

STONE MOUNTAIN PARK: CONTESTED MEMORIES AND PERSPECTIVES IN THE METRO ATLANTA AREA

CLOE ELLINGTON

Master of Applied Anthropology, University of Maryland, College Park

Cloe Ellington is a first year Master's of Applied Anthropology student from Augusta, Georgia. She is currently focusing her research on the historical archaeology of rural communities. In her free time, she enjoys reading and painting, as well as incorporating visual arts into archaeological analysis.

Abstract

Stone Mountain Park, one of the largest tourist attractions in the Metro Atlanta Area, serves as a physical reminder of the Confederacy's role in Georgia's social hierarchy well into the late 20th century. Though the Park maintains its apolitical stance regarding the Confederate monument carved upon the North face of Stone Mountain, it remains a testament to the contested memories on both the local and national scale. Contested memories form the political basis of heritage management and play a large role in the interpretation of historic sites and monuments. Understanding differing viewpoints of identity formation at Stone Mountain Park explored in this analysis can lead to better planning as communities reckon with their own histories moving forward.

Introduction

Stone Mountain Park is a place of recreation, enjoyment, “artwork,” and contested memory. Located just East of Atlanta, Georgia, the park attracts visitors to its one-of-a-kind landscape as, quite literally, a stone mountain in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountain Range. The mountain has fallen under heavy scrutiny in the last several decades for a unique carving upon its North face—a memorial to the Civil War featuring Stonewall Jackson, Robert E. Lee, and Jefferson Davis. Completed in 1972, the carving serves as a testament to the “Old South” and repeats the messages of other Confederate monuments throughout Georgia. The mountain is now a part of Stone Mountain Park and is owned by the Stone Mountain Memorial Association (SMMA), a Georgia state organization. The park hosts “family oriented” activities, shows, and historical centers (Stone Mountain Park, 2025).

Stone Mountain Park is but one player in the controversial history of Confederate memorialization. Unabashedly, the mountain stands firmly in the Georgian landscape as a symbol of Confederate pride amongst those who wish to uphold the narratives repeated by Civil War veterans in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Lowery, 2012, pp. 246-66). Many local residents see Stone Mountain Park as upholding antebellum racial ideals, arguing that Georgia preserves a white-washed and Confederate-centric history that diminishes the validity of Black existence (Thomas, 2011, p. 15). On the contrary, some feel that the park is merely a place of history, recreation, and enjoyment, denying a need for revision. To understand memory at Stone Mountain Park, it is imperative to first understand the importance of the Lost Cause narrative, the role of the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), the politics of memory, and the history of the park itself in the Atlanta Area. Considering contested viewpoints is a necessary step in planning the future of Confederate monuments like Stone Mountain.



[Image 1] Memorial Lawn at Stone Mountain Park. Photograph by Chris Yunker, Wikimedia (Creative Commons)

The Confederacy and Public Memory

The “Lost Cause”

The conclusion of the Civil War created a regional shift in how many white Southerners would view their ancestors for generations to come. This shift softened the blow of what the war's loss really meant: an upheaval of established structures of power and dominance, both economically and socially. The Lost Cause narrative defines the lost war as a concession after heroic actions defending the honor and glory of the South could not outweigh the aggression of the North (Graham, 2020, pp. 458-459). Ultimately, this version of history is used to elevate the stance of Confederate soldiers and provide them honor in what they died for. It erases the role of slavery as a driving force in the defense of the South and cessation from the Union, replacing it instead with a posthumous call for states' rights and economic freedom. Not only does the Lost Cause affect the view of the Civil War in the south, it has also generationally altered memory associated with national post-war segregation.

The United Daughters of the Confederacy

As the South's most popular memorialization committee, the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) were responsible for the post-war rhetoric that defined the next 150 years of collective memory, or so they intended. The group worked within a patriarchal society, justifying their places by upholding conservative gender roles and promoting traditional values. They accumulated an impressive amount of power over the physical and historical record by pushing a Confederate agenda under

the guise of upholding the status-quo (Heyse, 2010, pp. 38-39). They placed fallen Confederate soldiers and important Southern leaders in public memory as a means of denying total Southern defeat. Monuments became the crux of post-war narratives, covertly reinforcing ideals of racial inequality by upholding the “glory” of the Southern defender.

The UDC's role in promoting this narrative through children's education transformed the way the Confederacy was perceived in national memory (Heyse, 2010, pp. 42). Through the accrued power of women and education of children, UDC's messaging slowly changed the social memory of the events that led to the Civil War and designated the fallen as patriots.

The organization's monuments tell their side of what transpired in the lead up to the Civil War and remembers the leaders of the Confederacy under a single perspective. Chamberlain and Yanus (2020) draw upon the UDC's history and position within society to propose their role in the upholding of social order and use of monuments as a mobilization tactic among white Southerners (p. 127). The correlative growth in monument building and UDC membership remained consistent in post-Confederate states. State funded memorials, lobbied for by the UDC, are often still protected today and remain a testament to their authority over public memory (Chamberlain and Yanus, 2020, pp. 136-137). Regardless, the curated memories left by the UDC disregard the perspectives of other stakeholders in Southern history.

The Politicization of Memory

The politicization of memory has been at the forefront of research regarding the rise of nationalistic ideologies remains especially pertinent to the remembrance of the Civil War in the South. The dynamics of memory are vividly defined by what is left for future generations to interpret (i.e. memorials) and represent the ties that bind people together. Bell (2003) draws upon these dynamics to explain how memory is used as a political pawn by groups aiming to create collective identity, often at the expense of other stakeholders (p. 67). Similarly, Dickey (2014) criticizes the film *Gone with the Wind*'s role in the early 20th century Confederate memorialization movement, weighing the balance of Margaret Mitchell's intentions with writing the book and the later impact of the film on Confederate sentiment. The media's role in perceptions of the Confederacy highlights the appeal for a nostalgic heritage amongst those clinging to memorialized histories.

Shackel (2001) dissects the creation of memory through the use of an exclusionary past, the creation of a patriotic past, and a discussion of how nostalgia legitimizes the concept of American heritage (pp. 1-14). The core of memory politicization lies in manipulation, key to understanding the root causes of cultural divide in the Southern states through contested imagery (Lieb et al., 2002, pp. 303-310). The authors propose that memorials reinforce nostalgia for an era that carried contested ideals and these memorials warrant careful consideration in how they are glorified under a patriotic lens.

Forest and Johnson (2019) argue that there may be potential problems with memorial removal that lead to public forgetting of the nationalist ideals that they once represented. They call for contextualized removals/rehousing that reinforce the shift in societal ideologies, though they do not dismiss the need for removal (pp. 127-131). Their call to critically examine the narratives of memorialization—and memorial removal—compliments Shackel's notion of memory creation through the glorification of an exclusionary past (2001, pp. 3-4).

Stone Mountain: Where Contested Memories Converge

A History of Stone Mountain Park

As an easily recognizable place in the Georgian landscape, Stone Mountain originally served as a prominent location for trade amongst groups of Indigenous peoples, particularly within the Muskogee-Creek nation under the name Thuhnithofkee, meaning "Bald Mountain." After Stone Mountain was controversially sold alongside all Creek lands in 1825 by William MacIntosh, the Muskogee-Creek leader at the time, it became a rallying point for white Georgians and a symbol of dominance over the landscape (Freeman, 1997, pp. 19-20). Its sale was a crucial moment in the mountain's role as a pawn of collective political memory through the erasure of Indigenous association with the site in favor of a Confederate monument.

The UDC originally proposed the Confederate monument project in 1915 to memorialize the Confederate army, but the project fell short and was later revitalized in 1958. Stone Mountain was completed in 1972, after Governor Marvin Griffin revived the project during a shift in the political sphere of Atlanta as a pushback to the Civil Rights movement (Freeman, 1997, pp. 57-61). The project's revival came at a time of extreme public discourse and sent a prominent message to both local and national figures in the Civil Rights movement, particularly given that Atlanta was home to Martin Luther King, Jr.

Though the final rendition of the memorial was not enacted by the UDC, the Lost Cause narrative was still prominently featured in the Stonewall Jackson, Robert E. Lee, and Jefferson Davis relief that honors their roles as Southern defenders. Ultimately, the carving places Stone Mountain within a larger Southern revisionist historical movement, despite the extended time between its initial proposal and its creation. Its creation is linked to a national rise in anti-segregationist sentiment highlighted by the positionality of Governor Marvin Griffin and his administration. Stone Mountain was marketed to the public as representing "traditional" values through the restoration and placement of an antebellum plantation in the park (Thomas, 2011, p. 3). Griffin's staunch stance on segregation in the South was most remarkably noted in his public declaration during his 1956 state-of-the-

state address, which occurred in the same year as the implementation of the Confederate battle emblem on the Georgia State flag (Martinez, 2008, p. 204). The memorial at Stone Mountain was thus intended to serve as a symbol of “Georgian values” during a national ideological crisis.

The evolution of public memory at the park, beginning with the 1915 reunification of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), defines the violent political landscape that encircles the curated experiences of the memorial (Allen et al., 2024, p. 7; Lowery, 2012, pp. 246-266). This evolution is important to how the park has been viewed by different groups and its struggle to maintain a single narrative that transcends generational shifts in societal ideologies. Ultimately, Stone Mountain has been used as a pawn to manipulate public memory toward sympathy with the South, beginning with the arduous promotion of the Lost Cause narrative by Confederate leaders after the war and continuing with the foundation of memorialization societies, like the UDC. Stone Mountain Park, like any confederate memorial, is the site of many narratives and serves as Atlanta’s paramount historical trove of combative identities.

Heritage and Memory at Stone Mountain

Stone Mountain’s omnipresence over the Georgian landscape lies not only in its grandeur, but in its history as a political tool and memorial to the values of the Old South. Confederate monuments like Stone Mountain have existed as sites of collective political gathering, both peaceful and not, since their inception as memorials to one version of Southern heritage (Lafrenz Samuels, 2019, p. 122). Southern heritage, in this vein, is tethered to traditional values, often with strict gender roles and an unspoken racial hierarchy, under the Confederate flag; it glorifies the doomed cause that the Confederates fought for against “Northern aggression.” This sentimental yearning has led to the formation of collective memory by way of a pseudo-national identity, underwriting the historical basis for this Southern heritage in the first place (Bell, 2003, p. 65). Stone Mountain exemplifies the ramifications of glorifying this contemporary heritage as a site of varying narratives, all leading back to the Southern identity and what that means for communities of people in the South.

The memorial echoes the other Confederate monuments of the Atlanta Area in that these leaders were glorified for their “heroics” in the Civil War. Unlike other Confederate

monuments, the monument contains no words, yet its message is clear. As it was not built until the mid-20th century, much of the South was already aware of what memorials were meant to convey. Here, the Lost Cause gained another placeholder in public memory, which was the goal of the UDC in the memorial’s proposal. This, combined with the nation-wide events that propelled the project’s revitalization under Governor Marvin Griffin, made the mountain a battleground of controversy. Stone Mountain remains contested due to the circumstances in which it was constructed, those who were memorialized, and the history of white supremacy in the area. This contestation falls within wider critiques of Southern revisionist history and political violence under the guise of defending heritage.

As the mountain glorifies Confederate generals that fought tirelessly for the right to control slaves, many Black Southerners see Stone Mountain as a symbol of oppression and a continuation of Jim-Crow era white supremacy. The park, however, officially maintains that its mission is to preserve Southern history and offer a multitude of “multi-cultural” events open to the public, alongside a recreated plantation home and other mix-matched antebellum historic structures (Stone Mountain Park, 2025). These events include laser light shows, fireworks, and projected images over the Confederate monument; its message is inextricably woven into every event (Allen et al., 2024, pp. 2-3).

The prominence of the memorial at Stone Mountain and the intentions of its creation highlight its role as a political tool with implications on the Georgian mindset today (Washnock, 2018, p. 78). Its promotion as a park full of “family fun” hides its history at face value but quietly reveals how the state of Georgia regards Confederate memorials and their use in the manipulation of heritage. Though the park has tried to adjust its messages as time has progressed, the current narratives still appear to preserve the pre-Civil War Southern racial order (Thomas, 2011, pp. 1-15). This perspective, rooted in the view of Confederate monuments as tools of oppression, concisely explains how some surrounding communities view the park and are impacted by its omnipresence.

There are, however, different reasons for visiting the park that may not be rooted in a taste for white supremacy. Some visitors may simply have a love for hiking or historic sites. Some may love laser-light shows, fireworks, and

community events. Given that the park does not widely discuss some “less desirable” historical narratives, out-of-state visitors or those who did not do their research upon visiting may simply lack awareness of its historic significance. Stone Mountain is a famous Georgia tourist attraction, adjusting its meaning for many modern visitors. Regardless of intent in visiting, every tourist contributes to the notoriety of the site which ultimately perpetuates the Confederate legacies associated with Stone Mountain.

Much like Stone Mountain, lesser-known confederate memorials at Avondale Estates, an Atlanta Suburb near Stone Mountain Park, have been discussed regarding their effect on the political landscape and regional competing memories. The memorialization of important Confederate figures naturalizes white power over the “spatial imaginary” and explored in its effect on the idea of heritage in the South (Wilson, 2025, pp. 7-45). The use of these sites by white supremacy groups as a Confederate celebration to a “consumption of commodified history” remains a testament to never-forgotten narratives of the Atlanta story that are often explained away through the “white identity” (Essex, 2002, pp. 211-227). Comparatively, the violent Charlottesville rallies of 2017 reflect the narrative enforced by Confederate memorialization and the temporal evolution of white nationalist sentiment (Lafrenz Samuels, 2019). Monuments like Stone Mountain have been used to promote dangerous white supremacist ideals throughout the South that permeate the fabric of the nation’s identity. Stone Mountain’s history of white supremacy, particularly the reunification of the KKK, remains etched upon its face, permanently inscribed upon the history of the Atlanta Area itself.

The political impact of memory on local Atlanta communities, particularly Black and Indigenous voices, lies in the divisiveness of memorials and the long-term effects of memorialization on minority communities (Allen et al., 2024, pp. 1-16). That divisiveness is openly spread by the remainders of Confederate sentimentality and highlighted by societal adherence to the Lost Cause. O’Connell (2021) supports this in her exploration of how these memorials are the greater part of a “memory movement” within the South and are used as a means of slowing down the process of changing values within subsequent generations (pp. 1479-1502). The use of memorials to combat societal shifts is worth exploration and leads to discussion on why memorials are created

in the first place, particularly in the context of their narratives.

White supremacy associated with the Confederacy has been shown prominently in media depicting racial stereotypes and the glorification of “traditional” Southern values. Films such as *Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind* reinforced the stereotypes that diminish the humanity of the Black southerners they depicted. The premiere of *Gone with the Wind* generated controversy over its entry refusal of the Black actors that supported its debut while championing Black choirs from Ebenezer Baptist Church and Bethel AME Church (Dickey, 2014, pp. 31-32). The film glorified the role of slavery in the South to an even greater extent than the book, despite the book’s romanticisation of the agrarian South. The opening credits quoted “[here] in this pretty world Gallantry took its last bow...” as a testament to the values the screenwriters wished to convey (Dickey, 2014, p. 32). This film defined the role of Atlanta in the Civil War; generations of Georgians would look back and see the nostalgic values it called for, aiding in the revitalization of the Stone Mountain carving by Governor Marvin Griffin.

Though not a story of the rise and fall of Atlanta during the war, *Birth of a Nation* exemplified the racist stereotypes that permeated the national landscape during the period of Stone Mountain’s original proposal. The film glorified the KKK and diminished the value of the Black human life, playing into fears about an identity crisis that would either make or break the nation (Freeman, 1997, p. 52). The original requests for the Stone Mountain carving included plans for a KKK altar, marking the history of its reunification there. KKK ceremonies and celebrations continued at Stone Mountain well into the late 20th century on Labor Day, featuring an “antebellum jubilee” with the historical reenactment of white-washed history (Allen et al., 2024, p. 7). The sheer popularity of *Birth of a Nation* coincided with the rise of UDC memorialization efforts and showed their support not just within the South, but throughout the nation.

Efforts to hide this history under claims of heritage slander, pointedly by the UDC and the Sons of Confederate Veterans (SCV), permeate the national crisis of historical re-writing today. The SCV reacted to news of a recently planned history exhibit, supported by the state of Georgia, showcasing the temporal role of Stone Mountain in the national rise of white supremacy. They critiqued the lens through which it conveyed historical

context for the Confederate memorial, claiming the exhibit broke state laws protecting the monument from “desecration” by changing history to fit current political motives. An exhibit of this nature at Stone Mountain Park would potentially change the way in which people in the predominantly Black town of Stone Mountain interpret its towering force upon the landscape (Associated Press, 2025).

The SCV see the exhibit as undermining the purpose of creating the park in the first place and would desecrate the memory of the soldiers in which the monument honors, despite a lack of depicted soldiers (Associated Press, 2025). Important to remember, Stonewall Jackson, Robert E. Lee, and Jefferson Davis were military commanders who played larger roles in Confederate history—not merely soldiers. As stakeholders in the public memory of Stone Mountain today, groups like the SCV and UDC have immense power over how the Confederacy is portrayed. Their power derives from their effective political lobbying on both a local and national scale. Pointedly, the SCV now directly oppose an exhibit meant to contextualize Stone Mountain through an explanation of white supremacy’s contribution in its carving. This stance highlights the modern role of Confederate groups in upholding a white-washed Southern revisionist history. Ultimately, the mid-20th century construction of a Confederate monument altered national values in the creation of public memory, hence its heavy contestation and tumultuous role in the current political landscape.

So, how should we move forward? Deliberations on Confederate monuments take place in various spheres, often at the monuments themselves through protests or public gatherings. Some scholars suggest that removing Confederate monuments is another form of revisionist history and fails to communicate why they are problematic to future generations (Forest and Johnson, 2019, pp. 127-131). Others claim that monument removal dismantles the Confederate stronghold on Southern history. Regardless, a national consensus will likely never be reached. Every site has its own history/context so there will likely never be a one-size fits all approach. However, in determining the fate of memorials it is important to center the local stakeholders and consider all the contested memories when planning public spaces.

Conclusion

Beginning with a proposal for the largest Confederate monument, Stone Mountain’s controversial history as an epitaph of the Lost Cause myth permeates the natural landscape of the Atlanta Area and enshrines the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) as the historic leaders of public education on Confederate History. The heritage that memorialization groups like the UDC wished to encapsulate in Confederate monuments repackaged the distasteful history of Civil War motives into pieces of art that encouraged thoughts of racial hierarchy and supremacy veiled by personal fascinations in familial history. Tying white descendants of slaveholders and Confederate soldiers to a glorified, nostalgic version of the past dismissed the perspectives of Black descendants of slaves and their familial histories outside of slavery. It also erased motives for the Civil War and allowed for integration of Confederate values into the national identity, seen with segregation and a pushback against integration leading to the revitalization of the carving at Stone Mountain.

Popular films of the early 20th century, like *Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind*, provided ample cultural ammunition to encapsulate nostalgic notions of heritage and racial hierarchy enshrined in the values of the Old South. The penultimate portrayal of the repercussions of this glorification lies in the revitalization of the Stone Mountain memorial project, what we now know as Stone Mountain Park, under Governor Marvin Griffin in the mid 20th century. Stakeholders in this monument—including the Black community of the Atlanta Area, Muskogee-Creek descendants, everyday visitors, and Confederate memorial groups—differ in their perspectives on the meaning of the Stone Mountain carving. The controversial history of Stone Mountain places it in a precarious position in the current political landscape, exemplifying the need for careful planning and consideration.

Ultimately, the controversy surrounding Stone Mountain exemplifies a national crisis of historical interpretation and questions how education should continue under new proposals. Different stakeholder groups each have conflicting perspectives of how the mountain should be portrayed; interpretations following a non-revisionist history more closely align with the Black and Indigenous voices of the traditionally disregarded stakeholders. This history is heavily contested by Confederate memorial groups and has led to claims of a dismissal of true

history and defamation of heritage under new-age political motives. Despite this, the history of violence and white supremacy at Stone Mountain is undeniable. Continuing to perpetuate the outdated Lost Cause myth and dangerous omissions of historic events will only further divide communities, emphasizing the need for recognizing the power monuments hold over collective memory and identity formation. In planning, involving stakeholders in the creation of public memory is necessary to help better illuminate underrepresented voices.

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