

The Life and Legacy of General William Mahone and the Construction of Southern Collective Memory

Richmond, Virginia, like much of the South, is replete with monuments to its Confederate past. Statues of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson feature prominently on Monument Avenue, and ever since the Civil War's end numerous accounts by veterans, citizens and scholars have ensured the Confederacy remains the most written about subject in southern history. However, one of Virginia's most famous generals and statesmen of this period, William Mahone, whom one contemporary described as "the most influential figure Virginia had produced since the days of Jefferson," remains almost entirely absent from popular discussions of southern history.¹ Deemed a "Benedict Arnold" by his contemporaries, and purposefully excluded by the popular "Lost Cause" memory of the Civil War, William Mahone was unique among other ex-Confederate generals.² His dual legacies as a Confederate war hero and, subsequently, a political organizer of the biracial Readjuster Party in Virginia have not been comprehensively examined in the extensive scholarly literature on the Readjuster Party and the construction of collective memories of the Civil War. By focusing on William Mahone, my thesis will show that racial and social issues were contested throughout the period of the "New South" and that the formation of the "Lost Cause," as we think of it today, was not a monolith of beliefs or ideas shared by all white southerners after the Civil War.

William Mahone was born in Southampton County, Virginia in 1826. His parents owned slaves and were the proprietors of a local tavern. At the age of eighteen, Mahone secured a coveted appointment as a cadet at the Virginia Military Institute and spent three years there from 1844-1847.³ During the Civil War, Mahone was an able commander for the Confederacy, but he did not attract popular attention until the siege of Petersburg, attaining the rank of major general after his performance at the campaign's most

¹ Nelson Blake, *William Mahone of Virginia: Soldier and Political Insurgent* (Richmond, Va: Garret and Massie, 1935), XV.

² Kevin Levin, "William Mahone, the Lost Cause, and Civil War History," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 113, no. 4 (2005), 378-412.

³ Blake, *William Mahone of Virginia*, 13-15.

dramatic engagement, the Battle of the Crater.⁴ Nevertheless, the military acclaim that Mahone won at Petersburg was of monumental importance to his postwar success and directly relates to how he was remembered in the decades following the Civil War. After the war, Mahone organized a biracial coalition to oppose paying off Virginia's war debt in full. Supported by both white and black people, Mahone's Readjuster Party dominated Virginia politics from 1880-1883. The party enacted never before seen racial reforms for Virginia's black population and catapulted Mahone to the U.S. Senate, but over time it fractured because of racial antagonism; white Virginians viewed the Readjusters' extension of patronage and other benefits to African Americans as a direct threat to the social benefits of white supremacy.⁵ Many Southern whites viewed Mahone as a race traitor and pariah, and this legacy persisted long after his death.

Research Questions and Chapter Organization

My master's thesis will take a biographical approach to the life and legacy of William Mahone and will consist of an introduction, two chapters, and a conclusion. The overarching research questions are: How did William Mahone's actions impact social and racial debates in the South between ex-Confederates and white and black people after the Civil War? How has his legacy been considered in historical memory by communities of different races and by different generations of scholars? The introduction will provide background to William Mahone's life in the context of the Civil War and its aftermath, specifically in the South. It will also review of the following three literatures: Mahone biographies, Reconstruction historiography and the recently defined historiography of Civil War Memory.

The first chapter will cover Mahone's service in the Civil War to his death. As the chief organizer of the Readjuster Party and harboring ambitions for Governor, William Mahone understood the value of his Confederate legacy to the success of his political career. The organizing research question of this

⁴ Ibid., 60.

⁵ Jane Dailey, *Before Jim Crow: The Politics of Race in Postemancipation Virginia* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 39.

chapter will be: How effective was Mahone in safeguarding his legacy compared to his contemporaries, such as General James Longstreet and John S. Mosby? William Mahone engaged in vigorous debates in defense of his military record with Confederate officers, such as Jubal Early.⁶ These debates are essential to understand how ex-Confederates interpreted their experiences in the Civil War and how they made a claim to that legacy in the postwar public sphere. A supplemental research question in chapter one is, how did Mahone's defense of his Civil War legacy differ in comparison to his fellow Confederate and Union veterans? Mahone was active in promoting reconciliation between veterans from the North and South, and honored the Confederate Cause at numerous reunions, but his advocacy for African American suffrage set him apart from other Lost Cause proponents. Scholarly analysis of his motivations has so far lacked sufficient nuance. The third research question I ask in chapter one is, in the context of the "New South," as defined by historians such as C. Vann Woodward, were William Mahone and the Readjuster movement capable of creating a lasting coalition between white and black Virginians, and were there other figures in the movement who were more committed to an extension of racial reforms in the private sphere of family life than William Mahone was?

The second chapter will cover Mahone's legacy in historical memory and will start after his death in 1895. The organizing research question of this chapter will be: How and why was William Mahone's career left out of the popular Lost Cause collective memory of the Civil War era in the South? My current research demonstrates that Mahone's memory as a Confederate general was isolated from his career as a pragmatic politician both during his own lifetime and in the decades following his death. Additional research questions in chapter two are, what do the different memories of William Mahone tell us about the nature of collective memory? How have successive generations of public and scholarly interpretations changed in response to current social and political issues?

⁶ Jubal A. Early and William Mahone, *A Correspondence Between Generals Early and Mahone, In Regards to the Military Memoir of the Latter* (n.p., 1871), 3.

The conclusion will ask: How do modern portrayals of Mahone and the Readjuster movement relate to our current debates over monuments of the Civil War era? How does a discussion of Mahone fit into current scholarly and popular discourse, which has changed dramatically since the Civil Rights Movement to be more inclusive of African Americans in Reconstruction and New South scholarship?

Historiography

While several scholars have produced biographies or works on William Mahone none have adequately connected the period in which he most shaped his military and political reputations with postwar memory. Historical memory of the Civil War is a field that cohered in the 1990s and new millennium, and thus a new biographical examination of Mahone is needed. William Mahone was a firm believer in white supremacy, and he advocated suffrage for American Americans for his own personal gain; he was incapable of considering any extension of rights to African Americans that might threaten white hegemony. However, this still put him at odds with other former Confederates, such as Lost Cause architect Jubal Early, and other white southerners. My thesis will add to historiography by taking a comprehensive approach that analyzes Mahone's entire life, and its impact on historical memory.

Biographies of Mahone, or modern scholarship that features him prominently, has either focused on his military career or his politics almost exclusively, and only Kevin Levin's essay and book on William Mahone and the battle of the Crater make any attempt to orient Mahone in the debates between ex-Confederates after the war and during the construction of collective memory. Kevin Levin's essay on Mahone and the Lost Cause is a necessary starting point in examining how discourse between Mahone and Confederate generals impacted the post war careers of these men, but more remains to be done in examining Mahone's role as chief organizer of the Readjuster Party.⁷ The most recent biography of

⁷ Kevin Levin, "William Mahone, the Lost Cause, and Civil War History," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 113, no. 4 (2005), 378-412; Kevin Levin, *Remembering the Battle of the Crater: War as Murder* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2012), 59.

Mahone is Nelson Blake's 1932 *William Mahone of Virginia*.⁸ This work effectively recounts Mahone's life, but it comes up short in its discussion of the unique situation Mahone occupied as an ex-confederate general and a Readjuster turned Republican after the war. Because of the time in which it was published Blake's work offers little engagement with collective memory and the Lost Cause. Blake's work also does not attempt to analyze the interplay of racial and social issues that shaped the Readjuster Party. Modern historiography on African American Readjusters, who Blake did not consider, will be a central part of my analysis.⁹ Additional modern scholarship by James Tice Moore and Jane Dailey, which focuses extensively on Mahone and the Readjuster Party, offers perspectives on the potential of the movement and its failures. These analyses will necessarily ground my own interpretation of Mahone, but their focus is more on the debt movement and its potential outcomes.¹⁰ Contrastingly, my analysis will engage with collective memory and the Lost Cause.

In order to understand the context in which Mahone's postwar career took shape, one needs a grasp of the Reconstruction and New South literature. Reconstruction literature has undergone significant changes from the early 1900s to today. Reconstruction began after the Civil War and is often cited as having ended in 1877. Traditional scholarly interpretations of Reconstruction came out of the Dunning School of Reconstruction studies in the early twentieth century.¹¹ These works promoted a racist view of African Americans' attempts to participate fully in the society and politics of the "New South" and defended the reestablishment of a conservative democratic power in the South based on the ideology of

⁸ Nelson Blake, *William Mahone of Virginia: Soldier and Political Insurgent* (Richmond, Va: Garret and Massie, 1935), 13-15.

⁹ Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under our Feet: Black Political Struggle in the rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 2003), 327; Gerald Gaither, *Blacks and the Populist Movement: Ballots and Bigotry in the New South* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005), 117; Bess Beatty, *A Revolution Gone Backward: The Black Response to National Politics, 1876-1896* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987).

¹⁰ James Moore, *Two Paths to the New South: The Virginia Debt Controversy, 1870-1883* (Lexington: The university Press of Kentucky, 1974), 100; Jane Dailey, *Before Jim Crow: The Politics of Race in Postemancipation Virginia* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 56-57.

¹¹ Merton E. Coulter and Wendell Holmes Stephenson, *The South During Reconstruction: 1865-1877* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1947), 1; Claude G. Bowers, *The tragic Era: The Revolution After Lincoln*. (New York City, NY: Cornwall Press, 1929), VI.

white supremacy. Revisionist scholarship in the mid-twentieth century by Kenneth Stampp viewed Reconstruction as not having gone far enough to guarantee the protection of African Americans' civil rights, primarily in the South, and critiqued the earlier white supremacist arguments of the Dunning school scholars.¹² This has led to the current modern scholarship on Reconstruction that emphasizes the agency of African Americans in the social and political landscape of Reconstruction, and the ultimate failure to protect their rights in the South.¹³ Scholarship on the "New South" relates to this view of Reconstruction by highlighting the dynamic social, racial and political movements in the South prior to Jim Crow.¹⁴ My thesis will use both of these literatures to present a comprehensive interpretation of William Mahone and his relationship with racial issues in Virginia during Reconstruction, set in the broader context of the New South.

There has been extensive writing on the Lost Cause and Civil War memory in recent scholarship, but William Mahone and the Readjuster movement need additional attention. David Blight was the first scholar to synthesize the study of collective memory and the American Civil War in his 2001 work *Race and Reunion*. Blight argues that Civil War veterans viewed the war through a lens of sentimentality that allowed them to foster a spirit of "reconciliation" between North and South as the true meaning of the war, without having to discuss the issue of race during the Civil War or its legacy of emancipation which, especially for white southerners, was a legacy best forgotten.¹⁵ My thesis on the Readjuster Party and Mahone will challenge Blight's argument about the nature of Reconciliation among white people in Virginia over issues of race by showing that it was never simply "ignored" in order to move forward in southern society. On the contrary, as Grace Hale and Jane Dailey have argued, the success of the

¹² Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Era of Reconstruction: 1865 – 1877* (New York: Knopf, 1965), 1.

¹³ Foner, Eric. *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York, NY: HarperPerennial, 2014), 1-10; Mark Summers, *The Ordeal of Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 1-10.

¹⁴ Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford university Press, 1992), 47; C Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New south, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), IX.

¹⁵ David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), 4-5.

Readjuster movement forced white Virginians to redefine their own “whiteness” in relation to the political advocacy of African American Readjusters.¹⁶ As an ex-Confederate general who relied on his war record to enhance his political career, William Mahone actively promoted sectional reconciliation between Northern veterans and his former Confederate comrades, and he believed he could attain black political support without any serious disturbance of the racial status quo. The movement, however, would prove to challenge conceptions about race and class at every level, and it moved outside of the political boundaries into debates about race relations in the private sphere. Building off these interpretations my thesis will provide a nuanced understanding of how William Mahone’s legacy does not neatly fit into simplistic Lost Cause interpretations of Civil War history and the additional categories of memory proposed by David Blight.

The most recent writing of collective Civil War memory by Caroline Janney attempts to diversify our understanding of the memory of reconciliation and the Lost Cause.¹⁷ Her scholarship shows that, while the country was reunited, the concept of emotional Reconciliation was never truly accepted as the dominant memory of the war for veterans or the nation. According to Janney, Civil War veterans remained “adamant that their cause had been moral and just,” and the bitterness from four years of fighting would not fade easily.¹⁸ William Mahone fits into this analysis of reconciliation through his role in veteran reunions at Petersburg, and his fame at the Crater had to be interpreted by Lost Cause advocates at reunions after his death to censor his political record.¹⁹ Additional modern historiography has explored the construction of the Lost cause and southern identity. My thesis on William Mahone will

¹⁶ Dailey, *Before Jim Crow*, 160; Grace Hale *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Pantheon, 1998) (New York: Vintage, 1999);

¹⁷ Caroline, E. Janney, *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation* (University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 39; James Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 67. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 2.

¹⁸ Janney, *Remembering the Civil War*, 39.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

examine his unique place in memory studies that has not yet been touched on using the frameworks of memory historians, such as Fitzhugh Brundage and David Goldfield.²⁰

My thesis will add to this historiography by arguing that Mahone and the Readjuster movement are a perfect encapsulation of the careful defense and reconstruction of southern identity and the Lost Cause in the New South. Its biracial political support and the complex motivations of Mahone, as well as the party's voters, made it nearly impossible to fit into a simplistic historical memory of the period like the Lost Cause. Many accounts have passed over the movement in order to draw a somewhat straight line into the period of Jim Crow and segregation in the early twentieth century. This ignores the movement's successful, albeit short-lived racial reforms and support of African American suffrage, arguing that these were totally irrelevant in the face of subsequent developments. My research will use the framework of Brundage and others to demonstrate the complex nature of memory surrounding Mahone and the Readjuster Party.

Methods and Primary Sources

The thesis will be a biography of Mahone with an emphasis on his postwar political and social endeavors and an exploration of his legacy in memory up to 1960, with a brief, concluding meditation on his memory in the present day. As such it employs diverse historical methods and sources that relate to William Mahone and the Readjuster Party. The primary focus is a biography of Mahone, but my thesis will also engage the subfields of social history in its analysis of the Readjusters and historical memory in the decades following Mahone's death. Civil War participants were aware that they were engaging in cataclysmic events that would be recorded for posterity, and many actively engaged in writing accounts or histories to shape their reputations for posterity. These early testimonies and histories will be used as primary sources to ascertain how contemporaries viewed Mahone and how he responded.

²⁰ Brundage, *Where These Memories*, 2; David Goldfield, *Southern Histories: Public, Personal and Sacred* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 8; Cobb, *Away Down South*, 67.

Because chapter one will examine the debates in which Mahone participated, I consult a variety of correspondence from ex-Confederates and southern politicians who were critical of Mahone's role as the "hero of the Crater," and later, of his role in organizing the biracial Readjuster Party. A necessary foundation for this discussion will be an examination of Mahone's war record in the *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*.²¹ These records will allow me to frame the importance of Mahone's victory at the Crater in relation to his contemporaries' war records. William Mahone was forced to defend his Confederate legacy from the critiques of Jubal Early, James Lane and George Bagby in the Southern Historical Society Papers and elsewhere to protect his political career.²² Understanding Mahone's place in the changing landscape of postwar interpretations in the North and South is essential when considering the possibilities for the success and limitations of the Readjuster Party in the New South. Additional sources I will consult for Chapter one will include the memoirs of other Confederates who had extensive post war careers, such as John S. Mosby and James Longstreet, as they also suffered fierce criticism from Early and other figures for their politics in the New South.

In chapter one I will use a number of manuscript collections, chief among them the Mahone papers at Duke University,²³ to identify Mahone's correspondents and determine how each fought to protect his reputation and how each viewed the social and racial landscape of the New South.²⁴ I particularly seek exchanges with Readjuster governor William E. Cameron, who eventually split with Mahone, and Lewis Harvie Blair, who was a contemporary businessman and also held what white

²² Southern Historical Society Papers 18 (1890): 72-80; A Correspondence. *Between Generals Early and Mahone, In Regards to the Military Memoir of the Latter* (n.p., 1871);

George W. Bagby, John Brown and William Mahone: *An Historical Parallel Foreshadowing Civil Trouble* (Richmond, 1880); *Official Records*, Vol. I-VI.

²³ I have received \$1,500 dollars of funding from VCU's Schilling Fund and Duke University to fund my travel to examine the Mahone Papers; William Mahone Papers, *Durham, North Carolina*, Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University; Blair Family Papers, *Charlottesville Virginia*, Alderman Library; William E. Cameron Papers, *Richmond Virginia*, Library of Virginia.

Virginians considered radical views. As previously mentioned, I will also explore Mahone's correspondence and interactions with Early, Lane, and Bagby in the Southern Historical Society Papers, a 52-volume published set, and in published and archival sources. Reconsidering Mahone's correspondence will explore the consequences these men faced through the defense of their war records and the debates about race, society and politics during Mahone's lifetime.

Chapter one will analyze William Mahone's decision making as organizer of the Readjuster Party and emphasize his "dynamic personality" in the context of his numerous and ever shifting loyalties. His complexities included being an ex-Confederate general, whose men executed black prisoners at the Battle of the Crater, to a veteran that encouraged reconciliation with the North, to a politician that alienated white Virginians to court the black vote.²⁵ The William E. Cameron Papers, located where?, will be a useful source to start with here. Cameron famously declared that the color line in Virginia politics had been broken through the efforts of the Readjuster movement. When Mahone failed to promote a black man, John Mercer Langston, for Congress in the late 1880s, his former ally Cameron was one of several men who broke from Mahone. I want to use his papers to further investigate the relationship between these two men who were the leading voices in the Readjuster Party and whose success was closely linked. This section will be based on the personal papers of William Mahone and Cameron, but also supplemented by records of the Virginia legislature's House and Senate journals of the Readjuster years.²⁶

Chapter two engages a range of sources to establish the construction of different collective memories around William Mahone and the Readjusters from Mahone's death in 1895 to 1960 and the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. My sources will emphasize both popular conceptions as well as changing scholarship over several generations to examine memory. One major source of memory in chapter two that I have identified are newspapers. Newspapers are excellent cultural artifacts from different communities that present windows into why an individual is being remembered in the present.

²⁵ Moore, *Two Paths to the New South*, 100.

²⁶ Virginia Legislature. *House Journal 1877-1882. Senate Journal.*

The primary African American newspapers I will consult are the Petersburg *Lancet* and the Washington D.C *People's Advocate*. These two newspapers contained extensive coverage of Mahone and the Readjuster period that went from adoration of the general to complete silence and condemnation in Mahone's later years and after his death. Similarly, white papers in Virginia like the *Dispatch* and the *Times*, which eventually consolidated into the *Richmond Times Dispatch*, featured a wide variety of coverage on Mahone while he was alive and numerous informative examples that discuss his memory and legacy as a Confederate general. I will use these papers to gauge public opinion. By observing the frequency and type of coverage of Mahone and the Readjusters in different years, I will make conclusions about how the man and the movement were treated at different stages of collective memory.

To examine the impact of scholarship on Mahone and the Readjusters and the Reconstruction years on scholarship and public understanding I will consult scholarly monographs before 1960 as well as school textbooks.²⁷ Monographs from the early twentieth century will be used to show how the choice to exclude Mahone from a discussion of the post-Civil war era translated into his absence from the academic and popular narratives of the Lost Cause in the South.²⁸ By examining how different southern textbooks interpreted Mahone, the Readjuster Movement, and the period of the New South I hope to show clear links between scholarship and the construction of collective memory. The public accesses scholarship chiefly through school textbooks, which are authored by groups of scholars and heavily influenced by politics. Textbooks I have already examined demonstrate specific interpretations of Mahone in school textbooks and will feature prominently in my thesis.

²⁷ Adam Dean, "'Who Controls the Past Controls the Future': Southern Textbooks in an Era of Civil Rights," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 117 (2009): 315-55 Francis Simkins, *Virginia: History, Government, Geography* (New York: Scribner, 1957), 465-467.

²⁸ Charles Pearson, *The Readjuster Movement in Virginia* (Gloucester: Yale University Press, 1917), VII; Richard Morton, *The Negro in Virginia Politics 1865-1902* (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 1919), 6; Crandall Shifflett, *Patronage and Poverty in the Tobacco South: Louisa County, Virginia, 1860-1900* (Knoxville: The university of Tennessee Press, 1982); James Rhodes, *History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850 to the Mckinley-Bryan Campaign of 1896* Vol. VII-VIII (New York: Kennikat press, 1967).

The conclusion will harness modern sources, such as newspaper articles and other literature discussing monuments to the Civil War era. My conclusion will demonstrate how the complexities of the New South, and its figures, such as Mahone, are being acknowledged in our modern discourse about the topic. The conclusion will also highlight any relevant cultural artifacts that depict William Mahone.

Summary

By organizing my thesis into two parts I hope to achieve a dynamic interpretation of general Mahone. My introduction will give adequate background on Mahone's life as a general and politician whose legacy defies any attempt to classify his actions in the typical mold of post-Civil War history as "Lost Cause," and whose actions remain tied to numerous collective memories of the period. I will present William Mahone and the Readjuster Party as a unique movement that embodied the upheaval of social and political life in the "New South" and that defied the creation of any singular interpretation promoted by the Lost Cause. William Mahone and the Readjuster Party have been given extensive attention by scholars, and the memory of his movement continues to remain with us today. In October 2017, an editorial in the *Roanoke Times* advocated for the construction of a monument to General Mahone on Monument Avenue to correct the mistake of statue builders a century ago who "tried to erase Mahone from history" because of his political career.²⁹ The editorial continues to recount Mahone's career before advocating a statue of the general to "put our history into full context." The fact that his memory has resurfaced, even though it was never commemorated in sculpture like so many other Confederates, is an instructive lesson in how memory and commemoration are interrelated in our history. Remembering William Mahone and the Readjuster movement is a necessary step to add context and nuance to the discussion of our shared past.

²⁹ "Letter to the Editor" *Roanoke Times* (Roanoke, VA), Oct 21st, 2017.

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