

Stephanie Veech

Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies

Historic Parks and Monuments:

Bedford Forrest Park and the Controversy of Sacred Space versus Public Place

I. Introduction

In Memphis, Tennessee, a large equestrian statue of Nathan Bedford Forrest stands resolute in Bedford Forrest Park, now called Health Science Park, keeping a watchful eye on Union Avenue. The statue stands unassumingly, often being passed by without much care or concern, and there is little to no identification of the park, the monument, or the history surrounding both. Below the statue, though, lie the bodies of Nathan Bedford Forrest and his wife. Every year, local Memphians and guests alike, visit the grave to honor both Lieutenant General Forrest and Confederate War Veterans. They decorate the statue of Forrest with red and white colored wreaths, and surround the monument with American and Confederate flags, engaging the space and imprinting it with their personal memories. Bedford Forrest Park is considered sacred space to these people, as well as to many Memphians who have long family histories in the South, and often Confederate Veterans throughout their ancestry. Yet, the general public often finds the park to be polarizing, exclusionary, and controversial, due to the history many feel the park represents. Because of this, the park is currently amidst a major controversy of sacred space versus public place.

In the case of Bedford Forrest Park, many are attempting to make the space more public – removing the exclusionary title and giving the park a less controversial name, hence the currently unofficial name of Health Science Park. However, yet what many fail to realize is that the name of the park is inconsequential when viewing the larger history of the park, the monument, and Memphis' history during and after the Civil War. Regardless of what the park is named, the history of Nathan Bedford Forrest, the Civil War, and Memphis cannot change, and therefore the discussion surrounding the park rests more on

the discussion of history and public memory than on the attempt to find a less polarizing name for a Memphis green space.

II. Defining Sacred Space

The term ‘sacred space’ is most often used in reference to religion. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Human Geography, sacred spaces are those “places and sites that have special religious significance and spiritual qualities.” Yet, in discussing the sacredness of a particular space, the subtext of the discussion always relays back to the politics of the place’s construction and the arguments surrounding it. Many would argue that sacred spaces encompass much more than just religion, and that this subtext of politics and contestation are the defining traits of what makes certain areas “sacred.” The question is, how does one define what is a sacred space? Is a space that I find sacred, sacred to you as well? And what are the implications for an area that one would consider a sacred space, while others consider it simply a public place?

A place’s sacredness often comes, primarily from its history. Our memories shape our understanding of our history. Yet we fail to realize that our memories are not constant or fixed. Historian John Gillis makes the point that our memories are constantly changing – not as individuals, but as a national or regional identity. And we are constantly “revising our memories to suit our current identities.”¹ But identity, like memory, is not fixed. Memory and identity are subjective. They are based on the time, the region, and the people. The relationship between memory and identity is history. Our history shapes the memories we maintain and the identity with which we choose to align. National and

¹ John R. Gillis, ed., *Commemorations: The politics of National Identity* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), 3.

regional memory, along with commemorative activity, is a result of social and political movement and actions. “Commemorative activity,” Gillis argues, “is by definition social and political, for it involves the coordination of individual and group memories, whose results may appear consensual when they are in fact the products of processes of intense contest, struggle, and in some instances, annihilation.”² Neither memory or identity are pure, they are shaped by the influences surrounding them, much like with the Lost Cause Movement of the late 1800s and early 1900s, remembering and honoring the Southern struggle during the Civil War and a means by which to represent the Southern identity. Traces of the Lost Cause can be found every where in the Southern United States – be it a street name, a park, or a statue. And yet, because memory and identity are in constant flux, our modern interpretation and understanding of these memorials is also changing. “New generations visit memorials under new circumstances and invest them with new meaning. The result is an evolution in the memorial’s significance, generated in the new times and company in which it finds itself.”³ Yet, monuments take no shape if they are not engaged. Should a monument remain self-contained and detached from our lives, it no longer serves as a reminder of the past. The “site alone cannot remember,” rather it is our engagement with the site that makes it a memorial, creating a sacred space. But as our engagement with a space changes, so does the places sacredness.

According to Historians of Religion, David Chidester and Edward Linenthal, “the sacred is nothing more or less than a notional supplement to the ongoing cultural work of sacralizing space, time, persons, and social relations. Situational, relational, and frequently,

² Ibid., 5.

³ James E. Young, ed., *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1993), 3.

if not inherently, contested, the sacred is a by-product of this work of sacralization.”⁴

Therefore, a sacred space is anything we make sacred. The sacredness of a place is dictated by our making sacred the time, place, and persons involved. Much like our memory and identity shift, the sacredness of a place continuously shifts and changes, what was once considered a sacred space to some, may no longer be considered sacred by others and vice versa. In taking inventory of these places, Chidester and Linenthal continue, would include places such as “cities; homes; schools; cemeteries; hospitals, asylums, prisons; tourist attractions; museums; and even shopping malls” because at any point in American history, these places were considered sacred by some. While these places differ vastly, they all represent a site, which was once a place for “intensive interpretation.”⁵ In America in particular, the sacredness of a place is no longer always based on the religiosity of the place, but often based on the patriotism of a place. Here, our battlefields are memorialized, our monuments are to great political leaders gone before their prime, and we commemorate days to remember our greatest military successes and our fights for freedom. Our national identity and memory has come to represent some of our most sacred spaces.⁶

But not all memories are included in our understanding of national identity, this being one reason that sacred spaces are often, if not always, contested spaces to some degree. Sacred space is contested, simply, for the reason that it is space. Any space that people, or groups of people, care about maintaining will inevitably be contested. In the case of Bedford Forrest Park, what makes the space contested is that fact that it is cared for

⁴ David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal, eds., *American Sacred Space* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Indiana State University Press), 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶ *Ibid.*

by groups of people. If no one showed concern for upholding the sacredness of the park, there would be no debate surrounding its sacredness. Because of this, the area being used, while it may be meant for commemorative purposes, in some way excludes a number of people or groups from that place, only representing a specific memory and identity. While spatially, it may be public, the sacredness of the space is established for a specific group or specific memory, inevitably establishing a divide in the community by leaving others out of the conversation. In this sense, the space itself is always under the ownership of specific persons or groups of people. The ownership of the sacred space both asserts its sacredness and the controversy of the space itself. The space is not simply constructed, but “owned and operated by people advancing specific interests.”⁷ Additionally, a “space is sacred if it is at risk of being stolen, sacred if it can be defiled.”⁸ In the case of monuments, vandalism is a great risk. While those whose memory is represented in the monument could not conceive of defiling the space, those whose memory is not included, do not have the same respect for the sacredness of the area. The space, therefore, is always at risk of being defiled or being contested. And yet, these risks are also defining characteristics of what makes the space sacred.

III. The Complicated History of Nathan Bedford Forrest

Nathan Bedford Forrest was born on the 13th of July in 1821, in Chapel Hill, Tennessee. At the age of sixteen, Forrest’s father died, leaving him as the figurehead for his family of six brothers, three sisters, and pregnant mother. In 1842, Forrest left his mother and siblings to work in Hernando, Mississippi for his uncle’s business. After his uncle’s

⁷ Ibid., 15.

⁸ Ibid., 19.

death in 1845, Forrest took control of the business in Hernando until 1851. Following Forrest's work as a businessman in Hernando, he sought greater opportunities in Memphis, Tennessee. There, Forrest became a wealthy slave-trader and real estate tycoon. He was quickly accepted in the Memphis community and elected as city alderman on multiple occurrences. His business ventures earned Forrest such a large wealth, that he was considered one of the richest men in the South at the time. In the wake of the Civil War, Forrest enlisted in the Confederate Army as a private and, after authorization from Tennessee Governor Isham G. Harris, raised a battalion of men for war.⁹

During the course of the Civil War, Nathan Bedford Forrest rose through the ranks from private, to Lieutenant General, and is still the only soldier to have done so in the span of one war. Lieutenant General Nathan Bedford Forrest engaged in a total of fifty-four battles. All, but his final battle, were Confederate victories. While Forrest's battles were considerably smaller than many of the major Civil War battles, he was considered by all to be a great soldier, especially considering that Forrest never attended military academy like most other generals at the time. Confederate soldiers praised Forrest, while Union soldiers feared going into battle against him. Following the war's end, Forrest continued to be a prominent businessman and political figure in the South, so much so that various organizations clamored for Forrest's recognition. He became affiliated with one such organization that forever left his name tarnished in the public eye.¹⁰

The Ku Klux Klan is often referred to as the "the single worst domestic terrorist organization in the history of the United States," known especially for its heinous crimes

⁹ John Allan Wyeth, *That Devil Forrest: Life of General Nathan Bedford Forrest* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 1-2.

¹⁰ Ibid.

during the 1950s and 1960s, often culminating in the public lynching of blacks in the United States, primarily in the South.¹¹ The Ku Klux Klan was founded shortly after the end of the Civil War in December 1865 in Pulaski, Tennessee. The Klan was founded by a group of ex-Confederate soldiers who got their name from the Greek word *Kuklos*, meaning “social circle.” Its founding is often associated with Nathan Bedford Forrest, despite the evidence proving otherwise. Advocates for Forrest stress that the Lieutenant General had no part in the founding of the organization and that the original Ku Klux Klan was established to fight against tyrannical reconstruction in the South and is unrelated to the present-day Ku Klux Klan and social terrorism. And yet, the Klan’s current politics precede them – famous for their ideals of white supremacy and their violence towards people of color.

A year after the group’s establishment, Nathan Bedford Forrest was elected in absentia to be the president, or Grand Wizard, of the organization. According to the Nathan Bedford Forrest Historical Society, however, there “is no corroborating evidence...that Forrest ever assumed the position or was even a member.” By 1868, Forrest saw evidence of violence breaking out in the Klan and “using his well-respected influence, ordered that the Klan be disbanded, and it ceased to exist.” In 1871, Congress investigated the Ku Klux Klan and its members and concluded that there was “no evidence that Forrest was associated with, rode with, or led the Ku Klux Klan, whatsoever.”¹²

While there may be no determinable evidence proving Forrest’s involvement with the organization and definitive evidence that Forrest attempted to disband the

¹¹ Rocco Castoro, *Triple Hate: KKK vs. The Crips vs. City Council*, documentary film (2013; *VICE Newsroom*), youtube.com.

¹² Nathan Bedford Forrest Historical Society, *The Three Klans of America*, (nbforrest.org) 1.

organization, present day Klan members still idolize Forrest for his role as the first Grand Wizard, contributing further to the complicated history and opinions surrounding the Lieutenant General. For the Ku Klux Klan, the modern memory of Nathan Bedford Forrest shapes their view of him as much as it shapes the public's perception.

Forrest's present day reputation also comes heavily from his involvement with Fort Pillow and the alleged massacre that occurred there in 1864. "He was a marauder, a murderer, and at Fort Pillow he executed hundreds of black soldiers," declared Justin Sledge of the Anti-Fascist group ANTIFA. The events at Fort Pillow killed more than half of the black Union soldiers there, even after their surrender. Following the events, Congress chose to investigate the war crimes that happened at Fort Pillow in the raid led by Lieutenant General Forrest. The Congressional Investigation, led by Union General William Tecumseh Sherman, set out with the intention to "investigate Forrest, charge Forrest, try Forrest, convict Forrest and hang Forrest." And yet, the Congressional Investigation found that there was no definitive evidence of a "massacre" at Fort Pillow in Tennessee. The massacre, said the final report of the investigation, was a series of "isolated incidents along the riverbank" that Forrest ceased when he arrived on-scene.¹³ Historian John Cimprich, who published a book on the topic of Fort Pillow in 2011, also concludes, "Forrest's exact role in the incident is unclear, but black soldiers, many of whom had surrendered, were slaughtered by troops under his command."¹⁴

The lesser-known history of Forrest contributes to his mixed perception by the public. *The Memphis Daily Avalanche* wrote in July of 1875, a speech given by Lieutenant

¹³ *Reports of Committees of the House of Representatives for the Second Session of the Forty-Second Congress, 1871-1872* (Charleston, SC: Nabu Press, 2012) 7-449.

¹⁴ Cameron McWhirter, "U.S. News: Memphis Park Sheds Confederate Name," *Wall Street Journal* (Brussels, Belgium: Wall Street Journal, Europe, 20 February 2013) 8.

General Forrest at a convention for the Jubilee of Pole Bearers, a political and social organization for blacks in the post-Civil War era. Forrest was the first white man invited to give to key note speech for black organization. Before his speech, he was introduced to the audience and presented a bouquet of flowers “as a token of reconciliation, an offering of peace and good will.” What’s more was Forrest gracious acceptance of the flowers and his statements following:

We were born on the same soil, breath the same air, live in the same land, and why should we not be brothers and sisters.... I want to elevate every man, and to see you take your places in your shops, stores and offices.... We have one Union, one flag, one country; therefore, let us stand together. Although we differ in color, we should not differ in sentiment.”¹⁵

The motives of Forrest’s speech cannot be guaranteed today. Many speculate that his advocacy for blacks to join the workforce was simply a ploy to get blacks in blue-collar type jobs, in order to elevate whites to positions of power. While this sentiment cannot be proven in present day, Forrest’s speech, unknown to many and highly regarded by some, only contributes to the confusion surrounding his character.

Regardless of Forrest’s involvement, or lack thereof, with the Ku Klux Klan and the Fort Pillow Massacre, the reputation Forrest gained through these events have had a lasting impact on the public’s perception of him, making him an extremely controversial figure in American history. In the forward to John Allan Wyeth’s biography of General Forrest, Dr. Albert Castel, professor of history at Western Michigan University, speaks of Forrest as a controversial figure in history, both hated and admired, stating:

¹⁵ Nathan Bedford Forrest, “Speech to the Independent Order of Pole-Bearers Association” (speech: Memphis, TN: Annual Pole Bearers Association Convention, July 5, 1875).

Sherman called Nathan Bedford Forrest a “devil” and promised a brigadier general promotion to major general if he kill him. Two generations later the southern Agrarian writer Andrew Lytle described him as the “spiritual comforter” of his people because during Reconstruction he headed the Ku Klux Klan. Today blacks in Memphis regard the equestrian statue of him as an offense to their race and are demanding that it be removed. On the other hand, to Civil War buffs, the vast majority of whom are white, he is a hero with a status rivaling that of Lee, Grant, and Stonewall Jackson. Hated and admired, feared and glorified when alive, he remains more than a hundred years after his death a controversial figure and no doubt will continue to be.¹⁶

Castel wrote his forward to Forrest’s biography in 1989, a year after one of the first major debates surrounding the park and the monument broke out. In 1988, the University of Tennessee Medical School began to utilize the park space for their students. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) objected the decision fearing that increased usage of the space would also increase the prominence of the Forrest statue. Maxine Smith, executive secretary of the Memphis chapter of the NAACP stated that “the presence of this park is a daily slap in the face to blacks throughout the city and we intend to see that it’s removed.”¹⁷ Despite their arguments, twenty-five years later, the monument is still standing in Bedford Forrest Park, now known locally as Health Science Park, but not without great debate.

¹⁶ John Wyeth, *That Devil Forrest*, xv.

¹⁷ Court Carney, “The Contested Image of Nathan Bedford Forrest,” *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 67, no. 3 (Southern Historical Association: 2001), 626.

IV. The History of Bedford Forrest Park

Bedford Forrest Park is located on Union Avenue in Memphis, Tennessee. The land was dedicated by the City of Memphis for the purpose of establishing a park in Forrest's honor. The land had previously been the location of the Memphis City Hospital, and after its demolition, was sanctioned by the Memphis Legislative Council "to be known as 'Bedford Forrest Park,' in honor of our distinguished hero, General N. B. Forrest." The park and its name were established through a Memphis City Ordinance signed by Mayor John Williams and passed on November 21, 1899.¹⁸

The monument to Forrest began construction in 1901 following the Eleventh Annual United Confederate Veterans Reunion held in Memphis. The reunion was held in May of that year and culminated with the laying of the cornerstone of the Nathan Bedford Forrest Monument in Forrest Park. Funds were raised through the entertainment committee of the Veterans Reunion as well as from the proceeds gained from the use of Confederate Hall during the four years following the reunion. The cornerstone of the monument was officially laid at 2:30 in the afternoon on May 30th, 1901.¹⁹

Planning for the Nathan Bedford Forrest Monument began long before 1901. The construction of the monument was led by the Forrest Memorial Association. The Association itself was founded in 1877, the year Nathan Bedford Forrest died, and was officially incorporated in November of 1891. Yet, the monument was not only planned as a response to Forrest's death. 1877 was also the year that the Reconstruction era is argued

¹⁸ Memphis Legislative Committee, "Ordinance Establishing Bedford Forrest Park," (Legal Ordinance; Memphis, Tennessee: 1899), 1-6

¹⁹ Chris Armstrong, "Memphis Recaptured By Confederate Army: The Eleventh Annual United Confederate Veterans Reunion of 1901," *The West Tennessee Historical Society Papers, vol. LII* (Memphis, TN: West Tennessee Historical Society, 1998), 5-6.

to have officially ended, and Southern conservatives resumed control of state governments. This was the year the Lost Cause Movement gained momentum in the South. The Lost Cause Movement describes a time of celebration and “regional enthusiasm.” The war was viewed as a military defeat, but not a defeat of Southern values and beliefs. Southerners were no longer mourning their losses of the Civil War, but lauding the genius and dedication of Confederate War heroes like Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and Nathan Bedford Forrest.²⁰

The construction of the Nathan Bedford Forrest monument and the dedication of Bedford Forrest Park, was not simply an means to honor the brilliancy of a Confederate General who found his success in Memphis, but it was also a political move on part of a local, Southern government, to assert regional pride following a period of Northern dominated reconstruction. White southerners at the time of the Lost Cause Movement, considered Forrest to be the epitome of southern ideals and values. Therefore, he perfectly epitomized what it meant to be southern. Forrest Park was more than a memorial to the war, but a sacred space where Southern memory identity and continued to stand strong, a sentiment that still stands popularly today.

The construction of the monument lasted from 1901 to 1905 and cost a total of \$32,359.53, roughly \$870,615 in today’s U.S. Dollars. The Forrest Memorial Association provided \$25,000 to the budget, which they began receiving donations for with the organization’s inception.²¹ The equestrian monument, sculpted in bronze by Charles Henry

²⁰ Karen L. Cox, “Lost Cause Ideology,” *Encyclopedia of Alabama*, www.encyclopediaofalabama.org (Auburn, Alabama: Alabama Humanities Foundation, 2008) last updated June 18, 2013.

²¹ *The Forrest Monument: It’s History and Dedication, A Memorial in Art Oratory and Literature* (Library of Congress) 11-16.

Niehaus, is one of the largest in the world today, standing a total of 21 feet and six inches tall. Inscribed on the south front of the monument is “Nathan Bedford Forrest, 1821-1877; on the west front, “erected by his countrymen in honor of the military genius of lieutenant-general Nathan Bedford Forrest, Confederate States Army 1861-1865”; and on the east front, a poem written by Virginia Frazer Boyle, “Those hoof beats die not upon fame’s crimsoned sod, But will ring through her song and her story, He fought like a Titan and struck like a god, And his dust is our ashes of glory.”²²

On November 11, 1904 during the final stages of the monument’s construction, the body of Nathan Bedford Forrest and his wife Mary Ann Montgomery Forrest were disinterred from their resting place at the historic Elmwood Cemetery in Memphis and moved to their current location beneath the monument.²³ The relics of Forrest and his wife located under the memorial further contribute to the sacredness of the park.

May 17, 1905, local Memphis newspaper, *The Commercial Appeal*, chronicled the events of the unveiling of the completed monument. According to the article, the event was incredibly well received amongst Memphians and visitors alike. The monument dedicated to Forrest was presented on behalf of the Forrest Memorial Association by Senator Thomas B. Turley, and was accepted on behalf of the City of Memphis by Mayor Williams. The article continued in claiming “the incident will be recorded among the important events in the history of the city.” An additional editorial from the *Memphis News- Scimitar* wrote that the monument was not meant to honor Forrest’s actions, but rather it speaks “less of

²² “Equestrian Statues of General Forrest,” *Art Inventories Catalogue: Smithsonian Institution Research Information System* (Collections Search Center Online, <http://collections.si.edu/search/results.htm?q=General+Forrest+Equestrian+Statues&image.x=0&image.y=0>).

²³ *Ibid.*

courage and faith and exalted country love. It speaks in the language of silence and with dumb lips proclaims that acts of heroism and self-sacrifice live forever.”²⁴

V. The Political and Public Debates

Since 1905, understanding of the Forrest monument and Forrest Park as a whole has shifted dramatically. The park has frequently become a topic of contention in the Memphis community, primarily due to Forrest’s questionable history and the large population of blacks in Memphis, which today is more than 60%. In Court Carney’s analysis of Forrest’s history and the early history of the park, he states that “as a symbol of the extremes of southern history, Forrest plays a controversial role in popular culture,” especially in the Memphis area.²⁵ Over the years since the monument’s construction, the controversy surrounding the park has been a topic of frequent debate. In the last ten years, however, the controversy has expanded to receive national attention and steady movement to quell the debate for good. In 2005, the park and monument came to the forefront of Memphis politics when Shelby County Commissioner Walter Bailey spearheaded the movement to change the name of Bedford Forrest Park. 2005 was not the first time he attempted the change the names of Confederate, Jefferson Davis, and Forrest parks. Jimmy Love wrote in *The Commercial Appeal* that Bailey’s campaign to change the parks, which was based on Forrest’s alleged involvement with the Ku Klux Klan, is misinformed, and more importantly a means by which to begin his campaign for reelection. Love continues in defending the lesser-known side of Forrest, claiming Bailey’s portrait of Forrest “bears

²⁴ *The Forrest Monument: It’s History and Dedication, A Memorial in Art Oratory and Literature* (Library of Congress) 11-16.

²⁵ Court Carney, “The Contested Image,” 630.

little resemblance to the man black Southerners knew in the 19th Century.”²⁶

Yet Walter Bailey was not the only politician moving to change the parks in 2005. Memphis lawyer Karl Schledwitz proposed an even more dramatic resolution to alter the parks: to disinter the bodies of Forrest and his wife and move them back to their original burial site in Elmwood Cemetery. The park would then be donated to the University of Tennessee Health Science Center.²⁷ The proposal did not go without opposition and after a statement from then-Mayor Willie Herenton posited that the Memphis community would be better off “avoiding a bitter debate” about renaming the three Civil War parks. Moreover, he expressed that “digging up and moving graves or renaming city parks is not the proper way of dealing with this issue. We do not need another event that portrays Memphis nationally as a city still racially polarized and fighting the Civil War all over again.”²⁸ While Mayor Herenton’s statement did not end the debate, it was enough to squelch the conversation for the time being.

While the public debate may have been quieted for the time being, advocates to change the park names, like Walter Bailey, continued in their efforts. Yet despite those efforts, on March 4, 2009, the park and the monument were added to the National and Tennessee Registers of Historic Places by the National Park Service of the Department of the Interior. The nomination for the park was submitted by the Sons of Confederate Veterans and was originally approved by the Tennessee Historical Commission. However, protests from about one dozen Memphians, including Bailey and Tennessee State

²⁶ Jimmy Love, “Slinging Mud at Forrest just Besmirches Walter Bailey,” *The Commercial Appeal*, 15 May 2005 (Memphis, TN: Commercial Appeal, 2005), V3.

²⁷ Jody Callahan, “Forrest Proposal Moves Graves,” *The Commercial Appeal* 25 July 2005 (Memphis, TN: Commercial Appeal), 1.

²⁸ “Seeking Peach in Memphis Parks,” *The Commercial Appeal*, 5 August 2005 (Memphis, TN: *The Commercial Appeal*, Scripps Howard Publishing, 2005) B4.

Representative G.A. Hardaway, caused the vote for approval to be rescinded. Shortly after, the Sons of Confederate Veterans successfully appealed the decision, temporarily shielding the park from further debate.²⁹

Until 2013, this was the last time that Bedford Forrest Park and the Forrest monument were considered national news. In 2013 though, the debates surrounding Forrest Park came back into the spotlight of local and national news and politics. While there have frequently been a number of people who are opposed to the monument of Nathan Bedford Forrest and the park named in his honor, the public debate has a tendency to come into the public sphere in waves. Much like with the 2006 controversy, the 2013 series of events seemed to spring from nowhere. What sparked the 2013 events was a sign located in front of the monument at Forrest Park on Union Avenue. The sign, installed in May of 2012, was a 1'6" x 10' granite marker that read simply, "Forrest Park." It was the only visible sign stating the title of the park.

On January 9, 2013 less than one year after the granite markers installment, the Sons of Confederate Veterans filed a police report with the Memphis Police Department due to the theft of the granite sign. Overnight, the massive granite marker was completely removed from the front of Forrest Park without any notice.

The Sons of Confederate Veterans along with the National Park Services and the Shelby County Historical Commission raised the \$10,000 in funds to install the granite marker in Bedford Forrest Park. After a series of correspondence, the sign received approval from the City of Memphis Division of Park Services Director, Cynthia Buchanan.

²⁹ Linda Moore, "Memphis' Forrest Park on National Register of Historic Places: Designation Puts Efforts to Change Name on Hold," *The Commercial Appeal Online*, 19 March 2009 (<http://www.commercialappeal.com/news/local-news/forrest-park-on-historic-register>).

After review from city officials and Mike Flower, the administrator of City Planning and Development, the sign to be installed in Bedford Forrest Park was regarded as “important signage for one of the City’s historic parks.”³⁰ Mike Flower officially approved the installation of the sign, and left no further instructions.³¹

Despite efforts on behalf of the Sons of Confederate Veterans and the Shelby County Historical Commission, Chief Administrative Officer George Little argued that the letter from Memphis Park Services did not constitute as an official approval for the granite sign. Proper approval for the Forrest Park sign would have to be approved by the Downtown Memphis Commission before its installation. Little ordered the removal of the granite sign and placed it in storage at a city storage facility in Overton Park without warning to either group responsible for fundraising and installation. One of the major advocates for the sign’s removal was Walter Bailey.³²

Lee Millar, spokesperson for the Sons of Confederate Veterans and the Shelby County Historical Commission argued that the two groups worked closely with Cynthia Buchanan, Director of Park Services at the time of the granite marker’s installation, and “relied on her as a city director to have the proper guidance based on her approval and that of her staff and administrators.”³³ Furthermore, the Downtown Memphis Commission, Millar stated, is only for signage downtown, including businesses, advertising, and billboards...and they have no authority over the parks. But [Little] claims we have to have

³⁰ Cynthia Buchanan, Director of Park Services Memphis, “Letter to Lee Millar,” used with permission of Lee Millar.

³¹ Mike Flowers email to Lee Millar 22 June 2011, used with permission of Lee Millar.

³² Michael Lollar, “City of Memphis Won’t Reinstall Forrest Park Marker,” *McClatchy – Tribune News*, 11 January 2013 (Washington, D.C.: McClatchy-Tribune News, 2013).

³³ *Ibid.*

a permit to put a sign up in the park,” but, “they don’t have jurisdiction over the park, only Park Services has jurisdiction over the parks.”³⁴

Less than one month following the removal of the sign in Forrest Park, Memphis City Councilman Myron Lowery announced “plans to introduce an ordinance to rename Forrest Park to Forrest-Wells Park, adding the name of...civil rights activist, Ida B. Wells, to the park name. Following this decision, the city council passed a resolution to rename all three Civil War parks” in Memphis.³⁵

Upon hearing the news, the Shelby County Historical Society, the Sons of Confederate Veterans, Citizens to Save Our Parks, living members of the Forrest family, and nine local Memphis residents filed suit against the Memphis City Council for “their illegal and detrimental acts in attempting to rename the city’s three Civil War parks.” The complaint was filed on May 29, 2013 in Chancery Court in Shelby County and “seeks a declaratory judgment that the Council had no legal or statutory authority to rename any parks.”³⁶ And shortly after, in May 2013, Tennessee State Legislature passed the Tennessee Heritage Protection Act of 2013, stating that “no statue, monument, memorial, nameplate, or plaque...which has been erected for or named...in honor of any historical military figure...and is located on public property...may be renamed or rededicated.”³⁷ This act may have come too late for Bedford Forrest Park though. Before the Act was passed, City Council established three new temporary names for the Civil War parks in Memphis:

³⁴ Lee Millar, interview by Stephanie Veech, June 23, 2014.

³⁵ Citizens to Save Our Parks, “Citizens to Save Our Parks Timeline,” (informational timeline, Memphis, TN: 2013), 1.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Steve McDaniel, “Tennessee House Bill 553,” 1-2.

Bedford Forrest Park, now Health Science Park; Jefferson Davis Park, now Mississippi River Park; and Confederate Park, Memphis Park.

Lee Harris, Memphis City Councilman who helped lead the efforts to change the park names, said that the upcoming Tennessee Heritage Protection Act incited the City Council to act quickly. Concerning the parks, he said “history ‘is of less importance than making sure our public space is common ground,” arguing that the parks are “not historical at all,” but rather a celebration of the Confederacy.³⁸

The lawsuit against the City Council rests primarily on the evidence that Bedford Forrest Park was established in 1895 through a Memphis City Ordinance. The resolution initiated by Myron Lowery, therefore, to rename the parks has no legal bearings to change what has been enacted by an ordinance. “A resolution,” Lee Millar explained, “is only temporary...so a resolution cannot rename a park.”³⁹ Additionally, the “lawsuit claims that only the mayor, not the City Council, has the legal authority to change the names” of the parks. The same case was made in 2005 when the City Council’s lawyer stated “that the mayor, ‘not the city council has the authority to name or rename parks.”⁴⁰ While the case remains in court, permanent names for the parks have yet to be established.

The renaming of the park and the lawsuit made national news when the Loyal White Knights, a branch of the modern day Ku Klux Klan, planned a rally at Bedford Forrest Park to protest the name changing. Klansmen came from across the country to rally on March 30, 2013. And while their presence was known, the Klansmen and their allies, including members of the Aryan Nation, were vastly outnumbered by anti-Klan protesters and

³⁸ Cameron McWhirter, “U.S. News: Memphis Park Sheds Confederate Name.”

³⁹ Lee Millar, interview by Stephanie Veech, June 23, 2014.

⁴⁰ “Memphis Fights Lawsuit of Renaming Confederate-Themed Parks,” *Fox News*, 29 June 2013 (Associated Press, 2013).

Memphis City Police. John Branston of the *Memphis Flyer* reported that the Klansmen arrived at the city courthouse steps over an hour after their scheduled starting time. He continued in saying “other than the white power chant and some vague denunciations of the ‘corrupt mayor and city council’ it was hard for the assembled media to hear what anyone said.” Overall, he concluded, the Ku Klux Klan rally was a “non-event.”⁴¹

Justin Sledge of ANTIFA was one of the Anti-Klan protestors at the rally that day. He vehemently argued against the Klan’s presence, the park name, and the statue of Forrest. “The statue dedicated to him remains at the park and we raise a demand that it should be taken down immediately. If there was a statue of Adolf Hitler in Central Berlin, it would come down...and this many is a symbol of tyranny, murder, and lynching for the vast majority of this city.”⁴²

Councilwoman Janice Fullilove expressed similar sentiments, again comparing Nathan Bedford Forrest to Adolf Hitler. Fullilove, who supported the vote to change the park names, questioning what the park represents to the City of Memphis: “why do we have to put up with what we have seen for decades and decades that’s just a reminder of how evil some people have been towards my people and other people?” Fullilove argues that the park and the monument are a representation of a negative history in Memphis, “we don’t need that,” she said, “we are a progressive city, we need to move forward.”⁴³

Myron Lowery seconded that opinion, claiming that the park is “a negative part of the past that many African Americans in this community don’t want and they don’t like.”

⁴¹ John Branston, “Klu Klux Klan Rally Is a Non-Event in Memphis,” *The Memphis Flyer Online*, 30 March 2013 (<http://www.memphisflyer.com/CityBeatBlog/archives/2013/03/30/ku-klux-klan-rally-is-a-non-event-in-memphis>).

⁴² Rocco Castoro, *Triple Hate: KKK vs. The Crips vs. City Council*, VICE Newsroom.

⁴³ Ibid.

Lowery considers Nathan Bedford Forrest and the Ku Klux Klan to the 'American Taliban.' Both Lowery and Fullilove expressed the sentiment that the history of Forrest and the park itself perpetuate the polarization of races in Memphis and contribute to its complicated history. Lowery continued his argument in support of changing the park name stating: "Change produces controversy and that's what we have in this case. People, many people, don't want to change. They want to live in the past with the memories they have. No one is trying to change history, we're only trying to add on to history."⁴⁴ Lowery's statement is both insightful and contradictory. He speaks directly to the sacrality that many Memphians see in Forrest Park. The debate is indeed controversial, not only because it may bring about change, but because it attempts to change a site that is historic to the City of Memphis. The park represents a regional identity, a sacred space dedicated to memorializing actions and figures during the Civil War. Therefore, in changing the park name, the history is not necessarily erased, but the sacrality of the place is affected.

And while changing the park names may be a popular opinion within Memphis City Council, others in the Memphis area disagree. Memphian Becky Muska addressed the council on the day they voted to change the park names, saying: "You do not have the right to spin, edit, denounce, slander, revise, tear down, hide or destroy my history, because when you do that, you do that to Memphis."⁴⁵ For Muska, the name of the park represents something much greater than a simple title, it represents a part of Memphis history that needs to be remembered and discussed among the community.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Cameron McWhirter, "U.S. News: Memphis Park Sheds Confederate Name."

VI. Public Dialogue and Public Memory

What seems to be an even greater problem than establishing park names, however, is establishing a way to appease both sides of the debate. On the one hand, Bedford Forrest Park and the Forrest monument need to be preserved as a historic memory in order for us to recall our past. On the other hand, the park and the monument are a memory of racial terrorism and are reminders of the disenfranchisement of blacks in Memphis and the South. There is, however, a lesser-known argument being made in this debate and it is finding the way in which to make the monument and the park part of a greater dialogue of Memphis history. Rhodes College chairman of the department of history, Timothy S. Huebner was, and remains, very close to the public debate surrounding the parks. In a guest article written for the *Commercial Appeal*, Huebner writes, “

If we really care about our city’s history, we will focus on adding parks or memorials that commemorate the city’s neglected 19th century African-American past, and will add interpretive markers to the parks that we already have. If we don’t do this, we will simply have put new names on the same old parks.⁴⁶

In 2005, Jimmy Love expressed a similar sentiment, changing the park names may temporarily resolve an issue in Memphis, but overall the fact that seems to be ignored is, “the names of the parks may change, but history will not.”⁴⁷

Others have suggested alternative ways to encourage public dialogue and a public knowledge of Memphis history through transforming the park into an interactive living history of sorts. One *Commercial Appeal* reader suggests using the park as a larger

⁴⁶ Timothy Huebner, “Guest Column: Parks Dispute Misses Dual Points of History,” *The Commercial Appeal Online* (Memphis, TN: *The Commercial Appeal*, 3 March, 2013).

⁴⁷ Jimmy Love, “Slings Mud at Forrest just Besmirches Walter Bailey.”

representation and reminder of the Civil War. While the south end of Bedford Forrest Park is home to the Forrest Monument, the north end, he suggests, can be home to new installations representing the Union Army. “The Union,” he argues, “is under-represented in Memphis,” and in cultivating the greater history of the Civil War, Memphians are able to memorialize both sides “in the context of the ultimate result...the survival of a great nation.”⁴⁸ The debate surrounding the park name may surround Nathan Bedford Forrest, but it stems from a larger discussion, being that “many in the South cling to an incomplete understanding of the Civil War, and so do many in the North.”⁴⁹ And while Tennessee may be considered the South, at the time of the Civil War, the state was largely divided on both sides – a division that we still face in Memphis today. Creating a dialogue for both parties to gain a more accurate history and knowledge of the war could help both parties understand their current roles in Memphis’ history and politics as well.

Not far from the courthouse steps on the day of the Ku Klux Klan rally in Memphis, another rally was taking place. The Memphis United: People’s Conference on Race and Equality was held in partnership with the Mid-South Peace and Justice Center at the old Memphis Fairgrounds in the Creative Arts Building. The event, which was the brainchild of Dr. Richard Lou, chair of the Art Department at the University of Memphis, was described as “a space where the greater community can hold substantial conversations and dialog about racism – both interpersonal and systemic – in our community.” The idea for the event most likely came as a response to a previous Klan rally in Memphis, which led to 26

⁴⁸ Comment by *Commercial Appeal Online* user RunngingDog on “Timothy Huebner Guest Column: Park Dispute Misses Dual Points of History,” *The Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, TN: *The Commercial Appeal Online*, 3 March 2013).

⁴⁹ Jesse Dukes, “Lost Causes,” *The Virginia Quarterly Review* vol. 90 no. 3 (Charlottesville, Virginia: *Virginia Quarterly Review*, University of Virginia) 88-105.

arrests and garnered massive national media attention. The mission of the peace rally was not to “indulge the KKK’s efforts to garner media exposure,” but rather to host an alternative to Ku Klux Klan rally and provide an opportunity to address the “multi-generational legacy of racism” in the Memphis community.⁵⁰ The event was host to a variety of different activities and performances, including a non-violent communication workshop on the Compassionate Communication technique, which was developed by Dr. Marshall Rosenberg. The workshop allowed for Memphis area teens and adults, including Memphis area gang members, to share “stories or accounts of domestic violence and its aftermath” and the “serious issues on violence within the African American community.”⁵¹ The Memphis United rally provided an outlet to discuss the greater issues at hand in Memphis. There are far greater issues at hand other than the name of a park. Social and political injustices and inequalities can be seen throughout the city’s infrastructure. Yet, instead of addressing the greater social concerns, the city focuses on a park name. In the grand scheme of things, what is a park name rather than a debate derived from a greater regional dialogue?

VII. Conclusion

What is important to remember throughout this public debate, is that Bedford Forrest Park is not the only Confederate named park in Memphis, Tennessee that is currently under debate, yet publicly, Forrest Park remains in the center of conversation, primarily due to its association with a figure as controversial as Nathan Bedford Forrest.

⁵⁰ Cathy Hannabach, “Memphis United: People’s Conference on Race and Equality,” *Gender and Society*, Spring 2013, modified April 9, 2013, <http://genderandsocs13.wordpress.com/tag/kkk>.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

As a public, our concern over Nathan Bedford Forrest acts as a distraction to greater underlying social issues. By focusing on Forrest as an individual, we fail to focus on the social and political reasoning behind why Forrest was memorialized.

In the debates regarding Forrest Park, Councilman Lee Harris said that ensuring Memphis public space is “common ground” for the community is more important than the history that space represents. Yet how does this affect the sacrality of the same space? In Janet Jacobs’ 2010 Paul Hanly Furfey Lecture on the Sociology of Religion, she speaks about the process of memorializing genocide. While her lecture refers to more modern events of war, her research observations led her to find that “...the collective memory of a nations’ shame and inhumanity, nevertheless become sacred spaces....”⁵² Regardless of the actions or opinions of Forrest, he is still representative of a larger American history and a greater social dialogue that have yet to take shape. Changing a name cannot change history, nor can burying Forrest elsewhere, bury our history. Shelby Foote once stated in response to the NAACP’s 1988 move to raze the statue, “you have to take the past as it is.”⁵³ Bedford Forrest, or Health Science Park, despite its name, will always be the same park representative of the same memory unless we actively seek to acknowledge the greater American history of which it is a part.

Chidester and Linenthal argue that sacred space will always be a contested space, a space fueling argument and opinion. Nathan Bedford Forrest has long been considered a contested figure in the American South, further contributing to the contestation of the park itself. Yet, changing the name will not change whether the park is sacred to some, it will

⁵² Janet Jacobs, “Sacred Space and Collective Memory: Memorializing Genocide at Sites of Terror,” *Association for the Sociology of Religion* vol. 72, no. 2, (Oxford University Press: 2011) 157.

⁵³ Court Carney, “The Contested Image,” 626.

simply contribute to further debate. Therefore we should take lesson from Memphians like Timothy Huebner and Richard Lou in order to find a way to turn what is a sacred space for some, into a sacred space for all by encouraging conversation and education, and supporting a public memory and history. The late Maya Angelou once stated, “We cannot change the past, but we can change our attitude toward it. Uproot guilt and plant forgiveness. Tear out arrogance and seed humility. Exchange love for hate – thereby, making the present comfortable and the future promising.” It is necessary, therefore, that as a public we seek to acknowledge our past in its entirety in order to find resolution for our present.