

The Surry and Sussex Confederate Monuments

1: The Cause of the War

The Confederate monument in front of the Surry Courthouse is dedicated to "OUR HEROES." The Confederate monument in front of the Sussex Courthouse states, "THE PRINCIPLES FOR WHICH THEY FOUGHT LIVE ETERNALLY." So what exactly are the eternal principles that our Confederate heroes fought for? There is a good deal of confusion and mystification about this question today, but it was not always so. At the time, people knew exactly what the fight was about.

Alexander Stephens, the vice president of the Confederacy, gave a speech in March 1861, just a few days after the Confederate Constitution was adopted, in which he explained quite clearly what the cause for secession was: "The new Constitution has put at rest forever all the agitating questions relating to our peculiar institutions--African slavery as it exists among us--the proper status of the negro in our form of civilization. This was the immediate cause of the late rupture and present revolution."

"... The prevailing ideas entertained by [Jefferson] and most of the leading statesman at the time of the formation of the old Constitution were, that the enslavement of the African was in violation of the laws of nature; that it was wrong in principle, socially, morally and politically. It was an evil that they knew not well how to deal with.... Those ideas, however, were fundamentally wrong...."

"Our new Government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery--subordination to the superior race--is his natural and moral condition." (Applause.)

"This, our new government, is the first, in the history of the world, based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth.... It is the first Government ever instituted upon principles in strict conformity to nature, and the ordination of Providence... Many Governments have been founded upon the principles of certain classes; but the classes thus enslaved, were of the same race, and in violation of the laws of nature. Our system commits no such violation of nature's laws. The negro by nature, or by the curse against Canaan, is fitted for that condition which he occupies in our system."

"... We stand upon the eternal principles of truth..."

So there are the eternal principles that our heroes fought for, professed openly and proudly to a huge cheering crowd, by the vice president of the Confederacy.

Abraham Lincoln was elected president on November 6, 1860. Shortly thereafter slave states started seceding. Most of the eleven seceding states published declarations stating the causes of secession.

1) South Carolina was the first state to secede on December 20. Its declaration cited "the election of a man to the high office of President of the United States whose opinions and purposes are hostile to Slavery."

2) Mississippi was next on January 9. Its declaration stated "Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery the greatest material interest of the world."

Jefferson Davis, just before becoming president of the Confederacy, made clear in his parting speech to the Senate that Mississippi's secession was in response to the alleged Republican "theory that all men are created free and equal, and this has made the basis of an attack upon her social institutions," that is, slavery.

3) Florida seceded January 10, citing "the strength of the anti-slavery sentiment of the free States."

4) Alabama seceded January 11, citing "the election of Abraham Lincoln" and the Republican party that was "avowedly hostile" to the institution of slavery and that believed "slavery in time, should be exterminated."

5) Georgia seceded January 19, citing "the party of Lincoln," the "anti-slavery party."

6) Louisiana seceded January 26. It didn't publish a declaration, but its Secession Commissioner stated that "Louisiana looks to the formation of a Southern confederacy to preserve the blessings of African slavery.... The people of the slave-holding states are bound together by the same necessity and determination to preserve African slavery."

7) Texas seceded February 1. Its declaration cited the Republican party's "unnatural feeling of hostility to these Southern States and their beneficent and patriarchal system of African slavery." The African race is "rightfully held and regarded as an inferior and dependent race, and in that condition only could their existence in this country be rendered beneficial or tolerable."

8) Virginia seceded April 17. Prior to seceding it published fourteen resolutions. The second declared that "African slavery is a vital part of the social system of the States wherein it exists" and that "any interference to its prejudice" would be "offensive and dangerous." Resolution three referenced the election of Lincoln who "entertain[s] opinions and avow[s] purposes hostile to the institutions of some of the States."

9) Arkansas seceded May 6. Like Virginia, it published a series of resolutions prior to seceding, stating its causes for complaint. In them it cited "a political party, purely sectional in character, the central and controlling idea of which is, hostility to the institution of African slavery." This "sectionalism... if not arrested, will inevitably involve us in a bloody civil war."

10) North Carolina seceded May 20. It issued no declaration of causes and is the only one of eleven seceding states not to issue some sort of official statement emphasizing slavery as the cause of secession.

11) Tennessee was the last to secede on June 8. It did not publish a declaration of causes, but the governor did send a statement to the legislature calling for a secession convention. In it, he referred to "the systematic, wanton, and long continued agitation of the slavery question" and the "uncompromising hostility to the rights and institutions of the fifteen Southern States." Later, the legislature sent out a "Legislative Address to the People of Tennessee" stating it "has taken her position and has proudly determined to throw her banners to the breeze, and will give her strength to the sacred cause of freedom for the WHITE MAN OF THE SOUTH."

The Confederate Constitution incorporated most of the U.S. Constitution, with very few changes. Among the few changes was a permanent guarantee of slavery: "No bill of attainder, ex post facto law, or law denying or impairing the right of property in negro slaves shall be passed...." This is what Stephens was talking about when he said "The new Constitution has put at rest forever" the issue of slavery.

So there we have official statements from ten out of the eleven seceding states; the Confederate Constitution; and the president and vice-president of the Confederate States, all testifying that slavery was the cause for secession and the formation of the Confederacy. Is there any room for confusion here? Is it clear now what the war was about? The southern states seceded and the Confederacy was created for the sole purpose of keeping dark skinned human beings as pieces of property. The result was a war that killed an estimated 750,000 people. The same proportion of the population today would be 7.9 million (1).

With the war lost and slavery abolished, Confederate apologists quickly started to rewrite history, denying the central role of slavery, and talking about states' rights, or tariffs, or anything else they could think of to deny the obvious. John Mosby, Virginia's famed 'Gray Ghost,' was appalled at this revisionism. In a letter, he wrote of his "disgust at reading the Reunion speeches.... The South went to war on account of Slavery. South Carolina went to war--as she said in her Secession Proclamation--because slavery wd. not be secure under Lincoln. South Carolina ought to know what was the cause for her seceding." Virginia did likewise. "Now, while I think as badly of slavery as Horace Greeley... I am not ashamed of having fought on the side of slavery--a soldier fights for his country--right or wrong.... The South was my country" (2).

2: Historical Context of the Monuments

Monuments put up during and shortly after the war tended to be for mourning the dead and were often placed in cemeteries. The monument period from 1861 to 1889 is called the Bereavement and Funeral Era. Later monuments would serve a very different function (3).

Beginning in 1890, southern states started to pass new constitutions that disenfranchised blacks. As delegate Watson of Virginia's 1901 convention explained, "the great underlying principle of this Convention movement, the one object and cause which assembled this body, was the elimination of the negro from the politics of the state" (4). Virginia established its new constitution in 1902 and white supremacy was thus fully reestablished. This is the context in which the Surry and Sussex courthouse monuments went up. Surry's monument was unveiled on August 2, 1910. Sussex's monument was unveiled on August 6, 1913.

This period of Confederate monument building is called the Celebration Era. In contrast to the somber and mournful affairs of the Bereavement Era, which usually took place in cemeteries, the dedications in the Celebration Era involved grand parades, exuberant speeches and took place at the centers of political activity: courthouse lawns. The main function of these monuments and gatherings was no longer to mourn the dead, but to defend the cause of the war and celebrate white supremacy.

At the Surry unveiling, "the court house lawn was thronged with great crowds." One estimate was "nearly 3,500 persons." A "parade was formed at the depot, and the picturesque procession moved up Main Street." The parade included a thirty piece military band and "215 veterans." Dinner was served. Among the speakers were Governor Mann and Senator Swanson, who was introduced as one "whose soul is imbued with the noblest traditions of the Old South."

Swanson's "stirring words" were "frequently interrupted with great volumes of applause." Once he was finished speaking, "as the cheering died down," the band played "Dixie" for the unveiling. "Twelve girls, gowned in white, representing each of the Southern States, attended" the cord pulling. "A sharp tug brought the veiling fluttering to the ground, and the noble shaft... stood bared in all its beauty to the eyes of the thousands gathered about.... For a full minute absolute silence prevailed in the vast throng, which stood as though spellbound by the spectacle. Then came the mighty cheers" (5).

The Southside Virginia Dispatch (one of the Sussex-Surry's predecessors) estimated that between 1,000 and 1,500 people were at the Sussex unveiling. The Richmond Times estimated 2,000. The Waverly Brass Band performed. A "parade of the Veterans accompanied by the school children and a float of thirteen Daughters, representing the Confederate States was formed and marched around the courthouse and into the court green, on which a stand had been erected for the use of the Veterans and speakers." Children sang Confederate songs. There was a "splendid dinner" that included "Virginia ham and fried chicken in the greatest profusion.... Other things hardly worthy of mention after these were on the tables in abundance." Ice cream and lemonade were for sale. The speakers included a judge, the commonwealth's attorney, the attorney general and Senator Swanson (6). (Gary Williams's "Sussex County, Virginia: A Heritage Recalled By The Land" includes two pictures from the event.)

It was during a roughly twenty year period, starting in the mid to late 1890s, that most Confederate monuments went up across the south. 64 out of Virginia's 84 courthouse Confederate monuments went up between 1899 and 1920 (7). (There are more Confederate monuments in Virginia than in any other former Confederate state.)

The next surge in monument building was from the mid-50s to the mid-60s. This was in response to the Civil Rights Movement. The first surge was a celebration of white supremacy fully regained; the second surge was defending white supremacy from a new threat (8).

To understand the full meaning and function of the monuments, there's still some more history that needs to be told.

Reconstruction was fully abandoned in 1877 when President Hayes pulled the last federal troops from the south, leaving southern states to reinstitute complete white control and black suppression in whatever manner they saw fit. One result was Jim Crow laws and new constitutions that disenfranchised blacks. Another result was an increase in racial terror.

Between 1877 and 1950 there were over 4,000 documented lynchings of blacks in the south. Who knows how many never made the news. There were 84 documented in Virginia. Surry and Sussex are among the counties where this terrible history took place (9).

In 1887, Reuben Cole, a black man in Surry, was accused of raping a white woman. As he sat in jail awaiting trial, "a masked body of fifty armed men... overpowered the guard and jailer, and took Cole out and hanged him to a tree" near the courthouse "where they left the body and then quietly departed." The "body hung for hours on the tree upon which it was drawn, and presented a hideous and ghastly spectacle. It was pierced by bullets, evidently fired into it to make sure of death" (10).

In 1925, James Jordan, a black man in Waverly, was accused of assaulting a white woman. As he sat in jail awaiting trial, "a frenzied mob of 500 residents" showed up. "A double-barrel

shotgun was thrust into Sheriff Fannin's face and held there. The sheriff had eight or ten county officers besides those living in Waverly, at the jail, but they were powerless to hold back the mob." The jail door was smashed in and Jordan was seized and dragged to a lot by the railway depot. "Jordan was strung up to the tree. Members of the mob fired at him as long as they pleased, and then set the body afire" (11).

The Waverly Dispatch (Sussex-Surry's immediate predecessor) defended this act of terrorism, writing, "Now that the lynching has taken place and cannot be recalled, it should, and perhaps will, serve as an object lesson to the colored men of the 'black belt'" (12).

Needless to say, no one in either of these two terror mobs was ever prosecuted for these murders.

Now we have the full context needed for understanding the monuments. Black Codes, Jim Crow laws and new constitutions were the legal instruments of white power. Behind these legal instruments lay the threat of mob terror. In this context of terror and total political power, Confederate monuments on courthouse lawns were then the symbols of white power fully restored. These gigantic symbols of white supremacy--both are over 20 feet tall--sent a clear message of intimidation. (Surry's monument was so massive they had to lay temporary railroad tracks all the way to the courthouse to get it there. There's a picture of it being transported in Deborah Harrison Dawson's "Surry County (Images of America).")

3: Conclusions

Slavery is evil. The Confederacy was created for the sole purpose of defending slavery. Do monuments to such a fundamentally unjust regime belong in front of courthouses? Should they perhaps be moved to places where they can be looked at as historical artifacts and not as object of reverence?

We can remember those that have died in wars without deceiving ourselves about the causes and purposes of the wars. Such deception underwrites current and future wars. Confederate soldiers, whatever their personal beliefs and motives, were sacrificed for an evil cause. They killed and got killed in defense of slavery.

Both courthouses have markers for soldiers of other wars. We could have similar markers for Civil War soldiers without having huge monuments to an evil cause. To honor all those that fought, they would have to include Union soldiers. 150,000 southern blacks, mostly escaped slaves, fought for the Union. There were at least 39 from Surry and 56 from Sussex. 100,000 white southerners also fought for the Union, but I don't know if there were any from Surry or Sussex (13).

Current state law prevents the monuments from being moved. Localities can put up war monuments, but they can't take them down or move them. This law was passed in 1904, less than two years after the black disenfranchising constitution went into effect. The purpose of the law was to protect Confederate monuments from a possibly less racist and more democratic future. The law is now serving its intended purpose (14).

The law can be changed. In the meantime, we could put up plaques in front of the monuments that admit that the Confederacy was created to defend slavery and that the monuments were put up as symbols of white supremacy in a time when blacks were disenfranchised, segregated

and subject to mob terror. If the law changes, the monuments and the plaques could be moved to more appropriate places. If they're not moved, at least the truth would be told.

If we want to preserve history, we first have to tell it.

Notes:

- 1) The widely cited traditional estimate for Civil War deaths is 620,000. This was revised in 2011. See "Historian revises estimate of Civil War dead," at discovere.binghamton.edu.
- 2) Primary documents concerning the cause of the Civil War and subsequent revisionism are collected in The Confederate and Neo-Confederate Reader, edited by James W. Loewen and Edward H. Sebasta.
- 3) A discussion of Confederate monument eras is in the introduction of Timothy S. Sedore's An Illustrated Guide to Virginia's Confederate Monuments.
- 4) The Watson quote is from The Virginia Constitution: A Reference Guide, by John Dinan.
- 5) This account of the Surry unveiling is pieced together from several newspaper clippings that the Surry County Historical Society has on file. Most of the clippings are not sourced. The "nearly 3,500 persons" estimate comes from the caption to a sketch of the monument in Willis W. Bohannan's Surry County at War, 1861-1865. This book is available at the Surry Historical Society.
- 6) This account of the Sussex unveiling is pieced together from The Southside Virginia Dispatch, 8/8/1913; The Richmond Times Dispatch, 8/7/1913; and The Petersburg Index-Appeal, undated. The Southside Virginia dispatch is on microfilm at the Waverly Library, though to view the film you'll have to go elsewhere. The Richmond Times report can be found through the Library of Virginia's website. The Petersburg Index-Appeal report is in Mary Stephenson's scrapbook held by the Surry Historical Society.
- 7) This was tallied up using An Illustrated Guide to Virginia's Confederate Monuments, by Timothy S. Sedore.
- 8) For the history of Confederate monument building see "Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy," from the Southern Poverty Law Center, 4/21/2016.
- 9) See "Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror," by the Equal Justice Initiative, at eji.org. It shows 4,085 black lynching victims in 12 southern states, with 84 in Virginia. That averages to 55 victims per year, for the whole time period, across all 12 states. "Lynching in America: Statistics, Information, Images," at law2.umkc.edu, lists over 100 lynchings a year for every year but one from 1882 to 1901, with a peak of 230 in 1892. It shows 100 lynching victims in Virginia, 83 black and 17 white. Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930, by W. Fitzhugh Brundage, has a list of 86 lynching victims in Virginia, with names and dates, 70 black and 16 white. The 86 lynchings occurred over a 48 year period, from 1880 to 1927, averaging 1.8 per year. 75 of the 86 occurred during a 25 year period, from 1880 to 1904, averaging 3 per year. 34 happened in a 5 year period, from 1889 to 1893, averaging 6.8 per year. The peak year was 1893, with 12 lynchings.
- 10) This account of the Surry lynching is pieced together from The Richmond Times Dispatch, 7/28 and 7/29/1887; The Alexandria Gazette, 7/28; and The Peninsula Enterprise, 7/30. All of these reports can be found through The Library of Congress and Library of Virginia websites.
- 11) This account of the Waverly lynching is from "Memories of 1925 lynching linger in Waverly," Frank Green, Richmond Times, 3/2/2014. It's also discussed in J. Douglass Smith's Managing White Supremacy: Race, Politics and Citizenship in Jim Crow Virginia. The original Richmond Times reports can be found through The Library of Congress or Library of Virginia websites.

12) This is quoted in the Richmond Times report of the previous note. The editorial is from 3/27/1925 and is on microfilm at the Waverly Library. The editorial also stated, "Citizens from Surry, Prince George, Sussex, Southampton, Isle of Wight, and perhaps other counties, as well as the cities of Petersburg and Hopewell, took part in the lynching. It is estimated that there was anywhere from 1,000 to 1,500 men in Waverly Friday night." My guess would be that this estimate is an exaggeration, rooted in the editor's desire to spread the blame beyond Waverly. But it might also be that the crowd grew much larger after the jail break, which the Richmond Times estimated involved 500 people.

13) Southern support for the Union is discussed in Lawrence M. Denton's Unionists in Virginia. The numbers for black Union soldiers from Surry and Sussex come from William Paquette's United States Colored Troops from Lower Tidewater in the Civil War. This book is out of print, but The Surry Historical Society has a copy as well as the Courtland Library. I came up with 55 from Sussex. One not listed is discussed in Gary Williams's Sussex County, Virginia: A History Recalled By The Land. The Surry Historical Society put together a list of Surry black Union Soldiers in its 8/99 newsletter.

Willis W. Bohannan's Surry County at War, 1861-1865 has a list of Surry Confederates. I came up with 483 from that list. Sussex County: A Tale of Three Centuries has a list of Sussex Confederates. I came up with 708 from that list. This book is out of print, but there's a copy at the Waverly Library.

14) The constitution took effect July 10, 1902. The monument law was passed in February 1904. On the law, see the attorney general's official opinion, 17-032, from 8/25/2017, at ag.virginia.gov.