



The Opinion Pages

DISUNION

Graffiti and the Civil War

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Disunion follows the Civil War as it unfolded.

In September 1864, Cpl. Robert I. Hogue was stationed with his regiment, the 8th Ohio Volunteer Cavalry, at an unassuming church known as Morgan's Chapel in Bunker Hill, W.V. Mustered into service earlier that year, the unit had seen hard fighting throughout the Shenandoah Valley that summer. A month later, it would participate in the decisive Union victory at Cedar Creek. But in this interstitial moment, the soldiers had some down time.

As others had before him, Hogue whiled away the time by writing on the wall. After signing his name and that of his regiment, Hogue wrote, “[Who]ever shall read this wall, please remember me in prayers and excuse me for writing this in the house of God, for I should not of written on these walls had it not of been all marked up.”

Throughout the war, Union and Confederate soldiers wrote graffiti on the walls of houses, churches, tunnels and caves, using whatever implements they had on hand – mostly charcoal or pencils, but also burnt sticks or knives. Soldiers left behind their names and regiments, crude pictures and jokes, political statements, taunts to the enemy and prayer requests. Writing graffiti was a soldier’s way of validating his existence in the maelstrom of war, of literally making a mark on the world while he was still in it. It was also a social act, not unlike posting a status update on social media today. Markings often begat responses, spurring lively debates.

Generally, graffiti was the work of the common, but literate, soldier, as opposed to higher-ranking officers, who presumably had more pressing matters to attend to. “It was really the grunts who were out there marking time,” says Edie Wallace, a

Hagerstown, Md., historian who has researched and spoken about Civil War graffiti near Harpers Ferry and Antietam. “The graffiti allows you to get into the minds of these men.”

Wartime graffiti can be found at places like the Robert E. Lee estate in Arlington, Va., known as Arlington House; Chatham Manor in Fredericksburg, Va.; the Andrew Johnson Home in Greeneville, Tenn.; and the Grand Caverns in Grottoes, Va. At Arlington House, for example, a soldier named John Chapman of Company K, 28th Pennsylvania, carved his name and regiment high on a wooden beam in the mansion’s attic, along with the date 1862. Ever since Union soldiers first occupied the Arlington estate in 1861, they had felt little compunction about deforesting and defiling the site, so Chapman may have considered his nearly hidden graffito a small offense by comparison.

At Morgan’s Chapel, another soldier scribbled, “The 91st Ohio got dinner on the opposite [side] of the creek July 19, 1864,” an utterly banal sentiment, until one considers how grateful the soldier probably was for the break and the repast. Such inscriptions functioned as “an informal testimony of a soldier’s presence in, and journey through, the wartime landscape,” according to the British scholar Katherine Reed, whose 2011 master’s thesis for the University of Manchester focused on American Civil War graffiti. They promoted camaraderie and loyalty, she writes, and yet the graffiti was still an invasive, violating act, which bolstered soldiers’ egos even as it offended sensibilities. In 1862, a letter to the Burlington, Vt., Free Press explained how Confederates had written graffiti in the historic Falls Church in Virginia, which had ties to the storied Fairfax and Washington families. “The walls are covered with the scrawled names of rebel soldiers, written in charcoal on the plaster,” the correspondent lamented. “We silently left the sacred, but desecrated, place.”

Many markings reflect the deep sectional divisions in the country before and during the war. One exuberant taunt in Morgan’s Chapel reads, “Look Out Johnny Reb for we are a-coming / And by the help of God / we are bound to lick you traitors.” Underneath it, someone else wrote a pointed response: “You did not at Lynchburg and Winchester.” Another message in the church says, “Down with traitors, treason, and copperheads.” After joining the Union as a new state in 1863,

West Virginia had become a haven for the Copperhead movement, led by conservative Democrats who opposed black suffrage and other supposedly “radical” policies espoused by the Lincoln administration. The Union soldiers passing through town were clearly aware of this border state’s split loyalties.

In Harpers Ferry, a private named Michael Smith went a step further, depicting a man hanging by his neck in a doorframe with the inscription, “The last of poor Jeff Davis.” (That still doesn’t compare to the Union graffiti at the Old Court House in Winchester, Va., which puts an extended curse on Jefferson Davis that has him being swallowed by a shark that is then swallowed by a whale that in turn ends up in hell with “a south east wind blowing ashes in his eyes for all eternity.”)

Still, the Tennessee governor and future president Andrew Johnson may have suffered the most at the hands of graffiti artists during the Civil War. At his Tennessee house, which was occupied by both sides during the war, soldiers wrote, “Andy you’d best skedaddle” and “Shame on You Andy.” Others called him “Traitor of the South” and “Guilty of Treason.”

Perhaps the best single site for Civil War graffiti is the so-called Graffiti House in Culpeper, Va., which served as a hospital after the 1863 Battle of Brandy Station and as an administrative office later in the war. Used by both Union and Confederate troops throughout the war, the house eventually became covered with signatures, drawings and messages from both sides. One prominent signature was left by a Confederate private named Michael Bowman, who made sure to scrawl his name larger than anyone else’s, and in a handsome, swooping script.

One of the most striking items at the Graffiti House is the so-called Dancing Lady, a drawing that depicts a small-waisted woman wearing a dress and a ribboned hat, lifting her hems as if she is stepping over a mud puddle. Reed believes the image, and particularly the baring of the woman’s ankles, was meant to be provocative, especially when coupled with a cartoon bubble from the woman’s mouth that says, “I am turned over to Lieut. Gale.” This was, therefore, a way to anonymously mock superior officers for their supposedly loose off-duty morals, Reed asserts. Elsewhere in the building, a portly civilian man is depicted near the rear end of a horse with the caption, “I smell a rebel.” It is very possible that the

drawing was done in two parts — with someone making an innocuous drawing of the man or the horse, and someone else finishing it off with an insulting twist.

Another noteworthy drawing at the Graffiti House is the Maryland Scroll, an elaborate pencil drawing of a parchment with the names of James Breathed's Battery, part of J.E.B. Stuart's Horse Artillery, completed on March 16, 1863. The very next day, the battery participated in the Battle of Kelly's Ford, notable for the loss of Stuart's artillery chief, Maj. John Pelham. A large signature bearing Stuart's name can also be seen at Graffiti House, but whether it was written by an admirer or the man himself hasn't been authenticated.

At Blenheim, an 1859 house in Fairfax, Va., that was commandeered by the Union Army for use as a hospital, the attic is almost entirely covered in Civil War-era graffiti such as names, regimental numbers and pictures, along with other markings in hallways and lower rooms. Now protected as a historic site, Blenheim has been the focus of considerable research into the lives of the soldiers who stayed there. To date, more than 115 soldiers have been identified and verified, and more than 40 of them were immigrants, many originally from Germany. Also visible are drawings of ships and cannons, a Confederate flag carved in the wall with a knife and a crude image of a naked, pregnant woman, her genitals in full view.

Although sex was certainly present in Civil War graffiti, other, less pleasant topics were generally avoided, especially slavery, suffering and death. The reason is difficult to know for sure, but one possibility is that, for however brief a time, the church, house or cave being defaced was also the soldier's shelter — his home for an hour or a night — and therefore not a place where soldiers wanted to be reminded of the most difficult aspects of the war. There was time enough for that in the era's copious newspaper articles, songs and letters home.

By writing their names on a wall, by making light of their situations and by taunting their enemies, these soldiers were simply announcing themselves — and their very aliveness — to everyone who came after them.

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Sources: Katherine Reed, "American Civil War Graffiti (1861-1865): Conflict,

Identity and Testimony"; Burlington Free Press, March 21, 1862; Richard Orr Curry, "A House Divided: A Study of Statehood Politics and the Copperhead Movement in West Virginia"; Edie Wallace, "Marking Time: Civil War Graffiti in the Catoctin Region," Catoctin History, Fall 2003; The Houston Chronicle, April 15, 2005; Kirsten Travers, "Civil War Graffiti House, Brandy Station, Virginia: Graffiti Exposure and Preservation Assessment" (unpublished report); Brandy Station Foundation web site; National Park Service web site for Arlington House.

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