

## **Race, Civil War Memory, and Sisterhood in the Woman's Relief Corps**

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### **Abstract:**

This paper explores the intersections of race and the public remembrances of the American Civil War in the Woman's Relief Corps (WRC), auxiliary to the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR). It specifically examines the role of slavery, emancipation, and sectional reconciliation in the WRC's discourse about the meaning of the conflict, and how Jim Crow-era racial ideology influenced the scope and effectiveness of African American members within the organization. The extent to which the model of black and white comradeship in the GAR affected the WRC's racial and commemorative policies and objectives will also be considered. Finally, the paper draws lessons from the WRC's experience grappling with issues of race, memory, reconciliation, and the role of veterans and women in memorialization with our own experience in observing the Civil War's sesquicentennial.

**Keywords:** race, Woman's Relief Corps, Grand Army of the Republic, Civil War memory, Union, emancipation, reconciliation

### **Race, Civil War Memory, and Sisterhood in the Woman's Relief Corps**

Woman's Relief Corps president Annie Wittenmyer stood before the assembled delegates of the organization's eighth annual national convention to deliver her presidential address. In her speech, Wittenmyer recounted the heroic legacy of African Americans during the Civil War. "I cannot forget that our white soldiers, flying for their lives, were often glad to sleep in the beds, and share the coarse food of the loyal colored people. And I never knew or heard during all those terrible years of strife and blood, of a colored man, woman or child proving a traitor to the Union cause, or to the men who upheld it." Using the memory of their wartime service, Wittenmyer urged that the WRC should be an organization that welcomes and values the involvement of African Americans in the group. "It seems to me," she exclaimed, "that the question in the Woman's Relief Corps should not be: whether a woman's face is white or black, but whether her heart is white and loyal, and her life pure and generous."<sup>1</sup>

In 1883, representatives from the local and state-wide Woman's Relief Corps and Soldiers' Aid Societies gathered and created a national Woman's Relief Corps (WRC), auxiliary to the national Grand Army of the Republic (GAR). The Relief Corps was comprised of local chapters called "corps" and state associations called "departments." Every corps and department was auxiliary to a GAR corps or department. The WRC had three main goals: provide relief, commemorate the Union war, and instill patriotism in young Americans. Specifically, the WRC commemorated the Union victory and the fallen Union soldiers while providing relief to destitute Union veterans and their dependents, war widows, and former Union army nurses.<sup>2</sup>

Race has always been part of how Americans collectively remembered the Civil War. It framed the meanings of the conflict, the common perceptions about the war's winners and losers, and the roles of individuals in commemorating America's most consequential war. Historians examining Civil War memory, issues of race, and Union

veteran's organizations have scrutinized how veterans and veteran affiliated women's organizations collectively recollected the war and promoted their Union Cause and memory of the war. Both the Grand Army of the Republic and Woman's Relief Corps contested other competing public memories and narratives about the conflict. Scholars argue that race significantly shaped the Civil War memory held by these two groups and the country at large but the racial dynamic within the WRC and GAR worked differently. Unlike in the Grand Army, the Relief Corps succumbed to pressure to segregate their white and black members in the South implying that its black members held a subordinated status inside the association.<sup>3</sup>

This paper situates itself within this historiography by suggesting that the relationship between racial ideology and Civil War memory within the WRC was more nuanced and complicated. It argues that white members recognized and valued the place of African Americans in Union Civil War memory and the work of African American members in commemorating the Union Cause in the South. However, those same white members who celebrated the twin victories of reunion and emancipation displayed a paternalist attitude toward their black sisters and allowed a form of decentralized segregation to exist within the organization.

Slavery, emancipation, and African American wartime sacrifice were important components to the WRC's commemoration of the Union Cause. This meant the four-year struggle to save the Union and destroy slavery, which for loyal Americans was a crucial tool to defeat the southern rebellion. When the WRC or GAR espoused their Union memory of the war they were collectively and publicly remembering the legacy of the cause loyalists fought for: national reunification and liberty. White WRC members also recognized the crucial role their black sisters performed in defending and promoting the Union Cause in Dixie. The South was, by the late nineteenth century, an increasingly hostile environment for promoting the Union Cause. In southern states with a weak GAR presence, the WRC department and their local corps were the primary actors in

combating the Lost Cause and assisting destitute veterans and their families. Recruiting white southern women into a group that actively opposed the Lost Cause proved to be a major challenge in the 1890s and early decades of the twentieth century. White Relief Corps officers often praised the energy, determination, and commitment of their black members in the South in providing charity to needy veterans and observing Memorial Day. The GAR actively encouraged the formation of local WRC groups to help them in their work. Virginia's Grand Army Senior Vice Commander, for example, reported to the WRC convention in 1891 that "there are many Posts in Virginia that could not retain their organization were it not for their auxiliaries." African American corps in the South were often the only ones who maintained Union cemeteries and displayed the American flag.<sup>4</sup>

In 1893, the national convention went further to assist their southern African American members. Prominent black voices inside the organization like Julia Mason Layton of Washington D.C. argued forcibly that the national body should focus on providing instructional and logistical support for the southern black corps. A motion was presented asking that several hundred dollars be used to pay for instructing the WRC's black corps in southern states and give them the tools necessary to help promote the Union Cause and assist the local GAR African American posts in their areas. After some debate, the convention decided to appropriate \$200 dollars which was renewed during the decade. The money was used to pay an African American member to travel to the southern black corps and, as best they could, provide training and guidance regarding fund raising and organization so that the corps could promote patriotism and loyalty in their local communities and have funds to aid poor veterans and their dependents.<sup>5</sup>

While slavery and emancipation occupied prominent places within the WRC's Union memory, civil rights and racial equality did not. White members applauded the commemorative role black members played in the South but allowed segregation to exist inside the organization for several reasons. Among them was a white paternalism rooted in the belief that black women had come a long way since 1865 but their level of education

and access to resources made them incapable of running their corps and departments independently. National inspectors (all of them white) from the WRC, who travelled to observe different corps, complained about the inability of black members to compete paperwork and conduct the organizations complicated ritual work.<sup>6</sup>

In part, the belief that allowing black corps to unite in a southern state to form a black run department would result in inefficiency and poor management motivated white national officers to keep black corps separate. Perceptions of ineffectiveness caused the national convention to dissolve the black majority provisional department of Virginia in 1892 after only one year in existence and remand the corps to their previous status as detached and separate. A more powerful force shaped what would become the WRC's nuanced policy of decentralized segregation inside the organization. White southern Relief Corps members would not work alongside their black counterparts. The blue grass state is a good case in point. Kentucky, while loyal to the Union during the Civil War, was also a slave state that refused to voluntarily and gradually abolish slavery despite repeated appeals from President Lincoln to do so in 1861-1862. The state reacted negatively when the Emancipation Proclamation was issued and rejected the Thirteenth Amendment (not ratifying it until 1976). It quickly adopted a Lost Cause, pro-Confederate spirit after the war and white supremacy was firmly entrenched in the state when the WRC Department of Kentucky was organized in 1886. Black Kentuckians joined the new order in large numbers, which immediately caused white hostility within the department. As one white member phrased it, "white women of the Southland do not associate so closely with the colored race." White WRC women claimed they would not tolerate the idea of participating closely in charitable, commemorative, and patriotic activities with African American women.<sup>7</sup>

I describe this policy of racial separation as decentralized segregation because it was implemented in the southerner states only and not in the other regions of the country or at the national level. Black and white corps were segregated because of racial animosity

from southern white women but also because northern and western white members wanted to grow the association in the former Confederacy. The WRC already had a strike against it in the eyes of southerners from the moment of its founding and that was its firm defense of the Union Cause which denounced secession as treason and spurned the hero worship of prominent Confederates like Robert E. Lee. Allowing white southern women to identify the WRC as an Abraham-Lincoln-loving-Jefferson-Davis-hating association with an interracial membership doomed the organization in the eyes of the northerners in being able to expand far beyond its African American base in Dixie.

Though the WRC did allow segregation in its southern departments, it rejected efforts to make it harder for African Americans to join the organization and departments outside of the South were integrated. Issues of race, membership, and memory reached a crescendo in 1906 when the national president Abbie Addams proposed two resolutions recommending that there would be no more black corps created in the South and for any black corps that did not have a permanent hall or building in which to hold their monthly meetings to be disbanded. The president argued in favor of the first resolution because of reports describing a waning enthusiasm for commemorating Memorial Day and decorating the graves of the Union dead in southern cemeteries among African American youth. She asserted that it did not make sense for those individuals to be allowed to form new corps in the future. In defending the second resolution, Addams contended that it violated WRC rules for a corps regardless of race to not have a regular location in which to hold meetings.<sup>8</sup>

White and black delegates opposed both resolutions. Sarah H. Gates, a member of the black department of Louisiana, declared that her fellow Louisianans took active part every year in Memorial Day exercises and commemorative activities. Former national president, Elizabeth A. Turner noted that black corps often did not have the financial resources to conduct both monthly memorial events and provide needy charity to poor Union veterans and widows in their communities. Financial constraints also did not

allow many black corps to rent out a hall every month for their meetings. These corps chose to spend their limited resources on relief and Memorial Day observances. Every member who opposed the efforts to curtail black membership also stressed the vital role that African American women played in commemorating Union Victory and honoring the American flag. As former national president Isabel Worrell Ball succinctly concluded in opposition to the resolution, “I know for a fact that if it were not for the colored members of our organization there are sections of the South where the flag would be unknown, absolutely unknown.” The convention rejected President Addams’ recommendations.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to the national body, northern state departments and corps did not restrict the membership or involvement of African Americans. Northern departments and corps were integrated in-part because the black population was far smaller than in the South, though some were all black. Black members held lesser national offices like Assistant National Inspector. African American WRC women held prominent local and state officer positions like president in their all-black corps and departments. Despite segregation and white paternalism, the WRC provided an environment where black women could hold leadership positions and contribute to the social uplift within their communities in part by reminding the nation of the heroic legacy of African Americans during the Civil War.<sup>10</sup>

Southern white hostility and northern paternalism does not entirely account for decentralized segregation in the southern WRC. In *The Won Cause*, Barbara A. Gannon argues that what previous scholars took to be segregation in the GAR was actually black comrades creating their own all-black local posts. African Americans in the Grand Army voluntarily belonged to all-black posts particularly in the South because it gave them opportunities to exert leadership in the organization and African Americans considered black posts important pillars in their communities. The black post challenged the Lost Cause memory of the war which asserted that slavery had been good for the slaves. It makes sense that southern African American women would also decide to create all-black corps. After all, national WRC by-laws stated that every corps, regardless of the make-up

of its membership's race, had to be affiliated with a local GAR post as its auxiliary. African American women wanted and did assist the black Grand Army veterans in their localities by forming their own WRC corps. Therefore, the existence of separate black corps and departments most likely had as much to do with African American women's own agency and desiring to work closely with the black comrades as it had to do with the insistence from southern white women that they would not belong to corps and departments with black members.<sup>11</sup>

Racial attitudes have always structured how Americans remember their Civil War. There were many white women in the WRC who praised the historical memorial of African Americans during that bloody conflict and both white and black members celebrated the twin victories of the war: Union and emancipation. White members extolled the work their black sisters in Dixie performed in observing and honoring the legacies of Union victory and trying to instill to the best of their ability patriotism and national loyalty in the hearts of all southerners. But white WRC members were not racial liberals. The Relief Corps did not take a public stand against Jim Crow. Even the most egalitarian, like Annie Wittenmyer, displayed a white paternalism that depicted and treated African American women inside the organization as not quite the equal of whites. For several reasons, national leaders, many of them northerners, approved and enforced the separation of white and black southern members. The interplay of race and memory shaped for both good and ill the black-white bonds of the sisterhood of the Woman's Relief Corps.



### About the Author

John C. Kennedy is a doctoral candidate in history at Purdue University. He received his Bachelor's degree in history and political science from Indiana University and a Master's degree in history from Purdue University. His research interests focus on Civil War Union veterans and associations, Civil War memory, and women's organizational activism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. He is currently working on a dissertation on the Woman's Relief Corps, auxiliary to the Grand Army of the Republic from 1861-1930.

### Endnotes

1. *Journal of the Eighth Annual Convention of the Woman's Relief Corps, Auxiliary to the Grand Army of the Republic*, Boston, Massachusetts, August 13-14, 1890, 25-26.
2. Annie Wittenmyer, *The Woman's Relief Corps Red Book: A Manuel, Containing the Rules and Regulations of the Woman's Relief Corps, Auxiliary to the Grand Army of the Republic, and Official Decisions of the Several National Conventions* (Boston: E. B. Stillings & Co., 1897), 16-20.
3. For Historians who have focused on race, Civil War memory and Union veterans' organizations see Cecilia Elizabeth O'Leary, *To Die For: The Paradox of American Patriotism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Francesca Morgan, *Women and Patriotism in Jim Crow America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Barbara A. Gannon, *The Won Cause: Black and White Comradeship in the Grand Army of the Republic* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Caroline E. Janney, *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013).
4. For analysis on the Union Cause, see John H. Neff, *Honoring the Civil War Dead: Commemoration and the Problem of Reconciliation* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 8-9; Gary W. Gallagher, *Causes Won, Lost, and Forgotten: How Hollywood and Popular Art Shape What We Know about the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 2-3; Gannon, *The Won Cause*, 7; Janney, *Remembering the Civil War*, 9-10, 51-53, 113, 153, 234-236; Gary W. Gallagher, *The Union War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 1-2, 6. For analysis of the Lost Cause, see Gary W. Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan, eds, *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 1, 4, 12-18; Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause and the Emergence of*

- the New South, 1865-1913* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 8; Caroline E. Janney, *Burying the Dead but Not the Past: Ladies' Memorial Associations and the Lost Cause* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 3; Karen L. Cox, *Dixie Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 4; David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 258-259, 261, 266; Janney, *Remembering the Civil War*, 43, 86-87, 134, 147, 154, 159; *Journal of the Ninth Annual Convention of the Woman's Relief Corps, Auxiliary to the Grand Army of the Republic*, Detroit, Michigan, August 5-8, 1891, 35; *Journal of the Tenth Annual Convention of the Woman's Relief Corps, Auxiliary to the Grand Army of the Republic*, Washington D.C., September 21-24, 1892, 35-36.
5. *Journal of the Twelfth Annual Convention of the Woman's Relief Corps, Auxiliary to the Grand Army of the Republic*, Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, September 12-14, 1894, 41.
  6. *Journal of the Eleventh Annual Convention of the Woman's Relief Corps, Auxiliary to the Grand Army of the Republic*, Indianapolis, Indiana, Sept 6-8, 1893; Janney, *Remembering the Civil War*, 8, 125, 252; O'Leary, *To Die For*, 81-90; Morgan, *Women and Patriotism in Jim Crow America*, 12.
  7. *Services and Activities of the Department of the Woman's Relief Corps Auxiliary to the Grand Army of the Republic 1883-1933*, Department of Kentucky, 131. Grand Army of the Republic and Woman's Relief Corps National Museum, Springfield, IL; *Journal of the Tenth Annual Convention of the Woman's Relief Corps, Auxiliary to the Grand Army of the Republic*, Washington D.C., September 21-24, 1892, 35, 492-493; Anne E. Marshall, *Creating a Confederate Kentucky: The Lost Cause and Civil War Memory in a Border State* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 1-6.
  8. *Journal of the Twenty-fourth Annual Convention of the Woman's Relief Corps, Auxiliary to the Grand Army of the Republic*, Minneapolis, Minnesota August 16-17, 1906, 80-81, 289-300.
  9. *Ibid.*, 292, 298-300.
  10. Morgan, *Women and Patriotism in Jim Crow America*, 37-39.
  11. Gannon, *The Won Cause*, 47-48, 53, 56 ; Wittenmyer, *The Woman's Relief Corps Red Book*, 18-20.

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