

Race and Southern Memory: The Gravestone of Louis B. Middleton

The gravestone of Louis B. Middleton located in the Emanuel AME Cemetery has long been an object of curiosity, and even contention. Middleton's gravestone is a military-issue headstone inscribed with his name and "Confederate Veteran." Even though scholars generally agree that African Americans did not fight for the Confederacy, Middleton's headstone complicates narratives of race and Civil War memory. The history of Louis Middleton's life and headstone is especially relevant during the current national reevaluation of Confederate memorialization. While Middleton was memorialized as a Confederate soldier, he actually served his master Robert Bentham Simons during the war as a teenage camp attendant and cook. Middleton's Confederate gravestone reflected the prevalence of the Lost Cause narrative during the early-twentieth century as white Southerners sought to construct narratives of slavery as a benevolent institution. As a part of the construction of this narrative, whites gave financial support to African Americans who they paternalistically viewed as having been loyal to their masters and the Confederacy during the Civil War.

There is little information available about Middleton's life prior to the Civil War due to the lack of documentation of enslaved people. Middleton was likely born between the mid-1840s and early-1850s. Based on the slave schedules of the 1860 U.S. Census, it appears that the Simons family purchased Middleton between 1860 and 1862. Robert Bentham Simons, Middleton's master during the Civil War, did not own slaves in 1860 according to the federal census. In 1860, the nineteen-year-old Robert Bentham Simons was a clerk for his father, merchant Thomas Grange Simons.¹ Thomas Grange Simons kept seventeen enslaved people on his plantation in St. Andrews Parish in 1860, none of whom were males with ages close to

¹ 1860 U.S. Census, Charleston, South Carolina, Population Schedule, Page 124; digital image, Ancestry.com, accessed November 14, 2017.

Middleton's.²

In February 1862, Robert Bentham Simons enlisted in Company A of the Palmetto Guard Artillery, also known as Company A of the South Carolina Siege Train and Company A of Manigault's Battalion, South Carolina Artillery.³ He brought Middleton, who was approximately thirteen years old, with him as a camp attendant.⁴ Middleton served as a cook for the duration of the war.⁵ As a cook, he provided sustenance for the artillerymen defending the Charleston harbor. Major Edward Manigault's Siege Train predominantly defended James Island, firing on the Union Swamp Angel battery located on Morris Island, as well as on the Union troops attempting to take Battery Wagner during the battle in 1863. The Siege Train also attempted to capture the USS *Marblehead* in the Stono River.⁶

After the Civil War, Middleton lived with Robert Bentham Simons's younger brother John. In 1870, John's household included his wife, their seven children, four relatives, Scottish housekeeper Isabella Stewart, African American cook Maria Williams, and Middleton's family. Two of the members of the Middleton family who may have been Louis's parents included Quash, a carpenter and Cecelia, a nurse. Kate, a domestic servant, and Fanny, a fifteen-year-old school girl, may have been Middleton's sisters. Middleton was approximately twenty-five years old at the time and employed as a brick mason and plasterer. Besides Fanny, Middleton was the

² 1860 U.S. Census, Charleston, South Carolina, Slave Schedule, Page 419; digital image, Ancestry.com. accessed November 14, 2017.

³ R. Bentham Simons, "Charleston County Application for Pension for Service in Company A, Palmetto Guards," October 31, 1919, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, accessed November 19, 2017.

⁴ "Camp Attendant Dies," *Charleston News and Courier*, October 5, 1935, accessed November 19, 2017, Newsbank.

⁵ Louis Middleton, "Charleston County Application for Pension for Serving as Cook Under R. B. Simons in Company A, S.C. Siege Train," April 24, 1923, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, accessed November 19, 2017.

⁶ Warren Ripley, ed., *Siege Train: The Journal of a Confederate Artilleryman in the Defense of Charleston* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1986), ii.

only member of his family who could read and write, although he had never attended school.⁷

By 1880, Middleton had married Martha, a washer woman. The two resided in a house on Mill Street.⁸ Their neighborhood became part of the Medical University of South Carolina and Roper Hospital campuses.⁹ Louis and Martha were able to purchase a house at 4 Chestnut Street, now Hagood Street, by 1889.¹⁰ They struggled to be able to afford their home, almost losing it to foreclosure in 1897.¹¹ Louis and Martha Middleton had two daughters, Ruby, who was born in 1905, and Emily, born in 1908.¹² Despite the family's working-class status, Ruby graduated from the nationally-recognized Avery Normal Institute in 1923.¹³ By 1930, Ruby became a teacher at a county school and Emily a teacher at a public school in Charleston. Ruby had married the Reverend William Forsythe, with whom she had a son named Burns. However, she continued to live with her elderly parents as a caretaker until their deaths in 1935 and 1937.¹⁴ Ruby Middleton Forsythe went on to become a nationally-recognized educator, receiving four honorary doctorates over her lifetime.¹⁵

Since 1923, Middleton had been receiving an annual twenty-five-dollar pension as a

⁷ 1870 U.S. Census, Charleston, South Carolina, Population Schedule, Page 145; digital image, Ancestry.com, accessed December 10, 2017.

⁸ 1880 U.S. Census, Charleston, South Carolina, Population Schedule, Page 12; digital image, Ancestry.com, accessed December 10, 2017.

⁹ Sheet 1, 1884, Charleston, South Carolina, *Digital Sanborn Maps 1867-1970*, accessed December 10, 2017.

¹⁰ *Charleston, South Carolina, City Directory, 1889*. Retrieved from Ancestry.com, accessed December 10, 2017.

¹¹ "Sherriff's Sale," *Charleston News and Courier*, April 7, 1897, accessed December 10, 2017, Newsbank.

¹² 1920 U.S. Census, Charleston, South Carolina, Population Schedule, Page 8A; digital image, Ancestry.com, accessed December 10, 2017.

¹³ Program for Avery Institute Commencement Exercises, 23 May 1923, Avery Normal School Memorabilia Collection, Avery Research Center, College of Charleston, Charleston, SC, USA.

¹⁴ 1930 U.S. Census, Charleston, South Carolina, Population Schedule, Page 154; digital image, Ancestry.com, accessed December 10, 2017.

¹⁵ "A Teacher in its Truest Sense, Ruby Forsythe," African American Registry, accessed December 11, 2017, http://www.aaregistry.org/historic_events/view/teacher-its-truest-sense-ruby-forsythe.

Confederate veteran from the state.¹⁶ In 1923, the South Carolina Legislature extended pensions for poor Confederate veterans to African Americans who had served for at least six months. There were so many applicants that the legislature passed an amendment in 1924 to limit eligible applicants to camp cooks and body servants. The 1924 amendment excluded the teamsters and manual laborers who were arguably more important to the Confederate war effort than the cooks and body servants who served their individual masters.¹⁷ African American applicants like Middleton were required to have their applications signed by whites who could attest to their loyalty to the Confederacy and good behavior after the war. Middleton's former owner Robert Bentham Simons signed the application to his "own knowledge that the applicant served the State of South Carolina for more than six (6) months during the War between the States under R. B. Simons and remained faithful to the Confederacy during the said war and that his conduct since then has been such that will entitle him to a pension under the Act of 1923."¹⁸ The extension of pensions to formerly enslaved camp cooks and body servants contingent on their loyalty to their masters and their perceived behavior of upholding the antebellum racial status quo reflected the Lost Cause narrative embraced by white Southerners during the early-twentieth century. Paralleled in popular culture like the 1915 movie *Birth of a Nation* by D. W. Griffith and the 1936 novel *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell, the Lost Cause narrative argued that Southerners defense of state's rights was the primary cause of the Civil War.¹⁹ The Lost

¹⁶ "Camp Attendant Dies," *Charleston News and Courier*, October 5, 1935, accessed December 11, 2017, Newsbank.

¹⁷ "South Carolina Archives Series Description: Confederate Pension Applications, 1919-1938," South Carolina Department of Archives and History, accessed December 11, 2017.

¹⁸ Louis Middleton, "Charleston, Charleston County Application for Pension for Serving as Cook Under R. B. Simons in Company A, S. C. Siege Train," April 24, 1923, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, accessed December 11, 2017.

¹⁹ *Birth of a Nation*, directed by D. W. Griffith (1915; David W. Griffith Corp.), film and Margaret Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind* (1936; repr., New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008).

Cause narrative minimized the centrality of slavery to the war and sought to depict it as a benevolent institution.²⁰ Offering pensions to personal camp attendants helped in the construction of the Lost Cause narrative by showing the benevolence of Southern whites to African Americans who were perceived to have been loyal to both their masters and the Confederacy. Aging African Americans like Louis Middleton used the pension system to their financial advantage.

After declining in health for many years, Louis Middleton died on October 1, 1935. His family and friends buried him at Emanuel AME Cemetery on October 4th.²¹ Using the well-established framework of the Lost Cause narrative, Ruby Middleton Forsythe applied for a Confederate veteran's headstone from the U.S. War Department. Paralleling the 1923 Act, the War Department recognized camp attendants as veterans, furnishing the deceased's family with a free headstone.²² Ruby Middleton was only responsible for transporting the headstone from the depot and installing it at the cemetery.

Louis Middleton's headstone demonstrated the pervasiveness of the Lost Cause narrative in the United States during the early-twentieth century. Both the South Carolina pension system and the U.S. War Department headstone application process showed the financial and bureaucratic lengths white Americans, especially Southerners, went to in order to construct narratives of the benevolent master-slave relationship. Under these systems, the white master-class financially and materially rewarded African Americans for their loyalty and service. Working-class African Americans like Louis Middleton and Ruby Middleton Forsythe used

²⁰ John R. Neff, *Honoring the Civil War Dead: Commemoration and the Problem of Reconciliation* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 7.

²¹ "Funeral Notice – Middleton," *The Charleston Evening Post*, October 3, 1935, accessed December 11, 2017, Newsbank.

²² Louis B. Middleton, U.S., Headstone Applications for Military Veterans, 1925-1963, digital image, Ancestry.com, accessed December 11, 2017.

these systems to their own economic advantage.

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