Citizens of Charleston watch the Confederate bombardment of Fort Sumter.

By Steve O'Neill

THE Never-Ending CONFLICT

WITH THE 150TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE CIVIL WAR COME RE-ENACTMENTS, COMMEMORATIONS, AND RENEWED DEBATES ABOUT ITS CAUSES, LESSONS AND MEANING.

On December 20, 2010, some 300 people paid $100 each to attend a "secession ball," a celebration of South Carolina's secession from the Union on the 150th anniversary of the event.

Billed by the event's sponsor, the Sons of Confederate Veterans, as "a joyous night of music, dancing, food and drink," the party was held at Gaillard Auditorium in the heart of downtown Charleston, only blocks from the site of the original secession convention. Among the attendees were prominent business leaders, several state legislators, and a Charleston city councilman.

The gala, which included a theatrical re-enactment of the signing of the Ordinance of Secession, attracted extensive media attention. It also drew 150 protestors, white and black, including the Rev. Joseph Darby, vice president of the Charleston NAACP, who denounced the "celebrat[ion] of a war which was fought for the right to maintain slavery." But Mark Simpson, a commander of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, offered a different view of the event — and of secession: "It was not about slavery. . . . We honor the men who wore the gray. We can understand what animated them to defend their homes."

The secession ball and accompanying protest symbolized the ongoing divisions about the Civil War — a contest that has never quite ended for Americans, and that certainly tends to reignite passions when its major anniversaries arrive. These latter-day battles are not fought with bayonets and Dahlgren artillery but with arguments about secession and the larger meaning of the war.

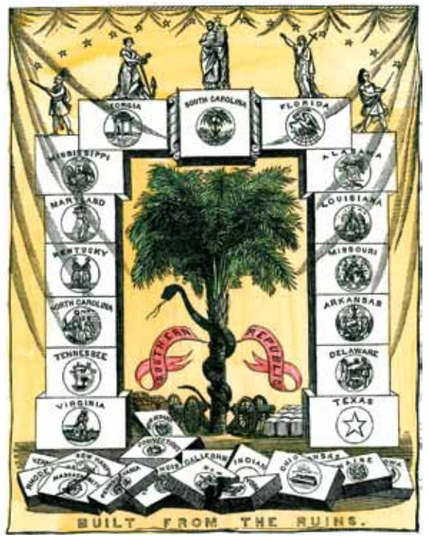
The recent events in Charleston marked the start of the Civil War sesquicentennial, which was officially launched April 12 with a re-enactment of the firing on Fort Sumter. So prepare yourself for four years of public debate over the meaning of the war.

And as we prepare for the commemorations of Manassas and Shiloh, Gettysburg and Vicksburg, perhaps it makes sense to put these modern-day events — the ones at the Gaillard Auditorium and the ones to follow across the state and nation — into historical context by examining some of the ways that the memory and meaning of secession and the war have changed over the years.

Slavery & Secession

Broader issues in the culture of South Carolina, the South and the nation have shaped how succeeding generations have viewed secession and the war, while opening wide gaps between the way that historians have explained events and the way the general public has remembered them.

The public memory of the war has responded more to the hopes, needs and fears of the last 150 years than the events and evidence of the 1850s and 1860s, and academic historians have had a somewhat tangential role in shaping what people "know" about secession and the causes of the war. Some of that is surely the fault of the academics, who too often have written for one another rather than for the general public, but a more powerful reason is that historical memories rooted in strong emotions tend to overwhelm even the most balanced and accurate scholarship.



Indeed, this has frequently been the case on the question of secession in South Carolina. The debate that pitted the secession ball celebrants in Charleston against the protestors is not mirrored in how historians have interpreted secession in the state. On the contrary, historians have been united and clear in their understanding that South Carolina's leadership seceded to defend slavery.

To be sure, historians have been alert to complexities when writing about secession. And nearly all would agree that a host of other issues attached themselves to those of slavery and abolition in South Carolina, among them property as a defense of liberty, a sense of manly honor, and fear of a race war sparked by abolition. Many of today's historians would disagree on the relative impact of these auxiliary issues, but none would omit slavery as the chief cause of South Carolina's decision to secede in December 1860.

The primary evidence is overwhelming, starting with the words of the state's leaders. They made their case in unambiguous language. William Preston, a states' rights advocate and president of South Carolina College, said in 1860, "Cotton is not our king — slavery is our king. Slavery is our truth. Slavery is our divine right." Preston Brooks of Edgefield, infamous for his 1856 assault on Massachusetts Sen. Charles Sumner on the floor of the Capitol, said bluntly, "We of the South have no politics but the Negro." Edward Bryan, a pamphleteer, demanded, "Give us slavery or give us death!" A.G. McGrath, mayor of Charleston at the time of secession and governor at the end of the war, said candidly in 1865, "Other considerations attached themselves to slavery; but they were merely incidents to it; of themselves they could never have produced the same results."

The Declaration of the Causes of Secession also pointed to slavery as the root cause. Written by Christopher Memminger and commissioned by the convention upon the occasion of its unanimous vote to secede, the document defended both slavery and the compact theory of government, which holds that the Constitution established a compact among the states, all of which maintained their right to sovereignty. The document also asserted that Lincoln's Republicans intended to exclude slavery from the territories and extinguish slavery in the South, and cited unfair and unconstitutional practices by the North against slavery.

Is the Declaration of the Causes of Secession a defense of constitutional principles and liberty? Yes, on some level; but we must be clear that it defends the liberty to freely own slaves and the right to retrieve fugitive slaves. Only a reader blinded by the need to elevate high-minded principles over baser motives could fail to see slavery as the basis for Memminger's justification.

On the question of states' rights and constitutional principles, the words of historian David Duncan Wallace are helpful. Wallace, a longtime Wofford professor, wrote a seminal history of South Carolina in 1934. He was born in Laurens County in the last days of Reconstruction, and his writings make clear that he was no liberal on race. About secession in South Carolina, he wrote:

> *The theories for a constitutional defense were essentially practical. If the slave-owner had faced dangerous opposition to slavery against which only the federal government could protect him, then he would have been expounding national sovereignty rather than state sovereignty. The constitutional argument was a mere attorney's plea claiming everything for his client. . . . The secessionists knew why they seceded and in the various secession conventions they crowned endless reiterations of the cause with the strongest statements of the threat to slavery as the cause. It is hardly conceivable that secession would have occurred if slavery had not existed.*

To say that South Carolina seceded to defend slavery is not to say that there is no more to learn about the state and the causes of the war, or even about the state and secession. We can never retrieve the past with perfect fidelity, so all the questions will never be answered. But professional historians must cite verifiable evidence and make arguments that will be scrutinized by their peers. In this context, explanations about secession in South Carolina that leave out slavery are misguided, if not thoroughly mistaken.

The 'Lost Cause' emerges

Still, as the sesquicentennial secession celebration in Charleston seems to confirm, some remain convinced that secession was fundamentally a quest for self-government and defense of liberty, and not concerned with defending slavery.

How did we move from the frank admissions of the 1850s and 1860s to explanations that de-emphasize slavery? The transformation is rooted in specific events during and after the war.

The South suffered devastating losses on the battlefield — 260,000 sons, fathers, brothers and uncles. In South Carolina alone, 21,000 men, one-third of the white male population between 18 and 45, died. Nor was the civilian population spared, as Sherman burned a streak through the region.

In response, the white South and white South Carolinians shaped memories to justify their ignoble defeat and painful loss, on both a personal and social level. As one woman from Georgia put it, "In the shadow of defeat and humiliation, we needed to know that right and justice were ours." They needed to believe that in seceding from the Union, they had acted legally and morally.

In the first generation after the war, Southerners rewrote the past to try to heal what one novelist later termed the "Great Wound." The specific way the defeated South reordered its past to cope with its present came to be called the "Lost Cause." The term is borrowed from the title of a book written by Edward Pollard in 1866. Pollard's book was one of many in the 1860s and '70s that put forward four tenets about the war:

- It had been a noble cause from the start.
- Liberty, not slavery, was the reason for secession.
- Confederate soldiers had fought bravely and lost only because of the overwhelming numbers and resources of the Yankees.
- Slaves and white women on the home front had remained loyal to the cause until the bitter end.

For the war generation, rewriting the recent past proved helpful and maybe necessary on a psychological level. The idea of the Lost Cause helped lift the spirits of the South at a time when so much physical work was needed to rebuild the region. Former Civil War generals, such as Jubal Early, were particularly active in promoting the Lost Cause in memoirs and history books. Those with personal memories of the war were defiant toward Yankees, Republicans and the federal government, and were not inclined toward reconciliation.

Regional Revisionism

The somber and steadfast tone of the first iteration of the Lost Cause in the 1860s and '70s was very different from the celebratory tenor that emerged around 1900 — and that was echoed at the Charleston gala in 2010.

Reconstruction had ended by the turn of the century, and Southerners with personal memories of the war were giving way to the sons and daughters of veterans. The new generation reconfirmed the tenets of the Lost Cause, but replaced the feeling of defiant justification with one of celebration of the Confederacy and reconciliation with the North.

The economic and political reunion of North and South that took place after 1877 was mirrored in a revision in perspectives on the war in both regions. In the North, at a time of rising nationalism confirmed by the War of 1898, the meaning and memory of the Civil War shifted emphasis, from an effort to emancipate the slaves toward a quest to save the Union. Because this new theme downplayed slavery, it left the Lost Cause unchallenged and invited both sides to celebrate the valor of the troops in the field. In the process, the Northern memory of the war as an emancipationist effort was forgotten by all but a few African-American leaders, such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Frederick Douglass.

Indeed, this "reunification" of North and South came about at the expense of blacks. In the 1890s the South, with both the tacit and active endorsement of the federal government, evaded the 14th and 15th amendments, which had been ratified to protect African-American civil and voting rights. In 1896, Plessy v. Ferguson upheld the South's Jim Crow laws that discriminated against African Americans, and beginning in the 1890s Congress perennially consigned an anti-lynching bill to defeat. The meaning of freedom for former slaves and their descendants was left for the defeated white South, not the victorious North, to decide.

As the nation solidified in law the status of blacks, Confederate heritage groups across the South also institutionalized the Lost Cause in

history books, school curricula and monuments to the dead.

Three groups stand out. The United Confederate Veterans, founded in 1889, were former soldiers who promoted the Lost Cause mostly at reunions that continued well into the 20th century. The United Daughters of the Confederacy, founded in 1894, and the Sons of Confederate Veterans, founded in 1896, were even more determined than the veterans themselves to make concrete and permanent the memory of the war and the sacrifice of their ancestors. Between 1894 and 1911 (the 50th anniversary of the start of the war), the UDC and the SCV sponsored pageants, parades and commemorations, and built what is today the most lasting legacy of their efforts — monuments and statues to the Confederate cause that dot the Southern landscape from Virginia to Texas.

Perhaps a more powerful effort to promote the Lost Cause was what Confederate heritage groups called the "true history" movement, an organized push to write, publish and regulate the history of the Civil War and the Confederacy. From 1900 to 1915 or so, through the work of the UDC and a host of affiliated women's clubs, the tenets of the Lost Cause became a catechism and a creed against which books, speeches, lectures and classroom lessons were measured. Teachers, authors and politicians were scrutinized to see if they conveyed the proper message about secession and the war, as well as the correct narratives of loyal slaves and steadfast soldiers.

The Lost Cause and its Northern counterpart, a war for reunification, remained the predominant historical "memories" into the middle of the 20th century. Although individual historians, such as David Duncan Wallace, took issue with some particulars of the Lost Cause, the broad trends in the interpretation and writing of academic history did little to challenge popular perceptions of the war.

Nor were the dominant narratives challenged much by cultural and historical trends. African Americans remained second-class citizens at mid-century. However, both the memory of emancipation and the place of blacks in contemporary American society were about to change.

A Disastrous 100th Anniversary

The events surrounding the 100th anniversary of the Civil War in 1961 illustrate the unpredictable relationship among popular memory, historical scholarship and contemporary culture.

In 1960 and 1961, careful plans for a unifying and non-controversial national centennial commemoration were disrupted by sweeping changes in the South generated by the civil rights movement. The modern fight for equality demanded a reconsideration of the Lost Cause and national reconciliation interpretations of the war.

In 1957, in the midst of the civil rights movement and at the height of the Cold War, Congress authorized a Civil War Centennial Commission, with 21 white appointees led by retired Gen. Ulysses S. Grant III, the grandson of the Union general. The commission was given money but no real power; it was conceived as an umbrella group over state commissions, which would actually carry out the commemorative events. As a result, the CWCC depended upon state commissions in the South controlled by adherents to the Lost Cause, who had found renewed strength and purpose in combating the push for civil rights.

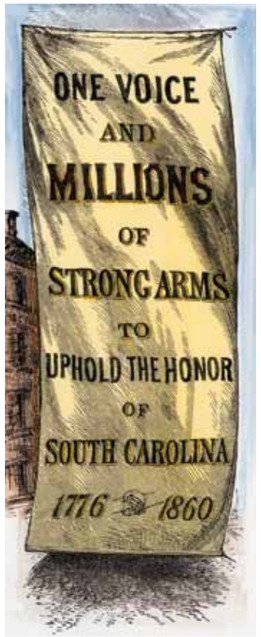
President Dwight Eisenhower, imbued with the spirit of the Cold War, had saddled Grant and the CWCC with a mandate to emphasize the unity of the nation and thereby show the world that the United States stood firm and united in the face of the communist threat. Grant, determined to follow Ike's orders and to pull the Southern commissions on board, made a conscious decision to shape the themes of the centennial in favor of states' rights, the Lost Cause and a fight to save the Union — and to essentially ignore emancipation.

What some might have considered a sound decision in 1957 looked very different by the spring of 1961, when the CWCC, the nation and South Carolina prepared to commemorate the war's 100th anniversary. Between 1957 and 1961 Eisenhower was forced to send troops to desegregate Little Rock's Central High, and subsequent federal court decisions began the desegregation of the South.

With the question of African-Americans' freedom and citizenship in the headlines and in the minds of the nation, the CWCC planned to hold its convention at the segregated Fort Sumter Hotel in Charleston. When the management of the hotel refused a reservation request from a black member of the New Jersey state centennial commission, the Northern state commissions threatened a boycott.

U.S. Grant held firm against the Northern states' protest. However, newly inaugurated president John F. Kennedy intervened, and in one of the first decisions of his presidency he moved the CWCC convention to cramped quarters at the nearby Charleston Naval Base. The episode proved a public relations disaster for the CWCC, and the official national commemoration never recovered. Grant resigned and was replaced by Columbia University historian Allen Nevins, who insisted on a thematic balance that included emancipation, slavery and a counter-narrative to the Lost Cause. In response, the Southern commissions repeated history, seceding from the national commemoration to hold their own centennial celebrations.

Still A Dangerous Battleground



Today the sesquicentennial events have begun. Once again we renew our interest in a war whose first shots were fired 150 years ago.

Since the 1961 centennial, countless books, films, documentaries and commentaries have emerged to further our understanding — and, in some cases, to further obscure our understanding — of an era when the nation was divided against itself. In the four years to come, we can expect hundreds of public events across the South and nation — re-enactments, symposia, exhibits, films and plays — that will shape the historical memory and meaning of the war for a new generation.

And with the past as our guide, we can expect contemporary issues, needs and circumstances to weave their way into those upcoming commemorations, most likely in ways that will stir emotions, awaken regional biases and open old wounds.

It is telling that both the Obama administration and Congress have refrained from funding or appointing a national commission for the sesquicentennial. In deciding against a national commission, perhaps our current leaders are bowing to the present circumstances of fiscal austerity.

Then again, they don't need the difficult lessons of the centennial in Charleston to remind them that the memory of the Civil War remains a dangerous battleground — even as the shooting recedes farther into the past. |F|

The author, a 1982 graduate, has been a history professor at Furman since 1987. Illustrations from North Wind Picture Archives.

Ordinance of Secession

At a Convention of the People of the State of South Carolina, begun and holden at Columbia on the Seventeenth day of December in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty and thence continued by adjournment to Charleston, and there by divers adjournments to the Twentieth day of December in the same year —

An Ordinance To dissolve the Union between the State of South Carolina and other States united with her under the compact entitled "The Constitution of the United States of America."

We, the People of the State of South Carolina, in Convention assembled do declare and ordain, and it is herby declared and ordained, That the Ordinance adopted by us in Convention, on the twenty-third day of May in the year of our Lord One Thousand Seven hundred and eight eight, whereby the Constitution of the United States of America was ratified, and also all Acts and parts of Acts of the General Assembly of this State, ratifying amendment of the said Constitution, are here by repealed; and that the union now subsisting between South Carolina and other States, under the name of "The United States of America," is hereby dissolved.

Done at Charleston, the twentieth day of December, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty.