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Gettysburg Magazine, Number 59, July 2018, pp. 101-104 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/get.2018.0018>

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If You Want To Go

What If There Were No Monuments?

SONNY FULKS

With the controversies over the removal of Civil War monuments, and what they mean to some people, is there any room as to consideration for leaving them up as a reminder to what they should mean to all people?

Like many of you reading this installment of “If You Want To Go,” I was amazed during the past year at the passion, and even violence from some, over the removal of Confederate statues and monuments around the country. Because of my association with *Gettysburg Magazine* and my lifetime interest in Civil War history, I was asked by many for an opinion as to what those monuments actually mean, and why were they put there in the first place? Why the big deal?

There is no one answer to those questions, of course. The Gettysburg monuments were put there originally to commemorate the deeds of those who fought—both sides—so that future generations would not forget those responsible for this so-called “high water mark” in American history. And what those monuments mean to me is going to be differ-

To many the statue of Lee, atop the Virginia Monument, represents his personality and influence on the actions at Gettysburg. Sonny Fulks.

ent from what they mean to another—for example, a fifth-generation African American whose ancestors toiled under the bonds of nineteenth-century slavery. My interest is from a purely military and historical perspective. Someone else’s is likely to be emotional or philosophical.

I was asked, “You go to Gettysburg at lot. What would you think if they start taking down the monuments on the battlefield? Would that make sense?” And, would it actually change anything in terms of current attitudes towards history and the social injustices of this day? Would it change attitudes that some still trace to the Civil War

and the twisted attempts of reconstruction that many claim are still apparent?

My answer is this. Taking down the monuments, the plaques, and the roadside signs cannot, and will not, change history or any pain that it has spawned. The statue of Robert E. Lee atop the Virginia monument on Confederate Avenue should be no different a reminder to those who are currently offended than the Egyptian pyramids are

to the descendants of the slave laborers who built them under bondage a thousand years ago. The monuments of Lee, J. E. B. Stuart, and Stonewall Jackson that stand on Monument Avenue in Richmond are no more egregious, or a chilling reminder, than Auschwitz is to those whose ancestors were brutalized by Nazi Germany.

You can argue symbolism, as I heard a park guide explain to a questioner at the foot of the Lee statue on Confederate Avenue this past summer. But you cannot change the events that the statues symbolize. “Nor,” he added, “should you remove the reminders of history for the fact that we as a future generation might someday forget and have history repeat itself.”

My own personal knowledge of Civil War history can be traced to many of those statues that grace the parks at Gettysburg, Antietam, Manassas, and Shiloh. I grew up visiting those places, reading those plaques, studying books and maps, enthralled by the military significance of their placement and being. As a youth I was very impressionable, and cannons and monuments to me signified battle, bravery, and commitment to duty. I understood Civil War history as simply a war to preserve the unification of the United States of America. It was inconceivable to me that so many were willing to sacrifice their life for what many of the soldiers didn’t even understand. It was to many of them a politician’s war and a soldier’s fight!

I understood that the war was fought over the principles of decidedly different cultures, yes. But more, I grew up with a fascination over the military deeds of men like Grant and Lee and with a certain chivalrous notion over those about whom we’d one day name a generation of schools, insurance companies, and our currency. In later years I would sometimes tag along with the military students from Carlisle Barracks who toured the field at Gettysburg and debated the strategies of those who fought there. But it was a purely military discussion, as a foundation for career preparation, and not one of philosophy or of the character of the figures principal to their studies.

During the past year I’ve often heard the argument that because someone fought for the cause of a government that supported slavery 150 years

The iconic North Carolina monument, by Mt. Rushmore sculptor Gutzon Borglum, is considered one of the fine artistic achievements on any of the national battlefield parks. Sonny Fulks.

ago any monument or reminder of that person’s character was a stain on the cause of contemporary democracy. But if that’s so, should we not also consider the character of other figures in American culture, like Ty Cobb, a baseball icon and hall of famer who was an outspoken racist and opponent of integrating the major leagues? Does it mean that Cobb’s impressive mausoleum in Royston, Georgia should be removed to square things now? No, of course not. It means that those who take the time to read, study, and enhance their knowledge of Cobb—like Robert E. Lee and Thomas Jefferson—can better understand one generation in comparison to another for the sake of positive change. And to that argument the history of our country, good and bad, is all we have as an example of how to better go forward. But to remove the reminders of our history—the statues, the plaques, and the discussion of contro-

The simple stone where Colonel Edward Cross was mortally wounded reminds those of one of the battlefield's best-told stories. Sonny Fulks.

versial figures—only makes it harder to understand the journey.

Shelby Foote once expressed that in order to understand what America is now one must first understand the political and cultural makeup of America in the nineteenth century; and different agendas of the individuals and states that eventually culminated in the Civil War. The point of Foote's words were that we must study to learn, and then we must not forget.

Abraham Lincoln himself said in his December address to congress in 1862 that, "fellow citizens, we cannot escape history." And no one can find fault with Lincoln, or his legacy, even after 150 years?

There is an even more dangerous precedent, of course, as to where one might draw the line regarding what's offensive? Who becomes the ultimate judge over what is and what isn't, and the standard that's fair to all races and perspectives? Do you also remove and destroy questionable books from libraries and risk the charge of censorship? Should

the daily news be questioned about their coverage of those individuals, on either side, who might simply inflame emotions as a means of having the public hear their message? Should they be banned from television?

And as to the determination of what is and isn't offensive, should we not worry more about going too far, and risk the example of Nazi Germany, and the loss of the taken-for-granted liberty of free speech that has always defined us? But to my own imprint from the past, I'm convinced that appreciation of history would simply disappear if the markers weren't there. For instance, when I see the 5th New Hampshire monument I think of the dying words of Colonel Edward Cross, a hard-handed commander of his regiment who was killed by a Confederate sniper on the afternoon of July 2nd, a well-known story passed down for generations. Said Cross, as attendants sought to bring him comfort in a field hospital after his mortal wounding, "I do think the boys will miss me."¹ That story would be lost to many if it were not for the reminding influence of the monument on the spot of his wounding.

Another favorite from Gettysburg were the dying words of Gen. Stephen H. Weed, upon being wounded through the spine on Little Round Top on July 2. It is written that the regiment quartermaster, William Crennel, asked, "General, I hope you are not badly hurt." But Weed was said to reply, "I'm as dead as Julius Caesar."² Again, the monuments to Weed, Charles Hazlett, and Paddy O'Rorke on the crest of Little Round Top beg curiosity and study by the unknowing of this generation, and if removed they would likely cease from the color of future conversations about the battle of Gettysburg.

When I think of the 15th Alabama's charge on the defenses of the 20th Maine and Col. Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, I think purely in terms of the military sacrifice of the Alabamians—not only for their repeated charges against the position of the Maine men, but for suffering from the heat and lack of water after a forced day-long march that left Col. William C. Oates's men physically exhausted. And, I think of Oates's efforts, postwar, to have a monument erected on Round Top to commemorate

¹ Harry Phanz, *Gettysburg: The Second Day* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1987).

² Phanz, *Gettysburg*.

The monument to the 20th Maine is big, but what it represents is much larger, considering the unit's impact on the second day. Sonny Fulks.

the service and memory of his men, including his own brother, who lost his life to the men of the 20th, as evidenced by Oates himself. Those efforts, because of state politics, were never rewarded. This is part of that history, inescapable, and important, as Foote noted, if we are to believe anything about who we are today, and how we got here.

But again, what's to remind if not for that one simple monument to the 20th Maine? From an artistic standpoint, I wrote in the January 2018 edition of *Gettysburg Magazine* that many come to the

battlefield simply to enjoy the design and interpretation of service and deeds through granite and bronze. And like those who currently disagree with the modern political ramifications they represent, not everyone can agree on art, either. Throughout the great museums of the world, it's tolerated and appreciated for the fact of interpretation. If you don't like a particular piece, you simply pass on it for something that's more to your taste.

As to controversy over what a Confederate monument, or flag, or any historical symbol or individual represents in this day, I come from the camp of full disclosure. Its importance pertains to history in a manner not unlike a medical diagnosis. You may not like it, but to pretend denial, or to argue that if we strike down the conversation over cancer that somehow its impact will lessen is mere foolishness. Our past, as Lincoln shared, is bound to be our present, only in a more enlightened context. We should take in, share, and learn from the reminders of history through the symbols left behind, as with Auschwitz and Hiroshima. Otherwise, the horrors of mankind will undoubtedly repeat themselves.

This is what we should think when we visit these sites—how we get better, over anger that it ever happened. It's there (at least for now) for your consideration on your next visit . . . If you want to go!

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Sonny Fulks is a direct descendent of three Union Civil Veterans. A great-great-uncle, Joshua Kite, served with the 2nd Virginia Union. His great-grandfather, Nicholas Simpson along with his brother Robert, saw duty in the Battle Above The Clouds on Lookout Mountain in November 1863 with the 1st Ohio Heavy Artillery. Fulks is a graduate of Ohio State University, a former professional baseball umpire, and a life-long student of Civil War history and Civil War photography. He has two grown children and lives with his wife Mindy in Covington, Ohio.