



Art, Monument, and Memory: An Introduction

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Abstract

People visit historic sites, museum exhibits, and commemorative objects and places because they are tangible representations of historic events. Individuals, internally defined groups, and communities of all sizes form culturally meaningful connections to these sites through the process of “monument building”—the creation of concrete and abstract, tangible and intangible creative, artistic works. These artistic works in turn purposefully function to perpetuate the memory and ascribed meaning of a site, and the events that took place there and/or the people with whom they associate it. They also function to fix particular interpretations of the site—whether an associated event was good or bad, moral or amoral, ethical or unethical—particular truths, based in evidence or not, that are important to the artist or commissioners of the work. That this can be contentious is evident, and this contentiousness can be amplified when the sites in question are those associated with traumatic events such as military battles and shipwrecks.

Keywords Monument · Memory · Commemoration · Art · Shipwrecks · Battlefields

In 2003, I gave a presentation to an undergraduate mechanical engineering class on the USS *Maine* where I provided a history of Spanish/Cuban/American relations in the late nineteenth century and the role of the vessel stationed in Havana harbor. When I spoke of the night of February 15, 1898, I said something to the effect of, “Then the vessel suddenly blew up.” There was an audible gasp throughout the room. I was taken aback at the response, then someone chuckled and said that no one expected me to say something that dramatic. I asked the class whether anyone had heard of the loss of the warship, its role as a catalyst for the Spanish-American War, or *Remember the Maine, to Hell with Spain!* The room collectively shook its head “no.”

One hundred and five years had passed since the loss of the USS *Maine* and the lives of 260 sailors, yet I was surprised that no one in the class had knowledge of the tragedy. A century ago, most Americans would have known about the USS *Maine*. The vessel and the event were highly commemorated, including formal public burial ceremonies, reinternments at Arlington National Cemetery, and the erection of prominent monuments in both the USA and Cuba over several decades after the war.

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But perhaps I should not have been so surprised. Relatively speaking, these monuments are not famous. They are not destinations of modern public reverence. They are not archetypes of historical artistic forms or associated with a notable artist. Nor are they a focus of modern public debate and discourse. Active remembrance and memorialization of tragic events, even those of significant political, economic, and social importance, fades over time. However, the importance and memory of certain tragic events persist through time and, in many cases, it is the memorialization of the event that is perpetuated rather than the knowledge of the event itself.

Monument building is defined for this thematic issue as the creation of any artistic or curated endeavor that functions to memorialize an event or an associated person, place, or phenomenon. It renders something that was essentially short-lived, happened relatively quickly, or ephemeral permanent, enduring, and repeatable. Conversely, it can make something structural, continuous, or incorporeal into something systematic and root it in both place and time. Examples include:

- the creation of formal and/or unique material culture such as statuary, paintings, music, novels, plays, films, photographs, and historical analyses;
- mass-produced material culture such as copies, costumes, coins, toys, and souvenirs;
- the demarcation of interpreted and protected spaces such as historical parks, forts and battlefields, roads and trails, and living history museums;
- curated stationary or traveling museum exhibits;
- and historical reenactments.

People visit historic sites, museum exhibits, and commemorative objects and places because they are tangible representations of historic events. The tangibility of historic sites still exists even if the objects or buildings cannot be touched or may no longer physically exist. The site may have never existed as a coherent “thing,” perhaps because the location where something happened produced no material culture or the location is fictional. This is because sites occupy space—space with which one can interact. The most modern iteration of this defined space is virtual, such as social media, and is capable of being manipulated by just about anyone.

Individuals, internally defined groups, and communities of all sizes form culturally meaningful connections to these sites through the creation of concrete and abstract, tangible and intangible creative, artistic works. These artistic works in turn purposefully function to perpetuate the memory and ascribed meaning of a site, the events that took place there, and/or the people with whom they associate with the site. They also function to fix particular interpretations of the site—whether an associated event was good or bad, moral or amoral, ethical or unethical—particular truths, based in evidence or not, that are important to the artist or commissioners of the work. It is evident that this can be contentious, and this discord can be amplified when the sites in question are those associated with traumatic events such as military battles and shipwrecks.

A 2003 thematic issue of *Historical Archaeology* titled “Remembering Landscapes of Conflict” explores this social process (Shackel 2003). In it, Blades (2003: 53) identifies the dichotomy of the defined historical landscape that attempts to show a visitor what happened at a site, and the memorial elements imposed on the landscape that attempt to tell how it should have been, or its true importance. With regard to Civil War monuments in Florida, Lees and Gaske (2014: 4) show that it is important to confront contentious monuments that are part of modern community landscapes and public spaces given their



Fig. 1 The Henry Hill Monument, Dedicated to the First Battle of Bull Run. Erected June 1865. Manassas National Battlefield Park; Posted to Facebook, July 31, 2014

appropriation and repurposing of symbolism by groups with different motivations and the need to reconcile this with the intentions of those who created them.

Manassas National Battlefield Park illustrates this phenomenon well and is an example of how this process of memorial commemoration can evolve and compound over time. The first major battle of the Civil War was the First Battle of Bull Run at Manassas, Virginia, which took place in July 1861. Confederate forces definitively won the battle. Almost immediately after the war ended, Union Army units built a monument commemorating the Union soldiers that died during the battle. This was one of the first military monuments to the war. It was built in a Southern state for a battle the South won (Fig. 1). This act, all at once, claimed this space both as sacred and as belonging to the North. The act of commemoration and re-commemoration at Manassas has evolved over time, both incorporating and removing images, people, and objects to meet the needs and intents of the commemorators, and perpetuates historical narratives today.

One popular method of transposing the past onto the present is by manually lining up a physical photograph onto a modern viewshed, incorporating the presence of the creator, anchoring the composite image to the present.¹ By then posting this image (Fig. 2) to the park's Facebook page, viewers are presented with three layers of commemoration: the monument, the historic image of the monument's dedication, and the posting of the compilation to social media. Shortly after the dedication in 1865, John Townsend Trowbridge drew a picture of the dedication ceremony from the dedication photograph (Fig. 3). He edited and added elements further anchoring the commemoration to the northern cause by adding soldiers and an American flag. In Fig. 4, we see a nearly identical monument, erected near the first monument to commemorate the second battle at Manassas, made

¹ For many examples, see the compilation website <http://dearphotograph.com> (accessed May 2, 2019).



Fig. 2 Partial photograph of the Henry Hill Monument Dedication, June 11, 1865, held over the monument in the present. Original photograph by Gardner, and published by Philip and Solomons, Washington, D.C. Manassas National Battlefield Park; Posted to Facebook December 7, 2015

more martial with the addition of two veterans in uniform, possibly representing men who fought in the battle in contemplation of the past. A fourth layer of commemoration is added to the photoshopped image of Civil War veterans posing in front of the first monument transposed onto an image of the site in the present day. The addition of the interpretive wayside cements the modern interpretation of the site's importance (Fig. 5). The image on the wayside is the same as that of the historic image imposed onto the modern photograph of the memorial. The park may have chosen this image because it is both striking and evocative, but through this, the park confirms the historic interpretation of the site and monument as a memorial sacred to the north. In this last compound image of the monument, which includes the monument, the historic photograph, and the wayside, the presence of the interpretive ranger ties together the uniformed past and present showing the transformation of the site from a traumatic, martial space into one whose history is firmly rooted in a park setting (Fig. 6).

Unlike with battlefields, the commemoration of many shipwreck events occurs without access or a geographical tie to the location of the event. The sacred space of commemoration is created, therefore, through the act of the commemoration itself including, for example, the display of artifacts from an archaeological site, the recording of witness testimony, or the creation of artistic works.

For example, *Nautilus* was en route from Galveston to New Orleans in 1856 when it wrecked in a gale in the Gulf of Mexico. All but one passenger perished in the accident. A decade after the event, Mark F. Bigney, a poet and associate editor of the local newspaper,

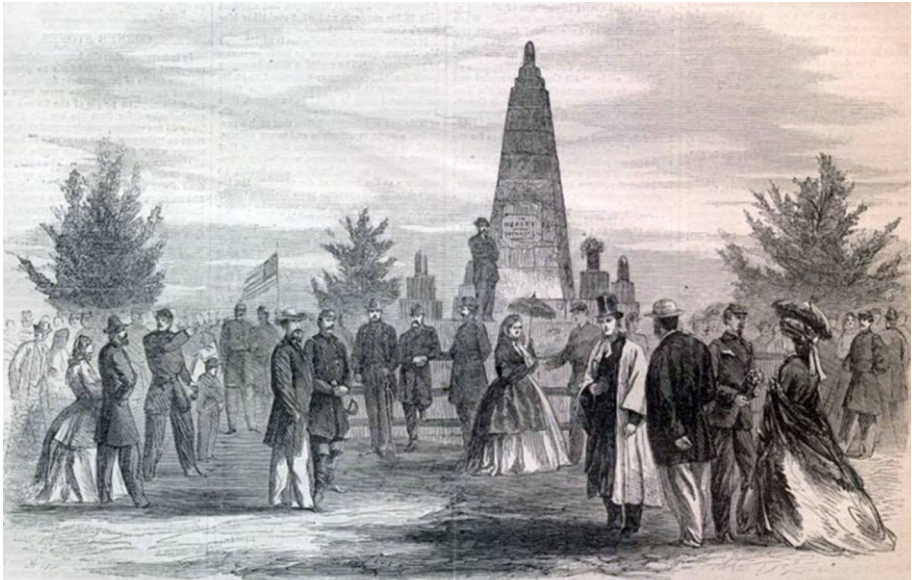


Fig. 3 Monument on the Field of the First Battle of Bull Run. Original photograph by Gardner, and Published by Philip and Solomons, Washington, D.C. Harper’s Weekly Vol. IX No. 444, pg. 401. Published July 1, 1865. Manassas National Battlefield Park; Posted to Facebook, March 20, 2015

New Orleans Times, published a volume of poetry that included the long poem “The Wreck of the Nautilus.” The second stanza of the poem:

Woe to the mariner! His oak-ribbed bark
 No more can serve as a protecting ark!
 Mastless and rudderless she drifts, a wreck,
 While the fierce billows thunder on her deck,
 Still clamourous (sic) for victims! Woe to thee,
 Thou peopled plaything of the raging sea! (Bigney 1867)

Bigney would have known of *Nautilus’s* wrecking, as he lived in New Orleans at that time, and many in the city, especially a newsman, would have heard the report of the loss immediately. Considering that the impact and importance of the loss was essentially local in nature, many others after the poem was published would have known only the poem and not the event it commemorates.

The commemoration of shipwrecking events may portray an aftereffect of the event, and not the shipwreck itself. For example, *Medusa* was a well-known survivor of the Napoleonic Wars. In 1816, it wrecked when it became stranded on a sandbank off Senegal during French colonization efforts. Several of the ship’s complement boarded a makeshift raft but after nearly 2 weeks at sea, only 15 of the 147 who initially boarded the raft survived. An account of the harrowing events on the raft, including violence and cannibalism, were published shortly thereafter (Savigny and Corréard 1818), and from this narrative Théodore Géricault painted his masterpiece in 1819, *The Raft of Medusa* (Fig. 7). The painting premiered in the formal Salon of 1819 and is now on display at the Louvre. This painting is meant to be emotionally evocative, not a representation of reality, and as such, says very little about history, but a lot about art and its role in commemoration. The



Fig. 4 The Monument Erected at Groveton, on the Field of the Second Battle of Bull Run. After a photograph by Gardner. Harper's Weekly Vol. IX No. 444, pg. 404. Published July 1, 1865. Manassas National Battlefield Park; Posted to Facebook, July 6, 2015

formal setting of its presentation, then and today, controls public consumption, as the location is far removed from the location of the events depicted. Unlike with the events at Manassas, or even the wreck of *Nautilus*, it is likely that few if any consumers of the painting have a direct connection to the events associated with it.

While the memory of famous events, such as the wrecking of *Medusa*, tends to fade over time, some manage to persist or even grow in fame. For example, the wrecking of the whaleship *Essex* in 1820. The loss of *Essex* was the inspiration for Herman Melville's 1851 novel *Moby Dick*, which has been interpreted several times in the last century in both film and television. It is possible that, as with *Medusa*, knowledge of the art would have subsumed remembrance of the shipwreck; however, in this case, interest in the history of the novel has reinvigorated interest in *Essex* and its wrecking. This began with the publication of the nonfiction book *In the Heart of the Sea* by Nathaniel Philbrick (2000), which has subsequently also been interpreted in theater and film. The modern interest in the history of *Essex* is a direct result of the popularity of the novel.

The specific location of the wrecking of *Essex* is unknown, and archaeologists have not actively searched for the remains of the shipwreck. There are, however, examples of interest in finding and studying shipwrecks as a direct result of their memorialization in film. For example, the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, as part of the greater Atlantic Deepwater Canyons project (Ross et al. 2017), searched for *San Demetrio*, a merchant tanker torpedoed during WWII while part of a merchant convoy. *San Demetrio*



Fig. 5 Photograph of Union soldiers posing in front of the Henry Hill Monument, June 1865, blended with the monument in the present. A National Park Service interpretive wayside featuring the same photograph is in the foreground. Manassas National Battlefield Park; Posted to Facebook, September 27, 2013

was targeted as an exploration goal because of its fame, immortalized in the 1943 film *San Demetrio London* (Jack Irion personal communication, 2016).

Why have certain commemorated events survived as famous moments in history? Is it because the event was fundamentally important to the course of history or is it because the act of commemoration persisted through time? For the latter, the act would have a high level of intrinsic artistic merit, be a focal point or place marker/maker on the socio-historic/sociogeographic landscape, or have persistent meaning to the culture that either created or inherited it. Alternatively, a shift in any of these identities may significantly impact the act of memorialization and even the memory of the event itself.

Monument building also plays an important role in the choices historians and archaeologists make when deciding which subjects to investigate and study. It focuses interest on particular events. It variably influences the investment in and selective preservation and accessibility of historical and archaeological sites, artifacts, and archives as well as informing the research interests of institutions. It guides sources of public and private funding. It also influences potential markets for professional output such as academic and trade publications or documentary productions, for example, during an event's anniversary.

Important anniversaries often amplify public interest in an event and its associated sites and can spur support and even funding for historical and archaeological work, the products of which are often designed for public consumption. A recent example is the 75th anniversary of the attack at Pearl Harbor. James Delgado timed the release of his and his colleagues' book on the submarine shipwrecks at Pearl Harbor (Delgado et al. 2016) to coincide with the anniversary (James Delgado, personal communication, 2016). The research team also had the opportunity to dive on several of these sites with the ROV



Fig. 6 Photograph from the Henry Hill Monument Dedication held over the monument in the present with Historic National Park Service Interpretive Wayside and National Park Service Ranger. Manassas National Battlefield Park; Posted to Facebook, October 9, 2012

system of NOAA’s *Okeanos Explorer*, and the video was streamed live to the public via the internet (Fig. 8). Understanding the importance of the association of these dives with the anniversary of the attack to the viewing public, the team consciously decided to narrate the dives to the audience, rather than treating it as typical research project audio. He stated “I programmed it more like the TV host I used to be once upon a time, and that’s why I went back and forth, *a la* CNN style, to the various “talking heads” in the [control center], and the team with me on *Okeanos*. We did not script it, but I wanted a flow, and we had already decided to end it at 07:55 a.m. Hawaii time, to coincide the beginning of the aerial attack on Battleship Row, and to fade out as live coverage of that began (James Delgado, Personal Communication, 2016).” Because of these decisions, the impact of the projects and the products was amplified through broad media exposure.

The four articles presented in this thematic issue discuss creative monument building in historic and contemporary societies. Jackson and Vrana discuss the creation and development of Great Lakes folk music performance as a tool for the perpetuation and dissemination of shipwreck history. They show that in many cases, local knowledge of historic shipwreck event is remembered primarily through song. Monument building for memorialization of those lost in tragic events, especially of those whose remains were



Fig. 7 The Raft of Medusa. 1818–1819. Théodore Géricault

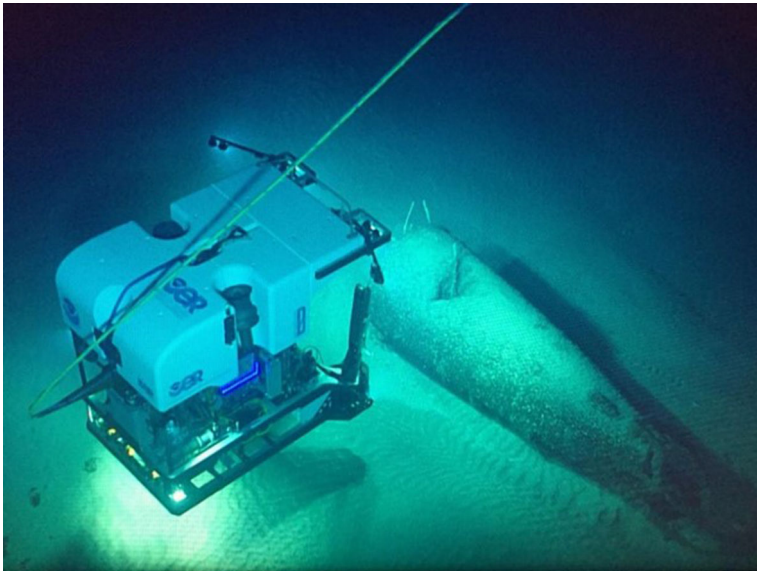


Fig. 8 The ROV Deep Discoverer investigating a Japanese WWII mini submarine on December 7, 2016, exactly 75 years after it was sunk by the USS *Ward*. Image courtesy of the NOAA Office of Ocean Exploration and Research

buried far from home or never recovered, is often a highly gendered practice (Lees and Gaske 2014; Stewart 2011). Phelan and Adamski explore the loss of HMAS *Sydney*, torpedoed off the coast of Australia during WWII, and the role the families of the lost sailors played in locating the wreck and developing a monument to the loss on shore. The loss of HMAS *Sydney* and its impact to Australian society is well remembered today; however, the memory of wartime battles, victories, and losses can wane over time, and the relative effect of the perceived importance of its associated monuments may also change. Smith discusses the evolution in form, location, and state of preservation of the Tripoli Monument, built to remember those who fought in one of the earliest American Naval engagements, the Barbary Wars of the early nineteenth century. While the memory of the battles lives on in the highly recognizable official Hymn of the U.S. Marine Corps, the stone monument is all but forgotten by the general public, and its care and placement a regular subject of debate within the Navy. Lastly, Fontenoy presents a form of monument building vastly different from the previous studies—the transformation of history into pop culture or “lore” and commercial, consumable material culture, through the example of the early eighteenth-century pirate Edward Teach, or Blackbeard, and the shipwreck of his most famous vessel, *Queen Anne’s Revenge*.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The author declares that she has no conflict of interest.

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