

David Weinfeld
Rowan University

Southern Jews and the Lost Cause

It is well known that prior to the Civil War, some Jews in the United States owned enslaved people, and that many Southern Jewish men fought for the Confederacy. Less well known is the story of Jewish commemoration of the Lost Cause. The Lost Cause was the notion that the Confederacy was a just and honorable experiment, that slavery was benign and even beneficial to enslaved African Americans, and not the real cause of the Civil War, which was in fact about states' rights. According to Lost Cause adherents, the noble Southern slaveocracy had been defended by a valiant Confederate military with saintly and heroic generals, Robert E. Lee the saintliest of them all. The Lost Cause was propagated in different ways, through textbooks, though memorial ceremonies, and through art.

In this paper, I argue that since the Reconstruction Era that followed the Civil War all the way through the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and beyond, some Jews in the American South participated in Lost Cause commemoration in order to better fully integrate into the white Christian majority. At the same time, they commemorated the Lost Cause in such a way that preserved and even celebrated their particularly Jewish religious identity, focus on Jewish Confederate soldiers as well as leaders like Secretary of State Judah P. Benjamin. They also invoked Jewish tropes and themes in their Lost Cause commemoration.

I argue that through Lost Cause commemoration, southern Jews solidified a specifically Southern Jewish identity, an identity tied to an entire region rather than a specific city or state. This was true not only for Jews who had deep roots in the antebellum South, but also for those who came after the Civil War and their descendants, and even Jews who migrated from the North. Many of these relative newcomers came to embrace the Lost Cause.

The story of Jewish Lost Cause commemoration is also about whiteness. Despite significant anti-Jewish sentiment in the United States, Jews were defined as white, and defined themselves as white all across the US, but especially in the Jim Crow South where the racial divide loomed largest. Jewish whiteness enabled Jews to participate in Lost Cause commemoration, augmenting their sense of belonging in the South in a way denied to African Americans.

For this symposium, I will highlight specific moments of Lost Cause commemoration when Southern Jews either interacted with African Americans directly or explicitly addressed the topic of slavery. For example, in 1960 African Americans held a sit-in at Thalheimer's, a Jewish owned department store in Richmond with a segregated lunch counter. After Thalheimer's desegregated, the store's leadership offered moderate opposition to the Lost Cause in their participation in the Civil War Centennial from 1961-1965. Similarly, during the Civil War Centennial in 1965, Jewish organizers sought to include African Americans in a pageant about Richmond's wartime history, demonstrating moderate sympathy for the Civil Rights movement while still advancing the Lost Cause.

I will also look at Jewish writing the celebrated Jewish Confederate Secretary of State and plantation owner Judah P. Benjamin that downplayed the horrors of slavery, along with remarks by Richmond Reform rabbi Edward Calisch that did the same. The goal of this paper is to demonstrate how for Southern Jews, it was easier to demonstrate sympathy with the plight of African Americans under Jim Crow, and even in some cases to advance Civil Rights, than it was to publicly contradict the ideology of the Lost Cause.