

Drew Gilpin Faust, “Race, Gender, and Confederate Nationalism” (1989)

Abstract

In “Race, Gender, and Confederate Nationalism” (1989), [Drew Gilpin Faust](#), professor in the History Department at Harvard University, interprets William D. Washington’s *The Burial of Latané* (1864) in its historical context. Washington, a Virginia artist, completed the painting of the burial of a young Confederate lieutenant late in the war as weariness and disaffection spread among many Confederates, both soldiers and civilians. Faust highlights the importance of the homefront in Confederate nationalism specifically and the Confederate war effort generally.



Introduction

Painted in 1864 by Virginian William D. Washington, the 36-by-46 inch canvas first hung in a small Richmond studio where it attracted such “throng of visitors” that it was moved to the Confederate capitol. There a bucket was placed beneath it for

contributions to the Confederate cause. After the South's defeat Washington arranged for engravings of the painting, which were widely distributed in a promotional effort undertaken by the *Southern Magazine*. These prints became a standard decorative item in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century southern homes, and its popularity has led scholars to recognize the engraving as a central symbol of the Lost Cause.

Yet William Washington's original painting was not designed as a commemoration of defeat and destruction. The work was instead intended to represent a contribution to southern victory. *The Burial of Latané* was created as an icon of Confederate nationalism. The painting defines the terms of the southern effort in a manner intended as much to be prescriptive of public loyalties as it was descriptive of actual events of the war itself. The canvas was a product of the Confederate moment and offers significant insights into the particular meaning of the South's experience in the years between 1861 and 1865.

The Burial of Latané portrays the funeral of a young lieutenant, killed during the legendary ride by Jeb Stuart's cavalry around McClellan's army prior to the Seven Days Campaign in June 1862. William Latané, the only Confederate casualty of the expedition, was left among strangers, southern civilians surrounded by enemy forces and thus unable to summon either his family or a minister to perform the last rites. Slaves built his coffin and dug his grave, and a white Virginia matron read the burial service. The women attending the makeshift funeral were all of some prominence, and the story soon became known in nearby Richmond.

In July a correspondent calling herself "Lucy Ashton" after a heroine of Sir Walter Scott wrote pseudonymously to John Thompson, a former editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger* and a poet already well-known for his popular nationalist verse. Describing the circumstances of Latané's interment and claiming close friendship with the dead lieutenant, Lucy Ashton urged Thompson to offer "homage and celebrity" to the slain soldier. Before the end of the year, Thompson had complied, [publishing a poem](#) that drew directly on Lucy Ashton's depiction of the scene. As wartime residents of Richmond, Thompson and William Washington both participated regularly in the activities of a group called the Mosaic Club, where Thompson frequently offered readings of his latest poetic works. The artist may well have learned the details of the Latané incident at just such a gathering. In the summer of 1864, Washington assembled models for his painting from friends and acquaintances in the circles of well-connected Virginia families.

A student of Emanuel Leutze, Washington was thoroughly educated in the idioms of romantic art, and his canvas is a representative example of the genre of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century "grand style" history paintings. Drawing its inspiration from works like Benjamin West's *Death of General Wolfe* and Leutze's own *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, *The Burial of Latané* operates both as narrative and as social and political allegory. Washington was creating for the new Confederate nation a patriotic symbol fashioned after those his artistic predecessors had earlier offered the people of Britain and the United States.

By the time of the painting's completion in 1864, southerners of nearly every social rank would have been well-acquainted with a public rhetoric defining the war's legitimating goals and purposes. The canvas uses its narrative power to make significant statements about both race and gender, issues of fundamental concern within southern wartime discourse. The story the painting tells thus embodies central themes specific to the ideology of Confederate nationalism.

History painting before *The Burial of Latané* chiefly concerned itself with the behavior appropriate to male heroes—soldiers like those with Wolfe in Quebec or Washington on the Delaware. But the Civil War marked a departure in the nature of military conflict, the appearance of a new intensity in combat that involved whole populations in war's terrible work of death. The enormous and unanticipated size of Civil War armies, the introduction of conscription by both North and South, the unprecedentedly high death rates, and the mobilization of civilian resources to support this extraordinary military endeavor gave the home front a significance it had not possessed in previous wars. The nationalist ideology of the Confederacy was thus directed as much at securing essential civilian support for the war effort as at motivating soldiers to fight. Washington's revision of the conventional history painting to portray women and black slaves was a significant ratification of these changed realities. Unlike Leutze's George Washington or even West's moribund General Wolfe, the only white male in *The Burial of Latané* is already quite dead.

Slaves

A considerable proportion of nationalist discourse addressed the problem of home-front loyalty and support so critical to Confederate success. From the earliest days of the war, widespread fear of black uprising disturbed both the white women left at home among largely unsupervised populations of slaves and men off at the front who worried about the safety of their families. After Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862, fears of black insurrection became even more pointed. Overtly revolutionary action by slaves against the system and its masters was in fact not widespread. But slaves were far from consistently loyal to the South. When Union troops approached, bondspeople fled to northern lines, and nearly 100,000 ex-slaves became soldiers in the Union army. Even those slaves who remained on their plantations resisted and challenged the system of human bondage in a variety of ways, from simple disobedience, to organized work slowdown and stoppages, and even, in some cases, to direct violence against their masters.

Yet slaveowners needed to regard slavery as a benevolent institution, appreciated by blacks as well as whites, in order to justify their struggle for a nation state committed to human bondage. Nationalist ideology acknowledged the centrality of slavery to Confederate purposes and identified the conversion and "remedial advancement" of heathen Africans as God's special mission for His chosen southern nation. In face of the reality of slavery's disintegration all around them, Confederate nationalists articulated a story of black loyalty and contentment designed to assist whites in preserving both their peace of mind and their self-image as benevolent Christian masters.

The Burial of Latané offered a visual rendering of this theme. The Confederacy's mission of converting the African is advanced by this graphic enactment before slave onlookers of the drama of Christian sacrifice and redemption, with a white southern man in the inspirational role. Washington's work thus forcefully emphasizes this central aspect of southern national purpose. Whites and blacks together affirm their commitment to God and nation in a ritual of community worship. Yet the painting depicts hierarchy as well as unity. It is, after all, the white man who has attained Christian martyrdom and the white women and children who are favored by God's light, while blacks remain in literal as well as spiritual shadow. Working together, the races are at the same time kept carefully apart, with the slaves segregated on the left side of the painting. Physically linking them is a blonde child, a representation of southern innocence and purity.

Women

In *The Burial of Latané* not only blacks but white women affirm the righteousness of the southern cause. Confederate ideology readily acknowledged the need to make an honored place for women in the war effort. On one level, women themselves became a purpose of the war, serving Confederate need in a manner not wholly unlike that of the slaves; just war rhetoric urged soldiers to protect their wives and firesides from Yankee invaders in the same way that nationalist discourse insisted on the importance of saving both slaves and slavery from northern assaults. Since more white southern men in fact had wives than bondsmen, and since virtually all had female relatives of some sort, this appeal provided a powerful rationale for southern fighting men.

But women longed for a less symbolic, more active means of assisting in the Confederate cause. Public discussion of women's roles in the wartime South sought to deal with this incipient female dissatisfaction both by specifying active contributions women might make to the southern cause and by valorizing their waiting and sacrifice as an achievement in its own right. Women had already been socialized in an ethic of self-denial, for this was central to the creed of nineteenth-century domesticity that ratified the true woman's service to others as the essence of her mission. But now the specifics of this required sacrifice would be significantly revised to comport with new wartime circumstances. Popular songs urged young ladies to bestow their favors only on men in uniform. Newspaper editorials appealed to women to act as a "conscript guard" and persuade stragglers to return to ranks. Public spokesmen explained that diminishing foodstuffs and shortages of clothing and shoes should be endured for the larger purpose of Confederate victory.

Ideological pronouncements could not change the objective realities of deprivation women faced as the southern economy began to disintegrate under the pressures of total war. But ideology could transform deprivation into sacrifice by imposing on it a meaning that gave it transcendence and purpose. One of the primary means through which this transubstantiation of suffering took place was mourning, for in the rituals of public grief an immediate personal loss could be redefined into a larger individual and communal gain. Without survivors, without mourners, a death is without impact; it is simply nothingness. Only those who remain behind define its meaning by constructing

its relationship to the living. Christianity, of course, offers just such a construction in its promise that death is in fact eternal life for those who believe. Women's tears and grief consecrated the deaths of their men to assure them spiritual and political immortality, ratifying each casualty as a positive contribution not only to Confederate victory, but to a more sacred and abstract notion of Christian martyrdom with which the Cause had become confounded.

The Burial of Latané embodies the larger Confederate discourse about gender by illustrating its exemplary ritual. Women here enact their roles in Christian sacrifice and celebration; the burial is at once a holy and a political communion. Even the clothes of the white ladies emphasize the conjoint religious and political significance of the narrative—two dressed in the black of Christian mourning, the others in the colors of the Confederate flag. And as strangers to the dead Latané, they generalize the particularity of the event to embrace a broader affirmation of Christian and national unity. Latané, like Christ, died for us all.

Like women in a variety of wartime situations—from nursing, to factory or office work, to agricultural management—the matron serving as preacher has in one sense been significantly empowered through her assumption of a position previously reserved to men. Yet her purposes are reassuringly traditional. John Thompson's poem pointedly described her voice as "soft and low," but Washington does not show her speaking at all. Instead, her eyes are cast heavenward; in the absence of terrestrial masters, she seeks her guidance from a divine father; the structures of patriarchy remain. The women in the painting, like the slaves, have chosen to use their autonomy, their new-found independence of direct white male control, to affirm rather than challenge the status quo. The matron-preacher is the instrument through which a male God and a male-authored Book of Common Prayer may speak; the voice she has gained as a result of wartime circumstance is not truly her own.

But, as in its portrayal of slaves, *The Burial of Latané* represented by the time of its completion in 1864 less a model of than a model for women's behavior. Observers described Richmond in that last fall and winter of the war as a frantic round of parties and balls, of self-indulgence and excess that made mockery of the ideal of sacrifice. Women of lesser social standing had by 1864 demonstrated even more striking dissent from the ideals of loyalty and sacrifice *The Burial of Latané* enshrined. Beginning in the spring of 1863, women across the South responded to mounting food shortages by taking to the streets in what came to be known as "bread riots." In violent attacks on stores and merchants, women seized the necessary foodstuffs the wartime economy had denied them.

Conclusion

The divergence between the realities of southern civilian life in 1864 and the ideal portrayed by William Washington is both dramatic and significant. In the years after Appomattox, adherents of the Lost Cause came to view the popular engravings of the Latané scene as a touching rendition of the virtues of loyalty and sacrifice the war had called forth. William Washington knew better. His painting was designed as nationalist

rhetoric, as a persuasive rationale for continued struggle in face of the erosion of Confederate loyalty all around him. Instead of a paeon, it was a plea.

Source

Drew Gilpin Faust, "Race, Gender, and Confederate Nationalism: William D. Washington's *Burial of Latané*," *Southern Review* 25, no. 2 (Spring 1989): 297-307.