On December 20, 2010, some 300 people paid $100 each to attend a “secession ball,” a celebration of South Carolina’s secession from the Union on the 150th anniversary of the event. Billed by the event’s sponsor, the Sons of Confederate Veterans, as “a joyous night of music, dancing, food and drink,” the party was held at Gaillard Auditorium in the heart of downtown Charleston, only blocks from the site of the original secession convention. Among the attendees were prominent business leaders, several state legislators, and a Charleston city councilman.

The gala, which included a theatrical re-enactment of the signing of the Ordinance of Secession, attracted extensive media attention. It also drew 150 protestors, white and black, including the Rev. Joseph Darby, vice president of the Charleston NAACP, who denounced the “celebration of a war which was fought for the right to maintain slavery.” But Mark Simpson, a commander of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, offered a different view of the event — and of secession: “It was not about slavery... We honor the men who wore the gray. We can understand what animated them to defend their homes.”

The secession ball and accompanying protest symbolized the ongoing divisions about the Civil War — a contest that has never quite ended for Americans, and that certainly tends to rekindle passions when its major anniversaries arrive. These latter-day battles are not fought with bayonets and Dahlgren artillery but with arguments about secession and the larger meaning of the war.

The recent events in Charleston marked the start of the Civil War sesquicentennial, which was officially launched April 12 with a re-enactment of the firing on Fort Sumter. So prepare yourself for four years of public debate over the meaning of the war.

And as we prepare for the commemorations of Manassas and Shiloh, Gettysburg and Vicksburg, perhaps it makes sense to put these modern-day events — the ones at the Gaillard Auditorium and the ones to follow across the state and nation — into historical context by examining some of the ways that the memory and meaning of secession and the war have changed over the years.

By Steve O’Neill
Broader Issues

To it; of themselves they could never have produced the same results.”

and governor at the end of the war, said candidly in 1865, “Other con-

College, said in 1860, “Cotton is not our king — slavery is our king. Slavery

the chief cause of South Carolina’s decision to secede in December 1860.

in the state. On the contrary, historians

how historians have interpreted secession

against the protestors is not mirrored in

secession ball celebrants in Charleston

case on the question of secession in South

tions tend to overwhelm even the most

of the academics, who too often have written

“know” about secession and the causes

tangential role in shaping what people

fears of the last 150 years than the events

The declaration of the Causes of Secession a defense of constitutional principles

in the culture of South Carolina, the South and the

Slaveholding was one of many in the 1860s and ’70s

Still, in the sesquicentennial secession celebration in Charleston

the Lost Cause” emerges

The economic and political reunion of

In response, the white South and white

of rising nationalism confirmed by the War of

the Somber and Steadfast tone of

the primary evidence is overwhelming, starting with the

the Somber and Steadfast tone of the

in seceding from the Union, they had acted

The theories for a constitutional defense were essentially practical.

the claims of slavery and abolition in South Carolina, among them property

in a defense of liberty, a sense of manly honor, and fear of a race war

why they seceded and in the various secession conventions they

of the academics, who too often have written

the secessionists knew

the secessionists knew

the late 1860s and early 1870s

the late 1860s and early 1870s

the somber and steadfast tone of

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Ballads and Breeches

for one another rather than for the general public,

a more powerful reason is that

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history books, school curricula and monuments to the dead.

Three groups stand out. The United Confederate Veterans, founded in 1866, were former soldiers who promoted the Lost Cause most actively on former battlefields and maintained a commemorative style of remembrance that was most tangible physically — monuments and statues to Confederate soldiers and battlefields. The United Daughters of the Confederacy, founded in 1894, and the Sons of Confederate Veterans, founded in 1896, were even more determined than the veterans themselves to make concrete and permanent the memory of the war and the sacrifice of their ancestors. Between 1894 and 1911 (the 50th anniversary of the start of the war), the UDC and the SCV sponsored pagants, parades and commemorations, and built what is today the most lasting legacy of their efforts — monuments and statues to the Confederate cause that dot the Southern landscape from Virginia to Texas.

Perhaps a more powerful effort to promote the Lost Cause was what Confederate heritage groups called the “true history” movement, an organized push to write, publish, and regulate the history of the Civil War and the Confederacy. From 1900 to 1915 or so, through the work of the UDC and a host of affiliated women’s clubs, the tenets of the Lost Cause became a catechism and a creed against which books, speeches, lectures, and classroom lessons were measured. Teachers, authors and politicians were scrutinized to see if they conveyed the proper message about secession and the war, as well as the correct narratives of loyal slaves and steadfast soldiers.

The Lost Cause and its Northern counterpart, a sort of reification, remained the predominant historical “memories” into the middle of the 20th century. Although individual historians, such as David Duncan Wallace, took issue with some particularities of the Lost Cause, the broad trends in the interpretation and writing of academic history did little to challenge popular perceptions of the war. Nor were the dominant narratives challenged much by cultural and historical trends. African Americans remained second-class citizens at mid-century, however, both the memory of emancipation and the place of Blacks in contemporary American society were about to change.

The events surrounding the 100th anniversary of the Civil War in 1961 illustrate the unpredictable relationship among popular memory, historical scholarship and contemporary culture.

In 1960 and 1961, careful plans for a unifying commemorative event. The model for equality desired by the organizers of the Lost Cause and national reconciliation interpretations of the war. In 1957, in the midst of the civil rights movement and at the height of the Cold War, Congress authorized a Civil War Centennial Commission, with 21 white appointees led by retired Gen. Ulysses S. Grant III, the grandson of the Union general. The commission was given money but not power and was perceived as an umbrella group over state commissions, which would actually carry out the commemorative events. As a result, the CWCC depended on state commissions in the South controlled by adherents to the Lost Cause, who had found renewed strength and purpose in combating the push for civil rights.

President Dwight Eisenhower, imbued with the spirit of the Cold War, Congress authorized a Civil War Centennial Commission in 1960, to conduct celebrations around the 100th anniversary of the Civil War. Between 1957 and 1961 Eisenhower was forced to send troops to desegregate Little Rock’s Central High, and subsequent federal court decisions began the desegregation of the South.

With the question of African-American’s freedom and citizenship in the headlines and in the minds of the nation, the CWCC planned to hold its convention at the segregated Fort Sumter Hotel in Charleston. When the management of the hotel refused a reservation request from a black military service band, the Northern state commissions threatened a boycott. U.S. Grant held firm against the Northern states’ protest. However, newly inaugurated President John F. Kennedy intervened, and in one of the first decisions of his presidency he moved the CWCC convention to cramped quarters at the nearby Charleston Naval Base. The episode proved a public relations disaster for the CWCC, and the official commemorations were about to change.

The author, a 1982 graduate, has been a history professor at Furman since 1987. Illustrations from North Wind Picture Archives.

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**A DISASTROUS 100TH ANNIVERSARY**

and a fight to save the Union — and to essentially ignore emancipation.

What some might have considered a sound decision in 1957 looked very different by the spring of 1961, when the CWCC, the nation and South Carolina prepared to commemorate the war’s 100th anniversary. Between 1957 and 1961 Eisenhower was forced to send troops to desegregate Little Rock’s Central High, and subsequent federal court decisions began the desegregation of the South.

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**STILL A DANGEROUS BATTLEGROUN**

Today the sesquicentennial events have begun. Once again we renew our interest in a war whose footprints were fixed 150 years ago.

Since the 1961 centennial, expositions, films, documentaries and commentaries have emerged to further our understanding — and, in some cases, to further obscure our understanding — of an era when the nation was divided against itself. In the four years to come, we can expect hundreds of public events across the South and nation — re-enactments, symposia, exhibits, films and plays — that will shape the historical memory and meaning of the war for a new generation.

And with the past as our guide, we can expect contemporary issues, needs and circumstances to weave their way into those upcoming commemorations, most likely in ways that will stir emotions, awaken regional biases and open old wounds.

It is telling that both the Obama administration and Congress have refrained from funding or appointing a national commission to commemorate the war for a new generation.

Then again, they don’t need the difficult lessons of the past, the blood and the damage the Civil War remains a dangerous battleground — even as the shooting recedes further into the past.

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**ORDINANCE OF Secession**

A Convention of the People of the State of South Carolina, begun and held at Columbia on the Seventeenth day of December in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty.

An Ordinance To dissolve the Union between the State of South Carolina and other States, united with her under the compact entitled “The Constitution of the United States of America.”

We, the People of the State of South Carolina, in Convention assembled do declare and ordain, That the Ordinance adopted by us in Convention, on the twenty-third day of May in the year in our Lord One Thousand Seven hundred and eight, whereby the Constitution of the United States of America was ratified, and also all Acts and parts of Acts of the General Assembly of this State, ratifying amendment of the said Constitution, are hereby repealed; and that the union now subsisting between South Carolina and other States, under the name of “The United States of America,” is hereby dissolved.

Done at Charleston, the twentieth day of December, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty.