

August 2015

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Recommended Citation

Graf, Rebecca Simmons (2015) "Origins of the Lost Cause: Pollard to the Present," *Saber and Scroll*: Vol. 4: Iss. 2, Article 7.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.apus.edu/saberandscroll/vol4/iss2/7>

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Origins of the Lost Cause: Pollard to the Present

Rebecca Simmons Graf

The literature available on the American Civil War is extensive and growing each year. The war is considered to be one of the bloodiest conflicts in human history and the earliest manifestation of modern warfare. The variety of interpretations of the war has aided in creating this tremendous volume of literature. Northerners and Southerners were—and continue to be—prolific in promoting their own versions of the conflict. Following the defeat of the Confederacy, a movement began in which Southerners wrote their version of the conflict and the events leading up to it. Southern historian Edward A. Pollard named this movement the “Lost Cause.” The historiography of the Lost Cause is constantly being added to and it is still a major topic; both proponents and opponents publish often on their interpretations of the Lost Cause.

One of the unique features of the Lost Cause is that it is a history written by the losers instead of the winners. Southern men, such as Edward Pollard, Jubal Early, and Jefferson Davis, were determined that their version of history would be carried into the future. Therefore, they wrote early and wrote often, disseminating their version throughout the nation, so that Southern heroes such as Robert E. Lee and Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson would remain in the forefront of the history of the Civil War. These authors left a legacy of conflicting information for future generations that has led some to continue debating the implications of the war even in the twenty-first century.

The Lost Cause is the phrase that is typically associated with the writings used to explain the defeat of the Confederacy in the American Civil War; all adherents to this school of historiography have built upon Pollard’s *Lost Cause*, from whence the name of the movement came. Lost Cause literary efforts are considered apologias: pieces written as explanation or justification of motives, convictions, or acts. The motivation of these writers centered on their attempts to ensure that their views reached posterity. This version of history has been continuously debated for nearly 150 years. Civil War historian Gary W. Gallagher stated,

The architects of the Lost Cause acted from various motives. They collectively sought to justify their own actions and allow themselves

and other former Confederates to find something positive in all-encompassing failure. They also wanted to provide their children and future generations of white Southerners with a ‘correct’ narrative of the war.¹

Challengers of the ideology of the Lost Cause alternately define it as a myth or, as Alan T. Nolan, the prolific Civil War author, stated, “an American legend.”² However, there is, as has often been noted, some truth to legends and myths. Some of the assertions of Lost Cause writers contain a grain of truth—enough to keep the legend alive for generations.

Nolan detailed the components of the Lost Cause in *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History* (2000). A primary claim of the Lost Cause contends slavery was not the primary sectional issue, and that the Southern states would have given up slavery on their own eventually. Meanwhile, abolitionists provoked the South by citing the mistreatment of slaves, although Southerners depicted slaves as happy in their situation (this was most notable in John C. Calhoun’s arguments in the late 1840s that slavery was a positive social good). Additionally, the Confederate military loss was due to the “massive Northern manpower and material,” not any martial ability on the part of Union officers or men. Finally, Northern military leaders were viewed as butchers, specifically William Tecumseh Sherman and Ulysses S. Grant, or blundering, such as George B. McClellan; meanwhile, the Confederate generals, in particular Robert E. Lee and Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson, were considered saintly or Christ-like—as were the common Confederate soldiers.³ In the end, Nolan stated his belief that the purpose of the legend was to “foster a heroic image of secession and the war so that the Confederates would have salvaged at least their honor from the all-encompassing defeat. Thus the purpose of the legend was to hide the Southerners’ tragic and self-destructive mistake.” (Southerners, after all, are the only [white] Americans who have ever had to suffer the humiliation of being conquered.) In fact, Nolan’s goal was to refute “the Lost Cause legend and reestablish the war as history” by comparing the tenets of the Lost Cause with the accepted history of the war.⁴ These tenets are affirmed or debated throughout the various writings of the Lost Cause, from Pollard, Early, and Davis, to Douglas Southall Freeman, Foster, and the brothers James R. and Walter D. Kennedy.

The writings of Edward A. Pollard (1832-1872), as editor for the *Richmond Examiner* established the Lost Cause, along with General Jubal A. Early’s (1816-

1894) writings for the Southern Historical Society, and former Confederate President Jefferson Davis' *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government* (1881). These authors espoused the tenets of the Lost Cause; Pollard and Davis both argued secession was a right and included some of the other tenets in their writings while Early focused on the numbers involved in the conflict and therefore the unequal competition. These men instituted the Lost Cause and attempted to gain credence for their writings throughout the nation. They were successful overall; many in both the North and South believed their proposed version of the events as the accurate history. Their attempts were fruitful because they wrote early—Pollard published just one year after the end of the war, and Early's *A Memoir of the Last Year of the War for Independence, in the Confederate States of America* came the next year—and their ideas have been passed on to succeeding generations of Southerners.

Pollard was the first to use the term Lost Cause; it appeared as the title of his three volumes, *The Lost Cause: A New Southern History of the War of the Confederate States* (1866). He was born in Virginia and during the war was an editor of the Richmond *Examiner*. His writings tended to be in favor of the Confederacy, but very critical of the Confederate administration, in particular President Jefferson Davis. Editor of the *Civil War Times*, Dana Shoaf noted that,

the volume's title [*The Lost Cause*] has transcended that book to serve as a label for a romantic, Magnolia-scented view of the war that focuses on state's rights over slavery as a cause of the conflict and that portrays Southerners as Americans who simply wanted to be left alone, but who fought heroically and savagely when provoked.⁵

Shoaf alluded to an idea of a laid-back Southern people who merely wanted to leave the Union peacefully and only fought once they perceived being attacked by the Union forces. This idea is presented in Pollard's writings as well as other Lost Cause authors; the Union began hostilities through their attempts to reinforce Fort Sumter. From this idea comes another name for the conflict: the War of Northern Aggression. Pollard covered both the political questions and the military aspects of the war, despite the assertion by Gallagher that "[Robert E. Lee] was the preeminent Lost Cause hero (by focusing on him rather than on Jefferson Davis, ex-Confederates could highlight the military rather than the far messier political and social dimensions of the war)."⁶ While Pollard was the first to use the term, Early would

cement the ideology in Southern history and culture.

Jubal A. Early, following his time as a general in the Confederate army, commemorated the resistance of the Confederacy. In addition to publishing a memoir of the war, during the 1870s Early wrote for the Southern Historical Society, often championing Robert E. Lee and Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson’s efforts as the military leaders of the Confederate armies. Early also looked at the differences in military power of the two belligerents and even provided, in March 1877, comments on Philippe d’Orleans, the Count of Paris’ *Histoire de la guerre civile en Amérique*, seven volumes published between 1874 and 1890, in which the Count wrote of his time in the Union Army under General George McClellan.⁷ The Count, as an Aide de Camp, expressed his view that the South was the cause of the war, actually calling its secession a *coup d’état* against the legitimate Federal government. Gallagher detailed Early’s major points throughout his writings as: “(1) Robert E. Lee was the best and most admirable general of the war; (2) Confederate armies faced overwhelming odds and mounted a gallant resistance; (3) Ulysses S. Grant paled in comparison to Lee as a soldier; (4) Stonewall Jackson deserved a place immediately behind Lee in the Confederate pantheon of heroes; and (5) Virginia was the most important arena of combat.”⁸ Actually, Gallagher gave Early some credence; he stated that “The longevity of many of these ideas can be attributed in considerable measure to their being grounded in fact.” However, “The distortion came when Early and other proponents of the Lost Cause denied that Lee had faults or lost any battles, focused on Northern numbers and material superiority while ignoring Confederate advantages, denied Grant any virtues or greatness, and noticed the Confederacy outside the eastern theater only when convenient to explain Southern failures in Virginia.”⁹ In order to demonstrate that Union generals were not the noblemen that Confederate generals were, Grant was used as the ultimate example. His military abilities were questioned and his own words, “to hammer continuously against the armed force of the enemy and his resources, until by mere attrition, if in no other way” were often used against him.¹⁰ This assertion by Grant was used to vilify him, as well as a few other Union generals who were believed to have taken harsh liberties with the civilians of the South. The maligning of Union generals was used to demonstrate the contrast between the leadership of the two sides and as yet another reason for the Confederate generals’ higher status for this chivalrous behavior.

On a more political note, the first volume of Jefferson Davis’ *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government* (1881) argued that the Southern states retained

their sovereignty despite the formation of the Constitution. In the second volume, Davis looked at the war itself. Over and over, Davis explained the states, North and South, did not lose their sovereignty to the Federal government and retained the right to leave the Union at any time. He includes instances of Northern states threatening the same action repeatedly prior to the formation of the Confederacy. He also argued that slavery was not the issue for the Southern people, as they would have eventually stopped slavery on their own. Davis notes additionally that slavery was as prevalent in the North initially, but had become untenable economically. Here, once again, a leader of the Confederate cause, attempts to look at both the political and military implications of the war, despite assertions that the Lost Cause writers attempted to avoid the political aspects.

The Lost Cause was expounded by these early writers and passed on to future generations through the actions of various groups; however, the primary carriers were white Southern women and veterans. Immediately following the war, many Southerners, especially women, focused on perpetuating the Lost Cause. Various means were used to remember the war and those who died for the cause. These included a Confederate Memorial Day, speeches by veterans, and more publications by both men and women; all of these were common following the war's end and throughout the remainder of the century. According to Purdue's Caroline E. Janney, who specializes in the Civil War, the war caused more women to enter the public sphere than ever before, and many of these women became increasingly politicized.¹¹ Historian Lesley J. Gordon claimed the wife of Confederate General George Pickett and author LaSalle Corbell Pickett's "published writings and lectures repeatedly stressed the South's right to secession, the righteousness of the 'cause,' the valor of Confederate soldiers, the devotion of Southern women, and the loyalty of the childlike slaves."¹² The women and men that survived the conflict attempted to honor the fallen through their writings and memorials, a practice which continues in many areas of the South to this day.

Some items became symbols of the Lost Cause through the efforts of both veterans and Southern white women. These icons included the flag of the Confederacy, the gray uniform, and the song *Dixie*. These icons were, and are, brought out again and again to invoke the memory of the Civil War. As historian Robert E. Bonner pointed out, as much as Americans now view the desecration of the United States flag as an act of violence "to the memory of soldiers who died defending their 'colors' from their countries enemies," the Civil War and the Confederate flag made the association "even more pronounced because the

[Confederate] country's most popular emblem, the Southern Cross, was a banner specifically designed for use in combat."¹³ The Southern Cross was routinely brought out, along with the Confederate gray uniform, at ceremonies and memorials of Confederate dead, inciting passion and great emotion from attendees. As historian Keith S. Bohannon noted, "Flags held a prominent place at reunions, appearing at the head of processions and draped behind speakers' stands. The tattered appearance of these banners, like the empty pants legs of many veterans, provided graphic reminders of the terrible violence and cost of the war."¹⁴ These visual reminders of the war became important to the remembrance of the war and yet another part of the Lost Cause history.

The Lost Cause has continued to be a topic of interest and debate into modern times. Many writers have argued for or against the Lost Cause since Pollard, Early, and Davis published their works. Many more reference the ideas of the Lost Cause without focusing on the idea itself. Drew Gilpin Faust, president of Harvard University and the Lincoln Professor of History in Harvard's Faculty of Arts and Sciences, discusses briefly the "cult" of the Lost Cause in *This Republic of Suffering* (2008), stating that it and "the celebration of Confederate memory that emerged in the ensuing decades were in no small part an effort to affirm that the hundreds of thousands of young Southern lives had not, in fact, been given in vain."¹⁵ In *Cities of the Dead*, William Blair (2004), director of the Civil War era center at Penn State, alluded to the importance of the Lost Cause in the twentieth century by noting, "[T]he literature of the Lost Cause portrayed Memorial Days as cultural elements with little or no political content, as examples of civil religion, or as a means of helping celebrants overcome the loss of the war."¹⁶ For some, the Lost Cause became more than history, or historiography; it became a religion.

The idea of the Lost Cause as a religion is described by historian Lloyd A. Hunter. He references a speech given at a United Confederate Veterans reunion by Lawrence M. Griffin, in which Griffin states that the "worship of the Immortal Confederacy, had its foundation in the myth of the Lost Cause." The Southern people "elevated it [the Lost Cause] above the realm of common, patriotic impulse, making it perform a clearly religious function."¹⁷ Hunter discussed the use of the emblems of the Lost Cause—the Stars and Bars or the Southern Cross, *Dixie*, and the Confederate gray jacket—as religious, and this connotation was extended to the image of the generals as well. He looked to the idea of sacralization, the elevation of "commonplace elements of a culture to some sort of sacred, inviolable standing" in which "the whole culture or land takes on religious import" and the "society itself

becomes sacred.”¹⁸ The land of magnolias and chivalry, in Hunter’s summation, became its own religion, to be cited by Southerners along with their sovereign state’s right to secede.

More recent uses of the Lost Cause include James R. and Walter Donald Kennedy’s *The South Was Right!* (2008). The Kennedys detail Davis’ argument for secession, explaining that secession was the right of all states. They also perpetuate the idea of happy slaves, more so than maybe any other Lost Cause writers, through the use of “Slave Narratives” which supposedly demonstrated “that a vast majority (more than seventy percent) of ex-slaves had only good experiences to report about life as a slave and about the Old South.”¹⁹ However, *The South Was Right!* does make a drastic assertion that was not prevalent in other writings, which may have become visible to them only in hindsight; the Kennedys assert that following the Civil War, the North went on a campaign of “Cultural Genocide” as part of an “effort to re-educate the Southern populace.”²⁰ Reconstruction and its evils has become a part of the Lost Cause in more recent years; however, it is still not the primary focus. The focus remains mostly on the tenets of the Lost Cause: brave, virtuous Confederate generals versus evil Union generals; Northern superiority in resources, but not leadership; Generals Longstreet and Pickett vilified for betrayal and incompetence; defense of states’ rights, not slavery, as reason for secession; secession justified in response to Northern aggression; slavery as a benign institution in which the slaves were happy; and, although very rarely mentioned in modern times, the idea that without slavery, slaves would have risen up and taken control of the South.

Assessing the early historiography of the Civil War, Ernst Breisach notes that the initial writers participated in the typical “war-guilt debate” in their efforts to determine fault for the bloody conflict.²¹ He also notes that despite the time and distance factors, “the discussion of the Civil War remained firmly linked to moral issues and judgments.”²² In terms of historiography in general, many writers who have examined the Lost Cause have fallen into two camps: the Progressives and the revisionists. Progressive authors tended to focus on the persistent “national” history evident through the preservation or restoration of the Union, following the economic-sectional approach of Charles Beard.²³ The revisionists, appearing only briefly, focused on the political aspects; they noted that the war could have been averted with a return to “calm reason and statesmanship.”²⁴ Later writers appear in the various approaches that developed during the twentieth century. Cliometricians, or New Economic historians, looked at the profitability of slavery, a quantitative method that

left questions of morality and qualitative methods out of the equation. Additional steps have been taken within the new Social History. Increasingly the actions of women, the slaves, and other minority groups have received new notice. Overall, the Lost Cause has been viewed in most methods of historiography that have evolved since the end of the war.

The Lost Cause ideology has been argued over for nearly 150 years, with no end in sight. The ideas that began with Pollard, Early, and Davis have, over time, invaded popular culture, for example, in popular books and movies, such as *Gone with the Wind*, *Gods and Generals*, and *Birth of a Nation*. Movies, and the books they were based on, such as these have perpetuated the ideas started by early Lost Cause writers, ideas that indicate the South was fighting for a just cause. They honor those generals and soldiers who fought for the Confederate cause and vilify those Northerners who defeated them as well as the carpetbaggers and scalawags who ran the Southern states' governments during Reconstruction. Additionally, these works perpetuate the myth that slaves were child-like and happy in their subservient situation. With the addition of these ideas to popular fiction and movies, the Lost Cause truly moved from a historical debate to prevailing culture. In more recent publications, proponents of the Lost Cause are portrayed as racists or accused of skewing the facts, and opponents are portrayed as merely trying to cover up the truth. Indeed, each side has many passionate authors working diligently to push their version of Civil War history. With such an expansive historiography, the Lost Cause may continue to be debated for years to come, as sectional differences do not seem to have abated for some in both regions of the country. In this sense, the Lost Cause engenders a continuing historical debate on the Civil War and Reconstruction era.

Notes

1. Gary W. Gallagher, ed., *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), 1.
2. Alan T. Nolan, "The Anatomy of the Myth," in Gallagher, ed., *The Myth of the Lost Cause*, 12.
3. *Ibid.*, 17-18.
4. *Ibid.*, 14.
5. Dana B. Shoaf, "Originator of the Lost Cause." *America's Civil War* 19, no. 6 (January 2007): 35.
6. Gallagher, ed., *The Myth of the Lost Cause*, 2.

7. Gregory R. Crane, ed. Perseus Digital Library, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/>, *Southern Historical Society Papers* 3, 1877, 140-154.
8. Gary W. Gallagher, "Jubal A. Early, the Lost Cause, and Civil War History: A Persistent Legacy," in Gallagher, ed., *The Myth of the Lost Cause*, 40.
9. Ibid.
10. Brooks D. Simpson, "Continuous Hammering and Mere Attrition: Lost Cause Critics and the Military Reputation of Ulysses S. Grant," in Gallagher, ed., *The Myth of the Lost Cause*, 156.
11. Caroline E. Janney, *Burying the Dead but Not the Past: Ladies' Memorial Associations and the Lost Cause* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 15.
12. Leslie J. Gordon, "'Let the People See the Old Life as it War': LaSalle Corbell Pickett and the Myth of the Lost Cause," in Gallagher, ed., *The Myth of the Lost Cause*, 170.
13. Robert E. Bonner, "Flag Culture and the Consolidation of Confederate Nationalism," *The Journal of Southern History* 68 no. 2 (May 2002): 295.
14. Keith S. Bohannon, "'These Few Gray-Haired, Battle-Scarred Veterans': Confederate Army Reunions in Georgia, 1885-95," in Gallagher, ed., *The Myth of the Lost Cause*, 94.
15. Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), 193.
16. William A. Blair, *Cities of the Dead: Contesting the Memory of the Civil War in the South, 1865-1914*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 2-3.
17. Lloyd A. Hunter, "The Immortal Confederacy: Another Look at Lost Cause Religion," in Gallagher, ed., *The Myth of the Lost Cause*, 186.
18. Ibid., 188.
19. James R. Kennedy and Walter D. Kennedy, *The South Was Right!* 2nd ed. (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing, 1994), 96.
20. Ibid., 274.
21. Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 260.
22. Ibid., 261.
23. Ibid., 337.
24. Ibid., 338.

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