

MONUMENT

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For those who attended the festivities, the occasion must have seemed a wholly right and appropriate way to honor the lives of the veterans and place a final, monumental blessing on their service and sacrifice. But there are two points worth considering before we leave the story on this idyllic, fraternal scene. First, one fact stands clear from the RECORD's account—the events occurred on one side of the color line. The newspaper never failed to designate the African-Americans who figured in the life of Chatham with the “colored” or some other epithet, but not one reference to a “colored” person appears in the account of the unveiling. And second, the RECORD of September 5 makes it clear that not everyone in the county regarded the monument with the same reverence as London and the veterans. In the third and final post of the series, the Rabbit speculates wildly about lines that connect these two points.

PART 3: SYMBOL

As far as I know, the person who put blackface on Chatham's Confederate monument a week after its unveiling never was caught. To be honest, I can't say that it was blackface. It's just a hunch; for one thing, Henry A. London rarely if ever shrank from itemizing the lurid deeds of humankind for the Chatham RECORD, but his report of September 5, 1907, titled “Monument Defaced,” pulls up curiously terse:

On last Monday night was perpetrated one of the most disgraceful acts of vandalism ever known in a civilized community. On that night some person or persons defaced the monument recently erected in front of our courthouse in memory of Chatham's Confederate soldiers. The defacement was made with black shoe polish (a bottle of which was found near the monument next morning) and with grease. After several hours of hard scrubbing most of the shoe polish was removed, but still a few streaks remain on the monument.

Of course such an outrage aroused great indignation when discovered next day, and the county commissioners as soon as they met promptly offered a reward for the arrest and conviction of the guilty person or persons. Such an outrage is a misdemeanor and is punishable by fine and imprisonment, and every effort will be made to detect and punish the guilty party as he deserves. We regret to know that our county is disgraced with the presence of any human being mean enough to commit such a despicable act.

There followed a reward notice issued by the county commissioners, offering \$25 for the arrest and conviction of the perpetrators.

A search of the RECORD for the fifteen months following turns up no report on the capture of the perpetrator. The likelihood of a corroborating account with more detail seems remote. Still, the event that left H.A. London, for once in his life, bereft of descriptive powers must have breached some taboo. And in 1907 North Carolina, an act with the transgressive power to turn Henry London circumspect may well have touched on the matter of race.

To be sure, lacking details, it is challenging to say exactly what symbolic statement the vandal intended. Was it someone who hated the pretensions of the statue, the overbearing pitch of the London fund-raising drive, or the pomposity of the previous weekend's



PHOTO: RANDOLPH VOLLER

unveiling ceremonies? Could the gesture have come from someone whose garden hoe was stolen or porch peed on during the weekend of celebration?

Or was it truly a racially-charged act, done by an anonymous dissident making a point about apartheid in the era of Jim Crow? Given the risks to a person of color, who in that community would have dared? If the perpetrators never did get caught, they either kept mum about it—which, given the public nature of the gesture, seems unlikely—or they confessed only in circles tight enough that no one betrayed them for \$25. But the African-American community would have known that one among them,



The author of this three part story, Will Sexton, addresses the Chatham County commissioners regarding the Confederate monument.

PHOTO: CHRIS TELESKA

if caught, would be dealt with cruelly.

Furthermore, can we even say that the blacks of 1907 Chatham saw a potent racial symbol in the Confederate monument? Was there clandestine organizing; what affairs of race did the members of the African-American community discuss when they met privately? What were their private thoughts about the memorial, the cult of the Lost Cause, and its connections to the Jim Crow regime? Unfortunately, the marginalization of African-American voices of the county limits us to nibbling at the edges of these questions.

The defacement may well have been a gesture with a more partisan point. In the decades before the memorial went up, a potent combination of Populist sentiment and black allegiance to the Republican Party ran through county. Democratic sympathies would have been concentrated in Pittsboro, where Mr. Pittsboro himself, London, was a staunch Democrat who published a Democratic newspaper. Populists thrived in the other parts of the county, and many of the farmers developed their political consciousness via the Farmers' Alliance. It was a different political landscape from our own, which follows on the realignment of southern whites with the Republican Party starting in the 1960s.

With this background, perhaps it

makes more sense to suggest that a Populist aimed the racially-charged vandalism of the memorial directly at London and the RECORD. Or perhaps the target was more broadly the Democratic elite, whom the shoe-polish phantom saw embodied in that figure posed in the center of Pittsboro. Or maybe it was, after all, just some teenagers who got into their father's corn liquor.

WHATEVER THE PARTICULARS of the defacement, it must have stung Henry and Bettie London deeply, given their personal investment in the statue as a project. For the Londons and their white contemporaries, the movement to memorialize the Lost Cause of the Confederacy represented a sweeping, nationwide project to sanctify the remembrance of the American Civil War. However, their version of the story behind that movement comes entirely from one side of what their black contemporaries, Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. Dubois, called “the color line.” While the Londons and other “redeemers” of the Confederacy spoke in terms of remembrance, it also happens that their movement coincided with the implementation of a regime of voter suppression and terrorist violence that we know as Jim Crow. More than a century later, it is impossible to deny its corrosive and lasting effect on American life.

Henry London used the pages of the RECORD to pose firm opposition to what he called “lynch law,” and criticized the practice in the harshest terms. Yet he was just as firm in his support for Jim Crow. Following election day in 1898, white supremacists stormed the city of Wilmington, turned their guns on blacks in the streets, killed dozens if not hundreds, forced the duly elected Republican-Populist (aka, “Fusion”) government to resign at gunpoint, and banished those who did not flee from the city. London's reaction was to write, “Wilmington is once more ruled by respectable white men and all her citizens are now safe and

secure in their lives, liberty and property.” The insurrection, in practical terms, ended the Fusion movement in North Carolina. About five years later, the Winnie Davis Chapter of the Daughters of the Confederacy, led by Bettie London, announced their plans to erect a monument in Pittsboro.

The Confederate monuments that went up in the early and mid-Twentieth Century are not memorials to a defeat, but commemorations of a victory. They celebrate the enduring victory, in the states of

the southern US, of a regime of racial apartheid. In recent years, this aspect of their history has flared in the national discourse, largely as a response to violent displays of hatred by white nationalists.

In 2017, the issue burned hot when white nationalists staged a murderous rally around the statue of Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville, and the same questions arose from the racially motivated murder of blacks in a Charleston church two years previous to that. There is an irredeemable bond between the monuments and the ongoing history of white supremacy in the United States. The questions and the agony around these symbols will persist until we have reconciliation on race in America, and reconciliation is a road that appears to stretch before us to something like eternity.

In the meantime, protestors have

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