

America's deadliest war also is most memorialized, professor says

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As the nation recognizes the 150th anniversary of the Civil War's start, public interest has been rekindled in the war and the numerous memorials and monuments marking historic figures, sites and battlegrounds in states around the country.

South Carolina militiamen fired the first shots of the Civil War at Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861, and over the next four years more than 10,000 military engagements between the North and South took place. In the end more than 600,000 soldiers died.

"The [Civil War](#) was our most destructive war, it claimed the most lives, and it was on our territory," said Professor Kenneth Foote of the University of Colorado Boulder's geography department. "And when it comes to memorials and monuments, the Civil War is by far our most memorialized of the nation's wars."

In general, public memorials are created to act as a reminder of a tragic event or because an event has an important moral or ethical lesson that needs to be preserved, says Foote.

"I think there is a lesson from Civil War memorials that carries through to the present day because the Civil War was this very divisive event in the 19th century over slavery -- and the destruction caused by it -- though later some battlefields also became points of reconciliation," Foote said.

And in the case of the Civil War, many people in America still feel a personal connection to the war.

"When it comes to the Civil War, even today probably a majority of Americans had some family member involved, and so there is still, even after these many generations, a pretty direct family connection for many people," Foote said. "The other major factor is that it involved the issue of slavery in the United States."

Gettysburg is one of the most visited and recognized Civil War sites. It also is one of the most decorated battlefields in the world, according to Foote. Virtually every corps, army, division, brigade, regiment, company and battery that served at Gettysburg has erected a memorial, he said.

"Almost all of the major Civil War battlefields are marked very extensively and some of them have become more important -- like Gettysburg or Vicksburg -- because they mark critical turning points in the war," Foote said.

Civil War monument and memorial styles have changed over the years, Foote says, and are very much a function of the time when they were built. For example, the Civil War statue located in front of the Boulder County Courthouse on Pearl Street was created at the end of its era, Foote says.

"This would be very similar to the ones that were put up in the 1860s and 1870s," he said. "When this went up in about 1914, the style of representation was beginning to fade away to more abstract public art."

When it comes to the North and the South honoring their dead, Foote said the styles of the memorials changed over time as the war's wounds healed.

"Initially, many of the memorials started off as very partisan, so Northern memorials celebrated the heroics of Northern forces, while it was common in the South to see memorials that were built as a protest," Foote said. "One of the most common statues in the South was of Nathan Bedford Forrest, who was a general, but also was the founder of the Klu Klux Klan."

Overall, Foote says the Civil War will always represent an important point in the history of our nation, and the memorials are part of that history.

"There were still some great divides that aren't possible to ignore, but people gradually came together over the meaning and it was worked out oftentimes with these memorials and [monuments](#)," Foote said.

Foote became interested in studying memorial sites during a 1980s visit to Salem, Mass. While there, he was surprised to find at that time no memorial site or markers associated with the Salem witch trials, a significant chapter in early U.S. colonial history and in Salem's history. He has visited hundreds of sites that have been scarred by war battles or other incidents of violence or tragedy in the United States and abroad, and is the author of the book "Shadowed Ground: America's Landscapes of Violence and Tragedy."

Provided by University of Colorado at Boulder

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