"I don't know if it's true or not, but I like it"

BLANDFORD CEMETERY

KEN WAS TALL AND SLENDER with thin, greying hair, and a pair of glasses atop his forehead, ready at any moment to, with a nod, drop down to his nose. Tours at Blandford Cemetery were scheduled to begin every hour. At 9:55 a.m. I was the only person there. "Looks like it's just you and me," he said, smiling and rolling up his sleeves.

The cemetery was as still as a cloudless sky. The soft din of lawn-mowers buzzed in the distance, their vibrating bodies held by Black men steering them in between tombstones draped in Confederate flags. The scent of freshly cut grass—a commingling of green blades and dry earth—swept across the field. The oldest marked grave at Blandford Cemetery dates back to 1702, but what this land is best known for took place more than a century and a half later. Buried here in Petersburg, Virginia, are the bodies of roughly thirty thousand Confederate soldiers, one of the largest mass graves of Confederate servicemen in the South.

I walked through this field and observed the names carved into each ashen tablet. JAMES. WRIGHT. COTMAN. I did not know if they were first names or last names, soldiers who fought in the Civil War or their descendants. It is a cemetery full of bodies that have long watched over this land, and of newly buried bodies just becoming acquainted with the earth.

The entrance to the cemetery was marked by a large stone archway ornamented with the words OUR CONFEDERATE HEROES and two smaller archways on either side of it. Two Confederate flags sat at the bottom of the columns framing the main archway and flapped gently in the wind. The first dragonflies of spring whipped through the light breeze, their translucent wings pulsing against the warm air, their unbridled bodies somersaulting past one another. I watched them dance through the air, land atop a headstone, and pause. I watched their wings twitch once, twice, then take off again, their bodies governed by the wind. I watched and, somewhat mystically, wondered whether these might have been descendants of the dragonflies that flew over this land during the war, more than a century and a half ago. I imagined them zipping past the bullets that turned men into ghosts, their wings warm with beads of blood. I imagined them landing on top of bodies that were strewn on top of bodies, circling the smoke billowing from burning soil.

Ken looked down at his black watch. It was 10 a.m. He led me out of the visitor center and up a set of stone stairs toward the church. The Blandford Church is a russet brick building with a festoon of tombstones in front of it. It was built as an Anglican church, part of the Church of England. But as the city of Petersburg grew, largely because of its proximity to the Appomattox River, which was a central means of trade throughout the region, the congregation decided in 1806 that they wanted to move to a more central location in the city. In order to do so, however, they had to go through a process of deconsecration, in which they formally declared that the building was no longer a church.

"When they do that, doors, floors, pulpit, pews, windows, all come out of this building. It is totally gutted," Ken said. The church, then a brick shell of itself, sat largely abandoned for ninety-five years.

"I want to jump forward," Ken said as a couple who had arrived late hustled up the hill to join us. Ken welcomed them, shared a brief summary of what he had previously said, and began telling

the story of how this land was transformed into one of the largest cemeteries in the state.

"A year after the Civil War, there's a young lady in town named Nora Davidson. She is very much a daughter of the Confederacy," said Ken. Davidson was headmistress at a school for young women, and she took her students to Blandford Cemetery to put flowers and flags on the graves of Confederate soldiers the year after the war. She was part of a group of women who, as Ken put it, were "disappointed because they felt that the Southern soldier had not been treated with the same dignity and honor that the Northern soldiers had. Southern soldiers, often when they fought and died, were buried where they fell. The South didn't have the resources to take you back to Georgia or Maryland or Texas or North Carolina.

"The ladies felt they wanted to do something about this. So they formed something called the Ladies' Memorial Association. Their mission was to...exhume the bodies of the Confederate soldiers they could find, and bring them into this now larger cemetery and rebury them." The Petersburg Ladies' Memorial Association was one of many that organized throughout the South in the aftermath of the Civil War, hiring laborers to find bodies and rebury them in Confederate cemeteries. "Well," Ken said, "it took them fifteen years." He dabbed at a line of sweat on his forehead with the edge of his sleeve. "They found almost thirty thousand sets of Confederate remains."

But, Ken said, there was a problem. Most of the bodies exhumed were not identifiable. New forms of artillery had been introduced during the Civil War that left men's bodies ravaged in a way that had previously been unseen in standard warfare. Sometimes all that was left was a leg or an arm or a head with no body attached. "The trouble with the Civil War soldier was there was no standard identification. No one wore dog tags. No one had ID bands," Ken said. Of the roughly 30,000 soldiers buried at Blandford, only about 2,200 are identified.

After fifteen years of collecting the remains, the women decided they needed a focal point around which to dedicate the cemetery. The city of Petersburg gave them the old church, which had been all but abandoned for almost a century, to refurbish and make into a living memorial to the slain Confederate soldiers. The Ladies' Memorial Association commissioned Tiffany Studios, owned by the world-renowned artist and specialist in stained-glass windows Louis Comfort Tiffany, to lead this project. As Ken continued talking, I briefly swiped open my phone and looked it up: Louis Comfort Tiffany was part of the famous New York Tiffany family, and it was his father who had started the company Tiffany & Co.

The problem for the Ladies' Memorial Association was that the women could not afford to pay a company as renowned as Tiffany's to complete the project. "In 1901, Mr. Tiffany sold a window like that, this size, for seventeen hundred dollars. If you do the math, that is forty-nine thousand dollars in today's equivalent dollars," Ken said. And the Ladies' Memorial Association needed more than a dozen windows. But ultimately Tiffany Studios gave the women a discount: only three hundred fifty dollars per window, a much more manageable price but still prohibitive for the organization.

"So the solution was they would go to the Confederate states and the border states and say, 'If you raise the money, we will put in a window in your honor in this memorial for the Southern soldier.' And that's how all the windows got populated," Ken said, waving his hands as if they held magic wands.

Ken grabbed a pair of keys from his pocket and fidgeted with the door of the church before pushing it open. As we stepped inside the church, a hazy darkness wrapped around my skin. At first, all I could see were the silhouettes of old pews and rings of stained-glass windows traced by sunlight. As my eyes adjusted, the contours of the room became more distinct and the images in the windows sharpened. Each stained-glass window was a mesmerizing display

of craftsmanship, a canvas of dazzling blues and greens and violets exploding from each pane. On each window stood a Christian saint surrounded by a burst of colors, the texture of the glass making it seem as if the pious figures were stepping out from the thick panels.

"Three things in the window: seal, figure, and inscription," Ken said, approaching the first window nearest the door, a towering, magnificent piece of glass with Saint Mark holding a scroll and looking into the distance. Each window commemorating a state's soldiers depicts a saint, with a state seal at the top of the window and an inscription at the bottom. Below Saint Mark, written in black in a golden box, was: TO THE GLORY OF GOD AND IN MEMORY OF SOUTH CAROLINA'S SONS WHO DIED FOR THE CONFEDERACY+++HE DOETH ACCORDING TO HIS WILL IN THE ARMY OF HEAVEN AND AMONG THE INHABITANTS OF THE EARTH.

In the other windows were the saints Bartholomew, Paul, John, Peter, James the Less, Philip, Thomas, Matthew, Luke, and Andrew. Beneath each of them was an inscription praising the valor of the Confederate soldiers who fought in the war.* My eyes moved back and forth from the images of the saints to the inscriptions under their feet, the dissonance growing with every second.

Ken went on to outline the aesthetic history of each window in the church with meticulous detail, making his way from window to window, reciting his practiced presentation with precision and depth. There was little discussion, however, of anything beyond the windows.

I asked Ken if many of the people who visited these grounds and came on these tours were Confederate sympathizers.

"I think there's a Confederate *empathy*," he said, altering the language slightly. "You're here primarily for the beauty of the

* There are fifteen windows in total. Of the thirteen windows dedicated to states, eleven have saints (Maryland's and Arkansas's don't, and are smaller). One window is dedicated to the Ladies' Memorial Association, and the last one depicts a cross, known as the Cross of Jewels.

windows, but a lot of people don't know about it and a lot of people who do come have Confederate empathy. People will tell you, 'My great-great-grandmother, my great-great-grandfather, are buried out here.' So they've got long Southern roots, which go back into the 1860s and before." He shuffled the keys in his hand, looking for the one that would lock the church door. "But an awful lot of people come from Michigan and Minnesota and Montana because they want to see the beauty of the windows."

I tried to be more direct.

I asked Ken how he personally—and Blandford as an institution—thought about addressing the history and symbolism of Confederate iconography in the church and throughout the cemetery. Was it okay to only talk about the windows and not to say anything about the Confederate cause they were built to honor?

"Very simple," Ken responded. "As they say, 'You're not from around here.' I am not a Southerner."

I didn't quite understand what Ken was saying.

"My father was in the military, so I was raised primarily north of the Mason-Dixon Line. So I don't have the Southern upbringing. I don't have the War of Northern Aggression or the states' rights war," he said, referring to the alternate names the Civil War is sometimes called by those sympathetic to the Confederate cause. "Is it possible that this church in 1735 may have been built probably with slave labor? Absolutely. When the balcony was used up here, and the congregation was small, did slaves stay up there? Perhaps."

Ken said that the lack of discussion around these topics was potentially tied to the demographic makeup of the cemetery's visitors. "Our visitor population is overwhelmingly white, because again, what this is, it's not that a Black population doesn't appreciate the windows, but sometimes in the context of what it represents, they're not as comfortable." He went on: "In most cases we try and fall back on the beauty of the windows, the Tiffany glass kind of thing."

Perhaps it was not simply that Black people did not come to a Confederate cemetery because they didn't want to be in the space; perhaps Black people did not come to these spaces in large part because of how the story of the Confederate cause was told. I was tempted to tell Ken about the Whitney Plantation: how a great many people assume that Black Americans would have no interest in visiting the land upon which their ancestors were enslaved, but my visit to the Whitney had shown me that if a place was willing to tell a different story—a more honest story—it would begin to see a different set of people visiting. For me, coming to a Confederate cemetery and hearing Ken speak about the beauty of a set of windows without exploring what they were meant to memorialize, was not unlike going to a plantation and listening to a talk about the decorative infrastructure of the enslaver's house without mentioning the enslaved hands who built it.

We stepped back into the visitor building, filled by a late-morning light that showered each glass encasement housing pieces of the cemetery's history. Ken pointed to a woman behind the counter. "She's my boss," he said in what felt like an attempt to pass me off to someone else, or at least to share the burden of questions I was throwing his way.

At this point the woman came over and stood just a few feet away from Ken. She smiled and I smiled back.

Martha had a kind face with large tortoiseshell glasses that sat high on her nose. I asked her if the cemetery was concerned that, by presenting Blandford in such a positive light, they might be distorting its connection to an army and a cause that was violent, racist, and treasonous.

"Absolutely," she said. "And when people ask—I've been here for eighteen years—people often ask what do I personally feel is the true cause. And I say, 'Well, you get five different historians who have written five different books, I'm going to have five different answers.' It's a lot of stuff. But I think from the perspective of *my* ancestors, it was not slavery. My ancestors were not slaveholders.

But my great-great-grandfather fought. He had federal troops coming into Norfolk. He said, 'Nuh-uh, I've got to join the army and defend my home state,' and that's what he did. It was not a slavery issue, but that's just for that particular individual. I always try to tell people, it was a lot of things that came together."

She continued: "It was interesting, when I came to work in the church—my whole point is to learn about the interesting early history and talk about what the women did. Again, as a woman I like to talk about women's history and say they've been through a lot, but this is how they helped to get through their grief of perhaps a husband, father, son dying, trying to take care of those remains, because again, the federal government took care of the Union Army. There was nothing done for the Confederates, so it was important to them. And this is what their result was, this beautiful chapel. To think you can walk in there and, as Ken was saying, just enjoy this little Anglican church that is restored to be this beautiful chapel. I think you could take the Civil War aspect totally out of it and enjoy the beauty."

I made a note of Martha's invocation of her lineage as the starting point of our conversation. It did not feel incidental, but central to how she thought about the war and what it represented.

"You were talking about how for a lot of people they can come in here and just see the windows and appreciate the history and décor of the church," I said. "But for me, as someone who is a Black American, someone whose ancestors were enslaved, it is very difficult for me to disentangle any of it. I think there's a profound dissonance, even to *be* here. I've never been to a Confederate cemetery except at this moment." Ken walked back in our direction. "I think I experience it probably in a very different way than a lot of your visitors."

As I said all of this, Martha and Ken nodded. "Unfortunately, we don't often get that," Ken said. "What would you guess, Martha—eighty-five, ninety percent of our visitors are white?" Martha nodded.

If I had to guess, I imagined even that number was understating the percentage of white visitors.

Ken stepped away again, and I continued my conversation with Martha. As we spoke, I looked down on the counter where handouts for a Memorial Day event hosted by the Sons of Confederate Veterans were piled up. My focus trailed off. Martha's words became an indecipherable din as I reached down and grabbed one. Martha's gaze followed the direction of my hand. Her face turned red and she thrust her hand down quickly to flip the paper, covering the rest of the leaflets.

"Don't even look at this. I'm sorry," she said nervously. "I will tell you from a personal standpoint I'm kind of bothered."

I looked at the flyer again, this time focusing on the photograph of the guest speaker for the event: Paul C. Gramling Jr., then the commander in chief of the Sons of Confederate Veterans.

"I don't mind that they come on Memorial Day and put Confederate flags on Confederate graves, that's okay," she said. "But as far as I'm concerned, you don't need a Confederate flag on—" She stumbled over a series of sentences I couldn't follow. Then she collected herself and took a deep breath.

"I hate the fact that people use that as in-your-face kind of stuff," she said. "If you're just talking about history, it's great, but these folks are like, 'The South shall rise again.' It's very bothersome. It's peaceful, but I went to one because I was invited and I wanted to see and I said I will never do it again. These folks can't let things go. I mean, it's not like they want people enslaved again, but they can't get over the fact that history is history."

Martha started talking to me about how *preservation* was different from *celebration*, an idea that made sense to me in the abstract. I asked Martha for her opinion of the Confederate monuments in Richmond that had gotten so much attention since the 2017 white-nationalist rally in Charlottesville.

"I would like to see the monuments staying up, but with context," she said. "Because again, I understand where people are coming

from, but if we can't have them where they are, we've got to have them somewhere.

"The thing is, my personal opinion, and I will tell you this, I don't think that Robert E. Lee would have been pleased with all this deitizing. He was a very humble person. I don't think he'd be happy at all with the controversy," she said. "He did what he thought was right. He did do an awful lot. Again, he was in the US Army before he took on the Confederate [States of America], the CSA. But I—just from personally reading things about him, I don't think he'd be happy at all to know [about] all these statues of him everywhere. I don't think he'd be happy to know that there's a controversy about Monument Avenue, because he was just much more humble than that."

More people were coming into the visitor center, and I didn't want to keep either of them from their work. I thanked Ken and Martha for their time. We shook hands, and I made my way out the door, the wind slapping against the thousands of tombstones around me.

I thought about Martha's admiration for Robert E. Lee and her assertion that he would not have liked the statues that had been raised in his name. Perhaps Martha was right, as Lee's words suggest that he likely would not have advocated for Confederate monuments to be erected. In an August 1869 letter he wrote, "I think it wiser, moreover, not to keep open the sores of war but to follow the examples of those nations who endeavored to obliterate the marks of civil strife, to commit to oblivion the feelings engendered."

Lee's hesitancy to erect memorials after the war, however, should not be considered exculpatory or a reflection of his desire to move toward an egalitarian society in which Black people were equal to their white counterparts. As historian Kevin M. Levin notes,

Lee remained outwardly reconciled to defeat, but privately he was troubled about emancipation and the end of slavery.

Robert E. Lee was a slave owner who led an army predicated on maintaining and expanding the institution of slavery. A letter Lee wrote to his wife in 1856 is often used as a means of demonstrating that Lee couldn't have fought for the Confederacy in order to protect slavery because he believed slavery was "a moral & political evil." Devoid of additional context—and an acknowledgment of the fact that Lee owned enslaved people—this assertion might seem to shield Lee from allegations of racism and bigotry. And yet two sentences later:

> I think it however a greater evil to the white man than to the black race, & while my feelings are strongly enlisted in behalf of the latter, my sympathies are more strong for the former. The blacks are immeasurably better off here than in Africa, morally, socially & physically. The painful discipline they are undergoing, is necessary for their instruction as a race, & I hope will prepare & lead them to better things. How long their subjugation may be necessary is Known & ordered by a wise & merciful Providence. Their emancipation will sooner result from the mild & melting influence of Christianity, than the storms & tempests of fiery Controversy.

While Lee believed slavery would one day come to an end, he also seemed to believe it was up to God when that happened. It was a view common of those in Lee's world. He, and his fellow enslavers, had no control over it. Everyone, including the enslaved, were simply meant to wait for divine intervention.

As a slave owner, Lee was ruthless in breaking up families. According to historian Elizabeth Brown Pryor, "By 1860 he had broken up every family but one on the estate." When three of Lee's enslaved workers escaped, he had them hunted down and, when they were returned, had them beaten in a spectacle of

cruelty. A testimony from one of the people who attempted to escape reads:

> [W]e were immediately taken before Gen. Lee, who demanded the reason why we ran away; we frankly told him that we considered ourselves free; he then told us he would teach us a lesson we never would forget; he then ordered us to the barn, where, in his presence, we were tied firmly to posts by a Mr. Gwin, our overseer, who was ordered by Gen. Lee to strip us to the waist and give us fifty lashes each, excepting my sister, who received but twenty; we were accordingly stripped to the skin by the overseer, who, however, had sufficient humanity to decline whipping us; accordingly Dick Williams, a county constable, was called in, who gave us the number of lashes ordered; Gen. Lee, in the meantime, stood by, and frequently enjoined Williams to "lay it on well," an injunction which he did not fail to heed; not satisfied with simply lacerating our naked flesh, Gen. Lee then ordered the overseer to thoroughly wash our backs with brine, which was done.

During the war, Lee was, like his contemporaries, disturbed by the sight of Black soldiers in Union ranks. White soldiers under his command ruthlessly executed Black soldiers who attempted to surrender during the infamous Battle of the Crater—the first time Lee's Army of Northern Virginia had faced large numbers of Black troops. The Battle of the Crater is helpful not only in contextualizing Lee but in contextualizing the cemetery itself.

"You can connect this directly to the Blandford Cemetery," Levin later told me. "The Confederate counterattack that pushed back the Union advance, including an entire division of Black soldiers, began just steps from Blandford. These men were told that Black soldiers were present on the battlefield and it infuriated them. Roughly two hundred Black soldiers were murdered after surrendering either during or after the battle. There are references

to the Crater inside the church. In short, the Blandford Church is on the Crater battlefield."

For whites in the Confederate Army, seeing these Black men in Union uniforms represented a profound and infuriating turning point in the war, one that tapped into their worst impulses. The use of Black soldiers was a threat to the entire social order the South had been predicated on. Black soldiers in the Union Army did not simply reflect a new demographic composition of their military opponents; Lee's army saw Black soldiers as participants in a slave revolt, an insurrection of the most nightmarish proportions that was being actively supported by Lincoln and the US government. The Confederate government put in place policies that officially considered Black soldiers slaves participating in an insurrection, and thus subject to re-enslavement or execution. Their white officers, as enablers of the insurrection, could also be executed.

When Lee's men encountered the Black soldiers in battle, they expressed explicit disdain for their Black adversaries. In his book *Remembering the Battle of the Crater,* Levin cites the reflections of a number of Confederate soldiers: "It had the same affect [*sic*] upon our men that a red flag had upon a mad bull," remarked one South Carolina soldier. Another, David Holt of the 16th Mississippi Infantry Regiment, remembered, "They were the first we had seen and the sight of a nigger in a blue uniform and with a gun was more than 'Johnnie Reb' could stand." (Johnny Reb was a character meant to symbolize a typical Confederate soldier.) Holt said that "[f]ury had taken possession" of him, adding, "I knew that I felt as ugly as they looked." Per Laban Odom of the 48th Georgia, "Our men killed them with the bayonets and the but[t]s of there [*sic*] guns and every other way until they were lying eight or ten deep on top of one enuther [*sic*] and the blood almost s[h]oe [*sic*] quarter deep." Another soldier in the same regiment wrote: "The Bayonet was plunged through their hearts & the muzzle of our guns was put on their temple & their brains blown out others were

knocked in the head with butts of our guns. Few would succeed in getting to the rear safe."

Confederate soldiers were no less brutal after Black troops had surrendered. Levin outlines how soldiers described in detail what happened after the fighting ceased. Jerome B. Yates of the 16th Mississippi remembered: "Most of the Negroes were killed after the battle. Some was killed after they were taken to the rear." According to Henry Van Lewvenigh Bird, "The only sounds which now broke the silence was some poor wounded wretch begging for water and quieted by a bayonet thrust which said unmistakably 'Bois ton sang. Tu n'aurais de soif.' [Drink your blood. You will have no more thirst.]" James Verdery called it "a truly *Bloody Sight a perfect Massacre nearly* a Black flag fight."

Levin argues that such violence was meant to convey to Black people still trapped in the claws of enslavement behind Confederate lines that no such insurrection, be it inside or outside the confines of war, would be allowed. The *Richmond Examiner* unambiguously captured the sentiment many Southerners held at that time, asking General Mahone and his men not to relent: "Shut your eyes, General, strengthen your stomach with a little brandy and water, and let the work, which God has entrusted to you and your brave men, go forward to its full completion; that is, until every negro has been slaughtered... butcher every negro that Grant sends against your brave troops, and permit them not to soil their hands with the capture of a single hero."

After the Battle of the Crater, captured Union prisoners—white and Black—were made to march through the streets of Petersburg. Levin argues that the display was meant as a message to civilians that this is what was at stake if the war was lost: race mixing and the end of white supremacy.

In the years following the war, Robert E. Lee did not become open to the creation of a society based on racial equity; he actively opposed it. He argued, for example, that Black people should not have the right to vote. "It is true that the people of the South,

together with the people of the North and West, are, for obvious reasons, opposed to any system of laws which will place the political power of the country in the hands of the negro race," he explained in a letter signed by other former Confederate leaders in 1868. "But this opposition springs from no feelings of enmity, but from a deep seated conviction that at present the negroes have neither the intelligence nor other qualifications which are necessary to make them safe depositories of political power."

The contrast between Lee's racist views and his sanitized image was not just realized by people of future generations; it was named and identified—particularly by Black writers and activists—soon after Lee's death. In 1870, upon seeing the blossoming of Lee's deification, Frederick Douglass denounced the "bombastic laudation of the rebel chief" and was disgusted by the fact that he could "scarcely take up a paper... that is not filled with *nauseating* flatteries of the late Robert E. Lee."

It was clear, too, in the early twentieth century, when W. E. B. Du Bois wrote in a 1928 essay:

> Each year on the 19th of January, there is renewed effort to canonize Robert E. Lee, the greatest confederate general. His personal comeliness, his aristocratic birth and his military prowess all call for the verdict of greatness and genius. But one thing—one terrible fact—militates against this, and that is the inescapable truth that Robert E. Lee led a bloody war to perpetuate slavery. Copperheads like *The New York Times* may magisterially declare, "Of course, he never fought for slavery." Well, for what did he fight? State rights? Nonsense. The South cared only for State Rights as a weapon to defend slavery... No. People do not go to war for abstract theories of government. They fight for property and privilege, and that was what Virginia fought for in the Civil War. And Lee followed Virginia... Either he knew what slavery meant when he helped maim and murder thousands in its defense, or he did not. If he did not he was a fool. If he did, Robert Lee was a traitor and a rebel—not indeed to his country, but to humanity and humanity's God.

It is not simply that statues of Lee and other Confederates stand as monuments to a traitorous army predicated on maintaining and expanding the institution of slavery; it is also that we, US taxpayers, are paying for their maintenance and preservation. A 2018 report by *Smithsonian* magazine and the Nation Institute's Investigative Fund (now Type Investigations) found that over the previous ten years, US taxpayers had directed at least forty million dollars to Confederate monuments, including statues, homes, museums, and cemeteries, as well as Confederate heritage groups. And in Virginia, the subsidizing of Confederate iconography is a more than century-long project.

In 1902, as Jim Crow continued to expand as a violent and politically repressive force, the state's all-white legislature created an annual allocation of the state's funds for the care of Confederate graves. *Smithsonian*'s investigation found that in total, the state had spent approximately $9 million in today's dollars. Much of that funding goes *directly* to the United Daughters of the Confederacy, which received over $1.6 million in funds for Confederate cemeteries from the State of Virginia between 1996 and 2018.

Cemeteries filled with Black and formerly enslaved people have never received commensurate financial support. The Virginia legislature passed the Historical African American Cemeteries and Graves Act in 2017, to demonstrate its commitment to making amends for this injustice, but at the time of the *Smithsonian* investigation less than a thousand dollars had been used. (Virginia has increased its level of support since then, and established a fund specifically for nineteenth-century African American cemeteries in 2020, a step to make up for over a century's worth of neglect.)

Across the street from Blandford Cemetery, a smaller, more understated burial ground stood.

The People's Memorial Cemetery was purchased by twenty-eight members of Petersburg's free Black community in 1840. Buried on this land are enslaved people, an anti-slavery writer whose burial site is recorded among the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom sites; Black veterans of the Civil War, World War I, and World War II; as well as hundreds of other Black Petersburg residents.

The contrast between the two was conspicuous in ways not dissimilar to that between the two cemeteries at Monticello. There were far fewer tombstones at the People's Memorial Cemetery than at Blandford, and those there were indiscriminately scattered across the brown grass. There were no flags ornamenting the graves. There were no hourly tours available for people to remember the dead. There was history, but also silence.

In the weeks that followed, I kept revisiting the way Martha had swiftly flipped over the event flyer, the way her face had turned a hot and revealing red, the shame she had expressed at me having seen that this event was being held on the grounds she presided over. If she had not responded this way, I don't know that I would have felt so curious about what she was trying to hide. But at that point I decided to find out what Martha was so ashamed of.

Wary of making a trip to a Sons of Confederate Veterans (SCV) commemoration celebration alone, I drove back down to Petersburg on Memorial Day morning with a friend, William, a white graduate student with blond hair, dimples, and a vivacious spirit. William and I had been good friends since college, and as a former preschool teacher, he is one of my children's favorite playmates. Following the death of his father, William began exploring his own ancestry and coming to terms with the fact that his ancestors included plantation owners and someone who had fought in the Confederate Army. This trip, he said, would be part of his own journey in reckoning with that.

As we turned into the cemetery, lines of cars were parked alongside the road, and people were walking up a hill toward a large gazebo. I was struck by just how casual the event was—what seemed like a couple hundred men and women sitting alongside each other in uneven rows of folding chairs they had brought themselves. Children laughed and played tag around the trunk of a towering tree. From teenagers to the elderly, people came together and hugged, guffawing and slapping one another's backs with an easy, familiar delight. It felt as if I was walking in on someone else's family reunion.

Dixie flags bloomed from the soil like milkweeds. There were baseball caps emblazoned with the Confederate flag, biker vests ornamented with the seals of each seceding state, and lawn chairs marked with the letters UDC, the abbreviation for the United Daughters of the Confederacy. To my left and my right were more—and more massive—Confederate flags, its rebel insignia billowing in the wind. In front of the gazebo were two flags, one Confederate, one US, standing side by side as if seven hundred thousand people hadn't been killed under the weight of the epic conflagration between them.

Without lawn chairs, we stood in the back of the crowd so as not to block the view of anyone sitting down and also so as not to be conspicuous.

The event began with an honor guard, a dozen men dressed in Confederate regalia marching in front of the crowd, carrying rifles with long bayonets resting on their left shoulders. Their uniforms were the color of smoke; their caps looked as if they had been bathed in ash. Everyone in the crowd stood up from their chairs as they made their way across the face of the gazebo. Some stood at attention and lifted their right hands to their brows in salute; others lifted their phones to take photos of the wistful procession. After the honor guard made their way from one side of the gazebo to the other, they stood at attention as the master of ceremonies asked everyone to remove their hats

and recite the US Pledge of Allegiance. This was followed by an acoustic rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner" with the crowd joining in. Then, seamlessly, the guitarist strummed his guitar once more and the crowd began a spirited rendition of the famous song "Dixie":

> Oh, I wish I was in the land of cotton
> Old times there are not forgotten
> Look away! Look away! Look away! Dixie Land

The song was originally written in the 1850s to be performed as part of a minstrel show in which white actors dressed up in blackface. Over time, it became the de facto Confederate anthem, and the song would play as Confederate soldiers prepared to enter battle. The song became a symbol of "massive resistance"—a movement to prevent school desegregation that grew to encompass resistance to civil rights more broadly—in the mid-twentieth century. The Ole Miss marching band even played it on the football field; they performed while wearing Confederate-inspired uniforms. I looked around as everyone sang in unison, lifting their voices in an almost paradoxically mellifluous tribute to a fallen ancestral home. A home never meant for me.

A variety of other speakers came to the podium under the gazebo to speak, each of them praising the soldiers buried under our feet and castigating those who might espouse objections to such eulogizing.

"This cemetery," one said, "this is as important as any [other cemetery] in the Confederate States of America. Lest we never forget the trials, the tribulations that they fought, died, and went through, and their families."

"While those who hate seek to remove the memory of these heroes," another said, "these men paid the ultimate price for freedom, and they deserve to be remembered."

As we stood there listening, I pulled out a small journal and

began taking notes. I tried to be subtle, but it felt as if my pen was loudly screeching against the page each time it touched the paper. I felt eyes on me, as more than a few people turned around in their seats and looked with puzzlement, and likely suspicion, at the Black man they had never seen before standing in the back of a Sons of Confederate Veterans crowd. A man to my right, not so subtly, took out his phone and began recording me with its camera. People continued to turn their heads. The stares began to crawl over my skin. I slowly closed my notebook and stuck it under my arm, looking up toward the gazebo, doing my best to give off the sense that I was unfazed. Without moving my head, I scanned the crowd again. The man in front of me had a gun in a holster on his waist. Virginia is an open-carry state.

Paul C. Gramling Jr., the commander in chief of the Sons of Confederate Veterans at the time, was the keynote speaker. I recognized him from the flyer Martha had tried to hide from me weeks before. Gramling wore a tan suit with a white oxford shirt and a straw boater tilted down just a touch over his forehead, as if it were meant to spin on its own axis. He had long dark-blond hair that fell down the back of his neck and rested on his shoulders, and a thick goatee that covered his lips. As he stepped to the podium, his face emerged from the shade of the gazebo and was soon bathed in the soft angles of afternoon light.

Gramling began his speech by sharing a story about the origin of Memorial Day. "I've read several people writing about Memorial Day and how it started. I come across one the other day. I don't know if it's true or not, but I like it. And I wanted to share that with you this afternoon."

He read aloud an account of a Memorial Day ceremony that took place on April 25, 1866, in Columbus, Mississippi, when a group of women "decorated the graves of both Union and Confederate soldiers," he said, his voice like an old rocking chair sliding back and forth on its crescent legs. "The [United Daughters of the Confederacy] will forever honor all of our country's heroes with

undying devotion and that of our Confederate dead, who have earned their rightful place to be included as American veterans. We should embrace our heritage as Americans, North and South, Black and white, rich and poor. Our American heritage is the one thing we have in common, and it is what defines us."

I was fascinated by the conciliatory equivocation of his tone, and his desire, it seemed, not to push a demarcation between the Confederacy and the United States but to assimilate the memory of the Confederacy more fully into the country's historical consciousness. Confederate soldiers, according to this narrative, were US military veterans just as those who had fought in World War I, World War II, Vietnam, Korea, and Iraq. It did not seem to matter that they had fought *against* the US; he believed they should be remembered as US veterans themselves.

Gramling's speech sounded so much like similar Memorial Day celebrations after the end of Reconstruction, when orators exclaimed that this day should be one of reconciliation, paying tribute to the sacrifices made by both Confederate and Union soldiers without accounting for what the war had actually been fought over. Former Confederate general Roger A. Pryor went so far as to claim that the war was not caused by slavery at all, that—as Lee maintained—slavery would come to an end if God deemed it so. "[I]mpartial history will record that slavery fell not by any effort of man's will, but by the immediate intervention and act of the Almighty himself; and in the anthem of praise ascending to Heaven for the emancipation of four million human beings, the voice of the Confederate soldier mingles its note of devout gratulation."

"I don't know if it's true or not, but I like it"—that comment, spoken at the start of Gramling's speech, had been strikingly honest and deeply revealing. I was struck by the cavalier framing Gramling used.

The idea for Memorial Day is often attributed not to Columbus, Mississippi, but Columbus, Georgia, which inspired Mississippi's

event even though it occurred a day later.* In 1866, the Ladies' Memorial Association in Columbus, Georgia, selected April 26th—the anniversary of Confederate general Joseph E. Johnston's surrender to Union general William T. Sherman—to pay tribute to the Confederate dead. Other states had other dates they used to mark the earliest celebrations of Memorial Day—or "Decoration Day" as it was often called. For example, May 10, the anniversary of Stonewall Jackson's death, and June 3, the birthday of former Confederate president Jefferson Davis.

Many places throughout the South lay claim to being the originators of Memorial Day, including Blandford Cemetery. According to the official website of Petersburg, Virginia, the first Memorial Day was celebrated on the grounds of Blandford in June 1866. The story is at least as much a matter of interpretation as of fact. According to historian David Blight, the first Memorial Day ceremony was actually held in Charleston, South Carolina, in May 1865, before Confederate women honored grave sites in Georgia or Mississippi or Virginia. In the archives of Harvard, Blight found reports from both the *New-York Tribune* and the *Charleston Daily Courier* detailing an event conducted by Black workmen, mostly freed slaves, who buried and commemorated fallen Union soldiers. Confederates had taken control of Charleston's Washington Race Course and Jockey Club and converted it into an outdoor prison, where they kept Union prisoners of war. The conditions of the prison were so terrible that nearly 260 Union soldiers died and were subsequently buried in a mass grave behind the racetrack's grandstand. Blight describes what happened next:

> After the Confederate evacuation of Charleston black workmen went to the site, reburied the Union dead properly, and

* The Ladies' Memorial Association in Columbus, Georgia, publicized the event in newspapers, hoping that other places would hold similar celebrations. The newspapers in Columbus, Mississippi, got the date of the proposed event wrong, so they accidentally held it a day too soon.

built a high fence around the cemetery. They whitewashed the fence and built an archway over an entrance on which they inscribed the words, "Martyrs of the Race Course."

The symbolic power of this Low Country planter aristocracy's bastion was not lost on the freedpeople, who then, in cooperation with white missionaries and teachers, staged a parade of 10,000 on the track. A *New-York Tribune* correspondent witnessed the event, describing "a procession of friends and mourners as South Carolina and the United States never saw before."

The procession was led by 3,000 black schoolchildren carrying armloads of roses and singing the Union marching song "John Brown's Body." Several hundred black women followed with baskets of flowers, wreaths and crosses. Then came black men marching in cadence, followed by contingents of Union infantrymen. Within the cemetery enclosure a black children's choir sang "We'll Rally Around the Flag," the "Star-Spangled Banner" and spirituals before a series of black ministers read from the Bible.

I wondered if Gramling had ever come across this history, which was largely forgotten in favor of interpretations more aligned with the Lost Cause.

The Lost Cause is a movement that gained traction in the late nineteenth century that attempted to recast the Confederacy as something predicated on family, honor, and heritage rather than what it was, a traitorous effort to extend and expand the bondage of Black people. The movement asserted that the Civil War was not actually about slavery, that the soldiers and generals who fought in the war were honorable men who did so simply for their families and communities, not because of any racist antagonism. The myth of the Lost Cause not only subsumed those sympathetic to the Confederate cause but also laid its claim to broad swathes of the American consciousness. It attempted to rewrite US history.

The first Memorial Day, as Blight describes it, received significant press coverage at the time. But after Reconstruction was defeated, and as white Democrats took control of state politics, the story of the event disappeared from official records and public consciousness.

As he continued his speech, Gramling turned his attention away from history and began describing a talk he had given that addressed the present-day controversy around Confederate monuments standing across the country. "I told them that we have a common enemy today and that common enemy seeks to eradicate this country's moral fabric. I told them that if they were to succeed in eradicating all things Confederate, what comes next?" I was struck by the stillness in his face, how serious his eyes were as they scanned the crowd. "Our enemies know that if they can take us out, the rest of this country is going to be easy for their picking. Now, thirty years we have been dealing with people trying to take away our symbols. When these monuments were erected over one hundred years ago, in our towns, they were erected in these cities and these towns, the whole town was involved in it. I know in Shreveport [Louisiana], where I'm from, we have a monument there, in Caddo Parish Courthouse, and at the dedication of that monument in 1906, there was hundreds of thousands of people there at the dedication."

People in the crowd nodded. My ears prickled with nervous heat.

"But to think about these men that lay here, buried, that look like that up there . . ." He pointed in the direction of what looked to be a thirty-foot statue of a Confederate soldier to the crowd's right. "If you take a good look at him, that was all there was to it as far as dealing with the elements, [dealing with] the enemy. And to know that we have thirty thousand of these men buried here, known only to God. And then I think about all the monuments across this country that naysayers are decrying, 'Get rid of them. That offends me. I don't like it.' . . . I refer to them as the American ISIS." He looked out into the crowd, who murmured affirmation, and his face

contorted with delight. "I have even written about this in the *Confederate Veteran*, in my article, because they are nothing better than ISIS in the Middle East. They are trying to destroy history they don't like. And like I said, once they go through the Confederate symbols—US symbols, Christian symbols, will be next."

Each syllable of Gramling's words were cigarette embers being pushed onto my skin. I thought about all of my friends back home in New Orleans who had spent years fighting to have the Confederate monuments removed. So many of them were teachers committed to showing their students that we did not have to accept the status quo as unchangeable. Others were parents attempting to build a better world, a better city, for their kids, one that did not include slave owners lifted up on sixty-foot pedestals. And many were our elders, veterans of the civil rights movement who had taught us so much about what these statues represented and who, decades ago, had laid their bodies on the line fighting against what these statues represented. I knew these people. None of them were terrorists.

Gramling continued, urging all who were present to understand the true meaning of the Confederacy and to "take back the narrative." "We've got to be able to stand up and say, 'We are more than just this.'" He pointed to the Confederate flag to the left of the gazebo. "We are both of these." He extended the index finger of his opposite hand in the direction of the US flag to his right, so that his arms were now outstretched as if he were blessing the flags that flanked him.

As he began to wind down, Gramling proudly noted how he and the Sons of Confederate Veterans sought to advance their cause by repackaging a well-worn rhetorical maxim. He exclaimed, "When I say that we need to make Dixie great again, some of you might have seen this on our website. We have a baseball cap that says 'Make Dixie Great Again.' It's very similar to the other red cap that I've seen coming out of Washington, DC, 'Make America Great Again.' But I'll submit to you that in order to make America great again, we've got to make Dixie great again."

As Gramling stepped away from the podium, the crowd gave him a rousing round of applause. Two men in front of us holding large Confederate flags began to swing them through the air with unsettling fervor. I turned to William. He raised his eyebrows and let out a long, heavy exhale. We both did a quick glancing survey of everything in front of us and behind us, as if we were small animals who felt unfamiliar vibrations in the earth beneath us.

The remainder of the program was filled with another singer and shorter remarks from a man who reasserted many of Gramling's previous points. As the event concluded, different representatives of the United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Sons of Confederate Veterans laid wreaths at the base of the statue of the Confederate soldier. The honor guard then turned toward the large stretch of cemetery, lifted their rifles toward the sky, and fired into the air three times. I felt my knees buckle at the sound of the first shot, and a thrust of adrenaline hurtled through me. The boom of the rifles reverberated throughout my body. I shut my eyes for the second shot, and again for the third. I felt a tightening of muscles inside my mouth, muscles I hadn't known were there.

As of 2019, according to a report from the Southern Poverty Law Center, there were nearly two thousand Confederate monuments, place names, and other symbols that remained in public places across the country.

The creation of these monuments was not a harmless commemoration or merely an attempt to remember fallen Americans. The creation of any monument sends a message, whether intentional or not. I think of the statues around the country of people who presided over Native American genocide or forced resettlement, and how a young Indigenous child might experience that pedestaled figure.

The erection of Confederate monuments in the early twentieth century came at a moment when many Confederate veterans were

beginning to die off in large numbers. A new generation of white Southerners who had no memory of the war had come of age, and the United Daughters of the Confederacy had raised enough money to build memorials to these men. The goal, in part, was to teach the younger generations of white Southerners who these men had been and that the cause they had fought for was an honorable one. But there is another reason, not wholly disconnected from the first. These monuments were also built in an effort to reinforce white supremacy at a time when Black communities were being terrorized and Black social and political mobility impeded. In the late nineteenth century, states began implementing Jim Crow laws to cement this country's racial caste system. Social and political backlash to Reconstruction-era attempts to build an integrated society was the backdrop against which the first monuments arose. These monuments served as physical embodiments of the terror campaign directed at Black communities. Another spike in construction of these statues came in the 1950s and 1960s, coinciding, not coincidentally, with the civil rights movement.

The organization at the forefront of funding and building Confederate memorials and monuments, the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), was founded in 1894 as an amalgam of women's groups and associations that had first emerged during the Civil War. The UDC alone is responsible for erecting more than seven hundred memorials and monuments across the country, according to the *Washington Post*, over four hundred of which are on public grounds. And while the vast majority of these monuments are in the former states of the Confederacy, testaments to the Lost Cause can be found all across the country, including, at the time of this writing, in California, Washington State, South Dakota, Delaware, New York, and Massachusetts.

Those who support these monuments contend that to push back against them is to unfairly apply today's moral sensibilities to a bygone era. This assertion, however, ignores the objections of that era's Black writers and activists. Frederick Douglass wrote in

1870 that "[m]onuments to the 'lost cause' will prove monuments of folly, both in the memories of a wicked rebellion, which they must necessarily perpetuate, and in the failure to accomplish the particular purpose had in view by those who build them. It is a needless record of stupidity and wrong."

Douglass remained a fierce critic of the Lost Cause in the immediate aftermath of the war and over the course of the rest of his life. In 1871, he spoke with great fervor about the danger of forgetting why the war was fought:

> 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.
>
> I am no minister of malice. I would not strike the fallen. I would not repel the repentant; but may my right hand forget its cunning and my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I forget the difference between the parties to that terrible, protracted, and bloody conflict.

In 1931, W. E. B. Du Bois attacked the decision to erect Confederate monuments as ahistorical and irresponsible:

> The most terrible thing about War, I am convinced, is its monuments—the awful things we are compelled to build in order to remember the victims. In the South, particularly, human ingenuity has been put to it to explain on its war monuments, the Confederacy. Of course, the plain truth of the matter would be an inscription something like this: "Sacred to the memory of those who fought to Perpetuate Human Slavery." But that reads with increasing difficulty as time goes on. It does, however, seem to be overdoing the matter to read on a North Carolina Confederate monument: "Died Fighting for Liberty!"

The myth of the Lost Cause does not begin or end with the Confederate monuments. The myth seeps into many other facets of state-sanctioned life. In eleven states there are a total of twenty-three Confederate holidays and observances. As of 2020, in both Alabama and Mississippi there is Robert E. Lee Day, Confederate Memorial Day, and Jefferson Davis's birthday; in South Carolina there is Confederate Memorial Day; in Texas there is Confederate Heroes Day. In both Alabama and Mississippi, Robert E. Lee's birthday is celebrated on the same day as Martin Luther King Jr. Day.

The myth of the Lost Cause has also been propagated through media, literature, and postwar propaganda. These fictions often have included denying that the war was ever about slavery, or depicting slavery as a benign or even mutually beneficial institution. On February 22, 1896, thirty-five years after Jefferson Davis's inauguration as president of the Confederacy, former Confederate general Bradley T. Johnson explained that slavery was "the apprenticeship by which savage races had been educated and trained into civilization by their superiors."

After the war ended, white Southern writers took the baton from Confederate leaders and continued to paint slavery not as an institution defined by violence and exploitation but as a mutually beneficial arrangement of eager Black enslaved people and kind white enslavers. Thomas Nelson Page, a writer from Virginia who was just twelve years old when the war ended, exemplified this misguided nostalgia in stories that appealed to white Northerners and Southerners alike. Using his conception of nineteenth-century Black dialect, he wrote about enslaved people who longed for the era of slavery to return. In *Marse Chan: A Tale of Old Virginia,* Sam, a formerly enslaved Black person, says:

> "Dem wuz good ole times, marster—de bes' Sam uver see! . . . Niggers didn' hed nothin' *'t all* to do—jes' hed to 'ten' to de feedin' an' cleanin' de hawses, an' doin' what de marster tell

> 'em to do; an' when dey wuz sick, dey had things sont 'em out de house, an' de same doctor come to see 'em whar 'ten' to de white folks when dey wuz po'ly. Dyar warn' no trouble nor nuttin'."

The Lost Cause was not an accident. It was not a mistake that history stumbled into. It was a deliberate, multifaceted, multi-field effort predicated on both misremembering and obfuscating what the Confederacy stood for, and the role that slavery played in shaping this country.

As the event began to disband, I looked around to see if there might be anyone willing to talk with me. William and I split up, to try to generate multiple conversations.

I walked over to a man a few yards away who had been taking pictures of the event with his camera, its black strap resting on the back of his neck. I introduced myself, and he dropped the camera from his eye and turned around. Jeff had a long salt-and-pepper ponytail that fell past his shoulders and down his back. His denim vest, adorned with Confederate badges, hung comfortably over his round frame. His face was damp from the summer's heat, and beads of sweat rolled down his forehead before he swept them from the top of his brow. He told me he was sixty-three years old and had several ancestors who fought for the Confederacy.

The sun hung like an orange orb above us. I wiped my forehead too and asked Jeff what he thought of the event we had just experienced. "Well, I think if anyone never knew the truth, they heard it today," he said, nodding as if to affirm his own words. "They found out that the Confederate soldiers—and we also mention these Union soldiers and other wars that we were involved in, and we try to be fair and honest about it," he said as an aside before resuming, "about exactly what happened and each individual that fought in these battles, under the circumstances, were trying to do

it for freedom. Whatever they believed in, we're all trying to do it for freedom. And I know that the Confederate side tries to honor the Union's a lot, even though some people think we despise them, but we don't. We all know that they're respected soldiers and we're trying to continue honoring them, be it through their flag, which is the American flag, and the monuments. We have them here in Petersburg. We have the Union and we have the Confederate monuments. We do have a Monument Avenue also. And they need to be there for generations in the future because they need to know the truth. They can't learn the truth if you do away with history. You'll never learn. And once you do away with that type of thing, you become a slave. And if anybody knows education, if you don't have it, you become a slave to people."

I was startled by his choice of words but could not tell whether or not that language was intentional and meant to be provocative or a matter of rhetorical coincidence.

"I think everybody should learn the truth," Jeff said, licking his teeth and wiping his forehead once more with the back of his hand.

"And so in your mind, what is that truth?" I asked.

"The truth of it is what really happened."

I nodded, waiting to see if he had more to say.

"Well, basically everybody always hears the same things, 'It's all about slavery.' And it wasn't. It was about the fact that each state had the right to govern itself," he said.

He then pointed to a tombstone about twenty yards away.

"So, you know, you look at that Mr. Richard Poplar—where is his grave marker—over there, Black gentleman. He was captured and sent to two prisons up north and he was a Confederate officer and they told him that if he would, a Black gentleman, 'If you would say they forced you to fight for the Confederacy, we will set you free.' He said, 'I will not leave my men.' He said, 'Because I know what happened. You invaded the South.'"

But the Confederate Army forbade free Black people from

serving in their army as soldiers, much less as officers. Poplar's story, I would later come to discover, was central to the story people in Petersburg told about the war. His 1886 obituary read:

> When the Sussex Dragoons were formed at the beginning of the war, and when they became Company H, of the Thirteenth Virginia Cavalry, Richard attached himself to the command. The Sussex Dragoons were a wealthy organization, and each member of the company had his own servant along with him. From April 1861, until the retreat from Gettysburg, Richard remained faithfully attached to the regiment.

The commemoration of Poplar seems to have begun in 2003, when the local chapter of the Sons of Confederate Veterans pushed for an annual "Richard Poplar Day." In 2004, the mayor of Petersburg signed a proclamation declaring one, and calling Poplar a "veteran" of the Confederate Army who served in the 13th Virginia Cavalry. A headstone for Poplar was also put in place at Blandford near where his body was believed to be buried, just a few yards from where I stood with Jeff. But as Levin notes, the characterization of Poplar having "attached" himself as a "servant" seems to indicate that he was not enlisted as a soldier. Poplar's 1886 obituary suggests that he was a cook for the soldiers, not someone engaged in combat. This mythmaking is not unique to Poplar. There have been claims that up to one hundred thousand Black soldiers fought for the Confederate Army, that Black men fought under General Robert E. Lee, and that these men valiantly died as part of racially integrated regiments willing to sacrifice their lives to save the South. There is no evidence to support this.

The myth of Black Confederate soldiers emerged in the 1970s, pushed by the Sons of Confederate Veterans. This story was a response to changing public perceptions of the Civil War in the years after the civil rights movement—away from Lost Cause mythology and toward recognition that slavery was central to this conflict.

The SCV appears to have thought that if it could appropriate the stories of men like Richard Poplar, it might, despite an avalanche of evidence to the contrary, protect the Confederacy's legacy. A Confederate sympathizer could argue, if the war was fought over slavery, why were Black soldiers fighting for the Confederates? If Black soldiers fought for the Confederates, how could it be considered racist to fly the Dixie flag?

The idea of using enslaved people during the war had been suggested by Confederate general Patrick Cleburne, but the proposal was scoffed at by the majority of Confederate leadership because it undermined the entire basis upon which the war was being fought. Leadership found themselves in a position in which they could choose to perpetuate slavery or give everything they had to win the war and secure independence—a choice many Confederate leaders were unwilling to accept. Robert M. T. Hunter, a senator from Virginia, is reported to have said, "What did we go to war for, if not to protect our property?" Another Confederate leader, General Howell Cobb, was even more explicit: "If slaves will make good soldiers our whole theory of slavery is wrong."

In a last-ditch effort to salvage the war, just weeks before Lee would surrender at Appomattox, the Confederacy did approve legislation that would allow Black people to fight for the Confederacy. But by then it was far too late. The war had effectively already been lost.

As I continued speaking with Jeff, he began talking about how Lincoln's aggression and the imposition of federal rule on the Confederacy escalated tensions and ultimately led to war.

"It's like I said, it's like me going in your house and telling you how to live in it. You have the right to live in your house, your way. As long as there is not a real major threat or nothing. And that's what he tried to do."

I wanted to understand what if any role Jeff thought slavery had played in the war's origin story; I asked him if he thought it was a part of the reason the Civil War began.

"Oh, just a very small part. I mean, we can't deny it wasn't

there. We know slave blocks existed. But the fact is, there was a small amount of us, small [amount of] plantations in the South that had them. Now, if you want to go after them, that's one thing, but you're coming after my family too."

The idea that slavery was "just a very small part" of why the Civil War began is not unique to Jeff; it is reflective of decades of Lost Cause propaganda.

While running for the presidency in 1860, Lincoln opposed the expansion of slavery into new territories, but he promised not to interfere with slavery in any of the fifteen states where it already existed. Despite his promise, many Southern leaders perceived Lincoln's election as a direct, abolitionist threat to their enterprise. According to historian Edward Bonekemper, before he was inaugurated, the seven states with the highest numbers of enslaved people per capita, as well as the highest percentage of family slave ownership, seceded from the Union. An additional four would follow.

Confederate declarations of secession and records from secession conventions show that these states were wholly committed to the institution of slavery—a commitment that far surpassed their commitment to the Union. If they had to choose between slavery and unity, these states unequivocally chose the former. The following are excerpts from several declarations of secession, speeches presented at secession conventions, and other documents related to secession (italics are my own):

> Mississippi: Our position is *thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery*—the greatest material interest of the world. Its labor supplies the product which constitutes by far the largest and most important portions of the commerce of the earth. These products are peculiar to the climate verging on the tropical regions, and by an imperious law of nature, none but the black race can bear exposure to the tropical sun. These products have become necessities of the world, and a blow at slavery *is* a blow at commerce

and civilization...There was no choice left us but submission to the mandates of abolition, or a dissolution of the Union, whose principles had been subverted to work out our ruin.

South Carolina: A geographical line has been drawn across the Union, and all the States north of that line have united in the election of a man to the high office of President of the United States whose opinions and purposes are hostile to slavery. [Lincoln] is to be entrusted with the administration of the Common Government, because he has declared that that "Government cannot endure permanently half slave, half free," *and that the public mind must rest in the belief that slavery is in the course of ultimate extinction.* This sectional combination for the submersion of the Constitution, has been aided in some of the States by elevating to citizenship, persons, who, by the Supreme Law of the land, are incapable of becoming citizens; and their votes have been used to inaugurate a new policy, hostile to the South, and destructive of its beliefs and safety.

Louisiana: The people of the slaveholding States are bound together by the same *necessity and determination to preserve African slavery.*

Texas: We hold, as undeniable truths, that the governments of the various States and of the Confederacy itself, were established exclusively by the white race, for themselves and their posterity; that the *African race had no agency in their establishment; that they were rightfully held and regarded as an inferior and dependant* [*sic*] *race,* and in that condition only could their existence in this country be rendered beneficial or tolerable.

Florida: This party, now soon to take possession of the powers of the Government, is sectional, irresponsible to us, and driven on by an infuriated fanatical madness that defies all opposition, *must inevitably destroy every vestige of right growing out of property in slaves.*

Alabama: [T]he election of Mr. Lincoln is hailed, not simply as a change of Administration, but as the inauguration of new principles, and a new theory of Government, and even *as the downfall of slavery.* Therefore it is that the election of Mr. Lincoln cannot be regarded otherwise than a solemn declaration, on the part of a great majority of the Northern people, of hostility to the South, her property and her institutions—nothing less than an open declaration of war—for the triumph of this new theory of Government destroys the property of the South, lays waste her fields, and inaugurates *all the horrors of a San Domingo servile insurrection,* consigning her citizens to assassinations, and her wives and daughters to pollution and violation, to gratify the lust of half-civilized Africans.

And the drafters of Virginia's ordinance of secession left no doubt as to why they were separating from the Union:

Virginia: The people of Virginia in their ratification of the Constitution of the United States of America adopted by them in Convention on the twenty-fifth day of June in the year of our Lord one thousand, seven hundred and eighty-eight having declared that the powers granted under the said Constitution were derived from the people of the United States, and might be resumed whensoever the same should be perverted to their injury and oppression; and the Federal Government, having perverted said powers, not only to the injury of the people

> of Virginia, but to *the oppression of the Southern slaveholding States.*

If these primary sources were not enough, we can look to the Constitution of the Confederate States, which avows in Article IV, Section 3:

> In all [new] territory the *institution of negro slavery, as it now exists in the Confederate States, shall be recognized and protected* by Congress and by the Territorial government; and the inhabitants of the several Confederate States and Territories shall have the right to take to such Territory any slaves lawfully held by them in any of the States or Territories of the Confederate States.

Indeed, the man who would become president of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis, in his farewell speech to the US Senate on January 21, 1861, after his home state of Mississippi had declared secession, made clear that any threat to slavery was a threat to the sovereignty of his people:

> It has been a conviction of pressing necessity—it has been a belief that we are to be deprived in the Union of the rights which our fathers bequeathed to us—which has brought Mississippi into her present decision. She has heard proclaimed the theory that all men are created free and equal, and this made the basis of an attack upon her social institutions; and the sacred Declaration of Independence has been invoked to maintain the position of the equality of the races... *When our Constitution was formed, [the institution of slavery] was rendered more palpable, for there we find provision made for that very class of persons as property; they were not put upon the footing of equality with white men—not even upon that of paupers and convicts; but, so far as representation was concerned, were discriminated against as a lower caste, only to be represented in the numerical proportion of three fifths.*

The conflict is also evident in the compromises that members of Congress sought in order to prevent secession and war. In December of 1860, as the rumblings of war became increasingly more forceful, Kentucky senator John J. Crittenden introduced what would become known as the Crittenden Compromise, which proposed six constitutional amendments and four congressional resolutions aimed at preventing the South from leaving the Union. Upon introducing the amendments Crittenden said the following: "The questions of an alarming character are those which have grown out of the controversy between the northern and southern sections of our country in relation to the rights of the slaveholding States in the Territories of the United States, and in relation to the rights of the citizens of the latter in their slaves. I have endeavored by these resolutions to meet all these questions and causes of discontent." Each of the six articles and four resolutions were specifically tied to the issue of slavery. Article 2, for example, stated: "Congress shall have no power to abolish slavery in places under its exclusive jurisdiction, and situate within the limits of States that permit the holding of slaves." Article 4 said: "Congress shall have no power to prohibit or hinder the transportation of slaves from one State to another, or to a Territory in which slaves are by law permitted to be held, whether that transportation be by land, navigable rivers, or by the sea." Altogether, the amendments would have guaranteed the permanent existence of slavery in states south of the line demarcated by the 1820 Missouri Compromise. One amendment even attempted to make it impossible for future amendments to overturn the other five. The proposal was supported by the majority of Southern politicians, but Northern Republicans, including Lincoln, refused to accept it.

One of the most egregious features of the Lost Cause is the dramatic about-face that occurred after the war. When the war ended, the leaders of the Confederacy attempted to walk back or completely deny the centrality of slavery to the formation of the Confederacy. In 1881, two decades after his farewell speech to

Congress, Jefferson Davis published a history of the Confederacy claiming that slavery had nothing to do with the Civil War and that there would have been a civil war even if no American ever owned a slave. Alexander Stephens, vice president of the Confederacy, maintained that the explicit rhetoric in his infamous 1861 Cornerstone Speech, in which he stated that slavery was "the immediate cause of the late rupture and present revolution" and the Confederacy was founded on "the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man," had in part been newspapers misquoting him. The reporters' notes of the event, taken contemporaneously and published widely, he said, "were very imperfect."

There is no shortage of documentation demonstrating that the Southern states seceded and began sowing the seeds of war in order to defend slavery. To look at primary source documents and convince yourself that the central cause of the war was anything other than slavery requires a remarkable contortion of history.

Two children ran behind me chasing a ball that had begun rolling down the hill. Jeff smiled as he watched them and dabbed his brow with a cloth before placing it back in his pocket. He told me that he does not call the country's deadliest war the "Civil War" because it distorts the truth. "We call it the 'War Between the States' or 'of Northern Aggression, against us,'" he said. "Because what they call the Civil War is not really the Civil War. Southern people don't call it the Civil War because they know it was an invasion... If you stayed up North ain't nothing would've happened."

When Jeff said "nothing would've happened," I wondered if he had forgotten the lives of millions of Black people who would have remained enslaved. For these people, the status quo that Jeff seemed beholden to would have meant remaining in bondage. Or did he remember but not care?

A mosquito buzzed in Jeff's ear and he swatted it away with his hand. As he spoke, it became clear that his connection to this land was not rooted in mere historical intrigue but that it was a part

of his lineage. "I've been coming here ever since I was four years old," he said.

He told me he had seventy-eight family members buried in the cemetery dating back to 1802. He frequently comes to visit the tombstones of his family members.

"Some nights I just sit there and just watch the deer come out," he said, pointing over to the gazebo, his voice becoming soft. "I sit here all the time and I just enjoy the feeling. I reminisce. I know there's some Revolutionary War guys here and veterans from other wars. To me, it's like I want to preserve history, and save what I can for my granddaughters and other people." He looked again at the gazebo, his eyes scanning its white frame bathed in the shadows of the trees around it.

"This is a place of peace. The dead don't bother me. It's the living that bother me."

It was clear that the Confederacy, and the flag flown in its honor, meant something very specific to Jeff. But for myself, and so many people I love, it meant something different, something far more sinister and violent. Jeff was quick to assert that he believed the symbolism of the flag had become distorted by "other groups" who stole it and have used it as a symbol of hate, which according to Jeff it was never intended to be.

Though he didn't say it explicitly, it sounded like Jeff was talking about the Ku Klux Klan. I asked him directly what he thought about people likening an organization like the Sons of Confederate Veterans to the KKK.

"No, they're not the Klan," he said, speaking with renewed conviction, his jaw stiffening. "No, that's what I was just saying. Even the Klan will admit that that flag does not mean that at all. It means something else to them. They just like the flag. They took our flag and used it. They use a Christian flag too and all that. But the thing you've got to remember, like I said, here in this area, the Sons of Confederates are representing their ancestors."

Founded in 1896 in Richmond—the former capital of the

Confederacy—the Sons of Confederate Veterans describes itself as an organization of around thirty thousand members that aims to preserve "the history and legacy of these heroes, so future generations can understand the motives that animated the Southern Cause." It is also the oldest hereditary organization for men who are descendants of those who fought for the Confederate Army; membership "is open to all male descendants of any veteran who served honorably in the Confederate armed forces."

While the organization publicly denounces any association with hate groups or racist ideology, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center, the Sons of Confederate Veterans has been suffused with internal discord between those interested primarily in the preservation of history and those who want to use the group as a mechanism to propagate hate. Hate and extremism are not absent from the history of the SCV; in fact, they are central to it.

There are members like Kirk Lyons, co-founder and chief trial counsel for the Southern Legal Resource Center, a group that has served as a de facto legal arm of the neo-Confederate movement, largely taking cases involving the Confederate flag. Lyons defended white supremacists, including a former Klan leader, and anti-Semitic activists in court during the 1980s and 1990s. In a speech from 2000, Lyons outlined his vision for the society he hoped the Sons of Confederate Veterans would build: "The civil rights movement I am trying to form seeks a revolution... We seek nothing more than a return to a godly, stable, tradition-based society with no 'Northernisms' attached, a hierarchical society, a majority European-derived country." And there are members like Ron G. Wilson, who during his two years as the SCV's commander in chief, from 2002 to 2004, suspended approximately three hundred members of the group who spoke out against racism, according to a Southern Poverty Law Center report.

Even beyond the infighting, the foundational project of the Sons of Confederate Veterans cannot be disentangled from white

supremacy. As the Southern Poverty Law Center and a group of New Orleans lawyers put it in a recent amicus brief: "Although the Sons of Confederate Veterans has disavowed racism in its official pronouncements in recent years, the group is still deeply invested in elevating and legitimizing its version of the Confederacy's 'history' and 'traditions,' which implicate an inherently racist, white supremacist vision of society."

The organizational lineage the Sons of Confederate Veterans enjoys can be traced directly to the Ku Klux Klan; the Klan was founded by former Confederates as a secret society before it became a terrorist group, and the early Klan was filled with Confederate veterans. Before the Sons of Confederate Veterans came into existence, its predecessor was an organization called the United Confederate Veterans (UCV). For a time, they existed as separate groups. At the seventeenth annual reunion of the UCV in 1907, the commander of the SCV gave an address praising Nathan Bedford Forrest, the first grand wizard of the KKK and a former Confederate general:

> Great and trying times always produce great leaders, and one was at hand—Nathan Bedford Forrest. His plan, the only course left open. The organization of a secret government. A terrible government; a government that would govern in spite of black majorities and Federal bayonets. This secret government was organized in every community in the South, and this government is known in history as the Klu Klux Clan [*sic*]...
>
> Here in all ages to come the Southern romancer and poet can find the inspiration for fiction and song. No nobler or grander spirits ever assembled on this earth than gathered in these clans. No human hearts were ever moved with nobler impulses or higher aims and purposes... Order was restored, property safe; because the negro feared the Klu Klux Clan more than he feared the devil. Even the Federal bayonets

> could not give him confidence in the black government which had been established for him, and the negro voluntarily surrendered to the Klu Klux Clan, and the very moment he did, the "Invisible Army" vanished in a night. Its purpose had been fulfilled.
>
> Bedford Forrest should always be held in reverence by every son and daughter of the South as long as memory holds dear the noble deeds and service of men for the good of others on this earth. What mind is base enough to think of what might have happened but for Bedford Forrest and his "Invisible" but victorious army.

The United Daughters of the Confederacy, too, has publicly distanced itself from hate groups, especially following the August 2017 attack in Charlottesville. A statement on their website says, "Our members are the ones who have spent 126 years honoring [Confederate soldiers'] memory by various activities in the fields of education, history and charity, promoting patriotism and good citizenship. Our members are the ones who, like our statues, have stayed quietly in the background, never engaging in public controversy" and that the organization "totally denounces any individual or group that promotes racial divisiveness or white supremacy. And we call on these people to cease using Confederate symbols for their abhorrent and reprehensible purposes."

However, they too have a more complicated history. As historian Karen L. Cox remarks in her book *Dixie's Daughters*, "UDC members aspired to transform military defeat into a political and cultural victory, where states' rights and white supremacy remained intact."

Heidi Christensen, former president of the Seattle, Washington, chapter of the UDC, before leaving the organization in 2012, said, "In their earliest days, the United Daughters of the Confederacy definitely did some good work on behalf of veterans and in their communities. But it's also true that since the UDC was founded in 1894, it has maintained a covert connection with the Ku

Klux Klan. In fact, in many ways, the group was the de facto women's auxiliary of the KKK at the turn of the century. It's a connection the group downplays now, but evidence of it is easily discoverable—you don't even have to look very hard to find it."

In 1914, Laura Martin Rose, who served as the historian and president of the UDC's Mississippi chapter, published *The Ku Klux Klan; or, Invisible Empire*, which effusively praised the Klan and engaged in the worst of racist tropes. "The negro considered freedom synonymous with equality, and his greatest ambition was to marry a white wife," she wrote. "Under such conditions there was only one recourse left, to organize a powerful Secret Order to accomplish what could not be done in the open. So the Confederate soldiers, as members of the Ku Klux Klan, and fully equal to any emergency, came again to the rescue, and delivered the South from a bondage worse than death."

In the opening pages of the book, Rose leaves no ambiguity about the relationship her organization has to the book she has written, stating that the book "was unanimously endorsed by the United Daughters of the Confederacy" and that "co-operation pledged to endeavor to secure its adoption as a Supplementary Reader in the schools and to place it in the Libraries of our Land."

The latter point, regarding schools and libraries, was key to understanding the UDC's collective founding project. Members did not simply want to erect monuments for the fallen; they wanted to rewrite the public narrative. As Cox notes, they saw children as "living monuments" who would go on to defend the principles of states' rights and white supremacy in ways that no inanimate monument could. The organization developed and distributed lesson plans for teachers, and placed pro-Confederate books in schools and libraries across the South. They told the children that slavery was an institution that benefited both Blacks and whites alike, and that it was rare for there to be a cruel enslaver. They held essay contests in which students would regurgitate these falsities.

Their work proved successful. Many of the children inundated

with these messages spread by the UDC during the early twentieth century would grow up to become the segregationists of the civil rights era, and the legacy of the UDC's teachings has contributed to the country's collective ahistoricism and has helped shape the ongoing landscape of white supremacy today.

During our conversation Jeff had shared with me what Blandford Cemetery meant to him and why it was so important to his sense of self. So, in turn, I wanted to share with him what it felt like for me to be here. I told him that because my ancestors were enslaved, and because the Confederacy had fought a war to preserve slavery, it was difficult for me to have much empathy for the Confederates and places like Blandford, which paid tribute to the cause they fought for.

"Well, if you ever read the letters," Jeff said. "It was actually written, you can find them if you look, read the letters of Lincoln himself. What he said about slavery. He did not want Blacks to hold office. And as far as he's concerned, he kept them where they belonged or [sent] them overseas."

Lincoln did have a complicated history with slavery and his stance on emancipation. As historian Eric Foner notes, while Lincoln said he had "always hated slavery" and called the institution a "monstrous injustice," his commitment to ending slavery was not necessarily matched by a commitment to Black equality. While some abolitionists saw the desire to end slavery and build a racially egalitarian society as inextricably linked, Lincoln thought of them as distinct. In a September 18, 1858, speech as part of his fourth senatorial debate with Stephen A. Douglas, Lincoln claimed:

> I will say...that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the black and white races—that I am not nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people; and I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever

> forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.

In fact, for much of his political career Lincoln was a public advocate of "colonization," a plan he pushed for throughout the first half of the Civil War. The idea behind colonization—sometimes called expatriation, the same plan that Jefferson advocated—was that it would be better for both white and Black people if the latter emigrated and resettled in another country, either in Central America, the Caribbean, or Africa. Lincoln thought that abolition paired with colonization was the best path forward, as it ostensibly gave Black people freedom and removed the concern that many Americans had about having to live alongside their Black counterparts. On August 14, 1862, Lincoln brought a group of free Black leaders to the White House in an attempt to convince them to lead a resettlement plan in present-day Panama. The proposal was not met with enthusiasm by the visitors and was roundly rejected by other Black leaders, who saw themselves as every bit as American as Lincoln, when accounts were published in the press. Frederick Douglass scathed Lincoln, saying, "The President of the United States seems to possess an ever increasing passion for making himself appear silly and ridiculous, if nothing worse."

While some supporters of colonization suggested that millions of free Black people posed a threat to the social order, Lincoln claimed that his support was rooted in a fear of white racism. According to Lincoln, white racism was so deeply entrenched that Black people would never have the chance to be equal members of society. Lincoln's position was similar to that of many throughout the North, those who believed slavery should be abolished but who did not want to share a society with or live alongside free Black Americans. As Foner notes, "For many white Americans, including

Lincoln, colonization represented a middle ground between the radicalism of the abolitionists and the prospect of the United States existing permanently half-slave and half-free."

It should be noted that Lincoln's position began to change after he signed the Emancipation Proclamation and after he saw two hundred thousand Black soldiers fight on behalf of the Union. A few days before his assassination he endorsed the prospect of limited suffrage for certain groups of Black people, albeit those he deemed "very intelligent" and "who serve our cause as soldiers." There is evidence that Lincoln's position was continuing to evolve on the issue, but because of his untimely assassination after the end of the Civil War, we will never know for sure where he might have ended up.*

Is Jeff wrong that Lincoln advocated Black inferiority and colonization during a significant portion of his political career? No. The issue, however, is not necessarily the veracity of his comments but the attempt to use Lincoln's record to obscure the fact that, as the war evolved, Lincoln was in charge of an army that was fighting to free four million Black people, while the other side fought to keep them enslaved.

Over the course of my conversation with Jeff, the shade of the gazebo had moved and exposed our faces to the hot sun. I could feel the pearls of sweat emerge on my temple and slide down my cheek before getting lost in the forest of my beard. A pair of children were running up and down the hill, resisting their mother's

* It is also important to note that Lincoln, and many other figures beyond the Confederacy whom our nation holds in collective reverence and esteem, advanced policies that were destructive to Native American communities. These policies included the Homestead Act and the Pacific Railway Act of 1862, which led to an enormous loss of Native land and resources. Lincoln's administration also presided over the removal of the Navajo and the Mescalero Apache from the New Mexico Territory, forcing most of them to march to a reservation roughly four hundred miles away. More than two thousand of them died on the journey or on the reservation, over a period of a few years. (Sherry Salway Black, "Lincoln: No Hero to Native Americans," *Washington Monthly*, January/February 2013.)

calls for them to move toward their car. The wreaths that had been placed at the foot of the towering Confederate statue leaned against the grey stone, the tails of the ribbons tied around them rising and falling with the breeze.

Jeff stepped away, and a few minutes later I began speaking with a woman and her son, a thin twenty-year-old with glasses and patches of black beard dotting his jawline. I had noticed the young man as one of the people dressed in Confederate regalia as part of the honor guard. "I was actually a last-minute recruit," he said, introducing himself as Nicholas, his voice quick and nasally. "I didn't even have my gun loaded."

"The last time I dressed up as a Confederate was six years ago and that was at Pamplin Park when I was fourteen years old and having fun," he said.

I asked Nicholas what it felt like to dress up in Confederate regalia, wondering if it reflected his allegiance to any particular side or narrative.

"I guess what it is—even though I'm more sympathetic to the Union side than the Confederate side—at the end of the day I still think that both sides were brave men who deserve to be remembered. So that's what I was doing here."

As I was speaking with Nicholas and his mother, another man dressed in Confederate garb, though much older than Nicholas, approached us and stood a few feet away. I watched him from the corner of my eye, but he was not hiding the fact that he was listening in. It was unclear if he was trying to intimidate me or if he was genuinely trying to join in on the conversation.

"How about yourself?" I said, turning to him, preferring to address him directly rather than have him ominously hovering behind us. "Have you been participating in these sorts of things for a while?"

"Since I was nineteen."

"And how old are you now?" Nicholas's mother asked from behind me.

"Forty-eight," he said.

I turned more fully toward him, introducing myself and getting his name: Jason. I asked him what this event, and what dressing up as a Confederate soldier, meant to him.

"This time period. This '61 to '65. This is my focus. If you look at my library, it's almost exclusively Civil War, other than children's books for my kids. This time period, it just gripped me."

He continued: "[I] took a class on Civil War history and from that someone had mentioned to me, 'You know, what I'd like to have for a job is one of those Civil War reenactors. That would be a cool job, right?' I didn't realize it's all volunteer." He laughed, Nicholas and his mother joining in.

"Are you similar to Nicholas in the sense that you are interested and kind of sympathetic to both sides?" I asked.

"I understand both sides. I understand their way of thinking. Both sides. I *will* be honest: I am more sympathetic towards the Southern cause. And there's so much more to it than what is taught in schools today."

I asked him what he was taught in relation to what he believed the more holistic truth was.

"It is the—how do I put this gently—people are not as educated as they should be. People are growing up being taught 'Civil War is all about slavery,' okay? Then they grow up and they teach [younger people], and then they grow up. And if that's all that you hear every single day, you know, and someone comes up to me and I say, 'Well, that's not exactly true. Let's talk about this'... And they just think I'm crazy. No way. That's like me saying," and he pointed his finger at my chest, "'This is not really a shirt.'"

"So were you taught that slavery, growing up, was the central cause of the Civil War?" I asked.

"That's what the textbooks say," he said.

I asked Jason what he believed the actual cause was.

"Now see, that's a whole conversation," he said. "It's so hard to just put that in a little five-second blurb."

"It's complicated," said Nicholas's mother, a departing word before she and Nicholas excused themselves.

"I will tell you this. I've done a lot of research because I'm interested," Jason said. "They've been taught all their life that Confederates are racist, that this was a war over slavery, these men were fighting to keep slavery legal, and if that's what you grow up believing, you're looking at people like me wearing this uniform, 'Oh, he's a racist.' We used to be able to stand on the monuments on Monument Avenue, those Lee and Jackson monuments. We can't do it anymore. 'Cause it ain't safe. Someone's gonna drive by and shoot me. You know, that's what I'm afraid of. I'm not standing out there for a racist reason."

I thought it was unlikely that someone would shoot Jason for standing in front of a Confederate monument; in fact, groups and individuals that are far more extreme than the Sons of Confederate Veterans—white nationalists, neo-Nazis, and others with obviously hateful views—have received an astonishing amount of protection over the past several years from police officers preserving their right to free speech, even when it costs a city millions of dollars to do so. But there was also an irony in Jason's admission of fear. These monuments had been erected decades ago with the intention of rewriting history and instilling fear in Black communities, and now it was Jason who felt scared to stand in front of the same monuments.

He then pointed to a man down the hill to our right. "See this large man standing right over here," he said. "He was the captain of my reenacting group. He recruited me into this hobby. He's in a international"—he paused—"*interracial* is the word I'm looking for, marriage." He looked at the man. "Anybody who doesn't know him is gonna say he's racist, but then when you see his wife, you may have a different perception. You know what I'm saying?"

While it certainly is not true that being in an interracial relationship means that someone can't be racist, it didn't feel like an issue

worth pushing back on for the time being, because I wanted to continue to hear what Jason thought about the war.

I asked Jason whether, through the process of his research, he had found anything that suggested the reason the Southern states seceded was tied to slavery.

"No," he said. "I will say there were politicians who will have very racist quotes and you can look it up. There were probably large landowners who felt threatened by this talk. *What? They wanna get rid of slavery? Well, I can't do this job without the slavery.* So I'm not saying that it didn't exist, that's the narrative, but as far as going to war and putting them through the absolute hell that these men went through, why would they do that? The average age was seventeen to twenty-two for a Civil War soldier. Many of them had never even seen a Black man. The rich were the ones who had slaves. They didn't have to fight. They were draft exempt. So these men are going to be out here and they're going to be laying down their lives and fighting and going through the hell of camp life, the lice, the rats, and everything else just so this rich dude in Richmond, Virginia, or Atlanta, Georgia, or Memphis, Tennessee, can have some slaves. That doesn't make sense. To me it's common sense. No man would do that."

The historian Joseph T. Glatthaar has challenged the argument that Confederate soldiers couldn't have fought because of slavery since very few were slave owners. He analyzed the makeup of the soldiers in the unit that would become Lee's Army of Northern Virginia and pointed out that "the vast majority of the volunteers of 1861 had a direct connection to slavery." In 1861, almost half of those Confederate soldiers either owned enslaved people or lived with a head of household who did, and many more worked for slaveholders, rented land from them, and had business relationships with them.

There also is ample evidence that white Southerners who did not own enslaved people were often still deeply committed to preserving the institution. Historian James Oliver Horton writes

about how the press inundated white Southerners with messages about why fighting to prevent the abolition of slavery was essential to preventing enslaved and formerly enslaved people from, in the words of the *Louisville Daily Courier*, rising "to the level of the white race." Without slavery, these papers argued, there would be no difference between poor whites and free Blacks. The *Louisville Daily Courier* warned non-slaveholding white Southerners about the slippery slope of abolition and the dangers of racial equality: "Do they wish to send their children to schools in which the negro children of the vicinity are taught? Do they wish to give the negro the right to appear in the witness box to testify against them?" The paper did not stop there, and went right to the issue it knew animated the most fervor and fear among white Southern men: would non-slaveholding white men accept a society in which they "AMALGAMATE TOGETHER THE TWO RACES IN VIOLATION OF GOD'S WILL"? Propaganda like this helped to convince non-slaveholding whites that abolition was an existential threat to Southern society. Without slavery, they were told, they would be forced to live, work, and inevitably procreate with their free Black neighbors. This was a proposition that millions of Southern whites were unwilling to accept.

Horton finds plenty of examples of Confederate soldiers saying this for themselves. As he notes, one Southern prisoner of war told the Union soldier standing watch, "[Y]ou Yanks want us to marry our daughters to niggers." An indigent white farmer from North Carolina said that he could not and would not stop fighting, because Lincoln's government was "trying to force us to live as the colored race." A Confederate artilleryman from Louisiana said that his army had to fight even against difficult odds because he would "never want to see the day when a negro is put on an equality with a white person."

In his book *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South*, historian Kenneth M. Stampp contends that white Southerners who did not own slaves still actively supported the institution as

"a means of controlling the social and economic competition of Negroes, concrete evidence of membership in a superior caste, a chance perhaps to rise into the planter class." Or as historian Charles Dew said, "If you are white in the antebellum South, there is a floor below which you cannot go. You have a whole population of four million people whom you consider, and your society considers, inferior to you. You don't have to be actively involved in the system to derive at least the psychological benefits of the system."

White Southerners' commitment to the Confederate cause was not predicated on whether or not they owned slaves. The commitment was based on a desire to maintain a society in which Black people remained at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

A man I had seen in my periphery, speaking with my friend William, walked up to Jason and me. We shook hands as he and Jason greeted each other with warm familiarity.

"He's a treasure trove of information too," Jason said, pointing to the man.

I mentioned that I had seen him talking to my friend on the other side of the gazebo.

"I been in his ear good and I gave [William] my telephone number if you need anything else," he said.

I thanked him and told him that was very generous.

He looked at me, his eyes searching my face. His face shifted. "I told him, if you write about my ancestors"—the air was now trembling between us; he leaned in closer—"I want it to be correct. I'm concerned about the truth, not mythology."

A few weeks earlier, after my first visit to Blandford, I had driven thirty minutes north to Richmond. When I arrived at Monument Avenue, I double-parked my car across the street, put my blinkers on, and walked toward the statue of Robert E. Lee a few hundred

feet away. I craned my neck to see Lee's statue awash in sunlight, its bronze hue glimmering in the rays of late afternoon. The sculpture was enormous, a twenty-one-foot-tall statue thrust into the sky by a forty-foot white stone base. Lee sat in a magisterial position atop his horse, his general's uniform fastened tightly around his torso, the bottom of the jacket draped across his upper legs. I stood there, looking up at the statue long enough to feel its shadow move like a sundial around me, scanning its frame from the bottom of the pedestal to the top of Lee's head. This statue of Lee was not so different from the one I had grown up around.

I was born and raised in a city filled with statues of Confederate soldiers. White men on pedestals and Black children playing beneath them—where Black people played trumpets and trombones to drown out the Dixie song that still whistled in the wind. In my hometown of New Orleans there are at least a hundred streets, statues, parks, and schools named after Confederate figures, slave owners, and defenders of slavery. For decades Black children have walked into buildings named after people who thought of them as property. My own middle school, Lusher, is named after Robert Mills Lusher, a Confederate and former Louisiana superintendent of education who fought against desegregation and who believed in "the supremacy of the Caucasian race." Every time I returned home I would drive on streets named for those who thought of me as chattel.

"Go straight for two miles on Robert E. Lee."

"Take a left on Jefferson Davis."

"Make the first right on Claiborne."

Translation:

"Go straight for two miles on the general whose troops slaughtered hundreds of Black soldiers who were trying to surrender."

"Take a left on the president of the Confederacy, who understood the torture of Black bodies as the cornerstone of their new nation."

"Make the first right on the man who allowed the heads of rebelling slaves to be mounted on stakes in order to prevent other slaves from getting any ideas."

So much of the story we tell about history is really the story that we tell about ourselves, about our mothers and our fathers and their mothers and their fathers, as far back as our lineages will take us. Throughout our lives we are told certain stories and they are stories that we choose to believe—stories that become embedded in our identities in ways we are not always fully cognizant of.

For many of the people I met at Blandford, the story of the Confederacy is the story of their home, of their family—and the story of their family is the story of them. So when they are asked to reckon with the fact that their ancestors fought a war to keep my ancestors enslaved, there is resistance to facts that have been documented by primary sources and contemporaneous evidence. They are forced to confront the lies they have upheld. They are forced to confront the flaws of their ancestors. As Greg Stewart, a member of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, told the *New York Times* in the aftermath of the 2015 Charleston massacre, "You're asking me to agree that my great-grandparents and great-great-grandparents were monsters." Accepting such a reality would, for them, mean the deterioration of a narrative that has long been a part of their lineage, and the disintegration of so much of who they believed themselves to be in the world.

But as I think of Blandford, I'm left wondering if we are all just patchworks of the stories we've been told. What would it take—what does it take—for you to confront a false history even if it means shattering the stories you have been told throughout your life? Even if it means having to fundamentally reexamine who you are and who your family has been? Just because something is difficult to accept doesn't mean you should refuse to accept it. Just because someone tells you a story doesn't make that story true.

"Our Independence Day"

GALVESTON ISLAND

The long-held myth goes that on June 19, 1865, Union general Gordon Granger stood on the balcony of Ashton Villa in Galveston, Texas, and read the order that announced the end of slavery. Though no contemporaneous evidence exists to specifically support the claim, the story of General Granger reading from the balcony embedded itself into local folklore. On this day each year, as part of Galveston's Juneteenth program, a reenactor from the Sons of Union Veterans reads the proclamation at Ashton Villa while an audience looks on. It is an annual moment that has taken a myth and turned it into tradition.

Galveston is a small island that sits off the coast of Southeast Texas, and in years past this event has taken place outside. But given the summer heat, the island's humidity, and the average age of the attendees, the organizers moved the event inside. A man named Stephen Duncan, dressed as General Granger, stood at the base of the stairwell, with other men dressed as Union soldiers on either side of him. Stephen looked down at the parchment, appraising the words as if he had never seen them before. He looked back down at the crowd, which was looking up at him. He cleared his throat, approached the microphone, and lifted the yellowed parchment to eye level.

"The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a