

SLAVERY'S  
MEMORIAL

THE FREEDMEN'S MEMORIAL became the nation's monument to emancipation even though the design might have better commemorated slavery. If one changed the white hero from Lincoln to say, John C. Calhoun, and took away the chains and the whipping post, the work would have functioned rather well as an illustration of the old proslavery argument: a benevolent master gradually uplifting the primitive African into Christian civilization through the secure shelter of slavery. Both the narrative and the image of Ball's group were still that deeply embedded in the relations of paternalistic domination and racial subordination fundamental to the American slave system.

Yet monuments openly sympathetic to slavery simply did not exist. After the Civil War, slavery fell in the trashheap of history, and even its most ardent advocates before the war were now forsaking it. Within a remarkably short period of time, white Southerners were not only repudiating the institution that had been central to their society but writing it out of their history of the war. The Confederacy was not formed to protect slavery, they claimed, but to protect states' rights; the war was not fought over slavery but over the abstract issue of sovereignty. A massive and deliberate process of collective forgetting took place, which has still not been reversed. Only recently have historians seriously challenged the erasure of slavery from the Confederate consciousness, despite overwhelming evidence that proslavery ideology became even more central to white Southern identity during the war than before. "Leaders of the secession movement across the South cited slavery as the most compelling reason for southern independence," Drew Gilpin Faust has written, and the same reasoning was repeated in press, pulpit, and school alike until virtually the end of the war. "Negro slavery is the South," wrote one Georgia editor in 1862, "and the South is negro slavery."<sup>1</sup>

The business of Confederate commemoration after the war was to smash this equation. This involved a vertiginous shift in consciousness. Articles of faith that had been widely inculcated suddenly had to be disavowed. Personal and institutional memories had to be thoroughly

revised and resorted. In short, the South had to be reconstructed, though not along the lines contemplated by the Northern victors.

In this process of reconstruction slavery disappeared but, in a peculiar way, remained central. It was the invisible or unspeakable core that structured what could be made visible or utterable. A nation formed expressly to protect slaveholding, no longer a nation and no longer slaveholding, sought to redefine itself as an abstract moral cause. If the grand emancipation designs of the 1860s were monuments to a new order that never came to be, the Confederate monuments erected after the war commemorated an old order that never existed in the first place—a slave society without the moral impediment of slavery. Contradictions were inherent in both these Northern and Southern projects of reconstruction. Yet the contradictions fatally undermined the former while the latter held together in surprising equilibrium.

As the radical Northern campaign of commemoration fizzled, white Southerners began to adapt their commemorative project to the changing conditions of postwar society. The centerpiece of their effort was the former capital of the Confederacy, Richmond, Virginia. Richmond was an industrial and financial center that was steeped in the complex historical associations of the Old South. Its heritage encompassed the highest of high culture—Jefferson's neo-Roman Capitol, with Houdon's great statue of Washington inside—as well as the second largest slave market in the antebellum South. At the same time, modern Richmond strived to be a showcase of business enterprise and urban progress. Richmond was the center of the "Lost Cause," as the Confederacy came to be known, but it was by no means backward-looking. The commemoration of the Lost Cause sought to span the old and the new, to integrate history and progress—which is precisely why slavery had no legitimate place in the commemorative order. The key figure in the cult of the Lost Cause was Robert E. Lee, the Confederate commander whose death in 1870 spurred a host of ambitious memorial schemes. The key monument was the huge equestrian statue erected on the suburban outskirts of Richmond in 1890, after a very long and sometimes bitter campaign. The history of that campaign and its outcome offers ample evidence of the white South's erasure of slavery from its official past. But if the same evidence is read a little against the grain, it soon reveals slavery's hidden cultural work as a controlling absence, with a subtle but nevertheless crucial impact on the sculptural configuration of Southern white heroism.

While Lincoln was the indisputable embodiment of the Union and its moral cause, Lee was the embodiment of the Confederacy. He had served as commander of the Army of Northern Virginia, the most successful of the Confederate armies, whose list of battles included most of the celebrated engagements of the war. That a political leader would represent

the Union and a military leader would come to represent the Confederacy deserves some examination. Jefferson Davis, Lincoln's actual counterpart as president of the Confederacy, was put in the unpopular position of prosecuting a national war effort among states that were in theory independent. So, of course, was Lincoln, whose own popularity during his lifetime suffered as a result. Yet Davis did not end the war a martyr, as Lincoln did. He was captured while allegedly trying to escape disguised in women's clothing; the incident became a cause célèbre and a major affront to Southern white "manhood." Lee, on the other hand, was an extraordinarily respected figure, always represented as the South's exemplar of manhood.<sup>2</sup>

However significant, these facts do not get to the root of the matter. The fundamental effect of installing Lee as the South's premier representative was that it depoliticized the Confederacy after the fact. With Lee as the major historical actor, the story of the Lost Cause became a glorious military record rather than a political struggle to secure a slaveholding nation. The white South's urgent need to dissociate the Confederacy from slavery after the war dictated this strategy of depoliticization. Davis was a plantation owner and large-scale slaveholder from the Deep South, whose own interests, like the Confederacy's, were obviously intertwined with the institution of slavery. Lee, on the other hand, was a professional military man from Virginia who owned few slaves before the war, and who claimed after the war to have "always been in favor of emancipation—gradual emancipation."<sup>3</sup> Although Lee's own statements on slavery recorded in several letters from 1856 to 1865 hardly support this retrospective claim, what matters is that he was less vitally attached to the institution than the typical Southern planter and he could more credibly claim afterward that he had not fought to defend it. In the late 1860s he was a living example of the white South's collective reversal on slavery. His historical role as a leader of soldiers—not a maker of policy—complemented and enhanced that personal example. In some ways he fit the classical mold of the reluctant leader, as George Washington had, and like Washington—the fellow Virginian with whom Lee was often compared—he was thought to be above politics. For all these reasons he was the obvious man to personify a newly revised, newly remembered Confederacy—a Confederacy that pretended to have fought a heroic struggle not for slavery but for liberty, defined as the right of states to self-determination.<sup>4</sup>

As he became the white South's answer to Lincoln, Lee compared favorably in one obvious and important way. He was "perfection" in his physical appearance. No artist, one writer claimed, could improve on the "grand original."<sup>5</sup> Where Lincoln was thought to embody "the sculpturally impossible," to use Marianna Griswold van Rensselaer's pithy

phrase,<sup>6</sup> Southern writers described Lee as if his person were already a work of art, embodying the very qualities thought essential to sculpture: repose, beauty, strength.<sup>7</sup> If Lincoln was a sculptural problem, then, Lee was a readymade specimen.

With the equation of canonical whiteness and moral virtue so deeply embedded in the consciousness of race, Lee's outward appearance was easily read as a reflection of inner superiority. This equation reappears frequently in descriptions by men and women alike, as in this gushing account written by a Maryland woman: "The man who stood before us, the embodiment of a Lost Cause, was the realized King Arthur. The soul that looked out of his eyes was as honest and fearless as when it first looked on life. One saw the character, as clear as crystal . . . and the heart, as tender as that of ideal womanhood."<sup>8</sup> These kinds of juxtapositions—King Arthur and ideal womanhood—were commonly invoked to suggest the visible range of virtues synthesized in the single figure of Lee, a range that could bridge even the customary gap between the sexes. While Lee's image thus benefited from the association of qualities normally sorted by gender, this synthesis serves to underscore the image's racial exclusivity. Lee may have been man and woman, but he was not white and black. He functioned much more readily than Lincoln ever could as a racial icon.

Lee offered white Southerners a hero in their own image, an instrument with which they could prod white Northerners to realign their sympathies along proper racial lines. The war had disrupted traditional patterns of cultural difference by allying white with black and pitting white against white. To ardent Unionists Lee was nothing less than a traitor, while the black men who fought against him were heroes. But white Southerners worked hard to reverse these sentiments. Lee was hardly a traitor, they argued, but instead was a courageous Christian gentleman who loved the Union and returned to it wholeheartedly after his defeat. As time passed, white Northerners increasingly accepted the argument. The legitimization of Lee after the war helped to reestablish old lines of racial sympathy. The losers in this process of reconciliation were of course African Americans, who could not possibly accept Lee as their hero. If Lee was no longer traitor, no longer "other," otherness was left to reside in the emancipated slaves and their descendants who did not forget that the Confederacy with Lee at its head had fought to keep them in bondage.

Lee's canonical whiteness was essential to his postwar rehabilitation. It forced white Northerners to confront their own racial loyalties and it gave white Southerners a racial model with which to justify both the Confederacy and their postwar politics of white supremacy. Lincoln was never a comparable racial model: he did not have the right looks or the military bearing. The irony is that sculptors were inspired to turn the

noncanonical Lincoln into a manumitting master, but a master nevertheless, whereas Lee's mastership had to be displaced, or represented by very subtle means. For Lee an imagery of mastery and indeed domination did emerge, but not in the obvious territory of race relations. It emerged rather in the relationship of the hero to his animal servant, the horse Traveller.<sup>9</sup>

The equestrian image, of course, was the standard formula for the representation of military heroes, precisely because it did encode the idea of command in the apparently natural dominance of man over animal. Yet in reality there is something unnatural about that dominance: horses are bigger and stronger than their human riders. They are controlled by a combination of cultural authority—the whole structure of confinement and reward/punishment—and the personal authority of the rider, who communicates and reinforces in subtle (or not so subtle) physical signals the structure of authority behind him. If the relationship is properly tuned, the self-control of the rider becomes indistinguishable from control over the horse. The ideal of decorum thus seems to merge in a natural way with the idea of dominance. This made the equestrian image the historically preferred image for leadership in general, and the equestrian statue the most prestigious form of public sculpture. It was the standard solution for military commanders because the idea of command defined them; the relationship of man to horse could easily be read as the relationship of officer to troops.

All this took on a special—one is tempted to say obsessive—character in the commemoration of Robert E. Lee. For no other American hero of the nineteenth century did the relationship of horse and rider assume such acute significance. It was as if the commemorative fortunes of the hero, the Confederacy, and the white South all rested on correctly defining and representing that subtle, if commonplace, union of man and animal (fig. 5.1). Consider one simple anecdote published in 1886 in the heat of the campaign to finish the equestrian monument to Lee in Richmond, a story about Traveller and an unlucky "negro boy" who tried to mount him. Like much of the lore about Lee and Traveller, it described a perfect sympathy between them. But this particular tale had an interesting twist. It aimed to prove that the horse, who "partook of the repose of his master when General Lee was on him, . . . was by no means the 'amiable' animal some have described." The story undoubtedly came from the Richmond-based sculptor Edward Valentine, who asked to see Traveller ridden so that he could study the action of the horse. This was in 1871, a year after Lee's death. One of Lee's daughters "ordered a negro boy to mount," and though Traveller was fourteen years old and looking very meek he thrust his forefeet in the air and "positively refused to allow the mount." Only after a "young Texan," a college student from Washington and Lee,



5.1 A. Hoen and Co., *Genl. Lee on Traveler*, 1876, lithograph.

brought a new saddle and mounted the animal himself could the demonstration take place. The story is far-fetched in its racism. Would Traveller's owners have never before had a "negro boy" mount him for exercise? The story is constructed to show how Traveller instinctively understood the white supremacist system that elevated Lee to its pinnacle. He refused to allow blacks to ride him and responded only to legitimate white authority, in this case the college-educated Texan. Ultimately only Lee could entirely tame the horse's high spirits and make him seem calm, because Lee had so mastered the practice of "absolute control."<sup>10</sup>

The anecdote was published in the main Richmond newspaper as part of its campaign to promote Valentine's model for an equestrian monument. What the public wanted in an equestrian statue of Lee, according to the paper, was not necessarily an exact likeness of Traveller (who was smaller and scrawnier than the typical Virginia thoroughbred) but an image that captured the underlying significance of Lee's relationship to the horse. This the paper summarized as "power in repose."<sup>11</sup> Lee's power over the stronger, wilder animal was so complete that it did not need to be exercised. Lee did not have to spur or whip or strangle with the reins; his moral authority achieved what mere physical domination could accomplish only imperfectly. As Jabez Curry observed, Lee's attitude on

his horse was "not that of an Equestrian, making a display of his skill or strength, but that of a well-trained officer, perfectly at ease and consciously master of an inferior animal."<sup>12</sup>

The equestrian relationship was thus an overripe metaphor, referring ultimately to the nature of power in society. The image of Lee on his horse worked beautifully as a model of leadership for a white supremacist society trying to legitimate its own authority. Reconstruction had ended sooner and less violently in Virginia than in states further south, in part because the white leadership realized that it could extend some political privileges to the black population without undermining the fundamental premise of white rule.<sup>13</sup> In this pre-Jim Crow era, before the outright exclusion of African Americans from the civic realm, the white supremacist system relied on symbolic expressions of a racial harmony achieved under the firm but patient hand of a white-dominated government. White authority was (mis)represented as moral rather than physical force, a natural relation of superior to inferior race. Hence, in the Traveller story, the Negro boy's inability to subdue the stronger animal signifies a failure of moral force, of natural leadership, whereas Lee has so much of it that the horse calms under him without any sign of physical coercion whatsoever. The equestrian Lee is at once a retrospective image of the benevolent master, good to his inferiors, and a prospective image of a postwar white government claiming to know what is best for its own black population. The great power of this equestrian image was that it could bridge the old regime of slavery and the new regime of white rule without explicitly representing either; it helped legitimate the continuity between the two even as it disguised the physical and institutional forces that propped up both of them.

Since the equestrian image of Lee stood for nothing less than the moral authority of the Confederacy and of white power in general, the campaign to erect an equestrian monument was an extraordinarily high-stakes affair. Getting the image just right proved exceptionally difficult and divisive. Three different groups representing major divisions within the white Virginia elite strove to control the monument campaign and mold it in their own image. One was a group of veteran officers from Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, headed by the notorious "irreconcilable" Jubal Early who wanted to perpetuate the policy and imagery of Southern defiance. Another was a "ladies' committee" of women from pedigreed Virginia families who wanted a monument of artistic distinction. The third group was an official body headed by the governor of Virginia, which saw in the monument campaign an opportunity for political accommodation between North and South. All three groups shared the presuppositions of white supremacy and shared the same basic image of Lee as "power in repose." Yet a long process of conflict and

compromise was necessary to mold their competing visions into a single monument.<sup>14</sup>

One key set of differences involved the ritual of the monument campaign, namely who would be asked to contribute and how they would be approached. The ritual of fund raising was crucial because on it turned the whole question of what public the monument stood for, whose collective memory was represented there. Though all three groups were centered in Virginia they envisioned a public subscription that would be national, or at least regional, in scope. But Jubal Early's group sought contributions only from the veterans who had actually fought under Lee's command; the monument was to be a kind of votive offering from the troops to their departed leader. The group issued an appeal in 1871 "To the Survivors of the Army of Northern Virginia" for their "spontaneous offerings." However the language of the appeal did not assume spontaneous support and ended by leaning heavily on images of military obedience: contributing was both a soldier's duty and a test of his devotion to his dead commander. Moreover, agents who would press the appeal personally were to "collect" (i.e., solicit) the contributions, on commission.<sup>15</sup> Early had grave misgivings about employing salaried agents because for him the enterprise was not a business proposition; it was supposed to be a ritual of voluntary participation. Early eventually fired all his agents, but all the various organizations involved in fund raising for the Lee Monument at one time or another had recourse to paid agents. The ladies' committee employed them early on with notable success, and later the governor's association sent agents throughout the South as far away as Texas.<sup>16</sup> The governor's secretary explained that only direct, personal solicitation would get results and that the preferred agent was "a crippled, maimed Confederate," smooth of speech and "apt to interest the women."<sup>17</sup> In other words, the techniques of persuasion, pity, and even romance were not only admissible but seen as necessary.

These techniques were made necessary by the widespread refusal to accept the basic premise of the public subscription—that donations measured allegiance to the hero's memory. The agents wanted to make the question of contributing a ritual test of each person's devotion to the hero: if you believed in Lee, ran their logic, you would contribute to this monument. But in case after case individuals pleaded extenuating circumstances: crop failure, yellow fever, poverty. Or, more defiantly, many people made clear that, despite their admiration of Lee, they had other priorities for their money, notably other monuments proposed at the local or state level. Texans, for example, told the governor's agent that they would not contribute toward a monument in Virginia until they had done their commemorative duty for Sam Houston or the heroes of the Alamo.<sup>18</sup>

Given the enormous difficulties involved in soliciting contributions for a monument, even one to a man as admired as Lee, the self-imposed limitations of the veterans' group were bound to be fatal. In 1875, when a Confederate veteran was elected governor of Virginia, Early gave up and handed his meager funds over to the monument association then being organized by the new governor, James Kemper, and his specially appointed secretary, Samuel Bassett French. Kemper's association widened the scope of the fund-raising campaign not only to get more money but to construct a powerful image of popular unity. This was to be a people's monument to their greatest hero, not a demonstration of soldiers' loyalty to authority. For this reason certain kinds of contributions assumed an importance far beyond their cash value. The association brought its campaign to the public schools, for example, and many responded enthusiastically though with little means—like the Custis School whose subscriptions totaled forty-seven cents, mostly from children donating a penny each. The image of schoolchildren contributing their precious pennies buoyed the standing of the enterprise and seemed to confirm that the memory of Lee still had a force in popular culture, if only the monument could tap it.<sup>19</sup>

One kind of contribution particularly gratified Governor Kemper's board because it seemed to belie the racial exclusivity inherent in the whole project: a contribution from African Americans. The one documented example, probably unique, occurred in the town of Terry, Mississippi, where the white and black populations both donated to the campaign. This extraordinary event came to the attention of Kemper and the board, who saw in it justification for their view that "the interests of the white and coloured races of the South are so intermixed, that to promote them, there must be a cordial unity of purpose."<sup>20</sup> The black man responsible for organizing his community in the effort, William Bingham, received a special letter of commendation from Secretary French, which concluded:

Under Providence the white and black man of the South have had their lots cast in the same place, and true wisdom determines that they should be friends not enemies: and every evidence of the breaking down of the partition wall between them, raised by bad men, for personal ends, will be hailed by all good men as an omen of better days in the future, to be encouraged in every suitable way.<sup>21</sup>

The apparent sincerity of the letter makes it all the more ironic. The board in reality made no effort to solicit contributions from African American communities and was careful not to make appeals in towns under "Radical" (i.e., Republican or black) rule. Everyone understood why a

monument to Lee would not represent the "interests" of the "coloured race," why it was not an instrument of racial harmony. A few years earlier, for example, a much-publicized dispute had erupted when white legislators in Virginia proposed to purchase an official portrait of Lee for the State Capitol. Black legislators opposed the idea because "General Lee had fought to keep [them] in slavery," and the *Richmond Dispatch* reported that "nobody was surprised" at their response.<sup>22</sup> It was obvious that the commemoration of Lee provoked racial discord. Yet according to French this was the fault of the "bad men" (meaning the Radicals), who were dividing the races; "good men" like William Bingham realized that their best interests lay with the white race and not against it.

In the 1870s Kemper's administration represented the moderate wing of the ruling white party, keen to foster a symbolic front of racial harmony. Unlike such "irreconcilables" as Jubal Early who did not want any blacks participating in civic life and ritual, except as servants, the moderates could accept a greater social and political role for blacks as long as blacks accepted the general terms of white supremacy.<sup>23</sup> Thus Bingham's activity was particularly welcome: it represented that "cordial unity" of the races that came with the acceptance of white domination. Blacks had a place in the commemorative ritual. They could enter into this construction of "collective" memory, created by and for whites, and in so doing become visible within the collective, though visibility came at an enormous price—that of relinquishing the claim to a countermemory more in line with their own hopes for liberation. This tension between visibility and self-definition would become even sharper in the more conspicuous ritual events organized later in the campaign.

For the governor the Lee monument project was part of a larger political campaign to legitimate Southern white supremacy in the national consciousness. The commemorative project paralleled Kemper's public policy, which was a series of delicate negotiations with Northern racial policy calculated at once to defend white rule at home and encourage Northern aid and cooperation. Kemper was a pragmatist, steering a middle course in between the "irreconcilables," who scorned Northern whites and their Southern black allies, and the "scalawags," who appealed to the black vote.<sup>24</sup> He deliberately took the monument campaign out of the hands of the irreconcilables and delegated it instead to the politically moderate French, a crony of the notorious political boss William Mahone, Confederate general turned railroad entrepreneur whose politics of accommodation made him a traitor to traditionalists like Early.<sup>25</sup> By giving the monument campaign to a Mahone ally, Kemper was not only dispensing patronage to a powerful supporter who had helped him get elected but forging the kind of coalition he felt the future

demanded. Kemper and French conducted the monument campaign in this spirit of coalition building. They were happy to take contributions from anyone, and were especially gratified when money came from Union supporters. On these few occasions French would stress that Lee was not merely a Confederate but "a great American soldier" and that the board looked forward to the day when the sections were reconciled and "peace and brotherly love shall everywhere prevail."<sup>26</sup> Lee was offered as a hero for all, not just for those of unimpeachable loyalty to the Confederate cause but for Northern whites and even for Southern blacks willing to embrace him. The commemoration of Lee thus provided a symbolic field in which to build a new image of popular unity and reconciliation under traditional white rule.

The handful of women who comprised the ladies' committee probably approved of these goals, though their views are harder to read. Unlike their male counterparts, they were not public figures and preferred to keep out of the public eye. Yet they too conceived of their project as a broad-based monument, "designed to go down to posterity as an exponent of the nation's devotion and admiration for our immortal Lee."<sup>27</sup> Their differences with the governor's association revolved not around the ritual of the campaign but around the question of how the monument would take concrete form. The women wanted above all a work of art, and they were fully prepared to go outside the South and even outside the country to get it. For the governor's board, however, art had little if any importance. The board approached the design process in the same spirit it approached the fund-raising process, as an opportunity for coalition building. When the board decided to hold a design competition in 1877, French assembled a jury of several dozen Southerners who constituted a cross section of white leadership in local and national politics, religion, and society; the idea was to create a powerful coalition that would support the design, give it broad respectability, and get it built. Though French gave the jury specific instructions in how to evaluate the designs, the process of evaluation appeared to be an elaborate charade intended primarily to identify the candidate with the most political support.<sup>28</sup>

The women's committee repudiated this process and the whole political arena in which it took place. The committee gave voice to conventionally feminine concerns in a century that made women the primary guardians of "culture," understood as the domain of gentility, social refinement, and aesthetic grace. As women from some of the most elite families in Virginia, they were perfectly positioned to play their cultural role. "'Art is long' though 'time is fleeting,'" argued Sarah Nicholas Randolph, head of the committee, and "the work whose execution we are directing will stand long after our generation is lost in oblivion."<sup>29</sup> In this