

Institutionalising the Infantry: American Civil War Soldiers and the Long-Term Effects of Conflict



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Introduction:

Southern society struggled to come to terms with its defeat in the American Civil War by the North, and with its reintegration into the Union. The greatest reminders of defeat were perhaps those who were themselves scarred, physically and psychologically, by the war. In contrast to their Northern counterparts, however, Federal support was not forthcoming to the Southern 'rebels' who had fought against the Union. The common soldier of the Confederacy – or 'Johnny Reb' – was seemingly caught between two worlds. Formerly seen as an upholder of the values of the "Old South" and the Confederacy, he was now charged with the task of finding a place for himself in a "New South".

The Robert E. Lee Camp, #1 Soldiers' Home in Richmond, Virginia, was one among a number of similar institutions set up throughout the former states of the Confederacy for such men. According to the charter of the organization, the purpose was to:

"Perpetuate the memory of our fallen comrades and to minister, as far as practicable, to the wants of those who were permanently disabled in the service; to preserve and maintain that sentiment of the march, the bivouac and the battle field"



During the early years of the Lee Camp Home, the 'inmates' maintained a quasi-military routine, forming for regular drills and inspections.

"I have not made 20 Dollars since I left the Home. Accomac is a hard place for old People. If you and the home turns me down I do not no what to do as what will become of me. I can not work for my age and infirmities. If I could get a job there is 10 youngsters to Root me out."

(Richard F. Ames, 29/08/1910)

"I am now in my 90 year and will not have long to wait for the last Roll call and with the hundred thousand Brave Boys that wore the gray and sleep in unknown graves I two shall approach my Grave and the records across the mystic River will not be at fault or depended on to show war record."

(John Wesley Blizzard, 21/10/1935)

"I am convinced it is the best posable place for him in view of what I know of the Home and from what my father has told me, it is neat and proper that he spend the few remaining years of his life among those with whom he marched and fought and in death to rest with his comrades in Virginia's sacred soil, "On fames eternal camping ground." "

(Charles H. Buchanan, 19/07/1922)

"I was born in Va and in 1867 I drew an arm from the state of Va that being of no avail, I was paid \$60 or \$65 in lieu of that arm... I am now 67 years old I [have] not been able to do one days work for past five years I have been boarding in Va past three years I caught great many cold + thought at one time I would die"

(William B. Andrews, 07/12/1908)

Aims:

- This project examined the long-term emotional and economic effects of conflict on Confederate veterans and revealed their personal and emotional responses to defeat.
- This project provides a pathway to a more sophisticated understanding of Southern memory and warfare, as expressed through the "living monuments" of its veterans.
- This research has revealed the extent to which veterans themselves were agents, sometimes unwitting pawns, in the game of Confederate memorialisation, revealing the extent to which social and cultural expectations of war veterans, and conceptions has changed.



Method:

- Applications to the Home consisted of an official form, which was central to making judgements about the economic, social, and medical plight of the veterans.
- Many veterans also included letters, which often contain more illustrative information about the effects of war upon these men, the ways they perceived themselves, and the way they responded post-war society.
- The effects of war precluded such men from resuming former ways of life – lost limbs especially undermined their economic potential.
- Such profiles would be judged against prevailing notions of what a former soldier of the Confederacy should be, allowing a view of what Southern society expected of its veterans. Southern notions of honor and manhood meant that such letters often sought to justify the need for the veteran to turn to charity.
- Letters from friends or relations provided additional insight into the social and economic circumstances of many families in the post-war South, and the extent to which notions of familial care were destroyed by the effects of war.



The Last veterans to live at the Home: John H. Shaw (left), J.W. Blizzard (centre), and W.R. Thomas (right).

Conclusions:

- The applications to the Camp Lee Home reveal the devastating social, psychological, economic and emotional impact of America's Civil War on its Confederate veterans.
- The accounts of the men and those writing on their behalf show the extent to which many veterans were hampered by social and familial expectations of them - encouraged to live up to values evocative of the past in order to receive help, whilst also attempting to survive in a radically altered present.
- The Lee Camp Home attempted to care for those veterans unable to provide for themselves. The rules and regulations of the Home, however, enforced the retention of martial values, revealing just one of the ways in which the South's veterans were enlisted to serve the 'Lost Cause'. Whilst this affirmed the status of these men as "living monuments", providing them with an active symbolic role in the New South, it also reveals the impossibility for these men of escaping their military past.
- The research revealed antisocial behaviour among a significant minority of the men, mainly through drunkenness, absence without leave, or refusing to clean their accommodation. This attests to the reluctance of the soldiers in prolonging their status as Confederate soldiers beyond the terms of their service.
- This research revealed that this nineteenth century version of 'Help for Heroes' was constructed within socially prescribed limits. In this context the scars of war could not be so readily erased.