

## **Bennett H. Young and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation**

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### **Abstract**

Serving twice as Commander-in-Chief of the United Confederate Veterans, and then holding the title of Honorary Commander-in-Chief for Life until his death in 1919, Bennett H. Young was an instrumental figure in expanding the Lost Cause memorialization movement by actively supporting monument projects, attending dedication events, and giving countless orations. Throughout these activities, Young's leadership and visibility vested him with a great deal of authority when it came to shaping the minds of ex-Confederates on issues related to the Lost Cause and white reconciliation. While these two ideals were, and remain today, fundamentally at odds with each other, Young often intertwined them in his speeches, at once exhorting his audiences to revere the cause of the South but to also put to rest old prejudices for the sake of working toward a modern era of peace and prosperity. This paper examines his position as a leader of the Lost Cause movement, with a particular focus on his address delivered at the unveiling of the Confederate Soldiers' Monument at Arlington National Cemetery in 1914.

**Keywords:** Bennett H. Young, United Confederate Veterans, United Daughters of the Confederacy, Arlington National Cemetery, Confederate Soldiers' Monument, Lost Cause, reconciliation

### **Bennett H. Young and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation**

Bennett Henderson Young was a man of many talents, not least of which was his ability to stir up a crowd. As one newspaper described him following a speaking engagement in 1916 before the United Daughters of the Confederacy in Texas, “That he is one of the most eloquent living Confederates all will concede. He has the marvelous gift of ‘whooping up the boys.’ No living man knows better the tender and heroic spots in the Confederate heart and he knows just how and when to touch. Tall, graceful, with a full suit of gray hair and a complexion that meets all calls, and with a thorough knowledge of Confederate history, his comrades regard him as a regular oratorical crackerjack.”<sup>1</sup> The purpose of his address was to appeal to the women of the UDC for their financial support as he and millionaire cattleman George Littlefield endeavored to erect a gigantic obelisk at the birthplace of Confederate President Jefferson Davis in Fairview, Kentucky. That project, which Young did not live to see to completion, capped a long post-Civil War career for the Louisville lawyer that involved extensive correspondence with former Confederates, serving twice as the Commander-in-Chief of the United Confederate Veterans, publishing books and articles that promoted the heroism of Confederate soldiers and the nobility of Lost Cause ideology, and delivering speeches around the country at memorialization events to encourage veterans and civilians alike to revere Confederate soldiers and their sacrifices but also move forward in the spirit of reconciliation.

While not counted among the great heroes of the Confederacy like Lee or Jackson, Young earned wartime fame throughout the South for his exploits as the leader of the Confederate raid on St. Albans, Vermont, in 1864. Having retreated to Canada, when faced with possible extradition from Montreal and execution by the United States government, Young fled to Ireland, where he completed his law degree before returning to Kentucky in 1868.<sup>2</sup> Once restored to his home state and city of Louisville, Young established a successful law practice and became active in a variety of local and statewide

organizations and activities. For example, he served as President of the Louisville Public Library; was a member of Louisville's noted historical society, the Filson Club; served as one of Kentucky's representatives to the Paris Exposition in 1878; was a member of the state Constitutional Convention in 1890; served as the major general in command of the Kentucky Division of the United Confederate Veterans (UCV); was President of the Kentucky Confederate Home; was President of the Kentucky Institute for the Blind; and was President of the Colored Orphan's Home.<sup>3</sup> Young became involved with the national UCV at the organization's first reunion in 1889, where he proposed Louisville as the host city for the following year's reunion.<sup>4</sup> It was in 1912 that Young, who held the rank of colonel in the Confederate army, was elevated to the title of general when he was elected commander-in-chief of the UCV, a position he held until 1916, when he declined a third re-election to the post. At that point, the organization bestowed upon him the position of honorary commander-in-chief for life.<sup>5</sup>

It was during his service as UCV commander-in-chief that the South's most important monument to date was sculpted and dedicated—the Confederate Soldiers' Monument at Arlington National Cemetery. Until 1898, when President William McKinley proposed “in the spirit of fraternity we should share with you in the care of the graves of the Confederate soldiers,” the burial and commemoration of the Confederate dead was left in the hands of southerners themselves.<sup>6</sup> Ladies' Memorial Associations throughout the South took charge of this responsibility in the aftermath of the Civil War, directing the exhumation and reburial of soldiers in cemeteries, and raising funds for the erection of permanent headstones and memorials.<sup>7</sup> Such graves were maintained by the women of the South, as no Confederates would be buried in any of the national cemeteries or their graves maintained with federal funds. Following McKinley's words of conciliation, a widespread movement for the reinterment of Confederates began, first with the reinterment at Arlington National Cemetery from 1900 to 1901 of soldiers who had died in northern prisons or hospitals. As historian Michelle A. Krowl has observed,

“Though never expressing its approval of the existence of the Confederacy, by agreeing to mark the final resting places of Confederates in the North, the federal government rescued the dead from the dishonor that the neglect of their graves implied.”<sup>8</sup> From 1912 to 1914, southern artist Moses Ezekiel labored on his sculptural masterpiece to be installed in the Confederate section of the cemetery, a monument he entitled “New South,” the funds for which had been raised in a nationwide campaign undertaken by the United Daughters of the Confederacy.<sup>9</sup> As historian Karen L. Cox has described, Ezekiel’s monument “is no less than a pro-southern textbook illustrated in bronze,” including images of the sacrifices made by southern men and women, parents and children, and of the paternalistic and “benevolent” relationship between masters and slaves.<sup>10</sup> At its unveiling on June 3rd, the anniversary of Jefferson Davis’s birthday, the speakers included President Woodrow Wilson; General Washington Gardner, the commander-in-chief of the Grand Army of the Republic; Colonel Robert E. Lee, the revered general’s grandson; and General Bennett Young.

While the national press largely focused on the content of President Wilson’s address, which he had to cut short due to the onset of a severe thunderstorm, there were many who observed the symbolic importance of Gardner’s and Young’s addresses and of the mingling of veterans from both sides of the conflict in the assembled crowd, which numbered above four thousand.<sup>11</sup> As the *Macon Daily Telegraph* observed of Gardner and Young, “These two men, spokesmen for the armies in that great fratricidal war, the most desperate the world has ever seen, told of a reunited brotherhood ready to fight shoulder to shoulder against all the world for country’s sake.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, both men spoke eloquently on the necessity for continued efforts to lay aside past prejudices and move forward as a truly united nation, but Young’s speech is in many ways representative of the greater complexity involved in speaking publicly of the Confederate dead and the Lost Cause.

It is clear from addresses that Young delivered on various occasions prior to the Arlington monument's unveiling that he was, undoubtedly, an unrepentant Confederate. His leadership roles in the Kentucky division of the UCV, and then of the national organization, thus vested him with an enormous amount of influence in articulating for Confederate veterans and civilians alike a vision of southern identity that involved ongoing devotion to the Confederacy itself as though the "Lost Cause" was not truly lost. For instance, in the eulogy he delivered following the death of Winnie Davis, the "Daughter of the Confederacy," in 1899, Young noted that "she was the heroine of all those who loved the Confederate States or had part or parcel in their unparalleled sacrifices for the cause of truth and liberty."<sup>13</sup> In an address entitled "The South in History" delivered at the 1910 UCV reunion in Mobile, Young—speaking on behalf of the History Committee—denounced the "perversion of truth" in children's schoolbooks about the South and the Civil War, and stated further, "we can say without fear of contradiction that the personnel of the armies of the Confederate States had never been and never will be equaled by any nation in any period of history, and that the 250,000 men who died for the Southland were taken all in all, the most magnificent sacrifice that liberty and patriotism have exacted from any people in any age."<sup>14</sup> Once elected commander-in-chief of the UCV, Young used his new leadership position to pen words of encouragement and laudation in the pages of the *Confederate Veteran* magazine, including this passage from the June 1912 issue:

The patriotic spirit of the South is the outgrowth of the work and plans of the United Confederate Veteran Association. The twenty-two Reunions that have been held, the vast number of State and Brigade meetings have created not only the deepest and intensest love for the South and all its traditions and the achievements of its sons, but in its every part have kept at highest pitch the ardor of Confederate spirit and caused the sacrifices of the armies of the South to be told and recorded with such accuracy and such detail that no man or woman of the South can fail to find a life-long inspiration in the grandeur and courage of those who fought for the independence of their native land.<sup>15</sup>

That he came from Kentucky, a slave state that did not secede and fight for the South, made Bennett Young's dedication to the Lost Cause all the more meaningful within Confederate circles. Indeed, not only did Young stridently defend the memory of the Confederacy, but in his efforts along with other Kentuckians to secure the Jefferson Davis Homestead in Fairview and erect the second tallest monument in the country in honor of the Confederate President, he sought further to place his home state squarely within the Confederate tradition. His advocacy on behalf of Confederate veterans was no less striking. Young aided in the establishment of a Kentucky Confederate veterans home, and his public positions within both the Kentucky and national UCV provided him with opportunities to speak openly on subjects that would bolster a sense of pride and validation for the men in gray.<sup>16</sup> The importance of public orations on Confederate pride should not be diminished, for postwar, and especially post-Reconstruction, southern veterans found themselves in a strange liminal space where they existed somewhere between Confederate identity and American identity. Further, organizations like the UCV and publications like *Confederate Veteran* magazine helped to create a far-flung support system whereby veterans could gather, reminisce, and romanticize the war as the passage of time stripped away the immediacy of the pain and horrors of the battlefield.

However, while many of his writings and speeches reveal an unabashed devotion to the South, when it came time to address an audience comprised of veterans, civilians, and statesmen from all around the country, Young was faced with having to find a balance between reverence for the past and ongoing devotion to the cause of the past—competing sentiments, indeed. In his closing remarks, Young praised the ability of American men “to blot out every trace of bitterness or of unjustness” and “to look forward with transcendent visions of the future splendor of our common country.” However, in considering the text of his speech as a whole, his sense of Confederate defiance and dedication to validating the actions of fellow aging Confederates ultimately prevailed. After explaining that only in a republic could the losing side of a great war be allowed to erect so many monuments

to commemorate the heroism of their dead, Young stated plainly for his audience,

At this hour I represent the survivors of the Southern army. Though this Confederate monument is erected on Federal ground, which makes it unusual and remarkable, yet the men from whom I hold commission would only have me come without apologies or regrets for the past. [ . . . ] we still glory in the records of our beloved and immortal dead. The dead for whom this monument stands sponsor died for what they believed to be right. Their surviving comrades and their children still believe that that for which they suffered and laid down their lives was just. [ . . . ] The Confederates can never forswear their flag. It represents that which is most sacred to them.<sup>17</sup>

A number of recent historians of the post-Civil War era and of the Lost Cause have examined the ways in which the women of the South were instrumental in fashioning the idea of the Lost Cause and promoting what they saw as the ideals of the South through memorialization activities—Ladies' Memorial Associations and the United Daughters of the Confederacy were especially influential in driving this process.<sup>18</sup> However, while the women of these organizations raised funds for monument projects, directed Memorial Day activities, and promoted within their own organizations a finely tuned Lost Cause ideology, Confederate veterans like Bennett Young were often the ones to speak publicly on issues related to southern memory and identity. With his gift of eloquence and manifold roles within his community and in Confederate organizations, Young was ultimately an important figure within the Lost Cause movement due to his ability to articulate for his brethren how they should best see themselves and their place within the postwar nation. As the “thin gray line” grew ever thinner with each passing year, reconstructed (and unreconstructed) veterans relied upon organizations like the UCV to maintain connections within their brotherhood of aging soldiers, and upon leaders like Young to articulate that which they needed to hear—that they fought for liberty, not slavery, that their cause had been just, that they had been and remained heroes in the South, that their sacrifices, their suffering, their bloodshed, and their lives were meaningful.

### About the Author

Joy M. Giguere, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of History at The Pennsylvania State University in York, Pennsylvania. Her research interests mainly focus on topics related to commemorative culture – cemeteries, gravestones, public monuments and memorials, the politics of memory (both public and private), and the customs and material culture associated with mourning. Giguere’s research has been published in *The Journal of the Civil War Era*, *Markers: The Annual Journal of the Association for Gravestone Studies*, and a forthcoming article on the Jefferson Davis Monument in Fairview, Kentucky will appear in *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*. Her book is entitled *Characteristically American: Memorial Architecture, National Identity, and the Egyptian Revival* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2014).

### Endnotes

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2. Oscar Kinchen, *General Bennett H. Young: Confederate Raider and a Man of Many Adventures* (West Hanover, MA: The Christopher Publishing House, 1981), 41–80.
3. Bennett H. Young, ed. *Kentucky Eloquence, Past and Present* (Louisville: B. LaBree, 1907), 411; Kinchen, 119.
4. Kinchen, 103.
5. *Ibid.*, 111–112.
6. William McKinley, “Speech before the Legislature in Joint Assembly at the State Capitol, Atlanta, Georgia, December 14, 1898,” in *Speeches and Addresses of William McKinley, from March 1, 1897 to May 30, 1900* (New York: Doubleday, 1900), 159.
7. See Caroline Janney, *Burying the Dead But Not the Past: Ladies’ Memorial Associations & the Lost Cause* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008).
8. Michelle A. Krowl, “In the Spirit of Fraternity: The United States Government and the Burial of Confederate Dead at Arlington National Cemetery, 1864-1914,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 111:2 (2003), 154.
9. Karen L. Cox, “The Confederate Monument at Arlington: A Token of Reconciliation,” in *Monuments to the Lost Cause: Women, Art, and the Landscapes of Southern Memory*,



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10. *Ibid.*, 158.
  11. *Ibid.*, 157.
  12. “Monument to Confederate Dead the Culmination of Many Years of Effort,” *The Macon Daily Telegraph* (June 13, 1914), 9.
  13. Bennett H. Young, ed. *Kentucky Eloquence*, 421.
  14. Bennett H. Young, “The South in History,” *Confederate Veteran* (1910), 6, 18.
  15. Bennett H. Young, “Work of United Confederate Veterans,” *Confederate Veteran* 20:6 (June 1912), 259.
  16. Regarding the Kentucky Confederate veterans home, see Rusty Williams, *My Old Confederate Home: A Respectable Place for Civil War Veterans* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 47.
  17. “Address by Gen. Bennett H. Young at Unveiling of the Monument at Arlington,” *Confederate Veteran* 22:7 (July 1914), 297–299.
  18. For see Janney; Karen L. Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003).

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