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Who Were the Fathers of the Sons of Confederate Veterans?

The Confederate Soldiers & Sailors Monuments stands at attention over the heads of passersby in front of the Williamson County Courthouse in Georgetown, Texas. The square itself shows a town that both maintains its history and adapts to its changing demographics: nineteenth century facades now house yoga studios and farm-to-table restaurants.

For five hours a day, every day in April (Confederate History and Heritage Month) for the past seven years, a man accompanies this statue. The man is a towering presence, standing at around six foot two, and is yet still dwarfed by just the statue's pedestal. He carries an original 1860s rifle and wears a gray jacket with yellow trim representative of the era. The yellow symbolizes a soldier in the cavalry, the gray classifies the uniform as belonging to the forces of the Confederate States of America. He even has the facial hair that one would attribute to that time period: a mustache, goatee, and sideburns that all coalesce together to form a single unit of bright white that contrasts his sun-freckled face.

The man is Retired Colonel Shelby Little, a thirty-year veteran of the United States Military (and Texas Guard) and the current Brigade Commander of the South Texas Sons of Confederate Veterans. For five hours a day in the beating heat of the past seven Central Texas Aprils, Col. Little stands at and for attention, guarding both the statue and the legacy that it represents.

This statue has stood, undisturbed, in this space for over one hundred years. At its dedication ceremony in November 1916, over five thousand people packed into the square to watch its unveiling. However, in the past few years, the waning enthusiasm for monuments of its type have sparked controversy both in this town and many others. In August of 2017, far-Right

activists wreaked havoc on the city of Charlottesville, Virginia in protest of the city council voting to remove a statue of Robert E. Lee.

Throughout the Southern United States, questions about the lasting memory of the Civil War has created a schism between the state-sanctioned “it wasn’t *all* about slaves” perspective that Col. Little and the majority of Southerners ascribe to, and a new voice that has become louder in recent years- that our memory of the Civil War is not one of soldiers fighting for “Southern Independence,” but to maintain that very institution. The Texan articles of secession, for example, categorize not Northern and Southern states, but by “slave-holding” and “non slave-holding.” To characterize Texas in particular as ambivalent to the institution perhaps doesn’t match its own documentation.

Another question, the one that concerns the statue itself, is one that seems simple on the surface: why was it erected?

In the past few years, the belief of a much more nefarious connotation to the statue has emerged and challenges the continued presence of this particular type of monument. For this side of the controversy, the timing of the statue’s erection is noteworthy. The year 1916 is a full half century after the conclusion of the war *and* in the midst of the Jim Crow era. The Atlanta History Center’s guide to interpreting Confederate monuments with this underlying context in mind states that “while many early memorials were erected to honor Confederate dead, most monuments were created during the Jim Crow era to stand in opposition to racial equality. Veneration of Confederates symbolized white racial dominance.”

Jaquita Wilson is an active member of Georgetown Courageous Conversations, a local group dedicated to addressing the racist history of Williamson County, including the monument in the Town Square. At first, the group drafted petitions to remove the statue from where it

stands entirely and place it inside the nearby Williamson County Museum, where it can be understood explicitly as a historical relic of a time and attitude long past. However, when those efforts ultimately proved unsuccessful, they shifted their goal to securing the installation of an “historical interpretive plaque” to accompany the statue where it stands. The plaque they propose would acknowledge the original intent to memorialize the fallen Confederates but remind the public that “their loss actually meant liberty, justice, and freedom for millions of people – a legacy that continues for all of us today.”

Although Ms. Wilson maintains a “fine” personal relationship with Col. Little, she wishes that he would have accepted the plaque as an “olive branch” between the two sides. She believes that the longer the public controversy drags on, the more likely the statue will be removed entirely.

Col. Little and his fellow supporters of the statue argue that the inscription on the front of the statue which reads, “in memory of the Confederate soldiers & sailors, erected under the auspices of the U.D.C. [United Daughters of the Confederacy] of Williamson County, ” is all one needs to know to ascertain its purpose. It is a memorial, constructed by the loved ones of those who fought in the War, erected in their honor. No other explanation is warranted when the purpose of the statue is literally carved in stone for everyone to see. To Col. Little, the statue holds the same meaning as a statue commemorating the soldiers in World War I or II. Even memorials for Vietnam War soldiers, a war that was controversial even at the time, are not faced with the same struggle for preservation.

The two sides of this debate have struggled to reach a consensus on what to do with the statue. The rivals spar back and forth, but there has been no definitive action taken concerning the fate of the monument. On January 29th 2019, Col. Little was a part of a four-person panel

held by the Georgetown Community Forum for a debate and discussion titled “Should the Confederate Soldier Statue Be Removed From the Georgetown Square?” The event was covered by the Liberty Hill Independent, a newspaper local to a neighboring town within Williamson County, and their reporter Mike Eddleman provides quotes from the panel.

“Most of the people here recognize there is a fundamental flaw between the disingenuous application of 21st Century perspectives to 19th Century history,” Little explained. “There is the crux of the problem, ignorance, mostly willful. Real knowledge and understandings of all types of history is abysmally shallow if present at all in our society.”

On the opposing side sat Reverend Chuck Freeman, minister of the Free Souls Church in Round Rock. He reiterated the argument of the statue serving as a threat against racial equality and to the very lives of free blacks. When Braun challenged this, Freeman informed the panel and the audience that there were 275 documented lynchings in Texas from 1885 to 1940. As lynching was seen as a form of vigilante justice that whites were entitled to during this time, Freeman continued by asking if the locations of the statues were at all coincidental. “Why courthouses?”

It's a fair point. The ongoing “Lynching in Texas” project by Sam Houston State University has compiled newspaper clippings from around the state covering the sort of sanctioned “justice” that Freeman mentions. To date, this project has been able to uncover seven reported stories of lynchings in Williamson County between 1883 and 1930. Any argument to keep the statue based on total denial of racism loses its ability to be compelling with this in mind.

However, Col. Little remained steadfast in his assertion that what is necessary in specific regard to the statue are the underlying political and societal legacies of the war, and to ignore the emotional ones. Confederate Gray should not fundamentally equate to evil, as the opposition

would like to convince the public to believe. The Confederate soldiers “fought the war as they saw it,” and with rewriting history comes the danger of tainting hundreds of thousands of individual legacies.

Still, it can be hard to understand the ways in which Col. Little differs his views from his opponents. Despite pleas to ignore the emotional effects of the monument, one could hardly characterize Col. Little as emotionally ambivalent to it.

Thirty-one years after the conclusion of the “War Between the States,” surviving members of the United Confederate Veterans (UCV) faced the reality that they would not live forever to maintain the “true history” of the Confederacy and the war. At the organization’s 1896 convention held in Richmond, Virginia, the group empowered their descendants to carry on this task through the formation of the Sons of Confederate Veterans. Their charge was to “commit the vindication of the Cause” of the soldier and to assume “the guardianship of his history, the emulation of his virtues” and “the perpetuation of those principles which he loved and which you love also.” In effect, the descendants of Confederate soldiers became responsible for the preservation of the “true history of the 1861-1865 period.” This charge is maintained throughout the localized Camps that exist in 38 states with an estimated 98,000 members.

Col. Little is proud of his ancestry and wants his ancestors to maintain the level of veneration that they have earned through their valiant bravery. His grandfather, Corporal Tom Reynolds, was a member of the Chickasaw Tribe in Kansas, and fought for the Confederate Army with the Chickasaw Mountain Volunteers. Another grandfather fought in the Alabama’s 33rd Infantry, a regiment well-known due to the remarkably large amount of firsthand accounts available to historians.

In addition to Col. Little's shell coat uniform that he wears to guard the statue, he also has a longer frock coat - this one with blue lining to represent the infantry and Alabama buttons in honor of his heritage. He also had a reproduction flag of Alabama's 33rd made for him to keep in his home. It sits nestled among three other Confederate flags: the 1st national flag comprised of familiar stars and bars (albeit with thirteen stars arranged in a circle rather than fifty), the Confederate battle flag (which is what is commonly assumed to be the only flag of the Confederacy), and the 2nd national flag- which features the battle flag in the upper-left corner surrounded on three sides by pure white. This final flag is nicknamed "The Stainless Banner."

His home is filled with books on the time period and cover specifics of the Confederate army and the overarching time period. He cherishes the opportunity to introduce a selection of books to those interested in learning about his mission. His coffee table offers volumes with titles like Black Confederates, The Jewish Confederates, General Stand Watie's Confederate Indians, and The REAL Lincoln. If everyone read those books, he believes that opponents would lose authority on the supposed racism inherent in the Confederacy. While the Northern armies had units comprised entirely of a single racial or ethnic group, the Confederate army had soldiers of multiple races integrated into single battalions.

He expresses disappointment that the word "Confederate" has recently become synonymous with "ignorant, redneck racists." He abhors the charge that all Confederates are violent but adds that there are potentially violent individuals on both sides of the controversy. Above all, he resents the charge that Confederates should not be venerated because they were "traitors" to the *real* America.

How can the Sons of Confederate Veterans be violent, he posits, when they are never advocating nor forcibly converting anyone to their cause? If anything, they are always on the

defensive, safeguarding their narrative against those who have reframed it with their “one issue, one word” interpretation of the War. This word is, of course, “slavery.” This argument just does not hold water for Col. Little. Only about “six-to-eight percent of Southern households owned slaves,” he explains, “so why would the other ninety-plus percent fight for them to keep them?”

The “Lost Cause” of the Confederacy describes a part of the ideology of the Sons of Confederate Veterans that seemingly emerged during the decades following the war. This line of thinking is that the Confederate soldiers were not as concerned about slavery as they were about maintaining a “Southern” way of life. This rationale has been perpetuated throughout textbooks, public education, popular sentiment and of course, monuments with vindicating inscriptions.

As a veteran, he takes particular offense to the charge of “traitor.” That word carries a connotation that he believes is much stronger than his opponents realize. How are the Confederate soldiers not American? If anything, they upheld the revolutionary values of the fledgling country. Texan Confederates, especially, conformed to those values, existing in the aftermath of the American Revolution and the Texas Revolution. What is so different between those wars and the War for Southern Independence? The most drastic difference is the outcome. The Founding Fathers are revered for their success, we remember Sam Houston because of his leadership role in the successful Texas Revolution, and yet we detest Robert E. Lee, who Col. Little considers to be one of the finest men to ever draw breath, due to the ultimate failure of his revolutionary venture. If the Confederates were not “real” Americans, as opponents will argue, then what could the “A” in C.S.A. possibly stand for? They may have seceded, but they were still the Confederate States of *America*.

Also, how could you reduce a man such as Col. Little to the word “ignorant?” As a military man, he traveled around the world. In his bookshelves, barely visible between an

impressive collection of historical literature, are travel books and photo albums chronicling his times overseas. He served in both Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan, and spent considerable amounts of time in Africa over the span of a few years. A room in his house is full of artifacts of his travels: a massive unfolded fan from Thailand takes up an entire wall and captures a beautiful aquatic scene. A drawing of a hijabi woman he bought from a young boy in a market in Kabul, Afghanistan has a prominent place on the wall next to photos of his family. If he didn't live in Texas, he would want to live in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

He strongly believes that every American should live internationally at some point in their lives. He is grateful for his own opportunities to interact with local populations, to learn about their ways of life, and to learn about their perspectives towards Americans. While spending a “sobering” time in Rwanda following the 1994 genocide, he was surprised to learn that the locals don't seem to dwell on the catastrophe. He was told that the survivors had either punished or reconciled with the perpetrators of those atrocities and were moving forward with no thought of further vengeance. Their focus was thus directed towards improvement and taking care of the folks that still inhabited the country.

Maybe this is what he is really after with his commitment to the Confederate States of America. All he wants is the preservation of this history which means a great deal to him, his family, and his co-patriots. He is adamant that this history is just as important today as it was one hundred years ago and is well worth remembering in times of political turmoil. The Confederates were defeated fair and square, and as a veteran of the Vietnam War, he fully understands the implications of that. There are no cries for the South to rise again coming from him, no desire to return to an Antebellum, slave-holding America. Aside from participating in recreational reenactments of battles, he is not interested in reopening the conflict itself. For him, this is about

respect, knowledge, and the preservation of the legacies of the brave soldiers that fought in yet another American revolutionary war. He believes they should not be completely discredited for fighting on the losing side. Why should people get to choose which soldiers to venerate and which to loathe?

Then again, why does he get that power?

The monument on the square is not the only Confederate historical marker that Col. Little tends to. The International Order of Odd Fellows (IOOF) Cemetery in Georgetown, about a block away from the town's university campus, is the resting place of over one hundred Confederate soldiers, their graves marked by rusty silver Maltese crosses, placed by the UDC over a century ago. Col Little notes that many of the crosses are missing from their places, having become something of a "collector's item" over the years.

Some Confederates died during the events of the war, others after returning home to Georgetown. Col. Little likes to point out those who contributed to the development of the city in the aftermath of the conflict. He singles out some recognizable names, including the founder and first president of the nearby university, Francis Asbury Mood. Before the founding, he served as a Chaplain for the Confederate Army in South Carolina. The local newspaper, the Williamson County Sun, was founded by a Virginian named Frank Roche who moved to the area after fighting for the Confederacy. He points out the grave of Herman Levinson, a Jewish, Polish immigrant whose grave is marked with the pointed stone marker that designates a Confederate.

Among the tasks of the Williamson County Grays, Col. Little finds the upkeep and honoring of the veterans' gravesites to be one of the most valuable. Every year between mid-April and Memorial Day, the Grays place Confederate flags on the 800+ graves of soldiers buried in the county.

In his 1996 green Chevrolet truck, between the dashboard and the gearshift, sits a thick white binder that contains a page for every veteran buried in the cemetery. Each page has a photo of a gravestone, whatever information can be gathered from the stone itself, and handwritten annotations of military rank, division, brigade. Some pages have several question marks surrounding the photo.

A question mark designates a puzzle for Col. Little. He has made it a personal goal to find as much information on these graves as possible. Every stone in every cemetery belongs to someone's son or daughter, someone's brother or sister. He feels a level of kinship to every stone in his dossier. He has assumed the role of protector for these long-gone people, over their personal histories as well as their final resting places. On some weekends, he joins a handful of like-minded volunteers in restoring abandoned cemeteries in the area. Almost all of these cemeteries have at least a couple of Confederate soldiers, after all.

Whenever he locates an unmarked grave of a Confederate veteran, the Grays hold a ceremony to honor him, sending off a previously unnamed soldier with the rifle salutes and cannon shots that are due to a soldier of his stature. No matter the political climate of the current day, the administration in office, or the challenges that face the group, the preservation of this history comes first - in full compliance with their 1896 charge to protect and vindicate the legacy of the Confederate soldier.

Author's Note:

Upon receiving this prompt, I knew I wanted to interview someone that I didn't necessarily agree with. I was surprised when the local Camp of the Sons of Confederate Veterans were so open to speaking with me.

Col. Shelby Little is something of a local legend- he is well known for standing outside the Courthouse in full regalia. Some students at Southwestern have confronted him to ask him what he thinks he's doing, and most of them come out afterwards commending his demeanor and manners. He seemed like a great person to talk to.

I met with him a few times, we first grabbed a cup of coffee before he took me on a tour of "his" Georgetown- pointing out the monuments and plaques that I had walked by many times before but never stopped to read. He knows the history of the square and the graveyard like the back of his hand.

He became a more and more sympathetic character the longer this process went on. His dedication to abandoned graveyards was something that I hadn't expected to hear, and I think his experiences in Africa reflect more about himself and his convictions than he realizes.

This article was interesting and at times, challenging to write. Col. Little was a gracious host, answering all of my questions and opening his home to me, and yet I had to remember always the delicate nature of the controversy at hand. I hope that I was able to walk that line appropriately.

I have acted with honesty and integrity in producing this work and am unaware of anyone who has not.

-Meredith Rasmussen