Veteran contributed to this vision by offering what John Simpson termed “a rich tapestry of Confederate military history for a younger generation of Southerners.”

Significantly, the Confederate Veteran is representative of not only how its contributors and editors viewed the past, as veterans of the Civil War increasingly passed from the scene at the turn of the twentieth century, but also how those affiliated with the magazine defined such philosophical notions as history, truth, and memory. By examining a selection of approximately fifty pieces from the full run of Confederate Veteran which address the notion of the past in direct fashion (given the content of the magazine, most of its articles do so at least indirectly), one sees a surprisingly self-conscious examination of history. These pieces varied in subject matter, from editorials to soldiers’ accounts of the war to reprinted minutes and speeches from veterans’ gatherings. All found their way into a magazine that reached a peak of 22,000 subscribers by 1902 (at fifty cents an issue). The perspective of history presented in the Veteran can thus be seen as one reflecting not only that of the editors and contributors (almost all of whom were also subscribers), but also those of a Confederate veteran community that labeled the magazine its “official organ” by 1903.

As General Gordon’s earlier comments indicate, veterans and their associates realized the importance of the past and what effect it would have on future generations. What is surprising is how little these concepts changed over time; other than the inclusion of references to major developments in American affairs over the publication run of Confederate Veteran, the vehemence and structure of how contributors articulated their view of history appeared in 1932 just as they had in 1893. The focus of the magazine would shift from wartime tales and recollections to features on contemporary veteran and memorialization issues with the ascension of UDC member Edith Pope to editor-in-chief following its founder’s death in 1913. However, the Confederate Veteran remained faithful to its original vision and thus sustained its success for another two decades. The contents of the Confederate Veteran were, for the most part, not deliberately manipulated; most soldier narratives and articles on wartime or postwar Confederate activities were written by veterans and their family members trying to get the story right for future generations. That they might fail to accomplish this mission was a possibility that many of those affiliated with the magazine accepted. The goal was not necessarily to find
the “truth” in the present, but to provide the source material so that it may be discovered somewhere down the line.7

From the very beginning, contributors to the Confederate Veteran stressed the need to settle upon the “truth” before the Confederate generation passed on, recognizing that the future of the “New South” was inextricably linked to the past of the Confederacy. One contributor, Samuel Will John of Alabama, spent an article picking apart relatively minor details regarding the service record of Barksdale’s brigade but concluded, “It may appear to some that these are small errors; but the Veteran will be read by future generations in search of the truth of history made by the armies of the Confederacy, and therefore all who write for its pages should be absolutely accurate in all their statements.” In a report by the United Sons of Confederate Veterans Historical Committee published in the January 1900 edition of the Confederate Veteran, committee members noted the turn of a new century and expressed “the great weight of responsibility that rests upon us” in getting the story of the past right for future generations, adding that “the establishment of the truth is never wrong.” The report continued, “We know that tens of thousands of boys
and girls are growing up into manhood and womanhood throughout the South, with improper ideas concerning the struggle between the States, and with distorted conceptions concerning the causes that led up to that tremendous conflict.” Contributors to the Veteran concurred with this feeling of “responsibility” for the future and set out, with apparent good intentions, to make sure that history was properly recorded in the magazine for those who may someday need its lessons.8

Despite this mission of protecting the past for the future, the Confederate Veteran was not designed to be an academic publication, but rather was a periodical aimed at a “mass audience” with the express intent of preserving the past of a deceased nation-state. The magazine was founded in 1893 by Sumner Archibald Cunningham, a dynamic and polarizing journalist who had served in the Army of Tennessee during the war but had seen little real combat. Described by his biographer as possessing an “irritating nature, neuroticism, self-righteous and condescending tones, and defensiveness,” Cunningham ran afoul of several Confederate veterans’ groups in the early 1890s over his alleged mishandling of funds in his role as general agent for the Jefferson Davis Monument Committee. Partly to vindicate himself, Cunningham founded the Veteran to, according to John Simpson, “extricate himself from a potential legal suit” and to salvage his reputation as a spokesman for the Confederate veteran community. In the premier issue, Cunningham in his role as editor portrayed the Veteran as “an organ of communication between Confederate soldiers and those who are interested in their affairs.” Although the first issue focused almost exclusively on the Jefferson Davis Monument fundraising campaign, Cunningham proclaimed that future issues would address “[w]hatever may be desirable to put before representative people of the entire South.” Cunningham apparently tapped into something; the Veteran quickly became the largest southern periodical in the country and made Cunningham “a leading exemplar of the Confederate heritage.”9

THE QUEST FOR TRUTH

With literary contributions from Confederate veterans and their family members, academics, politicians, and the interested public, the Veteran dealt mostly with historical narratives of the war along with the activities and publications of the United Confederate Veterans and the United Daughters of the Confederacy. As one member of that community noted in 1916, “[i]n the annals of historical literature the Veteran is the most unique in design and the most satisfying in the elements of truth.” This word truth appeared repeatedly throughout the historical narratives published in the Veteran. Cunningham and virtually all of his contributors shared the unequivocal notion that there was a single “truth” to history. For example, in an article entitled “Shall we Stand for Truth in History?,” Dr. E. P. Lacey of Alabama offered a critical assessment of the Lincoln presidency while
calling for historical matters to be “discussed dispassionately and settled within the domain of reason and truth.” He continued on to quote Cicero, saying that “the first law of history is that it should neither care to say anything that is false nor fear to say anything that is true.”

Of course, the precise “truth” of history referred to by contributors like Dr. Lacey was a repeated refrain in the pages of the Veteran and familiar to all students of the Lost Cause: secession was justified, the North waged an unjust war, and the South had been victimized ever since. Thus, the “truth” of history could reach only a single conclusion: the South was right. As one contributor noted in an article in 1918, the South was “[w]illing to abide by the verdict of posterity, if the verdict is based upon the truth and not upon the false statements of Northern historians, writers, and speakers.” Joab Edwards of Leesville, South Carolina, viewed historical discussion of the war as the key element to achieving vindication and reaching the truth of the past, proclaiming in a 1917 article that “[i]t is the province of history to remove all rubbish and let the bare facts in every case stand out, no matter who is to be touched by them.” The “truth” would set the South free from their apparent persecution following the war, and only then could the country move on from the divisions caused by the conflict.
According to many contributors, the problem was not southerners who could not let go of the war, but rather northern veterans and historians spreading “infamous and slanderous falsehoods.” Contributors called for balance in historical discussions of the war, suggesting that northern authors were the ones who had lost perspective and strayed from the “truth.” This concept neatly merged with the victimization commonly associated with the Lost Cause, making it seem like southern authors were only trying to correct an injustice that had been done to them by “rash people.” Mrs. A. McD. Wilson, the Historian General of the Confederated Southern Memorial Association, argued in a 1922 letter to the Veterans that the South had abided historical errors and condemnations for too long and a crisis point had been reached: “For more than fifty years the South has endured in silence, in the interest of peace, and hoping for harmonious relations with our erstwhile antagonist.” In her letter entitled “Shall the Truths of History Be Written?” Wilson asked rhetorically, “Is it not time that the truth should be written, or will the South still cringe to a section always defaming and unjust?” While the very presence of publications like the Confederate Veteran and Southern Historical Society Papers contradicted her claim of the South suffering in “silence” since the war, Wilson’s statements captured the perception of Veterans contributors of their struggle against a perceived assault on the “truth” of history.12

Reconciliation

This war for the “truth” and against Yankee “lies” continued unabated well into the twentieth century, and the Veterans viewed the conflict as the real explanation behind the continued divide between the sections. In contrast, by the 1890s the notion of reconciliation was rapidly growing in popularity among veterans across the country, the same period during which the Confederate Veteran was founded and began its dramatic rise in readership. To the casual observer, it might appear that the magazine became a haven for the “unreconstructed” element in the South who did not subscribe to the growing reconciliationist movement popular in many circles, including academia. Historians such as William Blair have convincingly demonstrated how there were divisive elements of the Lost Cause and southern remembrance that perpetuated hostility to reconciliation in any form, at least until the First World War. In fact, S. A. Cunningham, probably could be classified under the “unreconstructed” label. John Simpson argues that the Veteran’s editor was against reconciliation from the start, because he “feared that such contact with northern veterans would result in second class status for the Confederate heritage.” Southerners like Cunningham were generally suspicious of the reconciliationist impulse influencing the history of the war due to a belief that it would result in the destruction of the southern narrative.13

Despite the views of men like Cunningham, most Lost Cause advocates felt that
unity could be achieved, but only on southern terms. In a widely reprinted speech given in San Francisco in 1915, Mildred Lewis Rutherford, then Historian General of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, explained why the “truth” and the southern view of the war mattered so much to the southern people:

Why should we be so intent upon the truth of history being put into the textbooks taught in our schools? Because history as now written is stirring up discord and causing bitterness . . . The South resents these falsehoods, and that part of the North ignorant of our side resents our resentment. Peace can be brought into the hearts of both only when a clear, plain, fair, truthful, and unprejudiced history shall be given, and that is what we as U.D.C. are trying to give.14

Rutherford added that the issue at hand was simple: “sectional differences will disappear when we succeed in getting down to the truth of history.” Much of the commentary within the Confederate Veteran seemed to follow Rutherford’s perspective, frequently alluding to the idea that only through unilateral acceptance of the southern view of the past could true peace and unity be achieved. Thus, the reconciliationist impulse was strong in the Veteran. There was a belief, emerging from the meetings and publications of organized Confederate veterans’ groups consistently printed in the magazine, that the country needed to heal and move on.15

By appealing to the concept of historical truth and linking it with the notion of reconciliation, the amateur historians contributing to the Confederate Veteran found themselves marching in step with the thinking of professional academics of the same era. As mentioned, modern historians such as Gaines Foster have demonstrated that few academics challenged the growing concept of Confederate memory in the decades following the war, despite its simultaneous occurrence with the evolving professionalization of academic history and the formation of the American Historical Association in 1884. Instead, southern historians in particular ended up playing it safe by sticking to praise of Confederate leadership and traditions rather than pursuing a truly critical assessment of the war’s origins and outcomes. As Peter Novick has argued, both northern and southern historians embraced a unified view of the war in order to enhance their reputation for objectivity among the general public. What attracted historians, North or South, to a unified, “impartial” accounting of the war was the idea that it would contribute toward healing the country and allow historians to “simultaneously demonstrate their own detachment and render valuable public service by furthering the goal of reconciliation between North and South.” As will be demonstrated, despite a linkage between public and professional perspectives on the war, contributors to the Veteran were actually reluctant to hand over control of Civil War history to academics, even those with southern ties. This had less to do with opposition to reconciliation than to distrust of the means by which history would be collected and organized for future generations.16
One of the challenges in preparing the historical narrative for posterity was recognition that history was a cloudy place of faulty memory, even to those who made it. A piece published in 1904 by an unidentified author who described himself as “an old cadet of the Virginia Military Institute in the days of Stonewall Jackson” referred to recent articles in the Veteran about Jackson and an incident from before the war, declaring that “a perusal of these articles raises the query as to whether the details of war history, or indeed, any history can be relied upon.” After identifying the inaccuracies in detail and pointing out that he had actually been there to witness what had really happened, the contributor noted, “I do not mean in any way to reflect on the motives or veracity of those who wrote the versions alluded to, but let us all in preparing material for the future historian be scrupulously careful to get the facts and omit all frills.” This author was not attacking the principles of the veterans or even the veterans themselves, but was once again stressing the responsibility to the future that those in the present had of correctly identifying and processing the facts of the past.

This struggle to “get it right” for the future thus allowed for some vehement disagreement over history and memorialization, yet these disputes were conducted within the Confederate Veteran in a civil manner that portrayed a deceptively unified front on most topics. In “Titles that Pervert History,” South Carolina veteran James Holmes attacked the honorific military titles that were given to the leadership of the United Confederate Veterans, claiming that he did “not want to see anything connected with ‘the cause that was, the principle that is, and the memories that cannot, must not die,’ belittled by absurd titles.” Holmes’s argument suggested that such titles would lead future historians to misinterpret the past and thus somehow contaminate the legacy of the Lost Cause. In a similar vein, but coming from more popular territory, Captain James Dinkins of New Orleans wrote a short piece in 1926 calling for an effort to “preserve as far as we are able the story of the grandeur and heroism of our dead.” Dinkins criticized the works of both northern and southern historians, while calling for veterans to write the “fair and true history of the war,” since “I do not believe that any man who did not live in that period could write as clearly of the events as one who participated in them.”

Contributors like Dinkins offered their own editorials and assessments on the purpose of history. It was clear to them that there was a particular way to investigate history and only the proper people could conduct such an investigation in order to “bring in the truth.” First of all, only the “correct sources” were to be utilized for historical analysis, as seen in an 1893 letter from G. E. Dolton of St. Louis, Missouri, who offered sage advice to those intending to investigate the past: “Do not depend on the opinions or assertions of any one when you can readily obtain all the available and reliable evidence there is.” In this case, Dolton
In 1915, Mildred Lewis Rutherford, then Historian General of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, explained that North and South would have a meaningful peace only “when a clear, plain, fair, truthful, and unprejudiced history shall be given, and that is what we as U.D.C. are trying to give.” Rutherford later published the monthly periodical Miss Rutherford’s Scrap Book (left, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons) and advertised it in Confederate Veteran (right, courtesy of Duke University Libraries).

was referring to the federal government’s ongoing compilation and transcription of wartime correspondence known as the *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*. Such records were vital for any understanding of the war since “without a study of them no one can possibly arrive at the truth or be competent to render a better decision than can a mariner at sea, in a storm without compass, determine his course.” Calls for reliance on “official” documents were balanced with those calling for first person narratives of major events, which also constituted a large proportion of the pieces published in the *Confederate Veteran*. As Captain Dinkins noted in his 1926 article, “Men who took part in a battle have a clearer recollection of events than any other who was not there.” Obtaining source material from veterans and wartime witnesses grew more pressing as the century wore on and living source material dwindled in numbers.¹⁹

Once such source material was gathered, it would be the responsibility of the historian (notably, *Confederate Veteran* contributors rarely made a distinction between professionals and amateurs) to properly analyze and present it. In so doing, southerners were seeking to establish what Peter Novick described as a “unitary convergent history which would correspond to a unitary past”—in other words,
provide the means to reconcile the various independent accounts of past events. In letters and articles submitted to the Veteran, contributors shared their experiences so that any details at variance with their memories could be discussed in a public manner and eliminated or corrected as necessary. In referring to an article by “J. D. J.” about General James Longstreet’s actions near Knoxville in 1863, J. W. Minnich, who had found himself near Longstreet at that engagement, sought to correct the story, while cautioning readers to look at all the evidence before forming a judgment. “The old saying is true that ‘no matter how many witness an event,’ no two will see it exactly alike,” noted Minnich, adding that “J. D. J. has forgotten some things, as we all forget more or less, a fact that we should bear well in mind when writing for posterity.”

One of the most controversial historical issues discussed in the magazine was exactly who should write and propagate the history of the Confederacy. The leadership of the established veterans’ societies and their corresponding committees tended to favor a more professional approach to the study of the past, a fact hardly surprising given the large numbers of veterans and their descendants in the early ranks of the American Historical Association. The United Sons of Confederate Veterans (USCV) Historical Committee weighed in on this subject in 1900, when they called upon academia to step up and provide proper historical training at southern colleges and universities: “No class of our people (and we except none) can do more to carry out the prime object of our Confederation than the teachers. Thus it is a matter of the most vital importance that the teachers themselves should be properly taught.” While veterans’ organizations tended to turn toward academia for properly disseminating past events, most contributors to the Confederate Veteran turned, not surprisingly, to the veterans themselves. In a letter published only two months after the USCV committee report, Lucius Wilson of West Virginia proclaimed the popular opinion, stating “[a]s to the histories, let the Confederate soldier bring in the truth about the war they waged for independence, and have that truth printed and given to the children of Southern people.”

Both the average veteran and the leadership of organizations like the USCV would probably have agreed with the words of Woodrow Wilson, as quoted in a 1928 Confederate Veteran article: “The history of the South, if it is ever properly written, must be written from a sympathetic viewpoint and, therefore, must be written by Southern men.” This idea of a southern narrative of the war being produced from within the southern population itself was a popular one and clearly made sense to those who repeatedly made known their distrust for northern publishers and authors. The mission and popularity of the Confederate Veteran suggests that subscribers commonly accepted a southern-produced narrative, but contributors still offered suggestions about processing and writing southern history effectively. One contributor applied the state’s rights ideology to the production of history and reached the logical conclusion that each state should be responsible for writ-
ing and publishing its own school textbooks. Once again, it was Mildred Lewis Rutherford who tapped into the voice of many by calling for southerners to seize hold of their history: “The sooner we know our own history and teach it, the sooner will such misrepresentations cease . . . We of the South must do it, and do it quickly.” At its most basic, Rutherford’s proclamation was a call to take possession of a past that seemed to be slipping from southern control. Northerners tended to receive the blame for this, but Rutherford’s comments demonstrate that southerners themselves carried some responsibility for the loss of authority over their own history.22

“FALSE HISTORIES”

Thus, while some disagreement materialized over who should write the history of the war and how it should be done, there was universal agreement about who should not write that history and how it should not be utilized in the present. A 1921 article by Howard Meriwether Lovett of Macon, Georgia, captures the general consensus on this issue. According to Lovett, “[r]enegade pseudo-educators”—in this case, northern publishers and southern teachers who used their books—had utilized “[t]he propaganda of the subtle lie” to turn Lincoln, Grant, and Sherman into heroes while vilifying southern leaders. This word “propaganda” appeared often, particularly during and after the First World War, usually in reference to northern histories of the Civil War and accompanied by a proverbial call to arms. “The opinion of the future is being molded by such propaganda,” noted one contributor in 1919, who called for banning books that presented “false” histories of the South. He continued, “our indifference or neglect to fight it makes us equally guilty with those who disseminate these untruths.” From this perspective, what made such histories propaganda was how they misused source material; to southerners, only errors or deliberate misrepresentation of sources could create a narrative at variance with the one accepted by the South.23

While some were forgiving of the North for honest errors that needed to be corrected, most contributors to the Confederate Veteran were not so generous, describing instead a deliberate campaign against the southern people. James H. M’Neilly of Nashville painted all northern historians with the same brush, when he proclaimed them as “generally men of brilliant intellect and culture, but entirely ignorant or prejudiced against the South and her institutions, her principles, and her real character, [they] have too often with deliberate malice suppressed or distorted the facts that would have been to our credit.” When a northern publisher bowed to pressure and agreed to change the content of a textbook which had been criticized by the Kansas City chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, Missouri UDC member Mrs. F. E. Rigney noted how their success had only proved the faults of northern histories:
Such a historian is beyond belief. If his history was a false record of events when written, he is not a good historian. If it was a true record when written, nothing has since transpired to make it false, and the history should not be corrected. A historian who will correct his work to suit the fancy and desire of each State and community only to save his book from elimination from public schools and thereby save himself from financial loss is not a suitable historian.²⁴

To Mrs. Rigney, history was an immutable phenomenon; by agreeing to change their presentation of it, the northern publishers had confirmed her view that they were guilty of prejudice against the South and thus were under the sway of financial gain rather than historical accuracy.

The struggle against “false histories” offered in Confederate Veteran was seen as just as important as the effort to establish an accurate depiction of the war and its participants. Once again, it was the future that was on the line, since, as one article put it, “it is a shame that such absolute falsehood should become prominent as a handbook for future generations.” In particular, as seen in the comments from General Gordon which began this article, the children of the South were at stake and should only be taught the “true” history of the past. Yet, with the “pseudo-educators” and “prostitute historians” of the northern publishing com-
Community spreading their malicious perversions of history, what could be done to save the past for the future? The solution was simple: eliminate all books that did not provide the “true” history. Consequently, after the turn of the century, school textbooks became one of the most widely discussed topics in the Confederate Veteran. Articles, editorials, and reprinted speeches filled the magazine with a rationale for expelling all books from southern schools and colleges that did “injustice and wrong to the ancestors of Southern youths.” In her 1915 speech, Mildred Lewis Rutherford told the story of a group of students at a southern college “who were too patriotic to study history unjust to the South,” in this case, a history textbook which suggested that Jefferson Davis had been a traitor. When their repeated requests to school officials to have the objectionable material removed from the classroom were denied, “[i]n a quiet, dignified manner, with no spirit of insubordination, they kindled a bonfire on the campus and into it every copy of that history was thrown.”

To combat the violations posed by northern textbooks, responsibility for policing the spread of “false” history increasingly fell on the “historical committees” formed by the United Confederate Veterans, the United Daughters of the Confederacy, and other veterans’ groups. These committees tended to be administered by prominent Confederate veterans. Stephen D. Lee and Clement A. Evans were among several members listed on the UCV History Committee in 1899 which offered proposals on how southerners could best document the past and protect it from assault. Confederate Veteran was a logical ally here, and readers were treated to repeated calls from the committee for preserving the southern view of the past. An early example came in a report by the renowned Dr. Hunter McGuire, chair of the History Committee of the Grand Camp Confederate Veterans of Virginia and General “Stonewall” Jackson’s chief surgeon during the war. Published in the November 1899 edition of the Veteran, “School Histories of the South” was a detailed assault on northern textbooks which constituted “an invasion organized and vigorously prosecuted” by authors and politicians in the North (along with a few misguided allies in the South), who “strive to control the opinions of our people.” McGuire concluded by offering the committee’s recommendations, which included banning a list of books from southern schools and stating outright that “we cannot now use Northern histories in Southern schools.” In addition, the report stated that this “holy work” needed further attention from veterans’ groups across the South in order to remove “all false histories from public and private schools.”

As McGuire’s comments illustrate, the committee reports published in the Confederate Veteran constituted more than simple indictments of “false histories”; they were also recommendations for how best to deal with the threat posed by these depictions of the southern past. While many letters, editorials, and articles included individual calls for action in identifying the “true” history, it was reports from UCV and UDC committees such as Dr. McGuire’s, which were usually pub-
lished in their entirety in Confederate Veteran, that created a plan of action for doing so. Not surprisingly, these committees begat other committees, particularly at the state level, where the call went out in 1899 for the United Confederate Veterans to form committees of three in every state that would “examine every school history taught in the schools of the State.” Stephen D. Lee, the head of the ucv Historical Committee in 1899, attempted to explain the mission of these committees:

We have never heretofore recommended, nor do we now recommend, that the Confederate veterans should attempt to exercise any system of censorship over the histories used in the schools, but we do strongly recommend that the influence of this Association be exerted in banishing from the schools any books which teach false lessons, either of fact or sentiment, or which are in any way partisan or unpatriotic in tone. We believe that the time has come when the influence of this Association may be beneficially exerted in elevating and enriching historical literature, in eradicating prejudice and inspiring patriotism.

By 1905, this “banishment” (but not “censorship”) program had seen success, as the Historical Committee reported to Lee, now Commander-in-Chief of the United Confederate Veterans, that “the most offensive of the false histories had been driven from the Southern States.”

CONCLUSION

The nature of this campaign to expunge “false” histories appears to reinforce Fred Arthur Bailey’s conclusion that the textbook campaigns constituted “[a] well-crafted historical paradigm [that] inoculated children against interpretations dangerous to the aristocratic class” of the South. Yet, as demonstrated above, disagreement remained over who should write the history of the war. Veterans who did not hold positions in the major veterans’ organizations deemed the average veteran as the most capable of telling the “true” history of the war, while the leadership of the ucv and its companion organizations privileged the professional historian for such an effort. While no systematic examination of subscribers to Confederate Veteran has been performed, the monthly contributions sampled here appear to come from far more enlisted men than the contributions found in the Southern Historical Society Papers or Century magazine’s “Battles and Leaders of the Civil War” series. Thus, we see in a far more “blue collar” magazine than its significant contemporary, the Southern Historical Society Papers, an interpretation that contains a near but, significantly, not universal acceptance of the aristocratic campaign to dominate the historical memory of the war. In fact, the comments of some contributors like James Holmes, who called for the end of “absurd titles” in the ucv, suggest a certain level of hostility beneath the placid surface of Lost Cause memory.

Throughout this commentary from the pages of Confederate Veteran, one sees a
struggle by amateur historians over what it meant to study the past. Some of the conclusions that they reached are understandable to us now: eyewitness accounts are among the most valuable historical resources, memories are faulty, the past is key to the future. They raised questions that are still with us, such as who “controls” history and whether it is best left to professionals or the public. However, many of their conclusions and methods were surprising and, by today’s standards, faulty: impartiality is possible, there is but one truth to history, censorship can help preserve that truth. While professional historians would likely reject such notions, they may not seem suspect to today’s general observers, who frequently seek a single, compelling narrative while devaluing information that may not conform to that narrative. Those who contributed to the Confederate Veteran had a clear vision of what constituted “truth,” and their publications placed their story and the story of the Confederacy into that single unifying narrative.

According to one southern veteran, this quest for the “truth” may have left a few casualties along the way. Dr. John Allan Wyeth served with the Alabama cavalry during the war and later became a contributor of numerous articles and editorials to the Confederate Veteran covering a span of twenty years. In his memoirs, Wyeth relates, perhaps self-consciously, some anecdotes of his time as a doctor in Alabama, but admits “it may be that I lean toward the twisting of facts because I am a doctor. In my profession we often feel justified in deceiving our patients, espe-
cially when the truth might contribute to their mental or physical undoing. The fact that we are caught at it does not discourage us or stop the practice.” Wyeth added, “Even a soldier may find it necessary to protect himself by a false statement.” The notion of “protecting” history is perhaps the greatest recurring theme in the Confederate Veteran. From Gordon’s reply to Shaw at the reunion to the efforts behind the textbook campaign, the pages of the Veteran were filled with an effort to save the past for the future, and those efforts outlived both the veterans who began that campaign and the magazine that served as their most vocal proponent.30

NOTES

1. “Shall the History be Perpetuated,” Confederate Veteran 8 (July 1900): 297.
2. Ibid., 297.
6. The sample utilized here was selected from articles which either contained the word “history” in some form in the title or made explicit reference to history and historical methods throughout the article itself; Simpson, S. A. Cunningham and the Confederate Heritage, 95–97. The report of the Historical Committee of the UCV published in the July 1905 issue identifies the Veteran as “the official organ of our great Association.” Confederate Veteran 13 (July 1905): 296.

9. Foster, 106. Confederate Veteran was not the only such periodical; other magazines such as Southern Bivouac and Land we Love preceded the Veteran among Confederate circles. However, none had the publication run of Cunningham’s publication, which endured for four decades. For more on such publications, see Susan Speare Durant, “The Gently Furled Banner: The Development of the Myth of the Lost Cause, 1865–1900” (PhD dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1972); Simpson, S. A. Cunningham and the Confederate Heritage, 98–99, 145; Ibid; Simpson, S. A. Cunningham and the Confederate Heritage, 145; Confederate Veteran 1 (January 1893): 1; Simpson, S. A. Cunningham and the Confederate Heritage, 95–97, 155.


14. Mildred Lewis Rutherford, Historical Sins of Omission and Commission, MS 118, Callaway Papers, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Georgia. This speech was given by Rutherford on October 22, 1915, in San Francisco, California, and the published version of it was repeatedly advertised for sale in Confederate Veteran along with other publications from Rutherford and the UDC. For more on Rutherford, see Bailey, “Mildred Lewis Rutherford.”

15. Ibid; See “Southern History,” Confederate Veteran 7 (June 1899): 248.


erate Veteran would have had access to this collection of source material that has since become a staple of Civil War research. For more information, see Richard Sauers, “The War of the Rebellion (Official Records),” in Encyclopedia of the American Civil War: A Political, Social, and Military History, eds. David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), 2060–2061; Dinkins, “On Writing History,” Confederate Veteran, 326.


22. Quoted in John R. Neal, “Unwritten History,” Confederate Veteran 36 (March 1928): 105. Neal quotes extensively from this speech, which he says Wilson presented “more than a quarter century ago” while at Princeton. I have not been able to confirm whether such a speech was given, but for this study it is more important that Neal and his readers believed that Wilson condoned restricting the composition of southern history to only southern authors; Lucius O. Wilson, “Advice about Schoolbooks,” Confederate Veteran 8 (March 1900): 103; Rutherford, Historical Sins of Omission and Commission.


28. Bailey, “Textbooks of the ‘Lost Cause,’” 533; S. A. Cunningham’s biographer John Simpson agrees, identifying Confederate Veteran magazine as a periodical that “appealed to popular tastes . . . the Veteran was always intended to be a repository for the reminiscences of common foot soldiers.” Simpson, S. A. Cunningham and the Confederate Heritage, 99; James Holmes, “Titles that Pervert History,” Confederate Veteran 5 (January 1897): 10.

29. Modern research indicates that, even decades after the demise of periodicals like Confederate Veteran, there is still a disconnect between how academic historians and the general public perceive and use history, though that divide may be far more complicated than members of either segment may comprehend. See Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History and American Life (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).