

CONFEDERATE MONUMENTS: LESSON 5: HANDOUT 1**THE “LOST CAUSE” MYTH**

Page | 1

The Lost Cause **myth** came be during the years of **Reconstruction** (1863-1877) after the Civil War. The Confederacy had been defeated after a grueling four-year battle, and White Southerners wanted to **justify** their actions for going to war. They also wanted to maintain their power or **white supremacy** in the South. Many important figures began to write and speak about the Lost Cause in order to influence how the nation remembered the history about the Civil War.

Thousands of men had died in the war and its industries and railroads were destroyed. The leaders of the Confederacy felt the need to justify this destruction. Clement A. Evans, a veteran of the Confederate army, declared: *“If we cannot justify the South in the act of Secession, we will go down in History solely as a brave, impulsive but **rash** people who attempted in an illegal manner to overthrow the Union of our country.”*¹

Jubal A. Early, a Confederate lieutenant, wanted to tell the Southerner’s side of the war and to remember its **honor**. In a letter to Robert E. Lee, he wrote: *“The most that is left to us is the history of our struggle, and I think that ought to be accurately written. We lost nearly everything but honor, and that should be religiously guarded.”*²

White Southerners also felt the need to justify slavery as an important social system that benefited both the planters and the slaves.³ Southern leaders described it as a **benevolent** institution where slaves were happy and content.⁴ In this new story, Southern leaders said that slavery would have eventually been naturally eliminated without help. This was different from the Confederate constitution which stated that slavery could not be abolished. These leaders also felt that the North should be blamed for the destructive war.

However, many still claimed that slavery was not the **primary** issue and was not the reason for secession. This claim was in direct contrast to the Southern leaders’ letters, speeches, and documents from before and during the Civil War that spoke about the need to **preserve** slavery. They were willing to secede from the Union for that very reason.

The Lost Cause also described the South as superior to the North. It portrayed its military leaders, such as Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson, as heroic and “remarkable and saintly creatures.”⁵ The South, its leaders, and its heritage were often portrayed in a beautiful way in films like *Gone With the Wind* and *The Birth of a Nation*.ⁱ

¹ Alan T. Nolan, “The Anatomy of the Myth,” in *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History*, eds. Gary W. Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2000): 13.

² Gary W. Gallagher, “Jubal A. Early, the Lost Cause, and Civil War History,” *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History*, 39.

³ Nolan, “The Anatomy of the Myth,” 14.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Some White Southerners argued that it was their pride in the South that justified their fighting. John S. Mosby, a former Confederate officer, eventually befriended Union commander Ulysses S. Grant and joined the Republican Party. Although he “despised” slavery, he stated: *“I am not ashamed of having fought on the side of slavery – a soldier fights for his country—right or wrong—he is not responsible for the political merits of the course he fights in... the South was my country.”*ⁱⁱ

A key part of the Lost Cause myth was the construction of Confederate monuments. Most of these monuments were built in the late 1800s and early 1900s to honor Confederate generals and soldiers.⁶ The Daughters of the Confederacy organization successfully lobbied for these monuments to be built across the country. There are national holidays, street names, and schools renamed in honor of Confederate generals and soldiers. This includes Stone Mountain in Georgia and the statue of Robert E. Lee in Richmond.

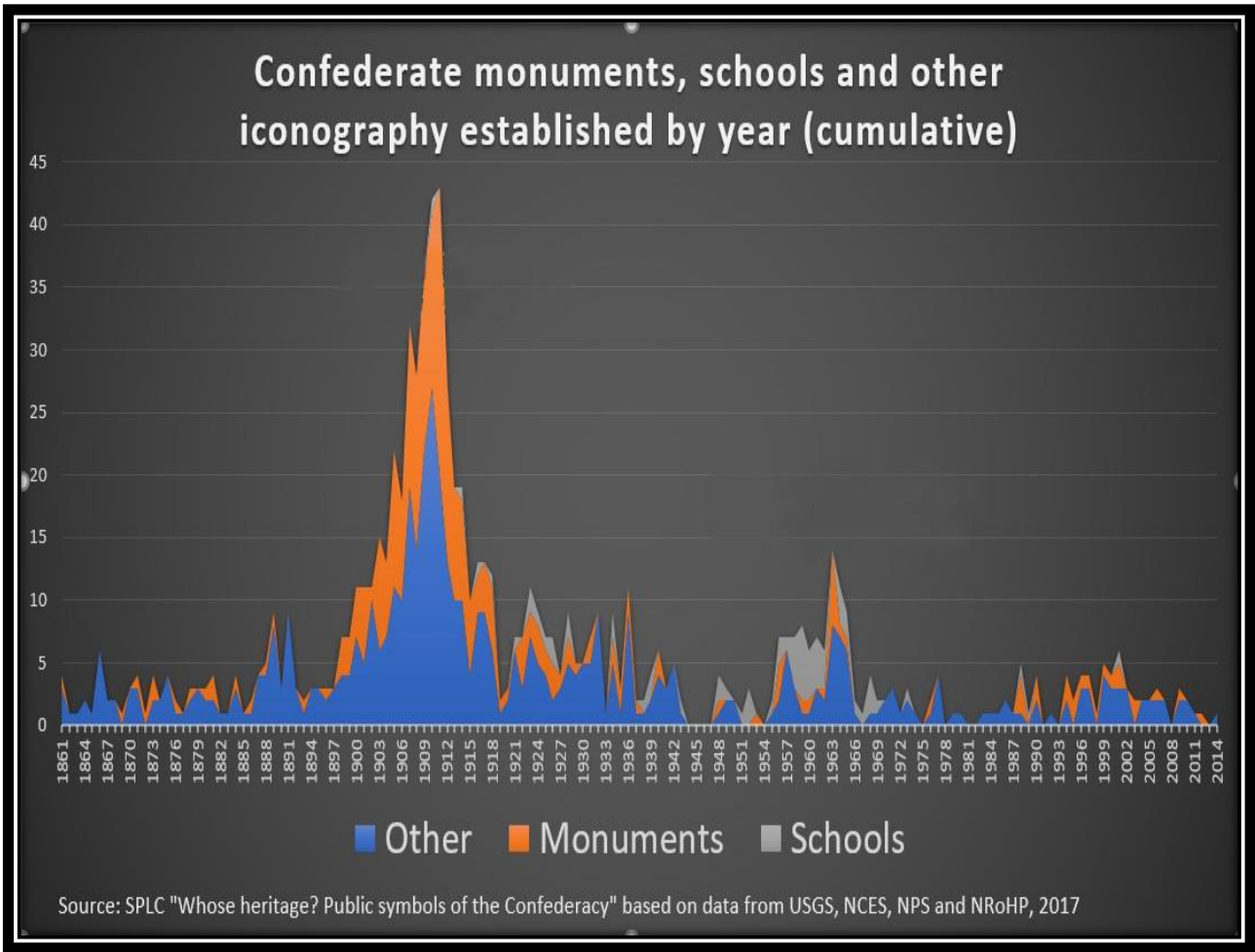
Research has found that the building of different monuments peaked at times of increased racial tension in the South (see *graph 1*). This finding suggests that the erection of these monuments were not just to honor soldiers but to also **invoke**, or create, fear in Black Americans. This was because the people who were being honored were those who fought to keep slavery.

From the beginning, northerners worried about the Lost Cause myth. Frederick Douglass wrote: *“We are sometimes asked in the name of patriotism to forget the merits of this fearful struggle, and to remember with equal admiration those who struck at the nation’s life, and those who struck to save it—those who fought for slavery, and those who fought for liberty and justice.”*ⁱⁱⁱ

Despite northern concern, this myth still exists throughout the country. In recent years there have been several efforts and protests to remove these monuments and **symbols**. Those who want to keep the monuments argue that they represent southern heritage and removing them erases history. Those who want them removed argue that seeing these monuments is a painful reminder of a long history of slavery and inequality for Black Americans. Governments and leaders are coming up with different solutions in the debate around the monuments.

In June 2020, the state of Mississippi voted to remove the Confederate emblem from their state flag. It was flown since 1894. A new flag design will be voted on in November 2020. On July 1, 2020, the mayor of Richmond, Virginia ordered the immediate removal of Confederate statues throughout the city, including the monument of Stonewall Jackson. Protestors took matters into their own hands and knocked down the statue of Jefferson Davis. Robert E. Lee’s statue on Monument Avenue is owned by the state and remains for now.

⁶ John J. Winberry, “‘Lest We Forget’: The Confederate Monument and the Southern Townscape,” *Southeastern Geographer*, Vol. 55, No. 1 (Spring 2015), p. 19-31.



Graph 1

ⁱ <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/content/former-confederate-officer-slavery-and-civil-war-1907>
ⁱⁱ <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/content/former-confederate-officer-slavery-and-civil-war-1907>
ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.gilderlehrman.org/sites/default/files/07926.01_OS%20with%20Decoration%20Day%20speech.pdf