

The *H.L. Hunley* and Confederate Ideals in Modern America

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Faculty Introduction

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Conner Flynt's essay takes as its subject the Confederate submarine *H.L. Hunley*. Rather than recount the well-known tale of its sinking, Flynt asks important questions about how the vessel has been remembered. Since the firing on Fort Sumter, Charleston, South Carolina has been a bitterly contested ground in the larger struggle over Civil War memory; Flynt's paper situates efforts to raise the *H.L. Hunley* into this essential context. Based on his own spadework in Charleston newspapers, Flynt's paper contributes to our understanding of neo-Confederatism in the U.S. South.

Abstract

In February 1864, the Confederate submarine *H.L. Hunley* made history by sinking the *USS Housatonic*, after which the *H.L. Hunley* sank with all hands lost. The submarine would drift into Confederate memory as a fascinating piece of advanced technology that many believed could help win the war. With the resurgent interest in Confederate memory, the search for this lost submarine was undertaken successfully by Clive Cussler and the National Underwater and Marine Agency. Many organizations and individuals, from state senators to archaeologists, helped raise the wreckage. The raising of this historic submarine brought renewed resurgence in Confederate ideals that influenced elections, especially the 2000 presidential election. Confederate memory and iconography remained heavily influential in Charleston, South Carolina. The Confederate battle flag was still flown proudly over the capital and people were still proudly thinking of themselves as "Confederate" allies of sorts. The *H.L. Hunley* was an important piece of history but also was a weapon in Confederate "Lost Cause" ideology. This piece of archaeological history keeps the Civil War memory glowing in the minds of Americans, especially those in Charleston, South Carolina, where the submarine awaits conservation.

The Civil War is once again above-the-fold news as communities debate the fate of Confederate monuments. But this ongoing contest over the memory and legacy of the nation's fratricidal war is anything but new. Since the muskets were muzzled at Appomattox Court House, Americans have contested, debated, and fought over the meaning of their costliest military conflagration. For most of the twentieth century, the Lost Cause narrative—which maintained that the Confederacy was hopelessly outnumbered, fought honorably, and had not rebelled on behalf of slavery—held sway. Yet an emancipationist memory of the war, one that remembered slavery as the cause of the war, prowled on the margins, ready to contest Southern claims to the past. By the late twentieth century, as the demographics of the nation changed, neo-Confederates devised new strategies to keep alive a pro-Southern memory of the war. The raising of the Confederate submarine *H.L. Hunley* was one of those strategies.¹ The recovery of the submarine brought out neo-Confederates who wanted to see “the Glory of the South” restored. It inspired countless marches, discussions, and even several funerals for long-dead servicemen. Recalling these events, which took place in the “cradle” of secession—Charleston, South Carolina—this essay situates the raising of the *H.L. Hunley* in the long history of Civil War memory.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, Civil War memory was an especially hot-button issue in South Carolina. In 1999, the NAACP called for an economic boycott of the Palmetto State because the Confederate flag still fluttered atop the statehouse dome. Politicians and interest groups debated the fate of the flag. In an especially bruising battle for the Republican presidential nomination between Texas Governor George W. Bush and Arizona Senator John McCain, the flag became a heated point of debate. McCain said that he viewed the “battle flag as a symbol of heritage,” rather than “hate.” On the other hand, Bush stayed more moderate on the issue and urged the people of South Carolina to decide whether the flag should stay or go.² Hoping to end the boycott, the state of South Carolina removed the flag on May 23, 2000.³ Still, NAACP leaders were not happy because the banner was moved to a Civil War monument a short distance from the capitol dome, where it remains in a prominent position.⁴

One month after the Confederate battle flag was removed from South

¹ For more information on Civil War Memory and Confederate memory see: David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001).

² Frank Bruni, “The Confederate Battle Flag: Bush and McCain Tiptoe through Dixie Minefield,” *New York Times*, January 13, 2000.

³ Bill Swindell, “Hodges Signs Flag Bill,” *Post and Courier*, May 24, 2000, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com>.

⁴ Swindell, “Hodges Signs Flag Bill.”

Carolina's capitol dome, the *H.L. Hunley* was raised, and the Civil War came to the forefront again.⁵ The *H.L. Hunley* was an innovatively designed Confederate submarine with a long and rich history. After several failed attempts at making submarines, Horace Lawson Hunley financed, with his own wealth, the construction of the *H.L. Hunley*.⁶ After its construction in Mobile, Alabama, it was shipped to Charleston and sank on a test run in August 1863 with the loss of five crew members.⁷ Shortly after this disaster, it was raised from the harbor floor and pressed into service once again. In October 1863, it was placed under the command of First Lieutenant George E. Dixon.⁸ It again was to commence with a test dive. For this test run, Dixon was unavailable as commander for some unknown reason. Horace Hunley proceeded to take over as commander of the vessel and navigate its test run in Charleston Harbor. On its second test run, the submarine dove below another ship and never resurfaced. The entire crew was lost, including its designer Horace L. Hunley.⁹ Although it sank twice before ever going into battle, the *H.L. Hunley* would be raised yet again and pressed into the service of the Confederacy. In 1864, it would go on the offensive in Charleston, where it would try to achieve its original function: to break the Union blockade on southern ports. In this goal the submarine would be successful, but at great cost.

On its second test run, the submarine dove below another ship and never resurfaced.

On the night of February 17, 1864, the *H.L. Hunley* was patrolling Charleston Harbor when it came across the Union sloop-of-war *USS Housatonic*, which was participating in the Union blockade of the port. Minutes after the spotting of the *USS Housatonic*, the crew of the *H.L. Hunley* prepared to go on the offensive. At approximately 8:45 that night, a Lieutenant Crosby spotted the *H.L. Hunley* from the deck of the *USS Housatonic*. As he recalled, "it looked... like a porpoise, coming to the surface to blow."¹⁰ The idea of a submarine in the Civil War was unheard of. Never had a submarine been used as an effective part of naval warfare. "Most Charlestonians," one historian writes, "regarded the *H.L. Hunley* more as General Beauregard's folly than as a warship possessed of a realistic chance of destroying an enemy vessel."¹¹

⁵ Thomas J. Brown, *Civil War Canon: Sites of Confederate Memory in South Carolina*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2015), 238-239.

⁶ Tom Chaffin, *H.L. Hunley: The Secret Hope of The Confederacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008), 143.

⁷ Chaffin, *H.L. Hunley: The Secret Hope of The Confederacy*, 140.

⁸ Chaffin, *H.L. Hunley: The Secret Hope of The Confederacy*, 148.

⁹ Chaffin, *H.L. Hunley: The Secret Hope of The Confederacy*, 150.

¹⁰ Chaffin, *H.L. Hunley: The Secret Hope of The Confederacy*, 183.

¹¹ Chaffin, *H.L. Hunley: The Secret Hope of The Confederacy*, 188.

The idea was just not realistic for most people. The *H.L. Hunley* sailed past the *USS Housatonic*, but unbeknownst to the crew of the *USS Housatonic*, the submarine had attached a torpedo near the *USS Housatonic*'s gunpowder magazine. Seconds later, the torpedo detonated the magazine, and the *USS Housatonic* went up in flames. The crew of the *USS Housatonic* frantically tried to save themselves and received assistance roughly thirty minutes later from the *USS Canandaigua*, a Union vessel that took on a lifeboat from the doomed ship.¹² The success of the *H.L. Hunley*'s attack came as a surprise to many because it was the first recorded instance in world military history where a submarine sunk a naval vessel in battle.¹³ After the *H.L. Hunley* attacked and sank the *USS Housatonic*, it disappeared into the historical record. Not until two days after the sinking of the *USS Housatonic* did any Confederate officer acknowledge the submarine's absence. Four days after the sinking, General Beauregard, who had been one of the main supporters of the submarine's construction before it prowled Charleston harbor, admitted that the submarine was presumably lost and that "a proper tribute [be made] to the... patriotism of [the *H.L. Hunley*'s] crew and officers".¹⁴ The *H.L. Hunley* would go down in history as a major turning point in naval warfare. Its final resting place in the harbor would not be known for over a hundred years.

After the loss of the *H.L. Hunley*, Charleston socialites—many of whom had befriended and even bankrolled Horace Hunley—kept interest in the history of the early submarine alive.¹⁵ Artists also kept the submarine's memory alive through paintings. Specifically, the Confederate soldier and artist Conrad Wise Chapman produced a painting of the *H.L. Hunley* in 1864. These paintings, along with other Charleston scenes that Chapman painted during the war, would be donated to the Confederate Memorial Literary Society in Richmond, which would later be named the Museum of the Confederacy (and today the American Civil War Museum). These paintings would be some of the only known images painted by a Confederate during the Civil War. Even with these organizations and individuals doing their part to preserve the memory of the submarine, the story of the *H.L. Hunley* would be overshadowed by other parts of Civil War military history until the late twentieth century.¹⁶

In the spring of 1995, the novelist Clive Cussler and his band of underwater explorers discovered the well-preserved wreck of the *H.L. Hunley* in about twenty-six feet of water one thousand feet due east of the wreck of

¹² Chaffin, *H.L. Hunley: The Secret Hope of The Confederacy*, 184-185.

¹³ Chaffin, *H.L. Hunley: The Secret Hope of The Confederacy*, 184.

¹⁴ Chaffin, *H.L. Hunley: The Secret Hope of The Confederacy*, 188.

¹⁵ Brown, *Civil War Canon: Sites of Confederate Memory in South Carolina*, 242.

¹⁶ "Hunley: The First Kill," *Clive Cussler's The Sea Hunters*, Season 2, episode 1, 2002.

the *USS Housatonic*.¹⁷ Once Cussler's team photographed and documented the wreck, the location was kept a secret, so as to deter looting. Once it was announced to the press that the submarine had been located, controversy struck like a lightning bolt in Charleston. The discovery ignited a political powder keg over who "owned" the rights to the *H.L. Hunley*. Did the state of South Carolina, where it was discovered, own those rights, or did they revert to the federal government, which had assumed ownership of all Confederate property after the war? The state of Alabama even suggested that it had a claim to ownership because the submarine had been manufactured in Mobile in the early 1860's.¹⁸ This fight turned into another battle over states' rights versus the power of the federal government.

After long negotiations and legal conundrums between the state of South Carolina and the United States government, longtime U.S. Senator Strom Thurmond (R-South Carolina) and South Carolina State Senator Glenn McConnell achieved a compromise towards the end 1995. The compromise awarded ownership of the wreck to the federal government, but gave permanent possession to the state under specific guidelines that it be conserved for future generations.¹⁹ Once Cussler gave the location of the wreck to officials, a private firm, Oceaneering International, was contracted to raise the wreckage from the harbor floor. A large truss was used, along with support cushions dragged under the wreck, to

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bring the submarine to the surface. On August 8, 2000, with much pomp and circumstance, the *H.L. Hunley* was lifted out of the waters of Charleston harbor and exposed to the surface for the first time since 1864.²⁰

With the McConnell and Thurmond compromise, the raising of the *H.L. Hunley* was a success; thousands of South Carolinians came out to see the event from shore, with many more piling into boats and accompanying the sub back home to its conservation lab onshore. The National Park Service chief in charge of nearby Fort Sumter National Monument estimated that about 5,000 people took part in welcoming the sub back to shore.²¹ Although quite a few people were jubilant at the sub's return, divisions already started to show socially and politically. One native Virginian said that "this [event] shows...the Southern spirit is alive and well in Charleston." Although this exudes a very positive attitude towards the

¹⁷ Chaffin, *H.L. Hunley: The Secret Hope of The Confederacy*, 217.

¹⁸ Chaffin, *H.L. Hunley: The Secret Hope of The Confederacy*, 218-219.

¹⁹ Chaffin, *H.L. Hunley: The Secret Hope of The Confederacy*, 220.

²⁰ "Hunley: The First Kill," *Clive Cussler's The Sea Hunters*.

²¹ Schuyler Kropf, "Hunley's Historic Return Thousands Welcome Confederate Sub Home," *Post and Courier*, August 09, 2000, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com>.

event, others disagreed. An off-duty Marine sergeant said “[he] think[s] it’s a part of history” but that “we should let go of it,” citing his discomfort with the Confederate flags that were hanging from boats in the harbor and being waved by people on the shore.²² These quotes show a society in conflict. This conflict has grown, ever since the Civil War ended, into something that can ignite a powder keg of racism in South Carolina.

After excavating and removing the bodies from the *H.L. Hunley*, McConnell and Hunley Commission member Randy Burbage were able to raise money and organize a funeral for the seven dead crewmembers taken from the submarine in 2004.²³ On April 17, 2004, these submariners were buried with great pomp and circumstance in Magnolia Cemetery, where Horace Hunley and the other two crews are buried.²⁴ The funeral procession was accompanied by around 9,000 re-enactors dressed as Confederate soldiers. This group of re-enactors constituted one of the biggest Confederate army re-enactments on record.²⁵ The jury is still out for many people as to the societal impacts this can have. Is it a bad thing for society, wearing uniforms of an army that fought against the United States and promoted slavery? Or is it simply just a harmless historical re-enactment?²⁶ With the broad application of the First Amendment over the years, the banning of these re-enactments could be construed as unconstitutional.

The raising of the *H.L. Hunley* elicited responses from a diverse array of characters—from every day people to state senators. In the eyes of modern neo-Confederates, the *H.L. Hunley* represented the most cunning technological innovation of the Confederate war effort. According to historian Thomas Brown, white southerners believed that technological advances such as the *H.L. Hunley* swaddled the Confederacy with a sense of “political legitimacy.”²⁷ In their view, the war it waged was not the treasonous rebellion decried by Abraham Lincoln, but rather an inspired—even noble—second American Revolution. These same modern-day Confederate supporters who argue that the Confederacy was a legitimate nation, also cling to the Lost Cause idea that the South was overwhelmed, outnumbered, and never stood a chance at winning the war. This idea is easily dismissed when taking into account that the Confederacy scored early victories over the Union forces in the Civil War. The tension in this argument is palpa-

²² Kropf, “Hunley’s Historic Return Thousands Welcome Confederate Sub Home.”

²³ Kropf, “Hunley’s Historic Return Thousands Welcome Confederate Sub Home.”

²⁴ Brian Hicks, “The Funeral for the Hunley Crew FINAL RESPECTS,” *Post and Courier*, April 18, 2004, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com>.

²⁵ Hicks, “The Funeral for the Hunley Crew FINAL RESPECTS.”

²⁶ Dan Huntley, “Deeply Devoted to ‘Bring Those Men Home’—Lawmaker Focused on Confederate History Has Played Key Role in Hunley’s Return,” *Charlotte Observer* (North Carolina), April 11, 2004; accessed November 29, 2017, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com>.

²⁷ Brown, *Civil War Canon: Sites of Confederate Memory in South Carolina*, 239.

ble; these ideas cannot co-exist, as neo-Confederates would like them to. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, neo-Confederates used the *H.L. Hunley* to claim definitively that the Confederacy was a legitimate nation. In short, the *H.L. Hunley* was a stunning technological achievement during the Civil War, but its postwar career was equally fascinating. ■

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Student Biography

Conner Flynt is a 2018 graduate of SHSU's History Department. He was actively involved in the Bearkat History Club as well as the historian for the Sigma Phi chapter of Phi Alpha Theta at SHSU. He was also was active in the Department of World Languages and Cultures, where he earned minors in Spanish and French. His interest in Civil War memory was inspired by Dr. Brian Jordan's Civil War Era history class. The ideas of Civil War remembrance were talked about a great deal and this pushed Conner to research the topic in the context of naval power, which has always been of interest to him. Conner plans to pursue graduate studies in the field of Mesoamerican Anthropology and Archaeology, specifically the Ancient Maya and their language.