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# Georgia History in Pictures

## “Our Confederate Dead”: The Story Behind Savannah’s Confederate Monument

BY FRANK WHEELER

ON February 18, 1867, a group of ladies met at Independent Presbyterian Church in Savannah to discuss the formation of a memorial association charged with maintaining the graves of the Confederate dead buried in Laurel Grove Cemetery. After completing the administrative tasks of this inaugural meeting, they decided to observe April 26 as the “day for decorating the last earthly resting place of our fallen brave.”<sup>1</sup> They observed their first Memorial Day on April 26, 1867 and the *Savannah Morning News* stated, “All avenues leading to the graves were crowded with carriages and persons on foot . . . here and there might be seen the sad expressive face of a mother, a sister or a widow, whose offering was accompanied with tears.”<sup>2</sup>

The following year, the Ladies Memorial Association (LMA) met on April 20, and discussed the possibility of placing a monu-

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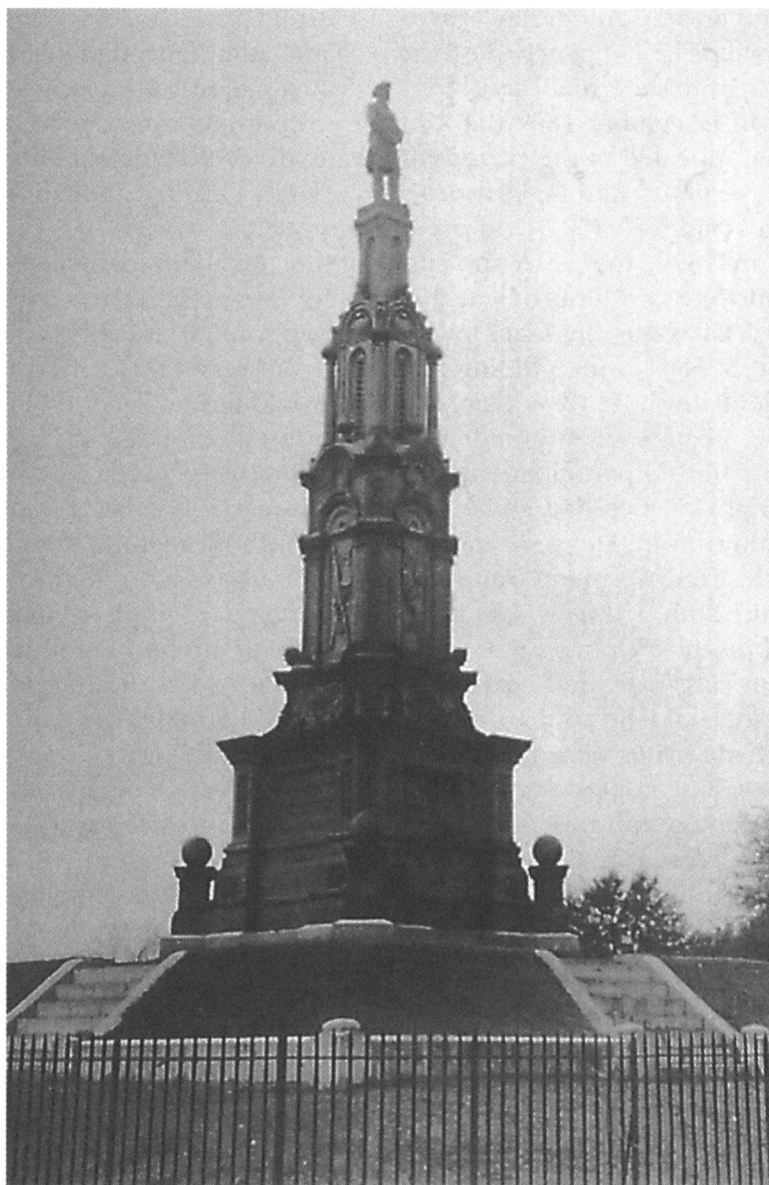
<sup>1</sup>Ladies Memorial Association Minutes, February 18, 1867, Ladies Memorial Association Collection, MS 473, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah. A longer version of this essay was presented at a conference entitled “Americans Remember the Civil War: Scholarship, Preservation, and Public Memory,” in April 1997 at Murray State University in Kentucky.

<sup>2</sup>“Decoration of the Graves of the Fallen,” *Savannah Morning News*, April 27, 1867.

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The *Savannah Morning News* proclaimed in 1874, “We were not a victorious people; on the contrary, we have to commemorate the noble heroism of those who fell in a ‘Lost Cause,’ hence silent grief and undying faith were to be expressed in the chiseled stone.” Pictured here is Savannah’s Confederate Monument as it appeared in the early twentieth century. *Unless otherwise noted, this and all other photographs are from the collections of the Georgia Historical Society.*

ment at the Confederate graves in Laurel Grove Cemetery in Savannah. The ladies accepted the idea and commenced their fund raising on Memorial Day 1868. Their first major fund raiser was a fair in December 1869 that ran for several days at Armory Hall. They appealed to the citizens of Savannah for donations of meat, refreshments, and fancy articles to be sold. Through the fair, the ladies raised \$5,260.51 (approximately \$98,000 in 1998).<sup>3</sup>

In 1870, the LMA investigated the possibility of placing a headstone and footstone at the grave of Moses Dallas at a cost of \$40. Dallas was the black pilot who “supposedly” lost his life on June 3, 1864 while guiding a Confederate vessel that seized the Federal gunboat *Water Witch*.<sup>4</sup> As luck would have it, General Robert E. Lee was in Savannah and the Ladies Memorial Association asked him to participate in the dedication of the marker on Memorial Day. Lee had come to the city in early April as part of a southern tour. He spent much of the month there but had to begin his return trip to Virginia before the Dallas marker dedication on the 26th. However, Lee had posed for a photograph with General Joseph E. Johnston during a visit with his old friend and West Point classmate, and both men agreed that copies of the photograph could be sold to benefit the LMA’s fund-raising efforts. Carte-de-visites were made and each LMA member was charged with selling copies. According to the association’s ledger, sales of the photograph raised a mere \$43.75, though its historical value increased with Lee’s death six months later in Lexington.<sup>5</sup>

At the 1873 meeting of the Ladies Memorial Association, Octavus Cohen announced that the money invested from the 1869 fair had grown to \$9,964 (more than \$178,000 in 1998 dollars).

<sup>3</sup>Ladies Memorial Association Minutes, April 20, 1870. The estimated prices throughout this paper were reached primarily through the use of John J. McCusker’s work, *How Much is that in Real Money? A Historical Price Index for Use as a Deflator of Money Values in the Economy of the United States*, published in 1992 by the American Antiquarian Society.

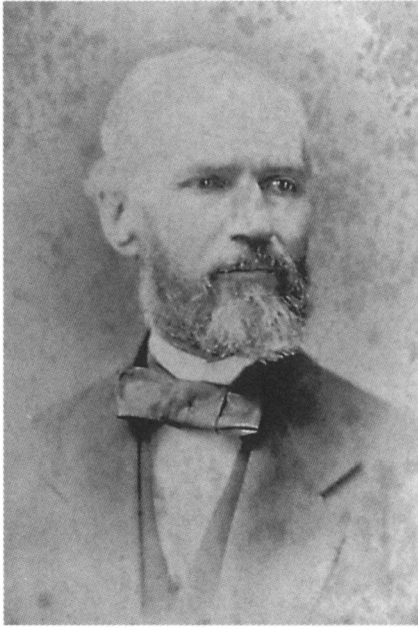
<sup>4</sup>While decorating Confederate graves and financing a monument were the primary goals of the LMA, in 1871 they became involved in a project to remove Georgia’s Confederate dead from Gettysburg. Ultimately, 101 soldiers’ bodies were brought from Gettysburg and laid to rest in Laurel Grove Cemetery.

<sup>5</sup>On Lee’s visit to Savannah, see Charles B. Flood, *Lee: The Last Years* (Boston, Mass., 1981), 238-42; and Emory M. Thomas, *Robert E. Lee: A Biography* (New York, 1995), 407-408. The photograph made there was not the last taken of Lee. In June, he sat for photographs in Lexington to be used by a sculptor modeling his bust. Thomas, *Robert E. Lee*, 409.



General Joseph Johnston resided in Savannah following the war. One of the highlights of Robert E. Lee's visit to Savannah was a visit with him. This photograph, one of the last taken of Lee, who died six months later, was taken by local photographer D. J. Ryan in April 1870, in Johnston's insurance office. *Copies of photograph held by both the Georgia Historical Society and the Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries.*

General Jeremy Gilmer reported on the selection of the design for the monument, and given a general distrust of anything from the northern United States, a decision was made to examine the monument design sent by Robert Reid of Montreal (a decision probably influenced by Confederate officials living in Canada). Reid, born and educated in Scotland, operated Montreal Sculpture and General Marble and Granite Works, his family's business. In August 1873, it was reported that the Ladies Memorial Association accepted Reid's design and that according to the *Montreal Gazette*,



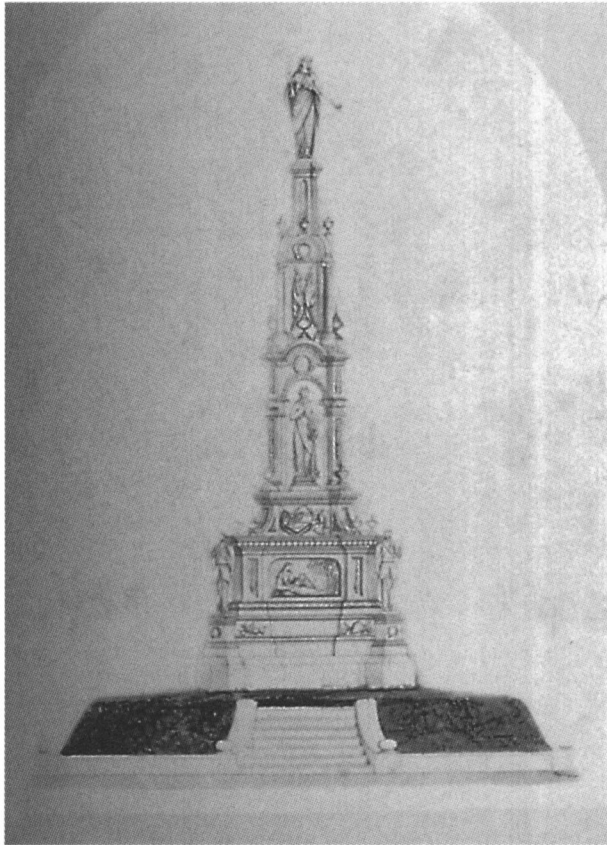
Not all of the Ladies Memorial Association funds were earmarked for a monument. In 1868 the LMA funded an enclosure around the graves in Laurel Grove Cemetery. The posts for the enclosure were made of stone from Stone Mountain and the iron railing was from the Tredegar Works in Richmond. General Jeremy F. Gilmer (left) oversaw the project, which was completed prior to the April 1869 meeting at a cost of just over \$1,000.

“Mr. Reid’s reputation as a sculptor and designer is not limited to the dominion of Canada and we so feel assured that the people of the South, more especially the generous and noble hearted ladies of Savannah, will have every reason to be fully satisfied with the Structure when completed.”<sup>6</sup> This was not to be the case.

The selection of this design was typical of that adopted by most southern cities between 1865 and 1885. Over 90 percent of the monuments erected during this period were funereal in either placement or design.<sup>7</sup> There were, however, two differences that set the Savannah monument apart from most. First, 70 percent of the monuments from this period were placed in cemeteries, the “City of the Dead,” and many of the rest were placed in central town squares. The Savannah monument would be in neither. Second, the design of the Savannah monument had four soldiers on each corner representing the four branches, thus combining the

<sup>6</sup>*Savannah Morning News*, August 7, 1873.

<sup>7</sup>Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South* (New York, 1987), 273.



The construction of Reid's monument was estimated to cost between \$23,000 and \$24,000. Numerous suggestions were made for suppressing the high cost of the monument. It was agreed that Reid should eliminate some of the elaborate design. His original design was framed and placed at the entrance of Laurel Grove Cemetery on Memorial Day 1873.

funereal aspect with the soldier. Most monuments that included representations of soldiers did not appear until after 1885.<sup>8</sup>

As the LMA neared its financial goal, a debate ensued over where the monument would be placed. The majority of Savannah's citizens appeared to favor placing it in one of the squares on Bull Street. It was felt that the Forsyth Park Extension was too far south and the monument would not be enjoyed by most citizens. A letter from "A Confederate Soldier" stated: "In my humble opin-

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 40-41.



An effort by another group to raise \$50,000 to erect a Confederate monument for the state of Georgia meant competition for the LMA. A lottery for the state monument was to have five Confederate generals serve as lottery commissioners. One of those was Savannahian Lafayette McLaws, whose bust, ironically, along with that of Francis Stebbins Bartow, was moved to the base of Savannah's monument. This photograph, taken by William E. Wilson, shows the 1908 dedication ceremony of both busts on Chippewa Square.

ion the monument should be located in the most conspicuous place in the city, where it would daily greet the eyes of our people, and not in an unimproved field, nearly at the extremity of the city." He suggested the area between the Pulaski and Greene monuments on Bull Street as a good site, in that "it would be a daily reminder of our patriotic cause and its brave defenders who went down in the shock of battle."<sup>9</sup> A correspondent for the *Augusta Chronicle* reiterated, "The design of the monument to the Confederate dead is one of the most elaborate and elegant I have ever seen. . . . It is regretted that this monument is to be located in the southern suburbs of the city."<sup>10</sup>

Eventually an LMA committee recommended the Forsyth Park site for the monument and the full association endorsed its

<sup>9</sup>"Letter to the Editor," *Savannah Morning News*, April 27, 1874.

<sup>10</sup>"Savannah's Affairs as Noted by a Correspondent," *ibid.*, April 30, 1874.

choice. In a report *To the People of Savannah*, it explained its decision: It reported that after days of debating the merits of each of the proposed sites, and after a visit to Savannah by Robert Reid, everything pointed to the Forsyth Park Extension as the logical location. The great height of the monument was a major factor in the decision as the committee felt that it should not be overshadowed by tall trees, high churches, and other prominent buildings. The ladies were also concerned that placing the monument in the main part of the city would cause mold and discolorization from deep shadows and the consequent dampness. Another concern was the amount of dust generated on the major in-town thoroughfares. The Park Extension would, in their minds, free the monument from soil and stain. The committee reminded readers that the Park Extension would not always be in the southernmost extreme of the city as they anticipated that the city would rapidly expand southward.

More significantly, the committee reported that it seemed appropriate to place the monument in the Park Extension as “this was the ground upon which the men being honored with the monument drilled in preparation for the bloody work in which their lives were the sacrifice. The quiet, peaceful surroundings of the chosen site are in harmony with the sentiments embodied in the monument, and in the minds of the committee add great force to its silent appeal to our sympathy and reverence.”<sup>11</sup> On April 22, 1874, the Savannah City Council granted the request of the Ladies Memorial Association to place the Confederate Monument in the extension of Forsyth Park.<sup>12</sup>

On the afternoon of June 16, 1874, almost every business in Savannah closed at the request of the LMA for the laying of the cornerstone. Just after 5:00, the parade started through the crowded streets of Savannah destined for the Forsyth Park Extension. The cornerstone, which had arrived a week earlier aboard the steamship *San Salvador*, was laid by the Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Masons of Georgia, the Honorable Samuel D. Irvin of Macon.

<sup>11</sup>“The Reasons Why the Park Extension was Selected for the Location,” *ibid.*, May 7, 1874.

<sup>12</sup>Savannah City Council Minutes, April 22, 1874, p. 478, Georgia Historical Society.



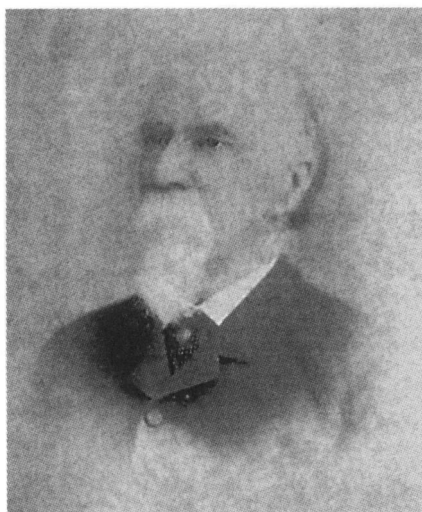
At the cornerstone's dedication, Captain George A. Mercer delivered the oration. He characterized the sentiment of the crowd and their feelings toward the Confederate dead, stating: "They espoused their cause with a unanimity and purity of purpose never exceeded—they maintained with a constancy and devotion never surpassed."

In the weeks preceding the laying of the cornerstone, the LMA called for items for the time capsule to be placed within the cornerstone. Items placed in the time capsule included numerous coins and pieces of currency, Confederate notes, newspapers, a bronze copy of the Seal of the Confederacy, a piece of the flagstaff from Fort Sumter, the muster roll of the Irish Volunteers at Fort Pulaski, November 1, 1861, Confederate sheet music, buttons from the uniforms of Commodore Josiah Tattnall and General Joseph E. Johnston, a copy of the Ordinance of Secession of Georgia, and several pieces of flags.<sup>13</sup>

During the months following the laying of the cornerstone, the pieces of the monument arrived in Savannah and construction commenced. On Christmas day of 1874, the LMA suffered what could have been a major setback. The British schooner *Mary Louise* arrived from Halifax, Nova Scotia carrying among her cargo 28 steps, 12 posts, 16 copings, 12 base pieces, 8 ramps, 129 cases of sandstone, 13 barrels of Portland cement, and 3 rough pieces of sandstone. LMA members, not wanting the monument made from any materials from the northern states, also did not want any part of it to pass through any northern ports. The captain of the

<sup>13</sup>"Laying the Cornerstone of the Monument," *Savannah Morning News*, June 17, 1874.

The finished monument was dedicated on May 24, 1875. Among those in the procession to the monument site were forty members representing the Georgia Historical Society. They were led by the Society's president, General Henry Rootes Jackson. This photograph of General Jackson was taken while he was U.S. Minister to Mexico (1885-1887).



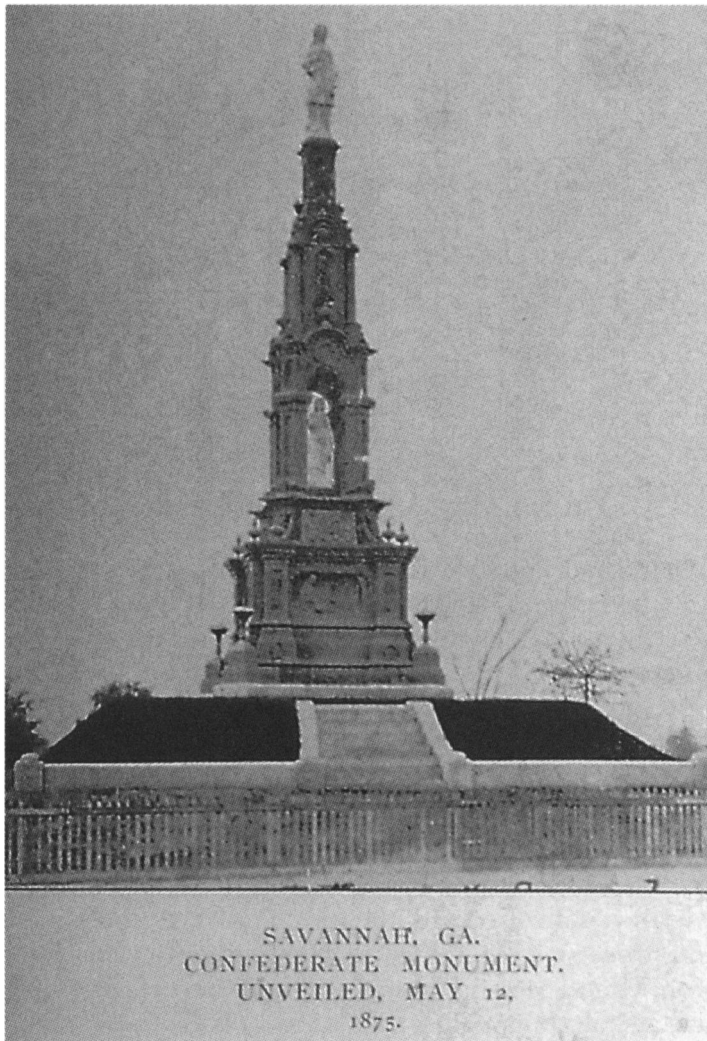
*Mary Louise* had failed to fill out a manifest and subjected the items to confiscation by U.S. customs officials upon reaching Savannah. Colonel James Atkins was eager to remedy the situation and quickly resolved the matter with the payment of the duty totaling \$1,100.<sup>14</sup>

The Ladies Memorial Association longed to dedicate the monument on Memorial Day 1875. This proved impossible and the dedication took place a month later on May 24, 1875. The City Council passed a resolution requesting that all places of business in Savannah close at 2:00 to allow its citizens the ability to participate in the festivities involved with the unveiling of the monument.<sup>15</sup>

The procession assembled at 4:00, led by General Joseph E. Johnston, Grand Marshal and General Robert H. Anderson, Assistant Marshal. Julian Hartridge of Savannah, and a member of the Georgia legislature, was the orator for the day and he followed in a carriage with the members of the Executive Committee of the Ladies Memorial Association. Numerous military units participated in the festivities and followed next in the procession.

<sup>14</sup>"Arrival of the Confederate Monument—An Omission Which Rendered it Liable to Confiscation," *ibid.*, December 28, 1874.

<sup>15</sup>Savannah City Council Minutes, May 19, 1875, p. 629. Richard Arnold was mayor of Savannah during the Civil War. He surrendered the city to General John Geary as General Sherman's troops advanced on Savannah.



Once unveiled, the monument caused some controversy. Savannahians did not like the monument's ornateness and, as a result, changes were made. The original monument had two marble figures—"Judgment" on top and "Silence" in the center, both of which were later moved to other locations.

During his speech, Hartridge alluded to the bond that the Confederacy felt with the American Revolution and its patriots. He referred to the recent centennial celebrations held at Concord and Lexington in honor of the martyrs of the first Revolution. He

contended that this beautiful and enduring tribute, which had been raised through the efforts of the fair women, was in honor of those who were equally martyrs. “They had been sacrificed alike in the defense of constitutional liberty.”<sup>16</sup>

The LMA was financially unable to complete the monument. By May 1875, they had spent \$21,250 (nearly \$382,000 in 1998), which included Robert Reid’s fee, freight, duty, and insurance. There was also the additional amount for the foundation, tilling, and the terrace. They estimated that it would cost \$5,000 to complete the monument by placing the four marble soldiers representing the army, navy, artillery, and cavalry on the corners. It was decided to forgo those features, and simply place urns on the corners instead. The only other expense that seemed necessary was to place some type of iron railing or fence around the base of the monument. If everything had been completed, the final cost was estimated to have been \$26,250.

Once completed, the general feeling of the citizens of Savannah was that the monument was too elaborate. Reid liked to cover the entire surface with ornament. As noted by Thomas Gamble in the *Savannah Morning News*, “It was too symbolic to meet popular approval, and the general effect was so lacking in charm as to offend those of artistic trend.”<sup>17</sup> Sentiment quickly grew that the monument should be changed, to truly illustrate the southern soldier. However, the LMA lacked the funds to do so. George Wymberly Jones DeRenne realized the ladies’ distress and submitted a proposal to them in 1878. He offered to replace the marble figure on top of the monument, “Judgment,” with a bronze figure of a soldier if the LMA removed the figure in the center of the monument, “Silence,” and bear the expense of covering the opening with stone slabs. DeRenne also asked the association to pay any additional expenses. On March 20, 1878, the LMA voted unanimously in favor of accepting this offer and the attached conditions.<sup>18</sup> The acceptance of the soldier illustrates Savannah’s

<sup>16</sup>“Our Honored Dead,” *Savannah Morning News*, May 25, 1875.

<sup>17</sup>“Material for Confederate Monument was First Subject to Government Confiscation,” *ibid.*, April 24, 1932.

<sup>18</sup>Ladies Memorial Association Minutes, MS 473, Georgia Historical Society. It appears that the members of the LMA did not know at the time of the offer that it was made by G. W. J. DeRenne. All contact with DeRenne was done through Hamilton Branch.

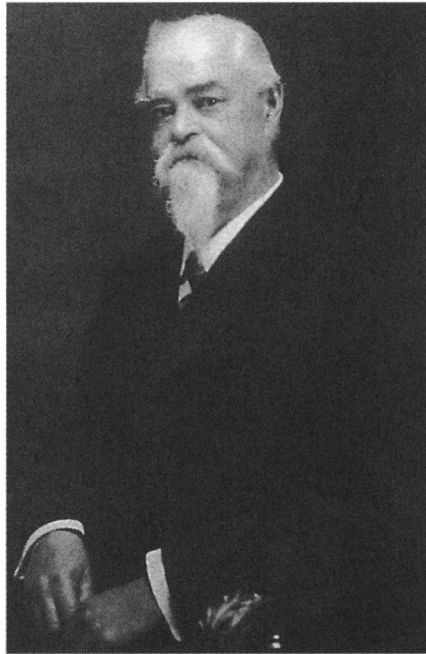


In proposing his addition to the monument to the LMA in 1878, George Wymberly Jones DeRenne described it as “a colossal bronze statue of a Confederate soldier, as he was seen among us—not trim and dapper as a holiday parader; but battle-scarred, weather-beaten, poorly clad and worse shod, perhaps even maimed, with only his weapon in perfect array—a figure of hard service, of veteran experience, of resolute endurance to the end—the type of men who sacrificed all to duty.” *Letter in the Ladies Memorial Association Papers, Southern Historical Collection, UNC-Chapel Hill.*

rapid psychological recovery from the Civil War and Reconstruction. Not only had they erected a funereal monument, but they were about to pay tribute to the soldier using a style that was not common until 1885. The period of “ceremonial bereavement” was over in Savannah. DeRenne commissioned artist David Richards, an accomplished Welsh-born sculptor, to create the bronze statue. He created numerous statues and busts while working in New York, Chicago, Maine, and New Hampshire.

At their annual meeting in April 1879, LMA members voted to transfer the two figures being removed from the monument to the entrances to the soldiers’ lot in Laurel Grove Cemetery. The following month, the LMA considered a request from the Thomasville (Ga.) Memorial Association asking for the donation of one of the marble figures. The Savannah ladies initially denied the request, but two weeks later, on May 30, they passed a resolution to donate the statue of “Judgment” to their sister organization in Thomasville. They also adopted a resolution accepting Captain Henry J. Dickerson’s offer to place, at his expense, the statue of

The controversy still exists over who artist David Richards used as the model for the Confederate soldier at the top of the monument. Some believe it was A. S. Bacon while others believe it was Hamilton Branch. This mystery will probably never be solved. This photograph shows Bacon many years following the war and the construction of the monument.



“Silence” on a pedestal overlooking the Gettysburg dead at Laurel Grove.<sup>19</sup> Only then did the Ladies Memorial Association adopt the early pattern of placing monuments with a funereal design in the cemetery.

On May 21, 1879, DeRenne presented the bronze statue of the Confederate soldier to the Ladies Memorial Association. In his letter DeRenne said of the statue: “It represents him as he was . . . a man who chose rather to be than to seem; to bear hardship than to complain of it; a man who met with unflinching firmness the fate decreed him, to suffer, to fight, and to die in vain.”<sup>20</sup>

The story of Savannah’s Confederate Monument is unlike that of any other southern city. At the end of the Civil War and throughout Reconstruction, the women of Savannah were able to raise enough money to erect a massive monument and then impose major alterations on it. Their fund raising was effective because Savannah did not suffer as severely after the war as did some

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup>Ladies Memorial Association Papers, #409-Z, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.



In a letter in the collections of the Georgia Historical Society (MS 720), Margaret Branch Sexton explained why the model was her father, Hamilton Branch. She claimed that DeRenne was not happy with the photographs of Bacon that Branch had delivered to him, and that he asked Branch to supply his own photograph. Sexton claimed that DeRenne wrote on the photograph of Bacon, "I want a Confederate Soldier, not a dude." The photograph's location is unknown.

other southern cities and, therefore, did not have to devote public or private funds toward rebuilding.

Today, "Judgment" remains in Laurel Hill Cemetery over Soldier's Circle in Thomasville. "Silence" remains in Laurel Grove Cemetery in Savannah, and the Confederate Monument remains in the Forsyth Park Extension. All three should be remembered not only as memorials to the soldiers of the Confederacy, but also as a memorial to the women of Savannah and their commitment to cause.

“Judgment” left Savannah on July 16, 1879. Mrs. C. P. Hansell, a native of Savannah and resident of Thomasville, was the driving force behind the donation of the statue. Once in Thomasville, “Judgment” was placed in Laurel Hill Cemetery in Soldier’s Circle. It recently underwent a major restoration, including a new trumpet, and was rededicated in 1995.



“Silence” was removed from the original Confederate Monument in Forsyth Park and placed in Laurel Grove Cemetery overlooking the graves of the Gettysburg dead. Since being placed in Laurel Grove, “Silence” and the graves of the soldiers have been decorated every year on Confederate Memorial Day.